



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Punishment and Crime

*The Reverse Order of Causality in The White Ribbon*

van der Pol, G.

#### DOI

[10.25364/05.4:2018.1.4](https://doi.org/10.25364/05.4:2018.1.4)

#### Publication date

2018

#### Document Version

Final published version

#### Published in

Journal for Religion, Film and Media (JRFM)

#### License

CC BY-NC

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

van der Pol, G. (2018). Punishment and Crime: The Reverse Order of Causality in The White Ribbon. *Journal for Religion, Film and Media (JRFM)*, 4(1), 47-61.  
<https://doi.org/10.25364/05.4:2018.1.4>

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# Punishment and Crime

## The Reverse Order of Causality in **THE WHITE RIBBON**

### ABSTRACT

This article explores, within a sociological-psychological framework, the problematic moral emotions of spectators evoked by watching the film *DAS WEISSE BAND* (*THE WHITE RIBBON*, Michael Haneke, DE/AT/FR/IT 2009). As always in Michael Haneke's films, the spectator's moral system is severely put to the test upon watching the unimaginable actions people are capable of. At first sight the atrocities shown that remain unpunished seem to cause the spectator's distress. The real horror, however, lies in the fact the evil occurs within the boundaries of a religious society that hails itself as good and just. The word of God as a moral guide becomes ineffective in this film, and also in *DOGVILLE* (Lars von Trier, NL/DK/GB/FR/FI/SE/DE/ IT/NO 2003), a film used as comparison. Both films exemplify that in the end the most difficult conclusion to process by the spectator is that the worst crime is feeling morally superior and teaching others how to behave. In *The White Ribbon* this teaching is projected as the punishment that causes the crimes.

### KEYWORDS

*THE WHITE RIBBON*, belief systems, spectatorship, psychology, *DOGVILLE*

### BIOGRAPHY

Gerwin van der Pol is lecturer in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. His academic work explores the psychology of spectators of film. He has published essays on subjects ranging from character engagement to film aesthetics. He is interested in the history, aesthetics and authors of European art film.

## WATCHING AND UNDERSTANDING **THE WHITE RIBBON**

*THE WHITE RIBBON* is a haunting story of the feudal village of Eichwald, set in 1913, in which the villagers are repeatedly alarmed by serious attacks on members of the community. The spectator is in constant suspense about who will be next, and although the arbitrariness of the incidents is troublesome, the realisa-

tion who the perpetrators are is even more alarming. The title of the movie refers to the white ribbon that the pastor's children have to wear to remind them (and the community) of the concept of purity and good behaviour. The film thus openly discusses morals, punishment and crimes. With the pastor as the strong defender of morals, the film seems to focus on religion and morals, and it would be tempting to interpret the film in the specific terms of religion. This article will deviate from this path by using a different, sociological, framework. The definition of religion that I adhere to in this article is neatly summarised by Grace Davie: "the sociology of religion aims to discover the patterns of social living associated with religion in all its diverse forms, and to find explanations for the data that emerge. It is not, in contrast, concerned with the competing truth claims of the great variety of belief systems that are and always have been present in human societies."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this article I will refer to the spectator as both male and female or will use the inclusive first-person plural. This article describes part of the viewing process as a universal, human endeavour. Naturally, every spectator is free to have a private, unique viewing experience while watching a film, but that private part is not addressed here. For example, we all recognise the pastor as a pastor, but how we feel towards him is in part influenced by our private and specific thoughts, beliefs and emotions concerning religion. I do, however, write about morals, because every human being functions on the basis of a moral system, strongly influenced by society, history and personal experience.

The film *THE WHITE RIBBON* is set in rural Eichwald in 1913. The film presents in chronological order, solemnly, calmly and precisely, the many atrocities that happen in the span of a year. It ends with the arrival of the news of Franz Ferdinand's assassination and with rumours of an impending war spreading. It is difficult to summarise the story as hardly any conclusions are reached and most crimes remain unsolved. The film is a series of seemingly unrelated events, some of which are gruesome while other scenes merely show the habitual events one could expect of a village, of every feudal society where men – the baron, the steward, the pastor, the doctor and the schoolteacher – are in power, and women, servants and farmers obey them. And we expect it to be, like any society, a place where children learn to behave and grow up in the footsteps of their fathers and mothers.

On many levels the film is very difficult to process for the spectator. His/her morals are put to the test, but how that occurs has remained only partly explained, even in the thorough analyses from Martin Blumenthal-Barby,<sup>2</sup> Claudia

1 Davie 2013, 6.

2 Blumenthal-Barby 2014.

Fig. 1: A still representing the “objective” view on the world of THE WHITE RIBBON (Michael Haneke, DE/AT/FR/IT 2009), 00:17:08.



Breger,<sup>3</sup> Garrett Stewart,<sup>4</sup> Kumar Niven and Lucyna Swiatek,<sup>5</sup> and James Williams.<sup>6</sup> They explore certain threads that meander through the film, in an attempt to find its overall meaning. I understand those articles as articulations of the spectator's efforts to process the film. As is usual for the detective genre, the spectator tries to find logic, causality and explanation. Unusually for that genre, however, the crimes remain unsolved. As in most of Haneke's films, the spectator is given multiple clues to an answer, but few firm conclusions.

Most spectators (layman, film enthusiasts and/or scholars) of the film THE WHITE RIBBON will agree that the film makes us aware of “immoral” behaviour – a term that describes that behaviour as mildly and generally as possible. There is no mention made of the film that does not contain a reference to “morals”. All articles, reviews and witnesses highlight one or more aspect of the moral problems portrayed in the film: the fact that the crimes committed are horrific, the fact that the crimes are probably committed by children, the fact that there is no motive for committing the crimes, the fact that the crimes remain unsolved and unpunished and the fact that the guilty children will later become actors in both World Wars.

My problem with these five conclusions is that they are all external to the spectator. They are moral problems of either the characters in the film, the film itself or (German) history. Without rejecting the importance of these interpretations, my claim is that the most profound moral problem – even moral crisis – occurs within the spectator. I want to explore questions such as, how is the spectator triggered to find meaning in this film that so obviously and obnoxiously withholds it? And how does the process of film viewing lead to moral crisis?

The articles about the film previously referenced are awash with implicit references to spectators, as representatives of the society that is shocked by

3 Breger 2016.

4 Stewart 2010.

5 Niven and Swiatek 2012.

6 Williams 2010.

the horrors witnessed, for example by seeing the unimaginable, as Niven and Swiatek theorise. But the act of seeing itself has been given too little attention, with the possible exception of the response of Blumenthal-Barby. He describes the film in terms of Michel Foucault's ideas about surveillance and draws attention to the characters' problems with surveilling and not-surveilling, and how that is complicated by the surveillant gaze of the film(maker) and of the spectator. Blumenthal-Barby suggests, "The most prominent 'disciplinary' discourse in Haneke's film undoubtedly is that of education, including the work of the schoolteacher, whose voice-over guides us through much of the film, but also the rigid educational regime enforced by the pastor and symbolised by the white ribbon that he ties around his children's arms or into their hair."<sup>7</sup>

Despite recognising this "prominence", even Blumenthal-Barby leaves it at that. In my opinion surveillance – knowing and seeing – does not form the core of the film's meaning. And "education" in a Foucauldian universe is merely a synonym for discipline. From a Brechtian perspective, teaching has different connotations. Bertolt Brecht called his plays *Lehrstücke* and translated that concept both as *learning plays* and *teaching plays*. These complexities of learning and teaching help to elucidate the film, the spectator and the characters.

As such, *THE WHITE RIBBON* (the film) teaches the spectator just as the white ribbon (the object) teaches the characters in the film.

## THE LEARNING SPECTATOR

Even without a Brechtian definition, every film is a learning process for its spectator. He is thrown into an unknown world and builds this world with scraps of information he receives from the film to form a coherent unit. The static black-and-white images of *THE WHITE RIBBON*, the long takes, the restrained movement of the characters suggest a clarity that should be easy for the spectator to handle. The incompatibility with the information given by the film, however, is a source of frustration.

Even the simple beginning of the film is problematic: we see a horse tripping over a wire and its horseman, a doctor, falling and getting hurt. We see Anna, the doctor's daughter, running out of their house towards him, coming to the rescue, as the voice-over narrator helps to explain. He tells us that the accident left the doctor hospitalised for months. The next shot shows the midwife, Mrs Wagner, who takes care of the doctor's children, Anna and Rudi, walking hastily to fetch her own child Karli, who is mentally disabled, from the schoolteacher. We do not know why she is hurrying. Is it because her life is so busy, with looking after the doctor's children, being a midwife, and now also having to deal with the doctor's mishap?

7 Blumenthal-Barby 2014, 96.

By then the narrator, the schoolteacher, has already explained what is forcing him to tell this story: maybe these strange events can explain something about what happened later. The spectator at this point does not know that “later” could be a reference to the two World Wars. “Later” in the film we learn that the midwife is the doctor’s mistress and was his mistress long before his wife died. We see the doctor and Mrs Wagner having sex after his return from hospital. Later we have to witness the doctor sharply telling her that he hates sex with her because he is appalled by her ugliness and her character and that he cannot stand her and would be happy if she died.

If we take the schoolteacher’s comments rather differently, restricting them to the span of the film, a new meaning appears for the opening scene. In the very first scene, Anna arrives immediately after the doctor has fallen off the horse, as if she might have been waiting for that event, and she looks first to see how the horse is doing and only then turns to her father. We also see that the hurried walk of Mrs Wagner could suggest that she is fleeing the scene of the crime.

This conclusion is suggested by the film’s ending. Mrs Wagner borrows a bicycle from the schoolteacher and goes to the police in another village because she knows “who did it”. She never returns. The doctor, Rudi and Karli have by then disappeared from the village. And Anna, at that moment at school, says nothing.

Because Mrs Wagner left so mysteriously and could not defend herself, in the aftermath of the events she is blamed for all the crimes.

Very few spectators will have noticed Anna’s first checking the horse’s health and only then giving her attention to her father. I cite this detail here only to show that the film goes very far in giving information that obscures, rather than clarifies, the film’s meaning.

Although characters refuse to talk and we have to guess the motives for their actions, most of which are hidden from sight, certain crimes/accidents/attacks indisputably occur:

- The doctor’s horse trips over a wire, leaving the doctor seriously hurt; it takes him months to recover.
- The wife of farmer Felder falls to her death through the rotten floor in the sawmill.
- Max Felder ruins the cabbage field.
- Sigi, the baron’s son, goes missing, is later found severely beaten, and takes a long time to recover.
- The steward’s baby almost dies of pneumonia because someone intentionally left a window open on a winter’s night.
- The barn goes up in flames.
- Karli, the midwife’s mentally handicapped son, goes missing and is later found with his eyes severely wounded; he has been left almost blind.

- Sigi's flute is snatched by Ferdinand, the steward's son. Sigi is thrown in the water but eventually saved from drowning by Ferdinand's brother.

As there are no obvious culprits and no legal process, no police able to solve the crimes nor absolute knowledge about the causes of the events, the film cannot be done justice unless every detail is mentioned. The smallest element might be the clue that allows the spectator to solve the crimes.

The spectator is an attentive learner, hoping to find meaning. But every new piece of information in this film obscures its meaning. We have difficulty attuning what we see with what we hear and what we infer. For example, when we see children (Klara and the rest) ask how the doctor is doing, it is the narrator who says that in hindsight this was strange; not the fact that they were informative and friendly, but that they were always present after the evil has happened. We come to understand that nothing is what it seems: being friendly works here as a cover-up of crimes.

Another example: as the schoolteacher recounts that he finally had the opportunity to visit Eva at her house – a long walk from the village – to ask her to marry him, we see a winter landscape and a man walking. In the next scene, we see Eva and the schoolteacher chatting in the living room, with Eva's sisters and brothers as audience. Then the door opens, and in comes Eva's father, who looks just like the man we saw walking outside. Was it the schoolteacher we saw walking, after which he would have entered Eva's house and sat waiting for Eva's father? Or was it Eva's father we saw walking while Eva and the schoolteacher chatted, and he then entered the house? Typically for this film, no definitive answer is given.

These descriptions help us classify the film. Although it is advertised as a European Art Film and shown in art-house cinemas, the film finds itself somewhere between classical and art film. Classical cinema is described by David Bordwell as a transparent style of narration with psychologically motivated characters and a clear causal chain of events within a logical space-time continuum.<sup>8</sup> Art film is by nature the opposite of classical cinema and thrives on subjectivity, and the belief that concepts such as objectivity and truth are illusions.<sup>9</sup>

THE WHITE RIBBON with its clear, objective, almost distant images, its omniscient narrator and causal chain of events presents itself as a classical film. Slowly the spectator comes to realise, although not consciously, that the film is an art film in disguise. The omniscient narrator leaves essential information out, and the causality that drives the chain of events is never shown nor explained. This defines THE WHITE RIBBON as an art film.

8 Bordwell 1985, 156–204. Although “classical” is often used to refer to the specific Hollywood era that ran from 1917 to 1960, mainstream cinema worldwide remains predominantly classical, albeit with some adaptations.

9 Bordwell 1985, 205–233.

## LEARNING TO RECOGNISE CHARACTERS: PROBLEMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Murray Smith explains that spectators engage with characters on the basis of a mixture of information, emotion, judgment, time spent with the characters and moral evaluation of their actions.<sup>10</sup> Watching films is a process of getting to know others, some of whom become significant others whom we care about.

In classical cinema this process is all perfectly aligned. We know who the main character, the hero, is and happily side with him/her. We recognise him/her as having morals and inclination to act that we in turn would like to have in the situations that are portrayed. We think that our engagement with film characters is specific to film, but our impression formation, our liking or disliking of characters, stems from our everyday routines of judging and engaging with people.

The indistinctness of art cinema problematises the spectator's engagement and impression formation. In some cases this complication even generates moral stress for the spectator.<sup>11</sup> The anxiety that is felt in watching *THE WHITE RIBBON* does not come merely from engaging with immoral characters. The problem is that our everyday moral compass fails us. The spectator is not complicit in the crimes but is complicit in the morals of the criminals. And on top of that, the spectator is constantly reminded of the suffering of the victims.<sup>12</sup>

In *THE WHITE RIBBON*, the process of engaging with the characters is seriously thwarted. For example, our initial sympathy for the doctor, who has suffered as a result of falling from his horse, becomes a burden when he reveals himself as an insensible, heartless, sadistic man who takes joy in destroying Mrs Wagner's self-esteem and has sex with his own daughter. If we had seen him first as the sadistic man and child abuser, we would not have engaged with him, and would not have felt any sympathy or empathy when he fell from the horse. This is not to claim that the film tricks us into engaging with characters we come to loathe. Nor is the film, or the narrator, unreliable. The film presents the events as they occur, and how the spectator chooses to engage with certain characters is the spectator's own responsibility. When those choices appear to have been poor choices, the spectator is regularly reminded of that misestimation.

10 Smith 1995.

11 Van der Pol 2015.

12 Although in all fiction films characters perform acts and therefore both behave morally and demonstrate moral flaws, usually (in classical cinema) the moral imperfections do no harm to the spectator. The spectator stays on the safe (moral) side because the character's intentions are usually good and/or the film obscures the effects of the immoral acts as much as possible. And even if we are engaged with evil characters, then we do so knowing that they are evil, in effect suspending our disbelief.



Breger<sup>13</sup> and Stewart<sup>14</sup> both focus on the film as a story about a collective or even a nation, on the basis of the schoolteacher's introductory suggestion that the events in this film might explain events later in history (so, the First and Second World Wars). But if we want to explore the spectator's engagement with the characters, the suggestion by Breger and Stewart that we engage with the characters as a group is insufficient. The film has so many characters, who are given almost equal screen time, that it is hard to talk about one main character. The film simply has many characters, and the spectator has to choose – and choose wisely – with which character to engage the most.

Two characters do have more screen time than the others: the schoolteacher and the pastor. It is not very difficult to engage with the schoolteacher; he is a friendly, reasonable and somewhat shy young man; he is the narrator and he is our moral guide. He has more knowledge than the other characters; he is both young and old (he tells the story as an old man); and he has hindsight. He is friendly and timid. He falls in love with Eva, who looks after the Baroness's twins but is sent away after Sigi's wounding. The schoolteacher helps Eva, but cannot prevent her from leaving the village. He goes to visit her at her parents' home, and her strict father suggests that he can marry her if he still wants to after a year.

In one sparse moment together, Eva and the schoolteacher set off to have a picnic. Suddenly she tells him that she does not want to go to a remote spot. He says he was not planning anything dishonourable and does as she asks. She thanks him for that. At the end of the film he recounts that he finally left the village, fought in the war, and started a shop, never returning to the village. Strangely, he does not mention whether he eventually married Eva.

The pastor is the central moral character. He gives long lectures to his children about moral behaviour. He is a natural leader. He is seen studying scripture. He is authoritative, strong and never shows his emotions. But it is the Baron, the leader of the village, who gives a speech on morals in the church, rather than the pastor.

Klara and Martin, the pastor's two oldest children, are difficult to engage with. They group together with the other children, and we come to believe, at the suggestion of the narrator, they are jointly culpable for the crimes. How are we to engage with them in light of the following events?

- That first day Klara and Martin come home too late and are severely punished by being strongly reprimanded and beaten. From then on they both have to wear a white ribbon, in order that they are constantly reminding of the concept of purity.

13 Breger 2016.

14 Stewart 2010.

- Martin becomes sad, and the pastor suspects he is masturbating and orders his hands bound at night.
- At Christmas the pastor frees them of their ribbons and restraints.
- At the end of the story, we see Klara standing on watch as the schoolchildren make a mess of the classroom before the pastor and schoolteacher arrive. The pastor publicly reprimands Klara, after which she faints.
- We see her killing her father's bird and putting it on his desk shaped like a cross.<sup>15</sup>

This list is as problematic as the whole film. How do these episodes define Klara and Martin? They are all extremely meaningful and traumatic events, but they pass without explanation, and without much emotional display. The only fact we can recognise is that Klara leads her brothers and sisters in a group that is present before and after the crimes, and when people ask what they are doing, she responds, "We want to help, how is the victim doing?" Are her words a kind gesture or a pretence, hiding their guilt?

## ENTERING AN UNJUST WORLD

All human beings constantly try to make sense of the world they live in by deducing a cause-and-effect chain of events, a stacking of new information into appropriate categories. If new information does not fit, we remain restless and unsatisfied. The basic assumption of this film is already discomfiting. We want the romantic image of a friendly village a century ago that is rudely disrupted by the outbreak of the First World War. What we get is a story about a village that is more vile and gruesome than a war could ever be. How can we process such information?

Taking a step back, we can endlessly discuss ways in which a spectator can temporarily, hesitantly or wholeheartedly engage with movie characters, but with the film *THE WHITE RIBBON* engagement remains seriously problematic. Our moral judgment is strongly questioned, as can be explained with the help of a theory developed by Melvin Lerner.

From a sociologist's perspective, Lerner sought to explain the human moral system irrespective of religion and culture. He termed his theory "belief in a just world".<sup>16</sup> His position is a reaction to developmental psychologist Jean Piaget's theory of how children learn to understand justice.<sup>17</sup> Piaget suggested that children start off believing in a just world. For children what is just is based on effect rather than intention. Someone who unintentionally breaks two dishes is seen

<sup>15</sup> To be precise: we do not see Klara kill the bird, but we come very close that moment. We see her opening the cage and grabbing the bird; in the next shot we see the dead bird on the table.

<sup>16</sup> Lerner 1980.

<sup>17</sup> Piaget 1948.

as more to blame than someone who intentionally breaks one dish. Later in life children come to reverse that interpretation: it is not the effect that counts, but the intentionality.

Lerner agreed that we may cognitively develop into people who *know* that in evaluating moral actions intention is more important than effect. But, he suggested, our emotional system does not develop accordingly. Lerner claims:

the reason that people who “know better” continue to blame themselves and others for “accidents,” stupid, thoughtless decisions, not doing enough, letting themselves go, not having enough courage, being selfish, cruel – is because these blaming reactions are so ingrained in our own thinking and our cultural assumptions that they are simply the automatic expression of a long-standing habit. They are automatically elicited, habitual reactions, which one cannot turn off simply because one has learned subsequently that they are inadequate or inappropriate.<sup>18</sup>

Life confronts us constantly with facts and experiences that “go against the grain” because our emotions are not in line with our knowledge of a just world. But rather than give up this belief in a just world, we stubbornly hold onto that belief, and fortify it against attacks, because it seems to be the pillar of our existence.

We have, as a society, developed rational strategies – a police force and courts, for example – to protect justice. We also adopt irrational tactics to deal with injustice, by resorting to denial or victim blaming. Or we conclude that although an injustice is not resolved now, it will in the end be punished.

By these means we can uphold our belief in a just world. However, we may have difficulty doing so when we see severe injustice, countries at war, starvation or criminal acts beyond our imagination. To be able to live with such instances (as we must do while watching the daily news) we construct an opposite world, an unjust world, a world that is not ours, where different rules function. We position ourselves outside this Unjust World.

This response is seen in the pastor. When the schoolteacher eventually confronts him with the suspicion that Klara and Martin are behind most of the crimes, the pastor, who is quick to publicly attack his children for the smallest flaws, he is outraged at such accusations and refuses to see the schoolteacher ever again. His strong reaction is a defence mechanism: by believing the schoolteacher, he would have entered the Unjust World. By calling the schoolteacher a liar, he upholds his own belief in a Just World.

The worst thing that can happen is that the atrocities and immorality we are confronted with can no longer be explained within the boundaries of the Just World. What the pastor seeks to prevent is what happens to the spectator

18 Lerner 1980, 121.

of *THE WHITE RIBBON*. We are thrown into the Unjust World, and despairingly search for a way out. In the Unjust World there is no (poetic) justice, no hope, no redemption. We have methods that prevent us from falling into this unjust world, but we lack resources to help us escape.

What also is disconcerting is that we are not allowed to look away. We are confronted by all those self-righteous people who create and uphold a stifling community. And we are also not allowed to look away from the effects of the crimes. On the contrary, suffering and the consequences of immoral acts are shown relentlessly.

We may seek shelter in the idea that the film is just a film and its story is fictional. But the problem is that all these characters are too familiar, and their actions are cruel but not unlikely. The film does not show us the aberrations of human nature; it shows us the evil roots of human nature, which we know about but do not want to be confronted with. It shows us who we really are. Reasoning the depiction away as fiction does not work. The characters may be fictional, but the message is not. And at the end of the film reality hits hard, with the realisation that all this (could have) happened at the outset of the First World War. The First World War is not a fiction.

## LEHRSTÜCK DOGVILLE

How did the spectator become entangled in this Unjust World? To clarify this predicament, it is helpful to compare the film to a similar *Lehrstück*, *DOGVILLE*, that portrays a similar small village isolated from a more “civilised” town.<sup>19</sup> Just like in *THE WHITE RIBBON*, one of the protagonists openly sets a moral example for the community, a lesson from which to learn.

The film *DOGVILLE*, by Lars von Trier, is well known for its aesthetics: the contours of the buildings of the village are painted on the floor. And beyond some props, the scenery is only suggested. *Dogville* is a fictional American village in the 1930s. A narrator tells a story about this village, where the main character, Tom Edison, philosophises about the possibility of showing the moral nobility of the village. When Grace arrives, seeking refuge from her persecutors, Edison and the villagers see her as a perfect testcase for their moral “experiment”. They welcome her, hide her and take care of her. Then, as a reward for their

19 There is a long tradition of films showing the horrors of a closed society. Works by Lars von Trier, Michael Haneke, Bela Tarr and Rainer Werner Fassbinder come readily to mind. Particularly unsettling are the films *THE BABY OF MACON* (Peter Greenaway, NL/FR/UK/DE 1993), *AUCH ZWERGE HABEN KLEIN ANGEFANGEN* (EVEN DWARFS STARTED SMALL, Werner Herzog, DE 1970), and *DIE SIEBELBAUERN* (THE INHERITORS, Stefan Ruzowitzky, AT/DE 1998). *DOGVILLE* has been chosen for comparison because it too has a protagonist who provides a moral test-case for a poor, small community. Also, both films are fictional but in the end make a link to reality, in the case of *DOGVILLE* by referring – through documentary photos – to the Great Depression.

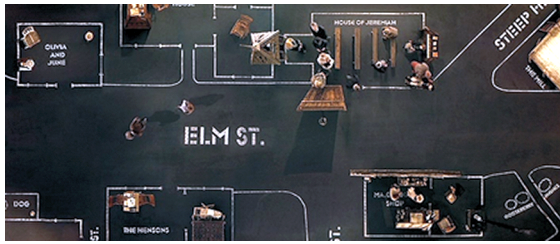


Fig. 2: A still representing the “objective” view on the world of DOGVILLE (Lars von Trier, NL/DK/GB//FR/FI/SE/DE/ IT/NO 2003), 00:23:35.

kindness, Grace offers to help the villagers in all possible ways. Later, when a price is put on her head, the villagers take their moral-balance metaphor very literally. They reason that as she could be turned over for money, they are losing that same amount of money as long as they keep protecting her and not turn her over. In this logic, the “cost” of protecting her has grown, so Grace must increase her duties in compensation. Her situation goes from bad to worse. She flees the village but is returned by the villagers, after which everyone takes even greater and more gruesome advantage of her, raping her and chaining her like a dog.

In the end her father, a gangster boss, finds her. He had been searching for her only in order to have a conversation with her in which he could defend his morals against hers. She had believed in the goodness of people, that people do their best in life, whatever the circumstances. In such circumstances she would have acted similarly, she would have done her best like the villagers. Her father asks a rhetorical question: “But was it good enough?”

The narrator recounts what Grace thinks:

If she had acted like them, she could not have defended a single one of her actions and could not have condemned them harshly enough. It was as if her sorrow and pain finally assumed their rightful place. No, what they had done was not good enough. And if one had the power to put it to rights it was one’s duty to do so for the sake of other towns. For the sake of humanity and not least for the sake of the human being that was Grace herself. ... If there is any town the world is better without, this is it. (02:35:44–02:38:10)

The spectator who at first strongly sympathised with Tom Edison, who is friendly and a moral compass, slowly comes to understand that he is conformist and dangerous. Throughout the film we prefer to engage with Grace, a refugee who has been treated unfairly. Our engagement is strong but troubling, for we have to witness and suffer all the atrocities the villagers inflict upon her. And we strongly hope that she will survive, and that justice will be done.

Grace’s rescue does not bring the spectator relief. In the end, she has all the villagers murdered, which is not the poetic justice that the spectator had wanted.

Several similarities to *THE WHITE RIBBON* are striking. Christian morals are set as a guiding principle and as a symbol for a rural community to live up to. Men assume power over women. The strict logic of the starting point is followed through to the end. If there is balance in the world, then one good deed has to be rewarded by another good deed. That seems natural. But when it means rape and starvation, something must be wrong with the equation. The most striking similarity is that in the end the spectators find their moral values shattered.

The main difference between the films is that *DOGVILLE* has a narrator who is not part of the story but knows the characters' motives and narrow-mindedness. That knowledge reveals even greater ugliness, and we might be pleased that we do not have to hear the hateful thoughts that likely populate the mind of Klara in *THE WHITE RIBBON*. As a matter of fact, in the rare instances when characters speak out in *THE WHITE RIBBON*, their speech is uncomfortably straightforward. We might feel that the most hideous acts in the film involve the spectator, but the doctor's denigrating of Mrs Wagner is in fact far worse.

## ORDER AND LOGIC

What does *DOGVILLE* tell us about *THE WHITE RIBBON*? It hints at another aspect of the immoral world: self-righteousness. Setting a moral example, bragging about it, feeling superior because of it, displaying it as a trophy – such acts open a Pandora's Box.

Almost all the characters are guilty of imposing on others to behave in certain ways and of applying rules they have learned without considering of the effect on others. For example, Martin orders God to punish him (for what?) and when he is not punished by God believes that God approves of his acts. As a result the crimes continue. The doctor obeys the commandment to speak the truth, but humiliates Mrs Wagner by saying how he loathes her.

A comparison of these films suggests that the real culprit in *THE WHITE RIBBON* is the pastor. In a sense, he is also the narrator of the film, as he is responsible for its title. Although we do not get to hear him preach in church, the word of God resonates in the speeches of this man, who thinks of himself as a pure and righteous person whose moral compass guides his children throughout.

However, he is dumbfounded when his youngest son offers him his precious pet bird, which he had rescued from certain death, as comfort following the killing of his own bird. He can merely stutter "thank you", understanding that this boy, who performs this simple act of consolation, has probably internalised the concept of righteousness far better than he himself could fathom in all his years of being a pastor. Maybe this act also holds him back from punishing Klara for killing his bird, and granting her the ritual of confirmation to become an official member of the church.

Both films thus show a plethora of immoral actions. People hurt each other, physically and emotionally. People lie and cheat. And all the characters act out of a feeling of moral superiority. They act immorally to defend their own morals. This paradox is not resolved; instead the films ensure the friction is severe.

## PUNISHMENT AND CRIME

In 1940 George Bernard Shaw famously stated: “We ought to have declared war on Germany the moment Mr. Hitler’s police stole Einstein’s violin.” *THE WHITE RIBBON* can be seen as such a rewriting of events, although for the First World War rather than the Second. Here we see criminal acts, unresolved and unpunished, carried out by those who will subsequently fight in the war. Shaw’s remark seems morally sound. Just like Shaw, the spectator eagerly waits for the characters to be punished. But the film has a different logic. There are punishments, but they come before the crime; even worse, they cause the crimes. And the crimes themselves are left unanswered.

Klara and Martin are reprimanded for not coming home in time; Mrs Felder dies. Ferdinand is reprimanded for saying out loud that he wished the baby to be a girl: the baby catches pneumonia because of the open window. The pastor’s bird is killed by Klara because the pastor had criticised her publicly. Karli is almost blinded directly after we have seen Klara at confession, with her father hesitating to offer her the wine to drink, she looking up to him, and he looking doubtfully at her (maybe reprimanding him with her eyes, she fighting his powers).

And even the horse’s tripping over the wire, the first event, is preceded by a punishment. After all, the pastor reminds the children that when they were younger they had to wear those ribbons, to make them recognise their moral purity. And even then, they must have taken it as a punishment. Although the pastor talks about the ribbon as some sort of trophy of moral superiority, he also, later, liberates them from this “burden”.

## BALANCE

I have suggested that the spectator of *THE WHITE RIBBON* finds himself in the dark recesses of the Unjust World. It is difficult to find a way out. It is not just painful to witness immoral acts; it also becomes unbearable, because the immoral acts are based on the concept of the Just World. Balance, as the foundation of the Just World, leads to the horrors of *THE WHITE RIBBON*. It leads to punishment and crime.

But the film does not *teach* us that. Actually, it shows how detrimental such a logic of balance is to a society. The film shows moments that disturb this logic. And the spectator longs for those moments. We find solace in the few acts

of kindness, the works of mercy that remain unrewarded, unbalanced. Those moments of compassion that the characters perform, a kind gesture, a subtle touch, remain unanswered; they have no implications for the logic of events, and just because of that they are what matters, and what remains.

Maybe our belief in a Just World is shattered through this film, but belief in the power of kindness is restored. That belief helps us endure this film. But it brings only small relief after a prolonged stay in the Unjust World.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blumenthal-Barby, Martin, 2014, The Surveillant Gaze. Michael Haneke's *THE WHITE RIBBON*, *October Magazine* 147, 95–116.
- Bordwell, David, 1985, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Routledge.
- Breger, Claudia, 2016, Cruel Attachments, Tender Counterpoints. Configuring the Collective in Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, *Discourse* 38, 2, 142–172.
- Davie, Grace, 2013, *The Sociology of Religion. A Critical Agenda*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2nd ed.
- Lerner, Melvin J., 1980, *The Belief in a Just World. A Fundamental Illusion*, New York: Plenum.
- Niven, Kumar/Swiatek, Lucyna, 2012, Representations of New Terror: "Autoanomie" in the Films of Michael Haneke, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, 3, 311–321.
- Piaget, Jean, 1948, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. Glencoe: Free Press.
- Smith, Murray, 1995, *Engaging Characters. Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stewart, Garrett, 2010, Pre-War Trauma. Haneke's *THE WHITE RIBBON*, *Film Quarterly* 63, 4, 40–47.
- Van der Pol, Gerwin, 2015, Spectator's Trust as an Indicator of Film Authorship. Is Vinterberg a Film Auteur?, *Studies in European Cinema* 12, 1, 19–34.
- Williams, James S., 2010, Aberrations of Beauty. Violence and Cinematic Resistance in Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, *Film Quarterly* 63, 4, 48–55.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- AUCH ZWERGE HABEN KLEIN ANGEFANGEN (*EVEN DWARFS STARTED SMALL*, Werner Herzog, DE 1970).
- DAS WEISSE BAND (*THE WHITE RIBBON*, Michael Haneke, DE/AT/FR/IT, 2009).
- DIE SIEBELBAUERN (*THE INHERITORS*, Stefan Ruzowitzky, AT/DE 1998).
- DOGVILLE (Lars von Trier, NL/DK/UK/FR/FI/SE/DE/ IT/NO 2003).
- THE BABY OF MACON (Peter Greenaway, NL/FR/UK/DE 1993).