

Das weiße Band / The White Ribbon: Transcript

Today I will be providing an analysis of Michael Haneke's 2009 film, *Das weiße Band*. *Das weiße Band* was extremely successful and won the prestigious Palme d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009. The film deals specifically with German history and, although it is set in the months preceding the First World War, it also deals indirectly with the events of the Holocaust and the Second World War as the young characters that are being portrayed in pre-World War One Germany will, the film suggests, become the Nazis of the Second World War.

The themes of war and the Holocaust are generally pretty common in recent German language film. For example, Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang*, Marc Rothemund's, *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage*, Dennis Gansel's *Napola*, Stefan Ruzowitzky's *Die Fälscher* and Volker Schlöndorff's *Der neunte Tag* are all German filmic representations of the Holocaust and life under the Third Reich. Sometimes, as in the case of *Der neunte Tag*, *Die Fälscher* and *Sophie Scholl*, the war is explored through Jewish victimhood and life in the concentration camps. However, in recent years a tendency has emerged whereby German film directors explore the way in which ordinary Germans have suffered. In films where German victimhood is explored, the films focus on women and children as the film's victims. For example, in Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang*, the events of the Third Reich are explored through Hitler's secretary, Traudl Junge, who claims ignorance to the Nazi crimes of the Holocaust. Similarly, Dennis Gansel's *Napola* deals with a group of young Nazi cadets who also suffer under the strict Nazi regime.

The film I will be discussing today, Haneke's *Das weiße Band*, however, although dealing explicitly with the theme of German history, in fact breaks away from the way in which

German history has previously been represented in German language film. Instead of merely presenting German history ‘as it was’, Haneke instead presents us with these historical events from the point of view of a potentially dishonest narrator, forcing us to constantly question what we see and hear on screen. Similarly, instead of presenting us with polarised images of victims and perpetrators and goodies and baddies, as is typical of German language Holocaust film, Haneke blurs the boundaries between them, again forcing us, the viewer, to question the way in which German history is being represented onscreen.

The questions that I will address throughout this analysis are: In what ways is German history being represented in Haneke’s film and why? And, how does Haneke blur the boundaries between victim and perpetrator in his film and what goal does this achieve?

The Representation of German History on Screen

Now I wish to examine how German history is being represented on screen. First and foremost, the plot of the film is purposely ambiguous. The film deals with the fictional feudal German village of Eichwald in the years preceding the First World War. This period of history is being portrayed through the depiction of a number of families within the village and the strange events that occur around them.

The film is narrated by the village school teacher, however, from the offset we are forced to question whether or not we trust his account of German history. Let’s go directly to the beginning of the film where the school teacher confesses, through the voiceover, that some of the things he is about to say, may not be entirely factual as the events he is about to discuss could indeed be fabricated due to the unreliability of memory recall, or could have been distorted as a result of village gossip and hearsay. Immediately, we the viewers are made

aware that the historical events that are about to be shown on screen are perhaps not to be entirely trusted. We must also take into account the period of history in which the narrator is discussing (pre-World War One), in relation to that period of history which he is narrating from (post-World War Two). What are his intentions? Could this be an attempt to exonerate himself of the Nazi crimes of the Holocaust? The ambiguity and the unreliability of the narrator forces us to question the way German history is being portrayed onscreen which creates a distance from the false naturalism that is often used in German language film to portray historic events. Haneke wants his film to be presented as artefact and wants the viewer to question the authenticity and moral integrity of what is being shown on screen.

Not only is this achieved by the use of a potentially untrustworthy narrator, however. Throughout the film we are also presented with a number of events that occur behind closed doors that the schoolteacher could not possibly have witnessed. For example, conversations and sexual relations involving the doctor and the midwife and the scene where we observe the doctor's daughter Anna explain death to her younger brother Rudi are all events which take place in the realm of privacy beyond the prying eyes of onlookers. This is a device used by Haneke to further signal that one should distrust the supposed 'reality' of what is shown and claimed and is furthermore an effect that invites the viewer to formulate their own individual interpretations of the film and of German history.

An additional technique used by Haneke to encourage the viewer to make judgement based on their own perception is the use of camera angles and framing. In a number of scenes we watch the drama unfold from through a window, down a corridor, or through a half opened door which reinforces our awareness of a gap between us and the action. As we watch the beginning of a conversation between Anna and Rudi about the truth of death and the

whereabouts of their mother from outside of the room, through an open door, we become an objective spectator.

Another way in which Haneke presents German history in a way that is intended to be questioned by the viewer is the use of black and white in his film. The film was shot in colour but then was converted to black and white in order to present the period of history being represented onscreen as a historical artefact which is further aided by the use of the old school teacher's voiceover.

So, we can conclude, that Haneke's representation of history on screen goes against the naturalist approach of historical storytelling forcing us to constantly question the information that is being given to us. Instead of merely presenting us with a series of events that provide us with an honest, authentic account of German history, Haneke highlights the problematic nature of attempting to represent history on screen, showcasing how certain historical events can become distorted depending on one person's memory and perhaps their ulterior intentions.

Victims and Perpetrators

Now we are going to address the second question: how does Haneke blur the boundaries between victim and perpetrator in his film and what goal does this achieve?

Firstly, going back to the potentially unreliable narrator, his opening suggestion that the story he is about to tell could explain some of the events that occurred in Germany in the years to follow immediately alludes to a psycho-historical reading of National Socialism. So, let's observe how Haneke's representation of pre-World War One village life and the events that

occur in this village provide us with a possible explanation of the events that occurred in Germany during the Second World War.

Once again, Haneke does not tell us what to believe, however provides us with a series of clues in order for us to interpret history ourselves. The film features a number of unexplained and unaccounted for violent events that occur in the village. For example, the film opens with the doctor getting injured after his horse ran into some invisible wire that had been purposely tied to a tree with the intention of brutally injuring him. As the film develops a number of other strange things begin to happen. The baron's son is found brutally beaten, a field worker falls into some machinery and is killed, the pastor's young child is left to freeze to death, and the midwife's Down's Syndrome son is found in the woods maimed and blinded. We, the viewer, never witness any of the events take place and thus the film acts as a kind of 'whodunnit', constantly forcing us to ask ourselves who could be responsible for these awful crimes and what are their motivations?

It is in parallel to these unexplained acts of violence that we are also presented with scenes of child abuse. The pastor regularly beats his children with a cane for disobedience and ties a white ribbon (which gives the film its title) around the arms of the two eldest children as a reminder of the Godly purity that they should attempt to abide by. The film also indirectly shows the doctor, who was injured in the horse riding incident at the beginning of the film, sexually abusing his young daughter.

It is not until later in the film, that the 'unexplained acts of violence' and the regular incidences of child abuse amongst the village's families can be linked. As we observe Klara, the pastor's eldest daughter, kill her father's prize parakeet and then place its dead body in the shape of a crucifix with the offending pair of scissors, we are suddenly made aware of the violent nature of the children. Also, more importantly, when the midwife's Down's

Syndrome son is found maimed, he is found with a sign around his neck reading a quote from the Ten Commandments: 'I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children.' Suddenly, with the help of the admission from the narrator, the film implies that as a result of their tyrannical, authoritarian upbringing, the children are 'punishing' their parents in the same violent way that their parents are punishing them. Thus, the children of the film constitute the film's victims, however, they are also portrayed as perpetrators.

Firstly, let us look at the way in which the village children are presented as victims in the film. Throughout the film religion plays a key function the children's' oppression. In this feudal patriarchal society that is being portrayed, the children must adhere to their father in the name of the higher, omnipresent father, God. Martin, the young son of the pastor, is presented in the film as a key victim of this abusive upbringing. Not only is he forced to wear the white ribbon in order to publically show his failure to live up to his moral purity, however, his natural sexual urges are ruthlessly repressed by the pastor as his attempts at masturbation are seen to defy the moral innocence that is projected onto childhood. In one particular scene, the pastor attempts to terrify his son into confessing to his 'crime'. The pastor then forces his son to have his hands tied to the bed to refrain him from performing this 'sinful' and 'dangerous' act in times of temptation. Thus, by informing Martin that this natural act is not only dangerous and which will inevitably lead to an appalling demise, but that it is also a crime against God, Martin is bound to feel guilt and shame as this natural sexual desire is transformed into a sin. This is made clear to the viewer when the school teacher, whilst out fishing, spots the pastor's son performing an extremely dangerous balancing act on the edge of a high bridge. When asked what he is doing, Martin replies: 'Ich habe Gott die Gelegenheit gegeben, mich zu töten. Er hat es nicht getan, also ist er zufrieden mit mir.' Clearly his authoritarian upbringing and the tirade of abuse he receives from his

father for his 'normal' childlike behaviour produces feelings of guilt attributed to the fear that he is not only frowned upon by his father, but also by God.

Now let us see how these child victims also become the film's perpetrators. Indeed, the representation of children in Haneke's film is highly ambiguous. On their own and on face value, the children exude a perfect portrayal of innocence. This is particularly apparent in the doctor's son Rudi. As we witness the young, angelic boy question his sister on death, asking her solemnly, 'Müssen alle sterben? Wirklich alle?', this acts as a highly stylised depiction of childhood innocence which contrasts greatly to the violent acts which the village children perpetrate, reinforcing that children are not born inherently violent but rather they have this behaviour instilled into them. They are seen to mirror the behaviour of their parents, punishing them in the ways that they have been punished, in order to adhere to the higher morality that they are in constant reference to.

At first we can observe the children disciplining each other. For example, at the beginning of the film, Klara is seen to scold her brother Martin for his failure to greet the midwife in the correct manner. However, just as the children are brutally punished for their failure to live up to God's moral innocence, it soon becomes apparent that, through their incessant eavesdropping and devious behaviour, the children are made aware that their parents are not adhering to this higher morality and thus the children punish their parents for their sins.

The view that those brought up with absolute morals and values impressed on them through violence will inevitably lead to them absorbing these values and acting in a similar manner is a notion that is explored in Haneke's film. His suggestion through the temporal specificity of the film and through the school teacher's archaic voice-over that the children of the film will inevitably become the perpetrators of the Nazi crimes of the Second World War is given a certain air of credibility, when, as the film progresses, it becomes apparent that the children

are almost certainly the perpetrators of the crimes which have been plaguing the village. Indeed, the children can be seen circling the scene of every crime, suggesting that perhaps they may hold a degree of responsibility for them. This is made particularly clear in the scene following the attack on the midwife's Down's syndrome son, Karli, which leaves him blinded as we observe the children crowding round the midwife's house, attempting to look through the window to catch a glimpse of her maimed son. The voiceover of the school teacher notes that he found this behaviour highly ambiguous as the local children usually avoid the midwife's son on account of his disability, thus indicating that there is more to their interest in Karli than mere concern.

Conclusion

Haneke's blurring of the boundaries between victim and perpetrator in the portrayal of the village's children aids his psycho-historical investigation into the roots of fascism as the ambiguity as to why and how these innocent, perfectly presentable children can commit acts of unutterable violence and cruelty prompts an investigation from the spectator. The film suggests, with the information provided by the narrator, that these children, who mirror the abusive behaviour of their fathers, will go on to become the perpetrators of the Second World War.