

The White Ribbon [15]

2009 Ger/Aus/Fr/It/Can 138 mins

UK released	13 November 2009
Director	Michael Haneke
Screenplay	Michael Haneke
Cinematography	Christian Berger
Music	Jörg Strodthoff, Martin Achenbach, Christoph D. Minke, Karsten Lessing
Cast	Christian Friedel (Lehrer); Burghart Klaußner (Pfarrer); Ulrich Tukur (Baron); Susanne Lothar (Hebamme); Josef Bierbichler (Verwalter); Leonie Benesch (Eva)

Winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes is a decidedly mixed blessing. For all the ones that go on to win other major awards and pierce the international mainstream – Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*, Jane Campion's *The Piano* – there are those that remain in arthouse purgatory, like the Dardenne brothers' *The Child* or Nanni Moretti's *The Son's Room*.

The anti-religious sentiment of Michael Haneke's latest film, which won the award earlier this year, may seal its fate in the latter category. Let us hope not, for *The White Ribbon* is the Austrian director's most ambitious and most accessible film to date.

Haneke's cruel streak, expressed so violently in both the original and his Hollywood remake of *Funny Games*, is tempered here in favour of a claustrophobic atmosphere of oppression. The year is 1913. In a rural German village still overseen by a feudal landlord, the small Protestant community is rocked by a series of unexplained events each more violent than the last. As the townspeople slowly turn in on themselves, a young schoolteacher begins to suspect that his pupils may not be as innocent as they seem.

If you've ever seen a Haneke film, you'll know better than to expect a satisfying resolution to the various mysteries he sets up, but this film comes closer to it than any of his others. In the first lines of the film, the narrator

solemnly intones that the events we are about to see “might clarify some things that happened in this country.”

On a simplistic level we are seeing the seeds of Nazism being sewn, but that diminishes the scope of Haneke’s intentions. This film is about how all communities ruled by religious repression are doomed to self-destruct. The deeply conservative pastor (played with terrifying severity by Burghart Klaussner) is the closest this film has to a villain; a man whose disciplinarian zeal ends up corrupting more than it inspires.

Haneke has said that *The White Ribbon* is a film about the ‘roots of evil’, and it is appropriate that it most resembles a horror film. The painterly black and white cinematography and the pervasive feeling of menace makes this a kind of *Village of the Damned* for the cerebral set.

Which is not to say it’s an entirely dark film. There are moments of sweetness, particularly in the schoolteacher’s shy, bumbling courtship of the landlord’s nanny, that show Haneke is not simply a gloom merchant. But that streak of cruelty is not completely absent; a simple scene showing the doctor (Rainer Bock) jilting his mistress (Susanne Lothar) is a masterclass in explicit abuse all the more shocking for being delivered with emotion-free directness.

Stylistically and thematically, *The White Ribbon* shows a director in full control of his form. From the meticulous composition of his frames to the subtle sequencing of his scenes, Haneke is now at the height of his powers. This is a complete work of cinema, at once engaging and ingenious.

Jonathan Crocker, *Little White Lies*

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