

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Das Weisse Band (The White Ribbon)

Director: Michael Haneke

Script: Michael Haneke

Cinematography: Christian Berger

Producer: Stefan Arndt

Spieldauer: 144 minutes

Release date: 21-May-2009 (Cannes Film Festival)

Cast: Christian Friedel (the schoolteacher); Leonie Benesch (Eva); Ulrich Tukur (the Baron); Ursina Lardi (the Baroness); Burghart KlauBner (the pastor); Rainer Bock (the doctor); Susanne Lothar (the midwife); Roxane Duran (Anna); Lenard Proxauf

The color of pathology...

Allen Krumm

Critics and academics alike place Michael Haneke in the modernist tradition and then agreement fizzles out. Robert Horton called him a “*modern master*.” Jonathan Romney said a Haneke film is “*a terrorist attack on the audience*.” Peter Matthews considers even Haneke’s flaws better than the strengths of other directors. Mark Kermode referred to Haneke’s “*... perverse precision in his desire to torment an audience...*”. And on and on it goes, back and forth. But whether pro or con, none of them can resist watching his films.

The opinions of two more critics would have been useful, but unfortunately neither Martin Luther nor Robert Bresson were able to attend a screening of Michael Haneke’s *Das Weisse Band*. We can state briefly that Luther would have cried “*You got it all wrong*” and Monsieur Bresson would have said something along the lines of “*Well done, thou good and faithful epigone*.”

A line from Robert Lowell provides a useful focus for Haneke’s latest film: “*Heightened from life, yet paralyzed by fact*.” It is hard to exaggerate the aesthetic achievement of the movie. This is a beautiful piece of work. The austerity of the black and white film, the often overly intense lighting, the melancholic distance shots of field and sky and village, the patiently lingering camera, the intimate sound of rustling leaves and the children’s choir hauntingly intoning Luther’s classic hymn all powerfully reinforce the intended *Verfremdungseffekt* or in Lowell’s terms, the heightening from life. Yet even as the movie pushes you up and away with all this almost hypnotic beauty, another dynamic pulls you in.

The story occurs over the course of a year from 1913 to 1914, and while it realistically captures the daily pace and seasonal rhythms of a rural village and the stifling socio-economic hierarchy, Haneke is doggedly determined to pull us in and then paralyze us with a broad assortment of sordid, banal and brutal facts. The story is dark,

disturbing, off putting and sometimes even offensive. In the beginning, the aged narrator says that although "I don't know if the story I want to tell you is true..." it may nonetheless "...perhaps clarify some things that happened in this country." So one waits, wondering if that goal will be achieved.

It is hard to say if Haneke puts any stock in traditional theology, but the sampling of children who populate his story certainly gives one pause to dwell on the distinct possibility of original sin. The adults may be pathetic and in the case of the doctor, even perverse, but the children are positively terrifying. It is as if they are outsiders or aliens, thrown down upon the community where they reside, rather than being native born inhabitants who arrived in the usual way. The accusing eyes, the downcast faces, the robotic responses to adults, the lurking together outside windows and doors like a flock of Hitchcock's birds, the clasped hands and precise pacing as they walk, all these characteristics just as easily suggest a willing embrace of evil rather than a loss of innocence.

The school teacher (who is the young version of the old narrator) and his inamorata Eva the nanny inhabit their own little garden of Eden, bounded by a larger community suffering from existential overload. The patriarchal figures are burnt out, seemingly baffled by their duties. The proletarians, epitomized by the Felder family, oscillate between a burning resentment and enervating apathy. Pa Felder leaves the answer to the ultimate philosophical question hanging in the air, while his angry heir Max vents his rage by decapitating cabbages. The class structure, seemingly permanent, seemingly static, teeters on the brink of implosion. Most members of the community maintain, like Eva on her bike, a desperate, precarious balance.

The *Grundstimmung* Haneke induces is relentlessly morbid. He seems to be psychoanalyzing an entire culture, not in historical context, but in 21st century, emphatically post Christian terms. Ironically he succeeds to a considerable extent in illustrating the human capacity for sin, while apparently not believing in the reality of sin,

but rather implying that such human failings are or somehow can be caused by a pathological synergy of traditional society and religion. Haneke does not seem willing or able to interrogate either on their own terms and so the clarity the narrator hoped for in the beginning is never realized.

Luther would have appreciated the revival of his great hymn, but would have gruffly instructed the director to humble himself and study Psalm 46. Moreover, he will almost certainly bring a law suit from beyond the grave if, in the wake of the success of *Das Weisse Band*, any entrepreneur starts marketing "ein feste Burg" as a ring tone.

Mr. Bresson would have loved this film. He would see Haneke's work as a continuation of his lifelong effort to create a new language of film. In carrying on Bresson's legacy, Haneke and his admirers have at various times articulated a belief that by creative uses of form in cinema, one can induce viewer engagement on an ethical level, making viewers responsible for and aware of the responsibility as to how they react to the content of a film. This sounds profound, but cashes out as pretence, as pointed out by the noted critic Amos Vogel, who cuts to the chase by noting that film "is an inherently manipulative medium."

Haneke's rendering of the failings of the society he portrays in *Das Weisse Band* is no more neutral than the dogmatics propounded in Luther's Catechism. He certainly wants us to agree that the darkness he portrays is the fundamental reality, and that the causes of that darkness are those which he implies. In his own way he is every bit the brawling polemicist that Luther was. Again, Amos Vogel gets to the heart of the matter: "All filmmaking inevitably entails control over the spectator; it is the degree and kind of control that will vary from filmmaker to filmmaker, from film to film. Haneke's stated intention to have the viewer come to his own insights and explanations, presupposes in its purest form, a level playing field that cannot exist."

So Haneke, obviously a rare talent with a gift for creating and linking images, is a preacher seeking to convert us to his rather nihilistic gospel as much as he is a Socratic cineaste pushing and provoking us to answer the grim questions he poses with his morbidly lovely images. He is alleged to have modified Jean Luc Godard's famous quote ("*The cinema is truth twenty-four times per second*") to his own version: "*Film is 24 lies per second at the service of truth, or at the service of the attempt to find the truth.*" But Godard had another quip that, like Amos Vogel's comment, gets right to the point: "*Cinema is the most beautiful fraud in the world.*" Haneke should think about this after he gets done meditating on Psalm 46.