

The White Ribbon: Michael Haneke's pessimistic study of society

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An often fascinating film that leaves a bitter aftertaste. This is the impression left with the cinema-goer by Michael Haneke's new film, *The White Ribbon*.

The joint German-Austrian-French production of the Austrian-born film director (*Funny Games*, *Hidden*, *The Piano Player*) received the Palme d'Or at last year's Cannes film festival, and at the end of August was nominated as Germany's contender for an Academy Award in the category of best foreign-language film.

For two and a half hours, the black-and-white epic presents us with stark images and hard-hitting dialogue to evoke a society enmeshed in deceit on the eve of the First World War. Life in a north German village, significantly named "Eichwalde," reveals in its essential form the underlying backwardness, cold-bloodedness, and cruelty of so-called respectable people.

It is a German children's story—according to the title that slowly and silently unfolds across the screen as the film begins. The focus is on children who—mirroring the behaviour of the adult world—inflict on others the painful physical and psychological oppression they have experienced. The performances of the children in the film are truly outstanding.

Thus, in the first scene, the village doctor—who sexually abuses and humiliates his house-keeper and midwife (Suanne Lothar) and his young daughter—brings himself and his horse crashing down when he forces it to leap a rope stretched across a garden.

Further, the baron's son has to pay for the bad treatment meted out to the peasants by his father (Ulrich Turkur), and is found badly beaten up in a wood. After his recovery, he again plays with the village boys, but later his friends throw him into a river because they can't stand his flute playing.

A parakeet, belonging to the parson (excellently played by Burkhart Klaußner), is cruelly killed with a pair of scissors, which are laid on his desk in the form of a cross. This is the only time one sees the shadowy figure of a perpetrator, in this case, his eldest daughter Klara, played by Maria-Victoria Dragus.

A barn is set on fire. The bailiff's youngest child is deliberately placed next to an open window by his brother—as we gather from the reaction of his sister—and almost dies of pneumonia. Finally, the midwife's handicapped son is cruelly maltreated in a blatantly senseless act of violence against the enfeebled.

The children of the parson and the bailiff (Josef Bierbichler) are

suspected of responsibility for the various deeds. When interrogated, however, they stubbornly affect a sanctimonious innocence to justify themselves—especially Klara, whose name (in German, suggesting clear and open) so sharply contrasts with her slyness. Their teacher, who vainly tries to uncover what has happened, assumes the role of an observer and narrator from within the network of village relationships, and recounts his memories of the time. The director's artistic approach allows the action of the film to recede and take second place to the presentation of the characters' psychological states and their attitudes toward issues of morality and conscience.

This is what interests Haneke most. He vehemently criticises the early twentieth century Protestant type of upbringing that punished children for signs of sexual awakening, and even for simple displays of anger in the classroom, with caning and other cruel measures such as tying them to a bed. The worst thing about the beatings is the accompanying moralistic preaching from the pastor, who goes so far as to dish out to his pubescent son, Martin (Leonard Proxauf), a lot of superstitious nonsense and lies about masturbation causing painful sores and leading to a miserable death. The white ribbon that Klara and Martin have to wear for weeks as punishment for their sinfulness stigmatises them to the whole village.

The director exercises considerable sensitivity, particularly in his presentation of the pastor. In contrast to his rather stereotyped presentation of some of the other figures, such as the doctor or the baron, Haneke grants the pastor—beneath the latter's austere appearance and hypocritical virtuousness—a certain vulnerability, especially after Klara murders his parakeet so cruelly. Administering sacramental wine during a confirmation ceremony, he winces when he sees Klara in the queue of candidates. He hesitates and looks her straight in the eyes, before finally extending her the goblet. A little later, he is obviously confused and unsure when his youngest son comes into his office with a cage and gives him his own bird as a replacement for the dead one, "because father is so sad." The pastor has difficulty concealing his feelings behind his stern mask. When the teacher finally hints to the pastor that his own children might have been involved in the mistreatment of the handicapped boy, Karli, he loses his self-control for the first time and drives the teacher out of the house.

There are a number of such moving scenes. However, it has to be said that—in the overall context of the film—they do not ring entirely true.

The White Ribbon begins with the camera (wonderfully employed by Christian Berger) ranging over beautiful landscape up to the village, and accompanied by the first observations of the narrator: his memories are to be “illuminating” in relation to certain historical events that followed. At the end—after the teacher has been thrown out of the pastor’s house—the narrator reports on how the outbreak of the war in 1914 coincided with a religious festival service, in which all social layers of the village—including the baron and his family, the teacher, peasants and children, all formally dressed and in serious mood—take their places in the village church. Titles preceding the end credits suggest that the mendacious village community welcomes the beginning of the war. No one will want to enquire any further into the things that have happened.

Michael Haneke would thus have us to understand that a brutalised German population, warped by their authoritarian religious upbringing, is collectively responsible for the violence of the war. This is a view that itself stems from Protestant morality. Moreover, although he refrains from making a direct allusion to fascism, the name of the village suggests future developments seamlessly connecting Eichwalde, via Eichmann, to Buchenwald.

Nor do interviews, given by the director, ameliorate this gloomy view. In the October 15 edition of *Focus* magazine last year, he denied that his film’s central theme was the origin of fascism. Rather, he was dealing with “the roots of evil itself, revealed in this particular example.” The basic idea consisted of, “showing a group of children who absorb the full consequences of the ideals preached to them, and who go on to punish those who have enforced these ideals without living by them.” Haneke stressed that “Whenever an idea becomes ideological, there is danger,” and explained that this was the “starting point” for his film.

He went on to say: “I set the story in its particular era so that it might acquire an added political significance. It could just as easily have been set in an Islamic village. Of course, it would have had a different look, but the essentials would have been much the same.” When the *Focus* interviewer persisted in trying to pin him down to the idea that he must have seen tendencies towards evil and fascism in the whole of the northern, Protestant-educated world, Haneke declared: “My films all carry the same label—‘citizens at war.’ How do we get along with each other? I really believe that major wars occur because of what has happened to us previously. This is why we’re so susceptible to them.”

What a banal and philistine conclusion! At a time when governments, representatives of big business, and the media are beating the drum for war in Afghanistan, and the German army is committing war crimes for the first time since the Second World War, Haneke will have us believe it is the general way people relate to each other that makes wars possible. The opposite is true: the great majority of people are against war, but the ruling elite increasingly clamour for its expansion.

Haneke deliberately overlooks the connection between the concrete social and economic interests of capitalists and the two great wars of the last century. He also fails to recognise the fact that by 1913 the backwardness and false piety of village life in Germany had long since ceased to predominate, and millions of workers—who had achieved not only political, but also cultural

education thanks to the Social Democratic Party—were calling for a humane, socialist society.

In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper, also published October 15, 2009, Haneke made his position even clearer. Village life constitutes “a microcosm of this society, from the ruling group right to the bottom.” He wanted to make a film about “the perversion of every possible ideal when it is turned into an absolute.” Haneke further proselytised that whenever people are put under pressure, for example, as a result of their position within social structures, “they clutch at straws to free themselves from the predicament. And that will be any idea, ideal, ideology. It could be religion, but it could be something else. Usually, it doesn’t work and leads to acts of inhumanity.” This is supposed to be the hypothesis underlying the film—one that can be applied to explain German fascism, but also the “terrorism of our times...and religious fundamentalism of all colours.”

The claim that a threat to society lies in the transformation of “an idea into an ideology” or the clinging of people in crisis to “any idea, ideal or ideology” allows Haneke to avoid any investigation into specific instances of social development and to equate advanced revolutionary ideas with reactionary ideology and religious fanaticism.

The oppressed, when they resort to violence to defend themselves, are for him just as culpable as the oppressors. While the village children are portrayed as victims of religious oppression in the first half of *The White Ribbon*, towards the end the director concentrates on their maliciousness and intentionally tries to arouse the viewers’ disgust when the body of the handicapped child, streaming with blood, is found in the forest.

Another scene typifies this same approach. A farmer’s eldest son, whose mother lost her life in the landowner’s sawmill, expresses his rage by smashing up all the cabbages during the village harvest festival. The consequence of his deed is that his relatives are punished by the baron. His father reproaches him for putting the survival of the 14 members of his family at risk and hangs himself in despair. This is supposed to point to the moral that violence from below only leads to further violence, and so it should never happen in the first place.

Haneke belongs to a generation of filmmakers that have drawn the most pessimistic lessons from the world wars and the terror of fascism. They explain the lapse into fascist barbarism by invoking the collective guilt of the whole population, and draw the conclusion that any progressive development of humanity involving a mass social movement is impossible.

Despite the positive qualities of *The White Ribbon*, there is a jarring discord between the choruses of praise for the film from a wide section of the media and the disorientation it seeks to encourage within its audience.



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