

## **THE SHOCKING WORLD OF *THE WHITE RIBBON*: WHERE DOES IT COME FROM? WHERE IS IT GOING?**

The humanist rule of narrative writes that every character is worthy of consideration as a human being, that everyone has their own reasons, that everyone has a perspective that the audience must understand, that there is no one we cannot sympathise with in some way. The rule was observed by Shakespeare, at least for the most part, since no one has been more adept at making his audience, even as they judge his characters, realise there are moments when they should suspend judgement. Like no other, he makes the case for human complexity. How are we to admire therefore Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, which unceremoniously dumps the rule in the dustbin, while giving us over 145 minutes of rivetting narrative which we watch in horror and fascination? We are too shocked to be indifferent, yet at the end catharsis is denied. The film superbly balances the repelling with the compelling.

We might applaud too an astonishing triumph of European arthouse cinema, which in pessimistic moments one might think to be presently enfeebled by comparison with the heroic age of yesteryear, the time of Dreyer, Bergman, Fellini, Buñuel, Bresson and so on. But no, *The White Ribbon* makes a worthy addition to this tradition, and Haneke, I believe, is strongly conscious of working within it. So, who might be the directors he is seeking to emulate – and to contradict? Robert Bresson springs naturally to mind, at least in his rural films (*Diary of a Country Priest*, *Au Hasard Balthazar*, *Mouchette*). In each Bresson gives an unblinking look at the introversions of village life erupting in dysfunction and cruelty. But his Catholicism leads him to counterbalance this fallen world with saintliness. Take the priest in *Diary of a Country Priest*: he adheres not just to his belief in the God of love and of redemption, but to the mottoes other characters give him, 'all or nothing' and '*faire face* / face up to it', all of which drives him to confront the breakdown of human kindness in the big house, the count having an affair with his daughter's governess, the daughter in spiteful rebellion as a result, the countess obsessed with her long-dead little boy. 'Hell is to be no longer capable of love' the priest tells the countess, which indeed makes an apt description of the village community in *The White Ribbon*. Is there a counterweight? There is of a kind in the bashful courting of Eva by the teacher, and of the humorous dialogue between the teacher and Eva's father when he goes to ask for her hand. There is also Eva's innocence. As a 17-year-old nanny, she naturally asks in perplexity of the teacher in respect of what happens to Sigi: "Who does things like beating a child?" The teacher has no answer. We do however, because we have witnessed the pastor's humiliation of his six children with the rituals of the cane, while the teacher has not, and lacks the imagination to conceive it.

Rather engagingly his appearance brings to mind portraits of Schubert, chubby-faced, tousled and kindly, but whose spectacles symbolize a certain myopia about the world. He and Eva are simply too innocent and inexperienced, and therefore ignorant, to confront what is happening, to throw off the weight of cruelty oppressing the village.

Is there then a scapegoat who can bear the brunt of the community's violence, like the donkey in Bresson's *Balthazar* taking the role of the suffering servant? The nearest we get is Frau Wagner's retarded son, Carli, who is cruelly blinded for being different, for his inability to participate in the infliction of pain that is the badge of identity in the village, so that he is in effect erased from the story.

To mark the act of his blinding, a note is pinned to his body with a quote from the Ten Commandments (Exodus chapter 20): "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children . . ." This Old Testament version of fatherhood (God as father, fathers as patriarchs) brings to mind Ingmar Bergman who, in his portrait of Bishop Vergerus in *Fanny and Alexander*, concentrated all his rage and disgust at what fathers can do to their children, and what apparently his own father did to him. 'God the Father' becomes the most toxic idea in all religion. Haneke has reincarnated Vergerus as the pastor in *The White Ribbon*, an embodiment not only of paternal cruelty, but also of religious hypocrisy. He calls to mind the minister Thomas Ericsson in *Winter Light*, whose Swedish title is *Nattvardsgästerna*, or *The Communicants*, a title that if understood ironically more truly focuses on Ericsson's inability to console his tiny rural congregation kneeling at the altar rail, partly as a result of a crisis of faith, partly because human warmth has been squeezed out of him. To emphasise the connection, the pastor (below left) and Ericsson (below right) even look alike.



I conclude from this that Haneke goes to the cinema. If he does, he has not bothered with Dreyer's *Ordet*, a portrait of patriarchy in which family bonds have not become chains, and whose sternness is softened by the love emanating from and directed towards Inger, whose death in childbirth precipitates crisis not just in the family but in the whole community. Nor does he appear to have time for Edgar Reitz's *Heimat*, an epic tracing of life in a German village from the end of the First World War to the contemporary era, and which becomes a subtle vehicle for the exploration of the impact of Nazism on ordinary Germans. Again it is a woman, Maria Simon,

who gives the family purpose and continuity, in essence enables it to survive, through Germany's grimmest years. *The White Ribbon* starts with the teacher as an old man speaking in voice-over that the events he recounts may help to "clarify things that happened later in this country". This cryptic comment, like the rest of the film, has a whodunit quality, for to what is he referring? To the defeat of Germany in the First World War which breaks out as soon as the film ends? If so, is it making a point that religious patriarchy, rural or otherwise, is a weak basis for society which leads to defeat? I don't think that this is the case, but rather the teacher is referring to the acceptance of Nazism by Germany in the 1930s. Haneke is wanting to say that hypocrisy about the family and about community, cloaked in a religious framework, is the point of entry for Nazi tyranny. Yet if this is his point, it surely fails: although these same structures could be found all over Europe, totalitarianism found no deep roots there. There was something special about Germany which Haneke is too little of a historian to discern. I concede he would feel this to be unfair. The sentiment is put in the mouth of the teacher, not the filmmaker, and the teacher may be likeable but he is too confused to see what is happening, a point underlined by the frankness with which he speaks to the pastor at the end about his children and which is undermined by his failure to pursue the matter further when the pastor turns threatening. In his voice-over at the beginning, he tells us that his account is based on hearsay, so that it is bound to be coloured by his own subjectivity, by the inadequacy of what he knows, and by his inability to interpret events.

So, what is the film for? A clue is furnished in the credits, for while Haneke is responsible for the story, the screenplay and the direction of the film, Jean-Claude Carrière is listed as giving 'dramaturgische beratung' i.e. as being script consultant. Carrière, now 78, is a name to conjure with for he became a close collaborator on Luis Buñuel's French films of the 1960s and 1970s, including *Diary of a Chambermaid*, *Belle de Jour*, *The Milky Way*, *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, *The Phantom of Liberty*, *That Obscure Object of Desire*. The link with Buñuel brought to my mind the latter's description of his silent-era, purely surrealist masterpiece *Un Chien Andalou* as a 'desperate appeal for murder' because what better judgement might be made of *The White Ribbon*? When Anni talks to her little brother Rudolph about illness and death, about what has happened to their father and their mother, and indeed will happen to them too – which makes for an utterly absorbing conversation – Rudi's response is to sweep his bowl of food onto the floor, his equivalent of murderous rebellion against the cruelty of the world, a sentiment of which the young Buñuel would surely approve.

Indeed, did the idea of the bowl swept aside come from Carrière, brought in as 'script consultant' to spice up an already spicy script? And did the visual shock of the pastor's dead

budgerigar, Peepsie, lying crucified on his desk with the scissors inserted down its throat so that bird and object make the form of a cross, the purest piece of surrealism in the film, come from the unabashed surrealist himself, Carrière? This is pure speculation, but the link is intriguing because the shock value of *The White Ribbon* certainly has the same intent as surrealism in making a frontal assault on 'bourgeois society', to use the phrase favoured by surrealists to describe the enemy.

So the film seems to have a moral, that all this should be overthrown. What do we put in its place? Moderation, an end to sternness and sanctimoniousness, a greater role for female compassion. To list them is to realise that Haneke is not interested in the answer, probably in the slightest. His task is to throw down not build up, but in doing so he challenges us to formulate a countercritique: is patriarchy always that abusive? Bergman understood this in *Fanny and Alexander* because Bishop Vergerus' tyranny is counterpointed by the wonder, the laughter, the sorrows and joys he finds in his own family. By contrast *The White Ribbon* gives us not just one abusive patriarch in the person of the pastor, but three others as well – the doctor, the Baron and the Baron's steward. We are shocked but this loading of the scales strains credulity, to which Haneke's reply would be that he is not making a realist portrait of German village life 100 years ago, just a truthful one. To judge it as not credible is to evade the truth he is seeking to convey. So, if this is accepted, should *The White Ribbon* rather be considered – like all costume dramas – as telling us as much about our own time as the past it depicts? Probably, for Haneke's preoccupations feel very contemporary: child abuse, the church as a failed institution, male oppression.

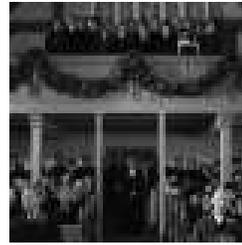
The resonance of these things may have been one reason for the film winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes, but surely a more important one is its superlative qualities as a film. It is most striking, pleasurable even, to watch a black-and-white film of such luminosity and shadow in 2009. You can see *Winter Light* and *Ordet* on DVD, past exemplars of the black-and-white cinematographer's art (respectively Sven Nykvist and Henning Bendtsen), but it is wonderful to see Christian Berger's modern camerawork in the cinema. Marvellous too is Haneke's paratactic style, presenting us with the facts of the story in measured succession, never hurried and never dawdling: where a shot dwells on a doorway or on a landscape it is so that we can absorb what is happening, so that the film can both create and maintain the quality of suspense so essential to a whodunit. Underpinning this narrative rhythm is the formal device of progressing through a year, July 1913 to July 1914, marked by temporal signposts in the teacher's narrative and the change of seasons, especially the contrast between the fields of high summer ready for harvest and the snowy landscapes of midwinter, still, glacial, blinding. There are no rough winds of autumn,

which would be too expressionistic for Haneke's purpose, and we are hardly made aware of the spring of 1914, perhaps appropriately because it was the year in which you could say that spring was cancelled, nor would the residents of Eichwald know how to spring-clean their lives. We should applaud too the casting, the costumes, the interiors, all done with care and exactitude of judgement. For example, when the Baroness confronts the Baron in their dining room with the news that he wishes to leave him, a momentous conversation made more so by the steward breaking in with the news that Archduke Ferdinand has been assassinated at Sarajevo, the ominousness of which needs no explanation for the audience, we have a moment to admire the furnishings, the elegant glassware, the tapestries on the wall, and to see the paintwork is everywhere – flaking. Admirable too is the recreation of the village street of 1913, with the cars, the tarmac, the pot plants, the hanging baskets all swept away.

This is narrative mastery, a succession of mesmerising images, its visual quality accentuated because for much of the time the dialogue is sparse and unrevealing. Where there are conversations – Anni with Rudolf, the doctor's humiliation of Frau Wagner, the teacher's difficult confrontation with the pastor – they are so unresolved that we return to the narrative even more disturbed. This verbal sparseness is exemplified in Klara's greeting of the teacher, 'Gutentag, Herr Lehrer', which occurs on at least three occasions during the film. By the end when we have learnt what she has become capable of (the murder of a budgerigar) and suspect what she might have done (the blinding of Carli), these three words of formulaic politeness take on the creepiest quality.

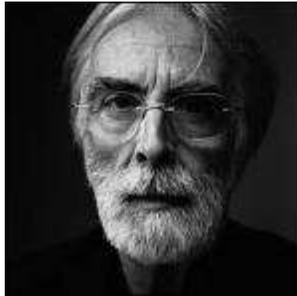
Fingering Clara, I might be guilty of spoiling the film for those who have not seen it. 'This essay contains spoilers' should have been written at the beginning. But I haven't done so because it shouldn't: the whole point of *The White Ribbon* is that the answer to the whodunit is withheld. Klara is no more a suspect than all the rest of the village. Nor is the unanswered whodunit the whole of it. The narrative is told so that you desire, fervently in my case, for the pastor and the doctor to get their come-uppance. Any such catharsis is studiously and deliberately withheld, as if the guilt is thrown back on all the characters in the film and on all of us watching it.

If one goes back to Bresson's *Balthazar*, one might recall that the village hooligan Gérard, destined for petty crime all his life, has a sweet voice and sings in the choir loft in church (next page, left), a grace note of a humanizing quality: no one is all bad.



The final shot of *The White Ribbon* (above right) seems to say something similar: the camera, placed by the altar, gives a full frontal shot of the church interior, the families below while the organ loft above holds the choir of children, including Klara, and led by the teacher in his role as choirmaster. They sing the Reformation chorale, which JS Bach made famous, 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott' / 'A mighty refuge is our God'. For a moment you think Haneke permits a grace note: life must go on, the community must continue to come together. That is not the point, but instead one of the sourest kind: the inhabitants are hypocrites and the idea of God being a strong refuge is derisory.

To look at a photograph of Haneke is to see a grizzled auteur, a prophet for our time, and to see his film is to admire a modern master of the cinema. But for my part I



conclude that his world is as confined as that of his terrifying pastor, dyspeptic, sour, narrow-minded, so that *The White Ribbon* is not a portrait of any recognizable human society but of Haneke's *doppelgänger*.

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