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Palme d'Or Winner of Cannes 2009: Michael Haneke's "White Ribbon"



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Michael Haneke's powerful film White Ribbon, which won the top prize at Cannes this year, is as close to a scientific study in evil as a fiction film can get. The camera travels from one family to another in a stern Protestant village in pre-World War I Germany, lingering on the uptight faces of the adults and the fearful eyes of the children. We have three main groups: a doctor who abuses his daughter and his mistress; a pastor who cruelly flogs his children, and an uptight Baron and his family, who seem to run the town with aristocratic condescension. Providing some relief

of innocence is a love story between a timid young pretty governess and a kind schoolteacher, the latter being the narrator of the film.

The film is beautifully shot in black and white, with poised shots of farm houses, manors, and even the dead body of a woman whose feet protrude in the frame, while flies circle about. The tempo is careful and steady, with each moment both understated and ominous.

The plot is ominous as well. Mysterious crimes occur in this village, one after another. The first: a doctor on his horse trips over a cable that has been tied deliberately to a tree; a boy is mutilated.

Haneke's central point: we never know who did it, but rather the finger points at the village itself: its repressive strict codes lead to rebellious acts from some (or more) furious individuals, perhaps even the innocent children.

The intent is clear: to show how the imminent war -- or any imminent war -- results from the sickness of a culture as well as from inherent human malice. The film has an ironic title -- White



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Ribbon -- named for an armband the children must wear in shame as a symbol of "purity". These children, we know, are going to grow up to be fascists.

Haneke's other point: we can never know exactly what happens in life, or "piece together reality" with accuracy. Indeed the first lines of the film, spoken by the narrator, are: "I do not even know if the story I am telling is true."

Indeed, what makes *White Ribbons* such a strong experience is that it unsettles -- just as do all of Haneke's films. Its theme is reminiscent of that of the director's previous film *The Piano Teacher*, where the stern piano teacher played by Isabelle Huppert (this year's president of the jury at Cannes) hides a perverted violent sexual side, her sickness a direct consequence of societal repression in Austria. It also reminds us of *The Seventh Continent*, where a family, living a dead bourgeois life, finally decides to collectively commit suicide.

Yet I would venture that perhaps Haneke is a bit too cold this time -- which is why the film was not unanimously the favorite for all at Cannes. The directorial distance -- the cold and gorgeous black and white shots -- forbid the viewer from truly entering into this sociologically delineated world. Emotionally, we remain as cold as the film, except during some tender scenes, including my favorite where a little boy asks his sister to explain "death" to him. Here, the tenderness of the boy -- and the reality of the Edenic fall -- are perfectly composed, with just the right touch of sadness.



The director comments:

What inspired this film?

The original idea was a children's choir, who want to make absolute principles concrete, and those who do not live up to them. Of course, this is also a period piece: we looked at the photos that we used to determine costumes, sets, even haircuts. I wanted to describe the atmosphere of the eve of the world war. There are countless films that deal with the Nazi period, but not the pre-period, which is why I wanted to make this film, that presents the pre-conditions. It is always the private questions that are most important. Of course, my concerns are different when writing or shooting. When writing the script, I am concerned with sociological and philosophical issues. On the set, you are asking if this actor is wearing the right tie, if the sound is ok. The details are important. This is where the film director steps in: otherwise sociologists would be making film.

Why are your films always so disturbing?

To function, art has to rub salt in the wounds. What interests me when I read a book or a movie are works that make me uneasy, that make me think of new problems, instead of those that reassure me. The films that I retain are those that disturb me. I often say that if my entire corpus were to be given one title, the title would be Civil War.

What is your film saying about Christianity?

I wanted to depict the children who in their adult life would play a role in the fascist period, and these people were determined by Protestantism. If made in Italy, of course it would be a different influence. You do not have to look very far to see a comparison to things going on today. Islam is the same: obsessed with a certain idea, a certain vision of religion, which has nothing to do with real religion.

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Does your film connect with issues today in Europe?

There is nonstop fascism in France, Austria, Germany, everywhere you look, in how people treat each other. The verbal violence they use. They don't treat the person as a person but as someone to be manipulated: this is daily fascism.

Are children innocent in your opinion?

Children are no more or less innocent than the rest of us. Since Freud, nobody believes in the innocence of a child. Same goes for men and women: I think everyone can be cruel with each other; not just men and or women, not limited to gender.

Why don't we know who commits the crimes?

In everyday life, you don't know all the reasons that something happens. In my work, I try to give the contradictory nature of reality. Cinema has made us used to having answers for everything, so does television.

My favorite scene is the little boy's discussion of death...

I remember that moment personally myself when I experienced the idea of death, at age 4 or 5, that a child realizes that life does not get in eternally. It's an important moment for all children.

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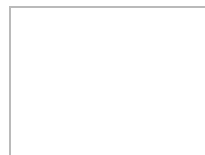
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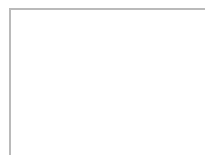
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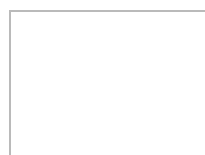
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