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Happy End (15)

dir: **Michael Haneke**

Starring: Isabelle Huppert, Jean-Louis Trintignant, Mathieu Kassovitz

sponsor: **Andrew Howard**

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Synopsis: Calais, the present. Anne Laurent runs a successful building company. She has to deal with a crisis - a fatal accident at one of her sites. Members of her family reveal they are in the grip of their own crises. Her brother's ex-wife is in hospital, following an overdose. Eve, their daughter, is desperately unhappy at learning her father is having an affair. She may have administered the medication deliberately. Her elderly father Georges is deeply depressed. Her son Pierre proves incapable of helping resolve the accident. He interrupts a family gathering by bringing some migrant workers to join in. Georges tries to drown himself, aided by Eve. Anne and her brother arrive to save him.

In what has to be considered a minor upset by Cannes standards, *Happy End* was the first Michael Haneke joint to leave the 2017 festival without a major prize since 2003's *Time of The Wolf* (unofficially ruled ineligible since jury president Patrice Chéreau appeared in a cameo). With the possible exceptions of Lars von Trier and the Dardennes, with whom he forms a sort of holy - or, for some, unholy - trinity of contemporary award-bait auteurs, no European filmmaker has been as decorated at Cannes over the past decade and a half.. And so *Happy End's* empty-handed haul, in a consensus off-year for the main competition, was taken, both on the ground and at a distance, as evidence of failure.

Cut to several months later, and it looks as if *Happy End* is Haneke's most interesting film since *Hidden* (2005), and also superior to his back-to-back Palme d'Or winners *The White Ribbon* (2009) and *Amour* (2012), which succeeded mainly in making their creator's bitterness more tasteful, if not downright palatable. (Suffice to say that seeing the author of an anti-establishment tract like 1989's *The Seventh Continent* smiling on stage at the Oscars generated some cognitive dissonance.) *Happy End* employs the same jagged, deliberately disorientating style of works such as *Benny's Video* (1992) and *Code Unknown* (2000) - complex films that hold up even in the wake of their arguably pernicious influence on 21st century global art cinema (no less than Quentin Tarantino, Haneke is apt to take the rap in some circles for the sins of his imitators.)

Happy End unfolds in short, oblique scenes, including a number of video recordings whose authorship is either mysterious (à la *Hidden* and its unlabeled video tapes) or purposefully disembodied (as in security footage of an industrial accident.) Context is absent; exposition is non-existent. This return to form(alism) is self-conscious, and one way to read - and quickly dismiss - *Happy*

End is to characterize it as a greatest hits album of sorts, with all the old Haneke classics, from sociopathic teens and monstrously self-involved bourgeois parents to class warfare, racism and assisted suicide in one handy tracklist. Such a characterization, while not inaccurate, ignores the subtle but significant shift in the material towards a lighter, though hardly benign serio-comic tone.

Previously, the presence of humour in Haneke's films was a cruelly theoretical proposition, as in the wicked situationist gags riddling *Funny Games* (1997), a film that still stands as the height of its maker's pedantry. Not only is *Happy End* less imperious and prescriptive than its predecessors, it's also more generous, both to its characters and to the audience. Because its ensemble has been conceived in terms of idiosyncratic individuals rather than stand-ins for larger forces, it seems far more possible than in the single minded *White Ribbon* or *Amour* that different viewers will take different things away from the experience.

As in *Code Unknown*, Haneke provides multiple points of entry into the narrative; *Happy End* disperses its point of view across a large group of characters, any one of whom could plausibly qualify as the main protagonist. Isabelle Huppert projects her usual low, steady centre of gravity as Anne Laurent, a driven real estate developer who is outwardly the sturdiest branch of her clan's gnarled, ingrown family tree. She's sharper than her softboy brother Thomas (Mathieu Kassovitz), a prosperous doctor who's been forced to bring 13 year old Eve, (Fatine Harduin), his daughter from a previous marriage, to live with him and his second wife and their infant child; she lords it over her own son Pierre (Frantz Rogowski) with some of the acid condescension she displayed as the alpha mama in *Elle* (2016). And yet Anne's attempts to downplay a workplace calamity and Huppert's powerhouse acting ultimately exist to the side of what really fascinates in *Happy End*, which is the slow, steady, unsettling bond that forms between Eve and her heretofore all but estranged grandfather Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant).

It's strongly implied, as *Happy End* goes on, that Trintignant is playing the same Georges Laurent he did in *Amour*, a bit of continuity that is (intentionally) undermined by the fact that the daughter figure played by Huppert in that film was named Eva not Anne. This intertextual funny-gamesmanship doesn't detract from the fact that Trintignant is allowed to be much whittier this time out; instead of acting slow-burning grief at his wife's physical and mental dissolution, he expertly essays the impatience of a man who would rather be dead himself. There are several scenes in which Georges, who is confined to a wheelchair, tries to arrange his own

demise, and all of them are played for morbid, deadpan comedy, including a slow tracking shot following him as he rolls down a street and tries to provoke a group of dark skinned men to attack him - an outrageous tableau rendered more provocative by the muffled sound design.

Georges's death wish intersects comfortably with his granddaughter's morbid pathology. It's made clear from the outset that Eve is a potential murderer: she force-feeds her pet hamster antidepressants and films the results on her iPhone. It's also implied that she may have been responsible for her mother's near fatal drug overdose - a mystery that isn't all that mysterious. As sensitively played by Harduin, Eve isn't a culturally symptomatic figure like the eponymous TV junkie of *Benny's Video*. Rather, she's a perceptive, believably resentful young teen, pondering permanent entry into a world of adults that's disappointing from every angle. Georges's apparent confirmation of her suspicions - that to grow old is to drift ever further from any kind of plausible Innocence - balances cynicism against an implicit empathy. And so it goes with many of the film's best moments, which open up beyond (or beneath) their surface scepticism. A clandestine online correspondence is it once embarrassingly florid and movingly confessional; a scene where she's asked to mind her infant half-brother pulses with anxiety as well as tenderness; a stunt at a well-heeled family gathering is outrageous in ways that embarrass its perpetrator as thoroughly as its intended target.

It's this same quality of embarrassment - of people feeling exposed to themselves or to others - that accounts for *Happy End's* queasy hilarity. When petulant, self-pitying Pierre does a karaoke rendition of Sia's chart-topping 'Chandelier' (a well-chosen song, as it's about feeling out of control), his exhibitionistic abandon is either pathetic or cathartic, take your pick. At his worst Haneke is a scold who makes cinema to excoriate - his characters, his audience, the whole rotten world. *Happy End* evinces the same scepticism as Haneke's other movies about a wealthy Western ruling class insulated against certain wide-angle realities, and yet for once, the critique feels light fingered and not heavy handed. The film suggests nothing so much as a compressed season of some heaving, melodramatic soap opera, parcelled out in glistening, judicious digital video shards. Following *Amour*, I wasn't ever sure I wanted to see another Haneke film, but the modest but genuine breakthrough of *Happy End* feels a bit like a fresh start.

Credits

Anne Laurent	Isabelle Huppert
Georges Laurent	Jean-Louis Trintignant
Thomas Laurent	Mathieu Kassowitz
Eve Laurent	Fantine Harduin
Pierre Laurent	Franz Rogowski
Anais Laurent	Laura Verlinden
Laurence Bradshawe	Toby Jones
Rachid	Hassam Ghancy
Jamila	Nabila Akkari
Marcel, hairdresser	Dominique Besnehard
Director	Michael Haneke
Screenplay	Michael Haneke
Director of Photography	Christian Berger
Editor	Monika Willi
Production Design	Olivier Radot
Sound	Guillaume Sciamia, Jean-Pierre Laforce, Denise Gerrard
Costume	Catherine Leterrier

France
/Germany/Austria/Italy 2017
107 mins

Another View

Michael Haneke's new film gleams with cold gallows humour. There's blunt, rasping comedy to be found in its thematic grimness (*Happy End* might also be titled *Death Wish*), though the Austrian director's bleak worldview won't be to everyone's taste. The plot begins with 13 year-old Eve (Fantine Harduin), who is forced to stay with her father Thomas (Mathieu Kassowitz), in Calais, with his new wife and their young child after her mother overdoses. Also living in the Laurent family home is Thomas's sister, severe real estate developer Anne (Isabelle Huppert), and their depressed father Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant of Haneke's *Amour*), who at a robust 84 is "too healthy" to qualify for the assisted suicide he seeks, and so must make alternative arrangements. Eve moves quietly, watching the adults around her.

One of the most interesting things about *Happy End* is the way Haneke's camera captures the act of watching; always interested in technology and surveillance. Here he often favours fixed perspectives, trailing his characters over the shoulder or looking with detachment from an unmoving vantage point. A fist-fight plays out from a voyeuristic, clinical remove, while the film's opening takes place via a series of darkly funny Snapchat-style videos. Eve discovers her father's laptop and a series of sexually explicit messages on a Facebook-style website.

It's pretty upsetting stuff, but we're encouraged to laugh, and to see the Laurents as a parody of bourgeois selfishness (Haneke inserts BBC News footage to highlight how glaringly unaware the family are of the refugee crisis taking place on their doorstep). There are some brilliantly zany comic moments too; an interpretive dance sequence set to Sia's Chandelier, Huppert's Anne dislocating somebody's finger, and a magnificent final set piece filmed on an iPhone.

Simran Hans: The Observer

Our next screening: Friday January 11th, 7.30pm Mountains May Depart (China 2015. Cert 12a)

The state-of-the-nation film is a genre we're used to in the UK but it's rarer to get a glimpse into the state of a nation as closed as China has been until very recently. *Mountains May Depart* provides us with such a glimpse as director Jia Zhanke follows the fortunes of Tao, a twenty-something young woman, from the start of the economic boom in the late 1990s to the near future. Structured in 3 episodes, we see how she and her family are all affected as the tide of free market social and economic development sweeps through their lives.