

Cannes Film Review: 'Happy End'

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COURTESY OF CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

If there weren't already a film called 'Loveless' in competition at Cannes, that would have made an apt title for Michael Haneke's cynical 'Amour' follow-up.

Michael Haneke is up to his old tricks in “Happy End,” a movie that finds the chilly Austrian maestro returning to obsessions that have haunted his earlier work — from cultural nihilism to bourgeois solipsism, cold-hearted murder to compassionate end-of-life solutions — and in at least one case, continuing a story left unresolved in his previous film, “Amour.”

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Although it reunites Jean-Louis Trintignant and Isabelle Huppert in uncannily similar father-daughter roles, “Happy End” hardly qualifies as an “Amour”

at this year's Cannes film festival, that would have made an apt title for Haneke's latest. Certainly, there's almost no trace of the humane, empathetic sensibility that somehow snuck its way into "Amour" to be found here — which isn't necessarily a bad thing, considering the director spent most of his career spelunking the ice caves of his own cynicism, successfully unsettling us with what he found there.

Audiences not already familiar with the demands of Haneke's more misanthropic work could be put off, if not entirely confounded as the director returns to his austere conceptual roots, reuniting with DP Christian Berger — whose rigid formalism set the look of "Caché" (2005) and "The White Ribbon" (2009) — to catalog this new family's dysfunction at a distance, all but announcing that their sins are those of Europe at large (another similarity with Andrey Zvyagintsev's "Loveless," which did the same for Russia).

For Haneke's longtime admirers, it will come as no surprise to learn there are no happy endings ahead for the Laurent clan. Let it also be said, however, that nothing so grim as the climactic group suicide of "The Seventh Continent" (1989) awaits them either — although the downbeat implication remains that malcontent Europeans might be better off dead than living in such a screwed-up world as this.

That seems to be the view of bitter 84-year-old Laurent family patriarch Georges (Trintignant), who snuffed his own wife some years earlier and now seems eager to join her (his idea of a happy end?). Georges finds no comfort in sharing his Callais home with his two avaricious children, manipulative real-estate developer Anne (Huppert) and twice-married doctor Thomas (Mathieu Kassowitz), but can't find anyone to assist his exit — until, conveniently enough, the ideal (yet horrifyingly inappropriate) candidate arrives at his doorstep.

Georges' desire for euthanasia is but one of many thorny themes under scrutiny here, several of which extend beyond the Laurents' generally selfish personalities to include the plight of local immigrants, from the "Moroccan slaves" who serve the family to the nameless Africans they pass on the street — echoes of "Code Unknown" (2000). Depending on how you see it, Haneke's new film is either a "been there, done that" rehash of old themes or an exciting return to form, demanding real effort from already sophisticated festival and art-house crowds as they attempt to untangle the cinematic equivalent of the ultra-tricky Saturday crossword puzzle. Either way, "Happy End" amounts to a

household contributes to the movie's almost suffocating sense of malaise.

Our discomfort begins with a series of lo-res Instagram Live-style videos. In the first, someone spies on a woman's predictable nightly toilette routine, after which a twisted kid tries an experiment on the family hamster, feeding it mom's antidepressant pills to see what happens (hint: the American Humane Society would *not* approve). After nearly six minutes of such clips, Haneke cuts to security-camera footage of a massive construction site, which seems calm enough until a freak accident brings one of the walls crumbling down on top of the workers below.

Though Haneke hasn't provided enough context for us to understand what we're watching, that doesn't stop him from reprimanding us for what he perceives as our twisted sense of voyeurism. To some extent, "Happy End" serves to update Haneke's VHS-era provocation "Benny's Video" (1992), also shot by Berger, as the director indicts Instagram, Facebook and YouTube as platforms that propagate such sociopathic behavior (which may be true to an extent, but rather naively excludes the many ways social media has made the world a more connected and potentially empathetic place as well).

Still, it seems harsh to follow a series of what may as well be snuff-film clips — the hamster ODs, and later we discover that a worker died during that cave-in — with a conventionally scripted scene in which a young girl absorbs the news that her mother overdosed on pills. (Technically, Haneke directed everything in the movie, even the opening "found footage," though he plays with audiences' ever-evolving notion of what is real, clearly aware that amateur-looking online videos read as more authentic than classical filmmaking techniques.) The girl in question is Georges' 12-year-old granddaughter, Ève (Fantine Harduin), whose father Thomas has no choice but to bring her back to the family home in Callais, where her stepmother (Laura Verlinden) has been raising Ève's newborn half-brother.

Because Haneke disapproves of traditional exposition, audiences must do their own detective work, puzzling out who's who around the Laurent dinner table — which is too much effort when our brains are already working overtime to make sense of the other oblique clues the film so stingily dispenses. An annotated family tree would go a long way to help, considering that Huppert's description of Ève as "my brother's daughter by his ex-wife" sounds like a tricky calculus equation — one that still leaves many questions unanswered, like who is the stranger on the other end of her English-language phone calls?

of immigrants, when the one he knows gives him a black eye and a bloody nose?

There are answers to these questions, of course, although it's disheartening to report that Anne and her son represent two of the movie's least interesting roles (their intrigues have mostly to do with the succession of the family business and a deal that she's gone to great lengths to arrange). *Everyone* here has secrets they're hiding from the others, though Georges' and Ève's illicit desires emerge as the most fascinating, if only because they're so far removed from how we first read these two characters — who both factor into a final shot that ranks among the most chilling of Haneke's career, even as it earns the darkest of laughs. It's as if the director has tied up loose ends from his earlier films, while forcing us to re-examine issues that have only grown more dire since he first brought them to our attention.

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Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 21, 2017. Running time: **107 MIN.**

Production

(France-Germany-Austria) A Les Films du Losange, X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film presentation, in co-production with Arte France Cinema, France 3 Cinéma, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Arte, with the participation of Arte France, France Télévisions, Canal Plus, Cine Plus, ORF Film/Fernseh-Abkommen. (International sales; Les Films du Losange, Paris.) Producers: Margaret Menegoz, Stefan Arndt, Veit Heidusck, Micahel Katz.

Crew

Director, writer: Michael Haneke. Camera (color): Christian Berger. Editor: Monika Willi.

With

Isabelle Huppert, Jean-Louis Trintignant, Mathieu Kassovitz, Fantine Harduin, Franz Rogowski, Laura Verlinden, Aurelia Petit, Toby Jones, Hille Perl, Hassam Ghancy, Nabiha Akkari, Joud Geistlich. (French dialogue)

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