



THE WHITE RIBBON (Cert 15)

Reel Issues author: Jeremy Clarke

Overview: Serial unsolved accidents disrupt a small, Northern German village a year or so before World War One.

Original title: *Das Weisse Band*, **Director:** Michael Haneke (2009)

Distribution company: Artificial Eye

Language: German – with English subtitles

Length: 137 minutes

Caution: includes strong sexual and child abuse references

SUMMARY OF PLOT

(Warning: contains many spoilers. Please watch the film first.)

On the soundtrack, the film's on and off narrator – the village teacher – begins to relate events gleaned from personal recollection, conjecture and hearsay. It's 1913–14 in a northern German Protestant village. The doctor, out riding his regular route, is thrown from his horse and injured by a trip-wire strung between two trees. The wife of a farm labourer is killed when factory floorboards give way beneath her. Merrymaking at the annual harvest festival is cut short after the deceased woman's son wrecks a field of cabbages with his scythe. Later on, children are abducted and tortured: first, the baron's son Sigg; then, the midwife's mentally handicapped son Karli. A baby's window is left open to the cold on a midwinter night. A building burns. But who is – or are – responsible?

While all this is going on, other dramas play out in the village. The midwife is, as the narrator puts it, 'making herself invaluable' to the doctor. But after the doctor returns from hospital he ends the relationship. Later,

his small son Rudolph, frightened of the dark, finds the doctor 'piercing the ears' of his teenage daughter Anna in a room downstairs. Later still, the midwife tells the teacher she knows who committed the crimes and sets off to tell the police in the nearby town. She's never seen again, her son has vanished and the doctor's surgery is closed.

The teacher falls in love with Eva, the shy, softly spoken nanny of the baroness' youngest children. But he is made wait to marry her by Eva's father after the baroness unfairly fires the nanny.

The pastor, his wife complicit, subjects his children to rigorous discipline and punishment in attempts to cultivate moral purity within them, symbolised by the white ribbon he makes his eldest daughter Klara and son Martin wear. In his study, the pastor keeps a caged bird, which later turns up as a corpse impaled on scissors. His younger son Gustav is allowed to care for, heal and raise a wounded wild bird, which Gustav subsequently offers his father as a replacement for the murdered pet bird.

The teacher has his own theories as to who is/are behind many of the crimes; however, when he eventually presents his thesis to the pastor, the latter turns nasty and threatens him for denouncing respectable families.

On the soundtrack, the narrator – the teacher – tells us that war was declared and that he left the village, never to return.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Can we trust the narrator? (Clip 2) – Set in the distant past almost a century ago, the story commences with a narrator (the teacher) and his point of view. As it unfolds, events are shown where the narrator is present and others where he is not; including some where he could know or guess what occurred and others which may be outside the scope of his narration altogether. This begs the question, what is true in what the narrator tells us and what is false? Likewise, which events shown are true and which are not? If parts are not entirely true, how should we interpret them?

Children and adults (Clips 1, 3, 5) – Children are traditionally associated with innocence, but the pastor brings his children up as if they were tainted with a universal guilt that they must overcome to be pure like the white ribbon he makes them wear. He is so busy trying to contain their impurity that when one of them acts out of genuine innocence and wonder (Gustav, who brings him the wounded bird) the pastor does not know what to do except to impose a set of rules upon the situation. Later, when the mentally handicapped Karli is found with eye wounds, attached to his jacket is a biblical quote about the sins of the parents (Exodus 20.5), as if an attempt has been similarly made to impose a set of rules on the atrocity by means of a Bible passage.

Out of sight (Clip 6) – The unreliable narrator notwithstanding, the ruling and professional class protagonists all hide dirty secrets – some little, some much larger. These include illicit sexual relationships and child abuse. Their children often disappear as a group, but no one really knows what they get up to when they're alone. Motives for the various crimes can be found everywhere. The narrator's loose opening claim that he wishes to explain what later happened

in Germany ups the ante. Where do you go when there's no one you can trust?

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1 – DVD chapter 7: begin clip at 1.27.46, end 1.29.20 minutes into this chapter

Group viewing

Please watch this clip as a group first as it sets the scene.

The pastor addresses the teacher's class in school. His speech includes the devastating words: 'For months I've tried to bring God's Word to you and make responsible human beings out of you.' His daughter Klara, sent to stand at the back of the class, suddenly collapses.

Clip 2 – DVD chapter 1: begin clip at 01.34 (i.e. after the main titles), end 4.22 minutes into this chapter

The narrator's voice introduces the tale as the screen shows us, with a static camera, the doctor's riding accident, followed by an introduction to various characters – the doctor's daughter, the midwife, her handicapped son Karli, the teacher, the village children led by Klara. Already, as events unfold before our eyes, we are hearing a spoken, verbal interpretation that may colour or contradict what we see.

Whole group discussion

- What is your reaction to the doctor's accident, both as you first watched the film and after seeing the whole film? How far do you accept what the narrator is saying about the accident?

- What are your initial impressions of these characters? Do these impressions change either later on in the film or as you come back to look at scenes again? In particular, what do you make of the teacher in his two incarnations as present-day narrator and as character in the past? Have you ever had first impressions of people that turned out to be completely inaccurate?
- Can you think of any significant events that might have occurred before the opening scene? (Your answer may vary depending on whether you're looking at the images or listening to the narrator.)

Small group discussion

- Television has been called 'radio with pictures'. Although this is a cinema film, do you think that term might apply here? Have you ever watched something on TV – either fictional or factual – where the voice over seems to add to, undermine or even contradict the images shown? If so, give examples. How did you feel about this?

Clip 3 – DVD chapter 1: begin clip at 8.28, end 11.20 minutes into this chapter

Over the meal table, the pastor tells his children they are to receive no food tonight because of their earlier behaviour, informs them of the caning to come and asks them to agree with the way he's handling things. He reiterates the significance of the white ribbon.

Whole group discussion

- The pastor belongs to an austere and strict disciplinarian Protestant tradition. What do you think about the way he disciplines his children? How do you imagine the children themselves feel about this – and what sort of actions might they later undertake as a result?

In twos or threes

- Do you recognise any aspect(s) of the pastor's approach to discipline in your own experience of strict and/or religious people? Why do you think people behave like this? How sympathetic or otherwise are you to such behaviour?

Clip 4 – DVD chapter 2: begin clip at 20.25, end 26.24 minutes into this chapter

Following the death of the labourer's wife, the doctor's young son Rudolph asks his elder sister Anna, 'What is death?' In the course of the conversation, he realises that his mother is dead and not, as he was told, 'on a trip'. He throws a fit of rage. Meanwhile, in the pastor's house, Klara and Martin are summoned to the study to be caned.

Whole group discussion

- In the course of their upbringing, children must learn about not only the basic biological facts of life (birth, sex and death) but also what behaviour is acceptable and what is not (crime and punishment). In the film various family units – and the larger society of the village under the baron – carry this out in different ways. To what extent do you feel they are successful? Into what traps could they potentially fall? How similar or different are the experiences shown in the film from our own as children? Or, perhaps, as parents? After tackling these questions, repeat the exercise in the light of the narrator's opening remarks about 'trying to understand what happened in this country'. Does the teacher's view of events in historical hindsight put a different slant on these issues?

Clip 5 – DVD chapter 4: begin clip at start of chapter, end 38.01 minutes into the chapter

The pastor, working in his study, receives a visit from his young son Gustav who wants to be able to care for and cure a wounded bird he has found. The child's innocent enthusiasm is countered by the father's dour insistence on the important responsibilities the child's self-chosen task will entail.

Group discussion

- What do you think is going on in the minds of (1) the child and (2) the father here?
- What do you make of the way the father deals with this situation? Where does his reliance on rules and systems of reason come from? (It would be tempting to suggest that this has something to do with the German national character or certain expressions of Protestantism, but it clearly can't be quite that simple because no one else in the village behaves as he does. Or do they?)
- The son wants to do something and is asking his parents (he has already asked his mother) for permission. He seems very unlike his father. What do you make of the two characters and their differences?

Clip 6 – DVD chapter 6: begin clip 1.16.10 minutes in, end 1.20.46 minutes into this chapter

Finding himself unable to continue having sex with the midwife, the doctor tells her in no uncertain terms what he thinks of her, how certain poor aspects of her health disgust him. She retaliates by asking who looks after his kids and accusing him of abusing his daughter.

Note: this sequence is extremely disturbing and care should be taken in utilising it, with due consideration given to the make-up of the group. However, for that very reason, it may yield some fruitful discussion.

Dual group discussion:

- How does the doctor relate to the midwife in this scene – and how does she relate to him? How far do you relate to either of these two characters here (if at all)? You may want to split into two groups – maybe male and female, or single people and couples, or parents and non-parents. Spend about three minutes in each of the three group permutations, briefly summarising of the reactions of the two groups for the other group after each permutation.

General group discussion:

- Is the film more sympathetic to the doctor or the midwife? Or is it more even-handed in its dealings with the two characters? How could the director have handled the scene differently and what difference would that have made?

Clip 7 – DVD chapter 8: begin clip at chapter start, end 1.41.12 minutes into this chapter OR for shorter clip (the teacher and Eva only), begin at chapter start, end 1.40.01 minutes into this chapter

- A romance punctures the otherwise gloomy proceedings in seeming light relief as the teacher courts Eva. He takes her out in a horse and cart for a proposed picnic alone together, but to her immense relief relents when he sees how threatened she feels by the prospect. The dark shadow cast by events going on around them, it seems, is never far away. As a number of children

take their first communion, the pastor has to force the chalice into Klara's mouth.

Group discussion

- Although only in her formative years, Klara may be an altogether different character from the other girls (and women) shown – and possibly from the males too, What do you make of her reaction to the chalice? What do you think she gets up to when we don't see her? What do you imagine she does with the rest of her life following the period depicted in the film?
- The teacher is seen here as a man acting in an honourable way towards his intended spouse. Yet there's a sense throughout the film that he's an ineffectual do-gooder compared to other more decisive characters even though their actions don't necessarily advance the greater good. The children, likewise, seem to be up to something as a group (much of which takes place outside what we see and hear). The teacher as narrator is also the person who guides us through parts of the film. What do you make of the teacher as a character? What do you admire about him? What do you not admire?
- Eva does not seem a strong person. She loses her job as nanny through no fault of her own and must respect the wishes of her difficult father. Yet the teacher defers to her here. During the historical period shown, a woman's social position was very definitely secondary. What do you make of Eva – particularly with regard to the other women (and girls) shown in the film? Would she be a very different person in contemporary Western society - or would she still be much as she is in the film?

GOD'S STORY

Can we trust the narrator? – Genesis 1.1, Luke 1.1–4, John 1.1–5, Revelation 1.1–3 – This film doesn't present a cut and dried narrative, but plays games with the audience, challenging them from the outset to question it and make up their own minds. In addition, this particular film is a *fictional* narrative. The Bible is in a different medium to film and, while it contains poetry and myth, much is historical reportage, alongside teaching, wisdom and prophetic writing. But if some narrative is neither reliable nor trustworthy, why should the Bible be any different? How do the biblical narrators compare to the one in the film? In each case, what kind of person are they?

The film puts its cards on the table right from the start, calling the narrative into question before the first image has faded in from black (Clip 2). By comparison, it's instructive to look at how the separate books of the Bible start. Take the Pentateuch (the first five Old Testament books), the four Gospels or the Revelation (or any of the other books in the Bible for that matter). The Bible comprises quite a few different types of writing – among them myth, historical reportage, poetry and prophetic utterances – but the opening of each book tells you exactly where you are and what to expect. Revelation, the final book, does the same thing at its end too (Revelation 22.18–21). Significantly, Jesus similarly lays out his own credentials as to why his testimony can be trusted (John 8.12–26).

For Individual reflection followed by group discussion

Choose any book from the Bible and look at what it says about itself as it opens. How would you describe its credentials? How would they compare to the shifting, questionable narrative of the film? What differences do you notice between different biblical books chosen by members of the group?

Children and adults – Matthew 18.1–6, Ephesians 6.1–4 – In Matthew, Jesus' disciples ask him who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. His response is to stress the importance of being like a little child. Yet clearly, he's not asking for children to take over the world from their parents. When Paul instructs Ephesian children how to behave towards their parents, and parents towards their children, he's expecting the former to do what they're told by the latter, within reason – but mutuality has a bearing on this too.

Group discussion

- What qualities do you think Jesus admired in children that he equated with the Kingdom of Heaven? (Clip 5 may help with this.)
- What would Jesus or Paul have made of the treatment of children by their parents within the film? Or of the children's reaction to their parents? (Clip 3 may help with this.) What changes might he have suggested to either party?

Out of sight – John 3.19–21, Matthew 15.17–20, Mark 7.14–23, Ephesians 6.10–29 – John, whose Gospel is framed by observations on darkness and light, talks about humanity's preference for the former. In the passages from Matthew and Mark, Jesus talks about 'unclean' not being something that enters the body, but as something that proceeds from the heart of man, following his observation with a list of offences. In Matthew 5.21–30, he elaborates on murder and adultery. Paul informs the Ephesians, in the context of donning the armour of God to withstand the devil, that they face 'spiritual wickedness in high places'.

Group discussion

- What kinds of preferences exist for darkness rather than light in the modern world? Can you think of

examples of spiritual wickedness in high places"? How might you go about tackling these? (You may find Ephesians 6.10–29 particularly helpful.)

- Jesus took the Ten Commandments and showed that they were impossible for men to keep (as in Matthew 5.21–30). How do you feel about this? Does the Bible offer any alternative approach that is more hopeful? (As a starting point, see Ezekiel 36.27 or Galatians 5.16–25.)

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