



THE WHITE RIBBON

(DAS WEISSE BAND - EINE
DEUTSCHE
KINDERGESCHICHTE)

Spring
Season
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Review by Dave Calhoun, Time Out:

Michael Haneke's extraordinary new film is a black-and-white ensemble piece set in a north German village on the eve of World War I. It's a sombre, roving drama that recreates the rituals of a rural Protestant community and imagines the private lives of its householders – the doctor, the baron, the pastor – to show how hierarchical, patriarchal and even feudal such a community may have remained even as the guns were being primed on the Western Front.

It's a film that's broader in its focus and less direct in its efforts to shock and tease than 2005's *Hidden*, the Austrian director's last original film (if you skip his American remake of *Funny Games* in 2007). Yet it also feels like a continuation of a sort of storytelling that he developed further with *Hidden*. In that film, the racial guilt of an entire nation was projected through Daniel Auteuil's hunted Parisian intellectual, and here again Haneke sets a drama in one period to explore issues relating to another. *The White Ribbon*, too, is an open-ended mystery about a crime or crimes. However, while in *Hidden* Haneke used the present to ponder its relationship with the past, here he does the opposite, using the past to reflect on that era's future.

Crucially, *The White Ribbon* is narrated by a man whose elderly voice suggests he's relating events to us from the perspective of the 1960s or '70s. In the film, he's a sympathetic 31-year-old teacher who educates many of the children who creepily roam the village in packs and whom we see subjected to extreme discipline and punishment (and in one case, sexual abuse) at home. The teacher is not from the village, which probably gives him a more objective eye, but he's present as a series of events occurs: a doctor's horse is tripped up by a wire; a woman dies in a sawmill; a barn is set ablaze.

Our narrator suggests at the start that what we witness 'may explain what came later'. Which, of course, this being a German story in 1913, turns the mind to fascism. One looks at the faces of the film's large cast, especially its children, and wonders what would their relationship be to National Socialism? But to linger too long on such literal questions is an error. This is art, not science, and I don't think that even Haneke, that most rational of filmmakers, believes one could trace a direct line from his village to the behaviour of a nation two decades later.



What he offers are merely suggestions as to why a people might turn to antisocial behaviour, whether it's as local as sabotaging cabbages and assaulting a disabled child or as national as following a leader whom you assist in carrying out crimes in your name. I'd hesitate, too, to assume that Haneke is saying something specific about the German national character at this time. Let's not forget the key role of shame in this film: even the 'white ribbon' of the title is a band tied around the arms of naughty children. Let's not forget, too, that it was partly the shame forced on Germany by the rest of Europe that led to the terrible events of the 1930s and '40s.

Faithful and striking historical reconstruction is evident throughout. The superb performances also lend a period authenticity to the film. Yet, there's also something essentially modern about Haneke's perspective: he peers into closed-off parlours and invades intimate moments (a father lectures a boy on masturbation, a child questions his sister about death) to suggest links between the psychology of domestic regimes and wider societal behaviour – links that few of these characters could have even conceived of in 1913. It's Haneke's investigative and quietly accusing contemporary eye that links repression in the home with corruption in the community beyond.

As a thriller, this is much more muted and subtle than *Hidden*. The result is that there's more space for Haneke – and us – to consider the behaviour of his characters and the relationships between them. It's his least aggressive and most mature film – a masterpiece from a director who is increasingly making a habit of them.

Other learned and interesting reviews:

Peter Bradshaw: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/nov/12/the-white-ribbon-review>

Philip French: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/nov/15/white-ribbon-review>