



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The White Ribbon

Michael Haneke on 'The White Ribbon'

Did you always envisage having a narrator?

Right from the start. As in my other films, I wanted to nourish a certain sense of distrust regarding the veracity of the film's story, and having a narrator allowed for distancing. At the beginning he says something like, 'I'm not sure as to the truth of everything I'm about to tell you; some of it I just heard about and didn't witness myself.' So the viewer knows the story is not 'reality' but a memory, an artefact created by someone. I felt that was necessary because this was a film set in the past. It's the same with using black and white rather than colour – it reminds you it's not reality you're seeing but something artificial.

With so many characters, were you worried it might be too densely informative for audiences?

People have to watch it closely. But I myself like doing that; I prefer being invited to engage with a film rather than have it wash over me. What I wanted to do was to make a film that was both long and fast – I recall Bresson saying he wanted to make films that were simple and fast. So for ten minutes or so, the film may feel a little fast and confusing as you try to work out who's who, but after that – hopefully – you get used to it.

Did you do a lot of research?

I did, especially into educational ideas and methods up until the early years of the 20th century. I read plenty of books written at that time about education – on how, for example, parents would deal with certain problems – and quite a lot of the events in the film are taken from those books: the white ribbon itself, for example. I also read a lot about rural life in the 19th and early 20th centuries. At that time, of course, most of the population lived in villages, and there was the classic feudal hierarchy: the landowner – the baron – representing the state; then the church; then the school; then the workers, the peasants. That's it. So that was my model; after that it's a question of using invention for the characters.

What was your prime purpose in making this film? What was the idea that drove you?

I really don't know. Maybe the idea of the difference between a child's appearance and that child's interior life. When I was about 11 or so, I might not have been able to explain what I saw, but I noticed everything. Children understand so much – often better than adults, because they've better instincts, and we lose that intuition as we get older. Even if a couple try to conceal any hostility they may feel towards one another from their child, the child will know it's there, just by noticing little gestures and other things the adults no longer notice. A child is never innocent. Well, maybe a baby... but as soon as it begins to reflect a little, a child sees and understands everything. And just because a child won't let itself take revenge – because it knows it's dependent on adults – that doesn't mean it doesn't want to take revenge.

Why did you set the film so precisely in that region?

Because of a particular form of Lutheran Protestantism that's there in northern Germany. When I was first thinking about the project, I kept asking myself why so many Nazis, in explaining their actions, would reply – like Eichmann, with no apparent sense of guilt or conscience – that it had been their duty as loyal servants of the Reich. I felt that this way of thinking about one's responsibilities to a superior was closely linked to the Protestantism of Luther.

Did you by any chance have August Sander's photos in mind when casting?

We looked at many photographs of the period to get things like the costumes right. But Sander's are by far the best photos of that time, and were especially helpful when it came to the faces, especially of the children. People look different now and it took a lot of work finding people with the right sort of face. Though I myself did auditions only with the 25 or so who'd been pre-selected, I did look at photos and videos of 7000.

Your use of subtly heightened sound is especially effective in the film.

I always love working on the sound. When you're editing the footage, your choice is limited to the shots you did, so the possibilities are also limited. But with sound, you can improve things in all sorts of ways: you can change the tone, even the actual words used, and of course all the other sounds. I often include sounds in the script; you can either try to get them while shooting, or leave it until you're mixing in the studio. I like spending a lot of time on the mix – often rather more than on the image – and happily I'm now in a position where I can ask for, say, ten or 12 weeks and get it. I love that, because for me, apart from the writing – which is fine once you're past the initial blank page bit – it's the part of filmmaking I like best.

For me, pre-production is very stressful, because you never know whether or when things will finally happen as you want. And shooting is extraordinarily stressful; I wake up every morning in fear that things won't go according to schedule, that something will go wrong and we'll have to do reshoots, which can then mean having to work too quickly. Editing is better, but making choices can be very painful, especially if you find that some of your sequence-shots are too long; it's rare that you can achieve a pace you'd really like. But by the time you get to the sound mix, all that stuff is already dealt with, so you're just putting in final touches that will improve things.

Do you feel your style – your approach to cinematic storytelling – has changed at all over the years?

I hope it's developed, rather than changed. After all, I'd been working in television for a long time before I made my first feature, which wasn't until I was 48 – (laughs) the same age as for Bresson! But I'm perhaps more conscious of my methods now. When I started out I did things more instantaneously. Now I'm trying to find a cinematic language that restores a little freedom to the viewer. With a book the reader provides the images through imagination; other art forms are like that too. But cinema steals those images from the viewer, in that it replaces them with images made by someone else. In providing images, words and all the rest, cinema determines and fixes many things; and thanks to that, it's easy to manipulate the viewer, by allowing little chance of standing back a bit to reflect on the film. From a moral perspective, that's not good.

So I try to give the viewer a little more freedom; but how, if an image is still an image? You have to work with what's offscreen – or, at least, with what is not onscreen – and use a kind of dramaturgy that isn't 'finished', that leaves openings for interpretation. Those seem to me the only two ways of giving the viewer more freedom. I see my job as being partly about increasing the possibility of imagining for the spectator. That way we might bring the cinema more in line with the other arts. It seems the only way for the cinema to make any real progress. Film can become faster, more violent, more technologically sophisticated, of course, but even then it's staying fundamentally the same.

So that's my aim.

Michael Haneke interviewed by Geoff Andrew, *Sight & Sound*, December 2009

THE WHITE RIBBON

(DAS WEISSE BAND EINE DEUTSCHE KINDERGESCHICHTE)

Director: Michael Haneke

©: X Filme Creative Pool, Wega-Film, Films du Losange (Paris),

Lucky Red, ARD, Bayerischer Rundfunk,

Österreichischer Rundfunk-Fernsehen, France 3 Cinéma

Presented by: X Filme Creative Pool, Wega-Film,

Films du Losange (Paris), Lucky Red

In co-operation with: ARD, Bayerischer Rundfunk

ORF Film/Fernseh-Abkommen, France 3 Cinéma, Canal+, TPS Star

With the support of: MBB - Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg

Supervising Producer: Michael Katz

Produced by: Stefan Arndt (Berlin); Veit Heiduschka (Vienna);

Margaret Ménégoz (Paris); Andrea Occhipinti (Rome)

Line Producer: Ulli Neumann

Associate Producer: Stefano Massenzi

Controlling X Filme Production Controller: Cordula Herrmann

Production Accountants: Michael Vogt, Janina Bukowski

Production Co-ordinators: Ulrike Lässer, Manuela Groh

Production Manager: Miki Emmrich

France Production Manager: Amira Chemakhi

Set Manager: Gisela Emberger

Location Manager: Johannes Schröder

Brandenburg Location Manager: Felix Manthey

Johannstorf Location Manager: Cathleen Hoffmann

Germany Post-production Supervisor: Andreas Dobers

1st Assistant Directors: Hanus Polak Jr,

Kris Portier de Bellair, Hervé Grandsart

2nd Assistant Director: Katharina Birò

Assistant to the Director: Kathrin Resetarits

Script Supervisor: Alice Stengl

Casting Director: Simone Bär

Child Actors: Markus Schleinzer, Carmen Loley

Screenwriter: Michael Haneke

Story: Michael Haneke

Script Adviser: Jean-Claude Carrière

Director of Photography: Christian Berger

B Camera Operators: Jörg Widmer, Marcus Pohlus

2nd Unit Camera Operators: Leah Striker

Focus Puller: Gerald Helf

Clapper Loader: Stefan Kaindl

Key Grip: Emmanuel Aubry

Steadicam: Jörg Widmer, Marcus Pohlus

Gaffer: Kimber Lee Jerrett

Visual Special Effects: Geoffrey Kleindorfer

Special Effects: Nefzer Babelsberg GmbH

(Special Effects Supervisor: Gerd Feuchter)

Edited by: Monika Willi

Production Designer: Christoph Kanter

Art Director: Anja Müller

Set Decorator: Hans Wagner

Property Masters: Ellen Heltzel, Ilse Töpfer

Costume Designer: Moidele Bickel

Costume Adviser: Dorothée Uhrmacher

Make-up by: Waldemar Pokromski

Make-up Artists: Anette Keiser, Cornelia Wentzel

Title Design: Komelius Tarmann, Judith Rataitz

Choirmaster: Karl-Friedrich Beringer

Music Advisers: Jörg Strodthoff, Martin Achenbach,

Christoph D. Minke, Karsten Lessing

Sound: Guillaume Sciamia, Jean-Pierre LaForce

Boom Operator: Olivier Burgaud

Supervising Sound Editor: Vincent Guillon

Foley Artist: Pascal Chauvin

Historical Advisers: Heidemarie Frimodig, Hei-Mu-Ko

Stunts: Buff Connection

Supervising Stunt Co-ordinator: Volkhard Buff

Horse Trainer: Ulrich Wessel

Cast

Christian Friedel (*schoolteacher*)

Ernst Jacobi (*voice of old schoolteacher/narrator*)

Leonie Benesch (*Eva*)

Ulrich Tukur (*the Baron*)

Ursina Lardi (*the Baroness*)

Fion Mutert (*Sigi*)

Michael Kranz (*the tutor*)

Burghart Klausner (*the pastor*)

Steffi Kühnert (*the pastor's wife*)

Maria-Victoria Dragus (*Klara*)

Leonard Proxauf (*Martin*)

Levin Henning (*Adi*)

Johanna Busse (*Margarete*)

Yuma Amecke (*Annchen*)

Thibault Sérié (*Gustl*)

Josef Bierbichler (*the steward*)

Gabriela Maria Schmeide (*the steward's wife*)

Janina Fautz (*Erna*)

Enno Trebs (*Georg*)

Theo Trebbs (*Ferdinand*)

Rainer Bock (*the doctor*)

Susanne Lothar (*the midwife*)

Roxane Duran (*Anna*)

Miljan Chatelain (*Rudi*)

Eddy Grahl (*Karli*)

Branko Samarovski (*the farmer*)

Klaus Manchen (*the farmer's dubbed voice*)

Birgit Minichmayr (*Frieda*)

Sebastian Hülk (*Max*)

Kai Malina (*Karl*)

Kristina Knepppek (*Else*)

Stephanie Amarell (*Sophie*)

Bianca Mey (*Paula*)

Aaron Denkel (*Kurti*)

Mika Ahrens (*Willi*)

Detlev Buck (*Eva's father*)

Anne-Kathrin Gummich (*Eva's mother*)

Luzie Ahrens, Gary Bestla, Leonard Boes, Felix Böttcher,

Sophie Czech, Paraschiva Dragus, Selina Ewald, Nora Gruler,

Tim Guderjahn, Jonas Jennerjahn, Ole Joensson, Gerrit Langentepe,

Lena Pankow, Sebastian Pauli, Franz Rewoldt, Kevin Schmolinski,

Alexander Sedl, Nino Seide, Marvin Ray Spey, Malin Steffen,

Lilli Trebs, Paul Wolf, Margarete Zimmermann (*children in classroom*)

Carmen-Maja Antoni (*bathing midwife*)

Christian Klischat (*policeman*)

Michael Schenk, Hanus Polak Jr (*CID inspectors*)

Sara Schivazappa (*Italian nanny*)

Marisa Growaldt (*servant*)

Vincent Krüger (*Fritz, a farmhand*)

Rüdiger Hauffe (*foreman*)

Arndt Schwering-Sohnrey, Florian Köhler (*tenant farmers*)

Sebastian Lach, Marcin Tyrol, Sebastian Badurek,

Krysiak Zarzecki, Sebastian Pawlak (*seasonal farmhands*)

Lilli Fichtner, Amelie Litwin, Paula Kalinski (*harvest feast girls*)

Matthias Linke, Vladik Otaryan, Peter Mörike,

Hans-Matthias Glassmann, Nikita Vaganov (*brass band musicians*)

Germany/Austria/France/Italy 2009©

144 mins

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