

The White Ribbon

Germany / Austria / France / Italy

Cert 15 2009 144 min

Credits

A film by	Michael Haneke
Screenwriter	Michael Haneke
Cinematography	Christian Berger
Editor	Monika Willi
Production Designer	Christoph Kanter

Cast

Christian Friedel	schoolteacher
Ernst Jacobi	narrator
Leonie Benesch	Eva
Ulrich Tukur	the baron
Ursina Lardi	the baroness
Fion Mutert	Sigi
Michael Kranz	the tutor
Burghart Klaussner	the pastor
Steffi Kühnert	the pastor's wife
Maria-Victoria Dragus	Klara
Leonard Proxauf	Martin
Levin Henning	Adi
Johanna Busse	Margarete

Synopsis

A baronial estate in Germany, mid-1913.

In voiceover narration the local schoolmaster, many years later, describes the events that unfold as his recollections, presenting them as a possible or partial explanation for what happened in Germany in the decades that followed. Seeds of discord are first sown in the village when the doctor's horse is deliberately tripped up and a woman dies in what looks like a workplace accident. The dead woman's son takes revenge, attacking the baron's cabbage crop; other sinister incidents - including an act of arson and the suicide of the widower - go unexplained. The schoolmaster's courtship of Eva, a nanny on the estate, is disrupted when the baron fires her, outraged at a physical attack on his son. The schoolmaster begins to suspect the pastor's offspring are behind some of the disturbances after a note is left with a victim saying that the attacks on children are punishment for the sins of their abusive parents.

Shortly after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, the schoolmaster reveals his findings to the pastor, but is strongly rebuked. He recalls the day war broke out, then briefly mentions later events in his life - marriage to Eva, conscription, taking on his father's business - and the fact that he never saw any of the villagers again. The mysteries remain unsolved.

Sight & Sound, Dec 2009.



Review

With this new film, Michael Haneke returns to his classic themes of guilt, denial and violence as the mysterious symptom of mass dysfunction. *The White Ribbon* is a period film set in a secluded northern German village on the eve of the first world war, shot in a pellucid monochrome, impeccably acted, and directed with this film-maker's icy exact rigour and severity.

An isolated community is shaken by unpleasant, inexplicable events: a razor trip-wire fells the local doctor on his horse, and he is badly injured. The landowning baron's son is found, bound and whipped. A boy with Down's syndrome is horribly abused. The white ribbon of the title is a badge of mortification: the pastor's children must wear it as a reminder of their sinful state and need for purity. But of course it is effectively the symbol of the retaliatory violence to come.

Like Haneke's earlier film *Hidden*, this is to some degree about the return of the repressed. Unlike that movie, however, *The White Ribbon* is not about the repercussions of a single buried event, but a continuous diseased process, in which those without power - children and disenfranchised adults - are in a permanent state of futile rebellion against authority, expressed in spiteful acts of anonymous nastiness; these trigger spasms of fear in both the community and their masters, who respond by redoubling their resented discipline. And so the unhappy process goes on. The outbreak of war, with its promise of larger violence, is to provide a distraction without which the village's petty hell would simply have gone on for ever.

Some viewers may be intrigued, or exasperated, that no clear culprit is ever unmasked. And yet the perpetrators' identities are not so hard to guess, and this open-endedness has the unfinished quality of real life. *The White Ribbon* has an absolute confidence and mastery of its own cinematic language, and the performances Haneke elicits from his first-rate cast, particularly the children, are eerily perfect.

Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian, May 2009