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TWENTIETH-CENTURY TRAUMAS DEPICTED IN THE MOVIE THE WHITE RIBBON BY MICHAEL HANEKE

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Abstract

Film as a relatively new medium has influenced the formation of collective consciousness almost from its inception. The generation brought up in the era of glass screens and familiar with the style instilled by mass media has soaked in with some patterns. Michael Haneke's unusual cinema argues with the popular models of film creation. It allows the viewer to make his interpretations, does not facilitate anything, and makes a distance that is supposed to lead to reflection. Haneke brings to light the darkest corners of the human mind. In The White Ribbon (2009) Haneke depicts the society in a northern German village just before World War I. This cinematic work has an important social and ethical significance for the contemporary viewer. It also cannot be denied a deep psychological dimension. The movie poses questions about the face of post-traumas of the 20th century. Haneke shows that behind huge mechanisms are ordinary people with a specific social entanglement. The author aims to try to search for the genesis of violence and the decline of societies based on the mentioned picture. The author uses in her work analytical - synthetic, comparative, and film analysis methods.

Keywords

Michael Haneke, The White Ribbon, Film, Trauma

1. Introduction

In this section, the author aims to introduce the reader to the topic of the article. It is important to recall the significance of film as one of the main mediums for conveying content, as well as to introduce the phenomenon of the director.

1.1 The Importance of a Film as a Medium

From the very beginning, the cinematograph was appreciated for its registration and reference character. The film was an excellent form of documenting events. The coronations of the monarchs were recorded, as well as modest family celebrations. Originally, when access to equipment was not as common as it is today, the use of the camera was determined almost entirely by the authorities. Of course, this contributed to their empowerment.

Already at the beginning of the era of the cinema, the authorities perceived this medium as a useful tool in conducting politics. Propaganda films are also associated with this phenomenon. The question then arises – to what extent is the director burdened with responsibility towards the film's audience? It is worth underlining, that cinema plays a huge role in shaping collective consciousness and building a social vision of events. Filmmakers, therefore, should consider the impact of their work.

A work of art has the potential to become the beginning of a public debate on a given topic. This, in turn, may lead to some attempts to resolve the conflict, to tame a past trauma. However – in some cases – to the intensification of antagonism. Filmmakers often take one of the sides, and their works are an attempt to answer important social questions and problems. Some images can touch deeply – they renew the scarring wound, break people out of comfort. Stabilization which is based on the impression of understanding the world and the laws that govern it is in ruins. Some images deeply touch the past trauma.

There is no country untouched by such problem. As it is pointed out in the work written under supervision of Brygida Pawłowska-Jądrzyk and Katarzyna Taras, taking into consideration Polish realities, “some films touch upon historically difficult experiences that have not been worked out socially so far. Such cases include, among others, the events of March '68, the Volhynia massacre or the issues of post-war settlements in the so-called Recovered Territories” (Pawłowska-Jądrzyk, Taras, et al., 2019).

1.2 The Concept of Trauma

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), trauma is: “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks,

strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives” (<https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/>). Moreover, according to the sociologist Piotr Sztompka (2000), this medical term can be extended to the entire social organism. The process is dynamic and multi-phase.

Michael Haneke has already managed to prove to his viewers that he likes to extract long-standing traumas and uncover old, almost forgotten stories (as an example could serve “The Hidden” from 2005, which tells the story of a long-standing intercultural conflict: the Algerian War of Independence and the Paris Massacre from 17th of October 1961). “The White Ribbon – A German Children’s Story” (2009) tells about the trauma related to the genesis of the twentieth-century wars.

1.3 Director’s Remarkability

Alexander D. Ornella and Stefanie Knauss write that: “Michael Haneke’s films can be polarizing. Nobody, I would assume, who has seen *Funny Games* (1997 and 2007), *Caché* (2005), *Das weiße Band* (*The White Ribbon*, 2009) is completely untouched by these films and their effects. Haneke forces the viewers to take a position, and as a director, he is as much loved as he is hated for that amongst both critics and the audience” (2010: 63).

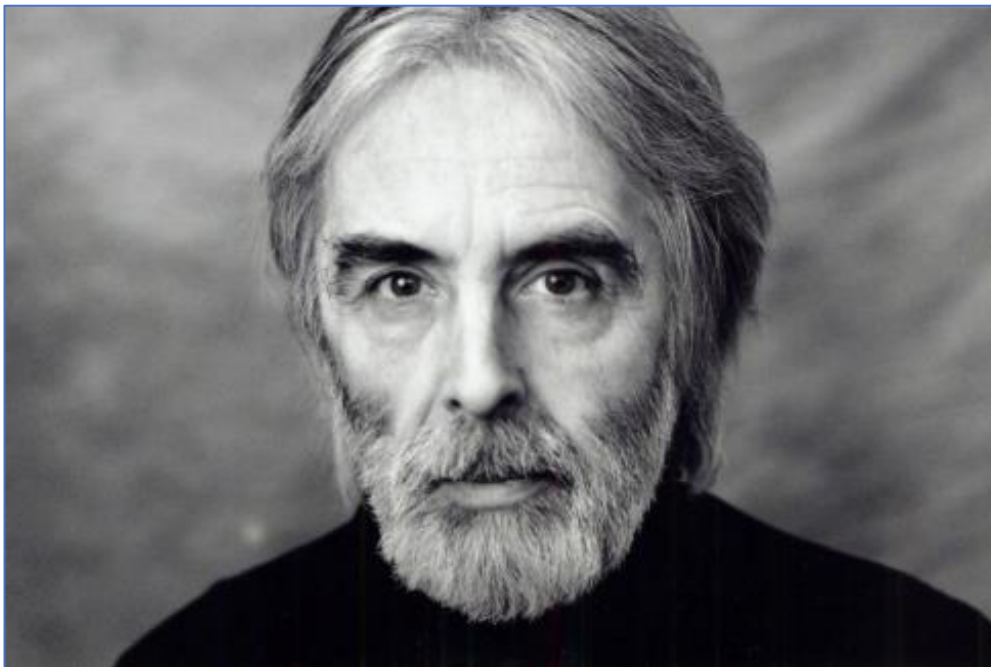


Figure 1: *Michael Haneke (IMDb, Michael Haneke)*

What is noteworthy, for Michael Haneke, showing the possible roots of fascism was important and also kind of “innovative”. During the interview with Karin Schiefer, he underlines that: “there was a glut of movies about Nazi Germany and German fascism, but not

one about its roots, i.e., about the period before. I thought this question of how it came to be was particularly exciting” (Grundman, Naqvi, Root et al., 2020: 111). The artist underlines as well, that his movie is a kind of art, and each art is governed by its laws: “Of course, the film is not an in-depth analysis of the question of how fascism comes into being – it does not want to be that – but it goes to the root of the subject” (Grundman, Naqvi, Root et al., 2020: 111).

The movie has received numerous awards and nominations. Among them were: two nominations to Academy Award (2010 – Best Achievement in Cinematography, Best Foreign Language Film of the Year), Golden Globe for the Best Foreign Language Film (2010), four awards in Cannes for the director (2009) – Cinema Prize of the French National Education System, FIPRESCI Prize, Palme d'Or and Prize of the Ecumenical Jury – Special Mention.

2. The Life in Eichwald

This part is devoted to a short explanation of the plot. The author presents the most important characters and stories, into which they have been skillfully woven by Haneke's hand. The director emphasizes the Protestant upbringing in the background of the whole story, which is not alien to him.

2.1 A Comeback to Roots

The script for this film was created over the course of ten years. Haneke – after a long time – returns to the German-speaking environment. The action of “The White Ribbon” takes place a year before the outbreak of World War I in Eichwald, a fictional, small, and very Protestant village in the former Prussia (Kałużyński: 2009). What is happening on the screen, is constantly being commented on by a village teacher who plays the role of the narrator.

The director, for the first time, decides to use only black and white colours because, as he comments, our image of that period is usually black and white. What is interesting, as we can read in the electronic version of “The Guardian”: “the icily exact imagery and composition are avowedly based on the photographs of August Sander (Sander has an eerie picture of a uniformed German soldier, gazing serenely into the camera lens, which has in its background a village very like the one in The White Ribbon), and also the work of dramatists such as Frank Wedekind and Max Frisch” (Bradshaw, 2009).

According to Haneke, the colour would influence the perception of the presented reality as less abstract (Brunette, 2010). It creates a sense of historical distance and makes what is shown paradoxically more substantial, and therefore closer. As Haneke mentions, it was much harder to achieve such an effect than making a film in colour. However, it was worth it. The

artist says: “Black and white aided in suppressing the nuances, which often reveal the artificiality of the décor. I am very happy that the reactions to the visual aspect of the film are so positive, as it was one of our ambitions to create a film that looks like a documentary of the time, where décor and costumes look like in old photos” (Grundman, Naqvi, Root et al., 2020: 112).

This decision harmonizes with the distance achieved thanks to the narrative of the venerable lector (Ernst Jacobi). Because of this, one can see the story more objectively. The voice “of the old man” suggests that he can reflect on the events from a historical distance. The Austrian director explains: “Judging from the age of the voice, he could have lived not only through fascism but also the time of Baader-Meinhof. Both Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin came from homes with a very strong Protestant tradition. That does not mean that I think Protestantism demonstrates a tendency toward political extremism. However, Protestantism has a more rigorous way of thinking and more rigid moral aspirations than Catholicism. These are not fundamentally bad, but when they are absolutized and thus inverted, they can be dangerous” (Grundman, Naqvi, Root et al., 2020: 112).

2.2 Cross-Section of Contemporary Society

What is more, Haneke also generalized roles of some characters – such as Baron (Ulrich Tukur), Estate manager (Josef Bierbichler), Doctor (Rainer Bock), Pastor (Burghart Klaußner), Farmer (Branko Samarovski) or the Midwife (Susanne Lothar), around whom their families also appear. There is also a young woman Eva (Leonie Benesch), with whom the Teacher (Christian Friedel) falls in love. By such generalization, Haneke attempts to present the history of the contemporary community to the viewers. The artist said, that it was the use of general terms for a job or position, rather than specific names that made the film more symbolic. It also emphasizes the rigid structure of the rural community, which has nothing to do with individual personalities, but much to do with social roles (Brunette, 2010).

In “The White Ribbon”, as in the Austrian's other films, there is not much music. It appears very sporadically when, for example, the Teacher plays the organ, the Baroness (Ursina Lardi) the piano or the choir sings songs in the church. Haneke made every effort to make individual people seem as “authentic” as possible, especially by making the characters, especially children, look like taken directly from the photographs of people from that period. As Peter Brunette writes: “According to the director, some even thousand children were considered for the children’s roles, with the first criterion being acting ability but the second being that of an authentic look that we unconsciously associate with the period” (2010: 131).

A significant change is the refreshing simplicity of this movie. Although the plot revolves around uncovering the mystery – unlike Haneke's earlier films – the viewer almost always knows exactly what is happening in each scene, who the different characters are and how they are related (despite the large cast in the film). When it comes to technology: close-ups dominate, while shots from a moving camera are very rare. Long shots are also occasional.



Figure 2: *Haneke's children in "The White Ribbon" (The Christian Science Monitor)*

2.3 Apparent Banality

"The White Ribbon" seems to tell the story of the interpersonal dynamics of the conservative Protestant community at the turn of the century. The viewer has an insight into the unusual personal lives of the villagers, controlled by a rigid social hierarchy. Haneke focuses on showing banal everyday life interspersed with events that are difficult to explain, announced by the narrator at the very beginning of the piece: "I believe I must tell of the strange events that occurred in our village, because they may cast a new light on some of the goings-on in this country". They set the pace of action, disturbing the peace of god-fearing inhabitants and disrupting their monotonous, predictable lives. They divide the film into a few short stories, somehow connected into a coherent whole. It is important, however, to pay attention to the subtitle of the film, which does not have a Polish-title equivalent. "A German Children's Story" suggests that "The White Ribbon" focuses on the history of the youngest representatives of the rural community, who are also the main characters of the story.

The mentioned above "strange events", are suspicious accidents involving adults and mysterious beatings of children. At the beginning of the movie, the doctor's horse stumbles over the line which is invisible at first glance, which causes the rider to fall. As a result, the Doctor

spends a long time in the hospital undergoing recovery. The Farmer's wife dies, in some mysterious circumstances, at the Baron's sawmill. The young son of the Baron – Sigi (Fion Mutert) – is badly beaten by unknown torturers.

As these subsequent events begin to shock the villagers, the viewer begins to see the sad reality behind the carefully constructed facade of a godly community. It turns out that a respected doctor has long been molesting his fourteen-year-old daughter Anna (Roxane Duran). He also mentally torments his lover – the Midwife, who remains faithfully by his side since his wife's death, helping him in raising his youngest son Rudolf (Miljan Chatelain). During one of the intimate situations, the ungrateful Doctor begins to verbally attack the woman. He is very cruel and at the end of his argument he asks: "Why don't you just die?"

Pastor, in turn, a person who is respected by the community and fearful among his children, is extremely strict and demanding. All children respectfully say goodnight to him before going to bed, kissing his hands and bowing the waist. The pastor hates opposition or any insubordination. He gives his children whips when they are late for dinner together. Martin (Leonard Proxauf) and Klara (Maria-Victoria Drăguș) are forced to wear white ribbons to symbolize the pursuit of their lost purity. The clergyman, without any evidence, also accuses Martin of masturbating. As punishment, she starts tying his hands to his bed every night.

The Estate manager also does not avoid violence. He brutally beats his son for taking another boy's flute. The doctor's children discuss topics related to death. The farmer, in turn, experiences the deed of his eldest son Max (Sebastian Hülk), who, deciding to avenge his mother's death in a dangerous sawmill, cuts down the Baron's cabbage field to zero. The old man is dismissed by his master as a result of the situation, and so is his daughter Frieda (Birgit Minichmayr), who worked as an aid during the harvest festival.

There are also very unpleasant accidents during the winter. The Estate manager's youngest son – still an infant – is left in a room with an open window, and as a result, he catches a serious cold. One night someone sets fire to the Baron's barn. Desperate and confused, the Farmer commits suicide by hanging himself in his barn, as he can no longer bear the dishonour of his family. Erna (Janina Fautz), Steward's daughter, confesses to the Teacher that she has prophetic dreams and visions. For example, she had seen something bad happening to the handicapped son of the Midwife. Indeed, not long after, another misfortune befell the child – this time Karlie (Eddy Grahl), who is severely mutilated, miraculously escaping alive. The police investigating the case, try to get more information from the scared girl in vain.

During the school's confirmation preparations, the Pastor so humiliates Klara, that she collapses in class. Most likely in retaliation, the girl kills his beloved parrot by stabbing it with scissors, then leaves a dead bird on Pastor's desk.

The doctor, midwife, and their children suddenly disappear from the village in mysterious circumstances, without anyone being informed of their intentions. Meanwhile, the Teacher concludes that the various events taking place in the village, at least the ones that remain unexplained, were caused by children who were always “magically” present at the scene. He even comes to the Pastor on this matter, who, outraged by his theory, asks the Teacher out of the house.

The Baroness wants to leave her husband for the benefit of an Italian lover, whom she met during a forced trip after the story with Sigi. She confesses to the Baron, that she can no longer stand him and that terrible village full of “malice, jealousy, and brutality”. During their furious exchange, the Steward appears to announce the shocking news – Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary has been murdered in Sarajevo. The teacher hopes that the spectre of the impending war will be reason enough to hasten the wedding with Ewa, which the girl's father (Detlev Buck) has postponed for the next year.



Figure 3: *Doctor's daughter Anna (Roxane Duran) (2011 last 2012)*

The village's enthusiasm for the coming war will eventually wipe out all previous scandals. However, the narrator's closing words are: “Today, more than a quarter of a century later, toward the end of my life, and several years after the end of a second war that was to change this world more cruelly and radically than the first one, the one that we faced at the time, I wonder if the events of those days and our silence about them weren't the germs of the tragedy toward which we were heading. Didn't we all know secretly what had happened in our

midst? Hadn't we, in a way, made it possible by closing our eyes? Didn't we keep our mouths shut because otherwise we would have had to wonder if the misdeeds of these children, of our children, weren't the result of what we'd been teaching them?"

3. How the Evil is Born

The author emphasizes here the toxicity of the presented adult approach to the way of instilling particular values into the younger generation. Notes the consequences of a similar attitude, present in the European history of the twentieth century.

3.1 Twin-track Narration

In the case of "The White Ribbon", the "great story" is located outside the narrative time of the picture. The viewer is aware of the enormous cruelties that will take place shortly after the actual action of the film. This "peripherality" – both temporal and location-based – is a source of terror.

Small events from the perspective of the later fate of the whole country may be of little importance. However, the skilful hand of the director shows clear analogies between what the viewer follows on the screen and what he knows from history. Such perception is also suggested by the off-screen voice.

The cinematic images themselves have a hidden meaning, but the viewer does not have the right premises to solve the mystery, so he experiences discomfort. This can be illustrated by the way violence is shown in this film. Despite the fact, that the particular events take place outside the frame, they are still painful for the viewer. He hopes for catharsis to the end, he wants the situation to be discharged, the evil to be named and punished, but it is not happening.

One may wonder, who is behind the sector of reality we observe. We want to know the source, but it is impossible. Figures of evil, like, for example, Doctor, Pastor, or Baron are insufficient for this and the next generation is bad as well. What is interesting, the title of the movie was original: "The Right Hand of God" (Brunette, 2010). Children brought up under certain conditions and being told repeatedly that a particular way of living and system of values are right – no matter what – will punish the others not following certain rules or not fitting to the approved template (Doctor, Sigi, mentally handicapped Karli), "just as they were violently punished, presumably for their good" (Brunette, 2010: 135).

The social diagnosis is, therefore, disturbing – omnipresent hypocrisy, legitimizing the victories of the strongest and violence against the weakest, the duality of Protestant morality, a frustrating fetishization of purity, manifested even in the titular white ribbon.

For Haneke, himself, this topic of Protestantism is important because of his background. He was raised in a Protestant family, which is not a very common belief in Austria. His father was German and Protestant, mum – Austrian and Catholic (This also left a trace on the director's life and attitude) (Doctor Honoris Causa Michael Haneke: 2013).

3.2 Responsibility

The question of responsibility should therefore apply to the whole society – in this sense, children would be victims of their times and families. This, however, does not seem to be a sufficient explanation because also in these children there is a desire for brutality and the discharge of aggression. Haneke does not believe in the innocence of children. According to the director, they are much more naive than innocent. What is more, they could be very cruel instead, but it is not a rule. Their nature is not different from adults. He says that: “Children are neither pure innocents nor pure monsters, but somewhere in-between, like the rest of us” (Grundman, Naqvi, Root, et al., 2020: 111).

Haneke said in one of the interviews that: “Children always occupy the lowest rung on the ladder of oppression and are therefore dramaturgically interesting because with them you can most impressively show a society's mechanisms. The fundamental idea was to make a film about a group of children who regard the ideals that are preached to them as absolute and for this reason punish the people who preach these ideals but whom themselves do not live by them. As soon as an ideal or a principle becomes an ideology, it turns out to be dangerous. Children tend to take seriously what they are told, and this can become dangerous. The film investigates the conditions under which terrorism arises. It does this – and I wish to emphasize this – using the historical situation in Germany as an example. It is important to me that the film is not seen only as a film about German fascism, but that it is interpreted as a film about the roots of any kind of terrorism, be it on the political right or left, or religious (...) it always happens where, on account of suppression or misfortune, salvation is sought in an ideology. That's where things become inhumane and dangerous” (Grundman, Naqvi, Root, et al., 2020: 110).

Any unhappy and oppressed community, sooner or later, will start clutching to any kind of hope that promises them to overcome their misery. In many cases, this straw of hope turns out to be a kind of ideology. This ideology, of course, can differ in different countries.

In the interview with Roy Grundman (Grundman, Naqvi, Root, et al., 2020), the artist mentions as an example of the high-profile case of Eichmann. Eichmann was a German-Austrian Nazi officer, war criminal, convicted of genocide. He was a chief coordinator and executor of the plan for the final “solution of the Jewish question” and also a member of organizations recognized as criminal after the warlike: Schutzstaffel, Sicherheitsdienst, and Gestapo. He

underwent a trial in Israel, which was recorded in a form of a documentary. Shockingly, this man kept repeating till the end that during all his actions he was just a dutiful civil servant focused on his “tasks”. He claimed to do his job only for the benefit of the state and was completely not aware of the seriousness of his actions. For him, it was a matter of an absolute belief of doing the right thing.

4. In Conclusion

The combination of grossly exaggerated discipline, blind faith in authorities, and uncontrolled fanatical actions can easily lead to the self-destruction of the individuals and society as a whole. “The White Ribbon” presents the objective relationship between activities in local societies and the so-called “great story”. Michael Haneke does not shirk responsibility for the image he presents to his viewers. This is evidenced, for example, by his aesthetic choices. The film, which was made 11 years ago and tells a story from over 100 years ago, has a very universal message. The way the world is created shows how deeply the twentieth-century traumas are rooted in people’s minds. The war wounds of fathers or even grandfathers have not yet healed in many. Witnesses of twentieth-century crimes are also still alive and, despite their old age, still, bear witness to the atrocities of those times. Despite the passage of time, people must not lose their vigilance and keep in mind how easy it is to overlook the emerging threat. Hope lies in the next generations, which only and exclusively growing in a sense of respect for others have a chance to unify society without duplicating the mistakes of their ancestors. It is also necessary to remember, that the youngest, but also the weakest and most vulnerable to manipulation of the environment individuals, turn out to be the greatest danger. Manohla Dargis, in her report from Cannes during the film’s premiere, commented on “Mr Haneke’s critique of systems of domination”: “the fathers who beat their children will soon march to war on behalf of the Fatherland” (Klawans, 2009).



Figure 4: *Just before Bedtime in Pastor's family (The Guardian)*

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Photo 1 Michael Haneke (2020, October 30) <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0359734/>

Photo 2 Haneke's children in "The White Ribbon" (2020, October 30)

<https://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2009/1231/The-White-Ribbon-movie-review>

Photo 3 Doctor's daughter Anna (Roxane Duran) (2020, October 29)

<http://2011last2012.blogspot.com/2011/10/movie-white-ribbon-das-weisse-band.html>

Photo 4 Just before the bedtime in Pastor's family (2020, November 2)

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