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CRUELTY HAS THE FACE OF A CHILD. ON *THE WHITE RIBBON* BY MICHAEL HANEKE

A BREEDING GROUND FOR EVIL UNDER THE COVER OF NORMALITY

Film makers like stories in which children's innocence is confronted with the social order established by adults. The film makers' willingness to confront a sensitive child protagonist with an austere and silent world may stem from the fact that such stories involve the viewers' emotions.

Michael Haneke presents children in a manner different from that of François Truffaut (*The 400 Blows*, 1959), Ken Loach (*Kes*, 1969) or Luc Besson (*Léon*, 1994). In the Austrian director's films they are not innocent creatures, but characters who in their evil deeds are colder and more methodical than adults.

This can also be said about the youngest protagonists of the Austrian's film *The White Ribbon* (*Das weiße Band*, 2009) about the life of the inhabitants of the German village of Eichwald on the eve of the outbreak of WWI. The peaceful existence of the local community is shattered by disturbing and mysterious events. The audience learns about various strange happenings from a retrospective narrator, who long time ago worked as a teacher in the village school, sharing the vicissitudes of life with the inhabitants of a Protestant countryside in northern Germany. Eichwald could be a paradise, but people live there in an atmosphere that is far from Arcadian. Mysterious incidents start to occur in the village. First comes an accident involving the doctor, whose horse stumbles over a wire stretched between trees near his house. This is followed by the disappearance of the son of the baron, who is the employer for many

locals. The boy is found hanging head down, with traces of flogging. Despite the doctor's and the baron's investigation, the perpetrators are not found. Life goes on as if the strange events did not matter much. But this is only seemingly so. The mysterious events will be repeated and the answer to the question who is behind them will become obvious, but, as is usual with Haneke, it will not be given explicitly.

The perpetrators are children, creatures usually regarded as innocent and pure. Why them then? Children become executioners as a result of a distorted Protestant upbringing in its ultraconservative variety, upbringing that changes family relations into a command-and-quota model of oppression. It is used primarily by the pastor and it is his children that excel at torturing others. The clergyman's upbringing follows an authoritarian premise whereby every individual should have a strong faith and obey the commandments of a supernatural power who is superior and whose decisions are not questioned¹.

The pastor's family life resembles a never-ending military drill. Standing stiff and holding their arms tight to their sides, the children lower their gaze apprehensively before their father, whom they address as "Herr Vater". When the father wants to tell them something, they stand in a line, when they leave the table, they kiss their parents on the hand. At home they have no respite from being model children with unconditional respect for the holy authority of their father and mother. They have no freedom even at night, in their own beds.

When the pastor discovers that his son Martin masturbates, he ties his hands to the bed. Of course, the boy cannot escape a conversation with his father, who begins it by telling him a story of a boy dying a horrible death because of masturbation. This confrontation is a show of sophisticated cruelty in the name of fatherly love and for a long time, perhaps for ever it will remain one of Martin's most severe humiliations in his life.

The pastor loves his children. Yet although we see suffering in his face, when without raising his voice he calmly punishes them, stressing that he will be the one who will suffer most because of the lashes they will get for being late, deep down humiliating them gives him a perverse pleasure. Thus, the categorical nature of the principles of upbringing applied by the pastor can be easily challenged. Punishment does not always have to fit the crime. This crack in the pastor's seemingly flawless upbringing is revealed in his conversation with the teacher. The teacher, who links the crimes with the children, confides his suspicions to the clergyman. The pastor reacts with indignation. But the teacher has approached the right person. The Protestant priest knows very well what the youngest inhabitants of Eichwald are capable of. In fact, the teacher's discovery frightened not appalled him.

Perhaps the man was really scared for the first time, when, after a religious instruction class during which he humiliated his eldest daughter Klara with a mo-

¹ Cf. T.W. Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality*, W.W. Norton & Company 1993.

ralising tirade, he found on his desk a canary pierced with scissors. The girl first shows weakness – when the father upbraids her in front of her peers for behaving childishly, having seen her clowning about with her mates, Klara faints. But the pastor's daughter quickly recovers and does what her father has taught her best – she administers punishment. She sneaks into his office and kills the bird, the same bird which the pastor has allowed his youngest son to care for.

Listening to the teacher, Klara's father confronts his desire for complete obedience. A desire that has been satisfied, for the teacher's words show that his upbringing has been effective. It turns out that the children are scrupulously following the pastor's teachings. Just as he has fulfilled his duty to administer punishment to them, so too his children have taken on the burden of responsibility for administering justice in the village. They punished the doctor for incest, the baron for the death of a farmer's wife during harvest and the midwife for her affair with the doctor, by kidnapping her disabled son Karli.

However, the pastor's confrontation with the reality in which his dream has come true proves traumatic. This unfulfilled dream has been a source of pleasure for him. As long as it remained unfulfilled, the man could give vent to his sadistic inclinations with impunity, humiliating his children. Yet the dream has got out of hand – the children have begun to follow their father's teachings. Thus they have sanctioned not subordination to him but taking over his role. This simultaneously angers and scares the pastor. His role of the guardian and executor of God's orders in his family has been questioned.

Experiencing the consequences of his game from a distance, the man sees its significance – by methodically and unyieldingly reviling disobedience and sin, he has shaped cold and unfeeling characters. Using violence and psychological oppression in the name of love, he has brought up successors, who have turned out to be better than their teacher in doing justified evil. The pupils have surpassed the master.

The principles that were to apply in the pastor's home have been transferred outside by the children. The clergyman did not intend to transfer the principles from the private dimension to the public space. His mission concerned only his own offspring. He was interested in what was going on in the minds of Martin, Klara and the other children; he was not concerned about the souls of other inhabitants of the village. Thus the man has failed both as a father and as the village's pastor. The children, therefore, not so much do the job for their father, but make up for his negligence. As they see it, if they have been paying for the smallest transgression, other perpetrators of evil also should pay for their sins.

The pastor does not respond to the evil caused by adults, although it is a source of suffering for the innocent (for instance, it is commonly known that the doctor sexually abuses his teenage daughter). He does not interfere with matters concerning the local community, although his parishioners, entangled in pathological relationships, confused and unhappy, need his help. The function of pastor and the

prestige associated with it are necessary for the man to strengthen his authority as a father and not to be the spiritual leader for the people of Eichwald. The children fill this gap by punishing evil, which has hitherto been sanctioned by the silence of the local community. Fulfilling their duties as defenders of morality, they also give vent to aggression – a by-product of Protestant drilling.

WHEN A VICTIM FEELS A DESIRE TO BECOME AN EXECUTIONER

Subjected to strong moral pressure, the pastor's sons and daughters are unsure of their status in the community. On the one hand, their parents treat them as befits their age, and on the other – they are not allowed any leeway with regard to behaviour characteristic of childhood. Corporal punishment administered to them is a typical punishment of children – in this case violation of bodily integrity is to inflict pain, first of all, and not to humiliate. Physical sacrum is reserved for adults only, it does not apply to children, who are to be unaware of their sexuality and, consequently – their bodies are neutral, there is no sinful potential yet.

Understandably, discomfort caused by such practices must have been most acutely felt by Klara and Martin, the eldest of the siblings. Experiencing a crisis of identity typical of adolescence, they found no support or understanding in their parents, who were just yet another source of pressure, making the uneasy task of self-identification at the beginning of adulthood even more difficult. Their parents' fondness for order and simple rules left no room for understanding a human being at the difficult stage of becoming mature. Unlike the younger children, Martin and Klara may have felt whipping to be an insult, because it humiliated the body, which is usually discovered at this age – it is, therefore, particularly interesting and even sacred.

We know nothing about Klara's sexual initiation, but we do have some information about Martin in this respect. When he starts exploring his sexuality, his father has a conversation with him and has him go through a cruel session of humiliation. The pastor talks to the boy about masturbation as a filthy, vulgar sin leading to mental illness, and subsequently to death. It is, therefore, not surprising that Martin takes part in acts of violence in the village. The piercing cruel gaze of the just judge (father) humiliates the victim. The penetrating look discovers a shameful truth about the victim. Humiliation resulting from the very fact of such exposure is further compounded by the realisation that this truth is highly disgusting to the omniscient observer. The zeal with which the pastor emphasises the vileness of masturbation shows that the man is not disinterested in administering the punishment. On the contrary, he uses the situation to humiliate his victim more than necessary and experiences perverse pleasure looking at his suffering.

Martin discovering his corporality has angered his father so much not only because he has disobeyed his moral principles. He is more discomfited by the realisation that the boy is ceasing to be a child and is becoming a man. The discovery of the body as a source of pleasure is a manifestation of physical maturity and constitutes a form of access to adulthood. Despite the pastor's avowed concern caused by the immaturity of his children, he does not want them to cross its threshold. Recognising maturity means granting rights, for example the right to express an opinion in a discussion. This, however, is not part of the vision of the pastor's Protestant upbringing. The clergyman's goal is to maintain his authoritarian position in the family. The position of moral superiority, of being someone who grants rights and, first of all, divides duties, is too comfortable for the man not to try to defend it.

That is why the pastor closely guards the boundaries to prevent a situation when the children will have the right to be heard, to question his rules or make decisions outside his control. The pastor's upbringing strategy is doomed to failure, because it provides only for duties and hardly any rights or freedoms for the children. His method of upbringing is paradoxical – the children are to behave as befits their childish age, but at the same time he demands from them a lot that is part of the repertoire of adults with well-developed personality and psyche – literal subordination to the evangelical principles, emotional stability and seriousness. The children sought a release of such strong pressure exerted by the father in acts of violence.

The world of Protestant ethics – providing for emotional coldness, self-control, self-mortification – lacks mechanisms necessary to release tensions generated by relations between people. Tensions in such a reality can be detonated by punishment understood as a tool for controlling others. Pleasure derived from a sadistic inclination to inflict pain on others is legal only when the suffering is used to sanction the system. Thus the position of being righteous is especially comfortable in a world of strict rules. Not only does it lead to an inner equilibrium, giving vent to a sadistic urge to harm others, but it also ensures satisfaction derived from a sense of fulfilling one's duty. All this is at the expense of the victim, who, on the contrary – loses calm, inner coherence and is left with a hardly bearable mark of being someone who disappoints.

Stressing deficiencies in others, deficiencies which prevent them from fulfilling all the hopes invested in them, is always unfair. Setting expectations for others is not right, because these expectations can never be met. Having hopes for somebody and disappointment are two extremes of the same continuum. This is confirmed by the fact that in relations that are more permissive than demanding, relations which do not lack harmony and mutual acceptance, there is no need for confirmations along the lines of: "I had such and such expectations for you and you have fulfilled them". When we talk about expectations with regard to somebody, it is usually in the context of disappointment with the fact that these expectations have not been satisfied. Talking about hopes for somebody justifies deprecating that person. In other words,

fulfilling someone else's ambitions is simply impossible, because it is not about living up to them. "Seeking the object in the Other necessarily runs aground because the object emerges out of the Other's inability to respond to the subject's demand"². This shortage of strength, possibilities and will to deal with them successfully is a source of pleasure for the righteous. For their expectations with regard to the Other assume that the Other will fail.

The position of victims who are caught sinning and who with their actions do less harm to themselves than to the unlucky person who has discovered their dirty secrets is difficult to bear. Even when the painful confrontation with the father ends, the children know that the father's power is great and that the man exercising that power is cruel.

That the pastor wants to instil in his children an awareness of the fact that his gaze reaches their deepest secrets (Martin's masturbation) does not mean he strives for the Panopticon effect³. The Panopticon Effect consists in inducing in the inmate "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power"⁴. Yet the father's actions reveal that his supervision is not constant. If Martin were convinced that he is watched even in his own bed, it would not be necessary to tie his hands to the bed. Bentham's Panopticon "automatizes and disindividualizes power [...]. The ceremonies, the rituals, the marks by which the sovereign's surplus power was manifested are useless. [...] Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power"⁵.

In the case of the pastor the fact that he exercises power over his children matters greatly (when the teacher confides his suspicions about the children to the clergyman, the latter vehemently denies them, also because he fears that if the teacher made his suspicions public, the children would be judged not by himself, i.e. they would not be in his power anymore). Unlike in the case of the Panopticon, what also matters in the pastor's family is the very ceremony of punishing and rewarding (calling each child one by one and administering the beating behind closed doors and then tying a white ribbon as a sign of recovered innocence).

Klara, the eldest daughter, like Martin puts up the greatest resistance to her father's strategy. The girl is on the eve of confirmation. This sacrament includes the Christians receiving it into the evangelising mission, for it signifies a strengthening

² T. McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*, State University of New York Press 2008, p. 169.

³ Panopticon effect: in 1791 Jeremy Bentham presented a design of a perfect prison – the Panopticon. The uniqueness of Bentham's design lay in the fact that the inmates placed in a circular building were aware of being permanently watched by a guard placed in a tower inside the building, with the guard being invisible to the inmates. Staying in such a prison led to self-control among the inmates who were convinced that their actions were being observed all the time, even when, in fact, they were not.

⁴ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin 1991, p. 201.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

of their faith, i.e. testifies to their religious maturity. Meanwhile Klara, on the verge of adulthood, shares the fate of her younger siblings. That is why corporal punishment, having her ears pulled in front of her mates must be particularly humiliating to her. Klara is the one most strongly affected by a crisis of personality. The symbolic identity into which her father tries to push her is a pious and modest woman who obeys his will. Despite being seemingly submissive, the girl does not let herself be dominated, because her own personality is authoritative – we always see her leading the group of children administering justice in the village.

Klara seems to be the most dangerous of all the children. She brilliantly plays a humble and kind daughter and member of the local community; thanks to her intelligence, she always keeps a cool head. Even when talking to the teacher, who suspects the children's role in the mysterious events, the girl remains calm and confident – she brilliantly pretends that she does not know what he means. Humiliated by her father in the classroom, she punishes him perfidiously – by killing the canary which the pastor kept in his office.

The bird's body pierced with scissors will make the man aware of the cost associated with the pleasures of power. The sight of the dead canary, which is a symbol of Klara's maturity in cruelty, confronts the pastor with reality. The children's silence in bearing the punishment, their gestures of love and respect (kissing the hand) are a game the rules of which have not been voluntarily accepted but have been imposed. The game hides a reality in which the father believes that an oppressive system of punishment and psychological humiliation will make the victims sincerely sorry for their sins and grateful for their punishment, an attitude that is very naive.

The very entry into his office, where he most probably studies the Bible, writes his sermons and thinks about God, constitutes a serious profanation of the *sacrum*. The bird, which the father lets the youngest son take care of, is evidence of rare tenderness in the man as well as exceptional, because healthy, relationship with his youngest offspring. The killing of the bird leaves no doubts – the response to merciless, severe love is not gratitude for fatherly care, seemingly suggested, for example, by the hand kissing ritual. Klara responds on the rebound, she gives back what she has received – violence and mercilessness.

The girl's behaviour may also suggest rebellion against the role of women in the Protestant world. In Eichwald a woman first of all supports a man. She silently strengthens his authority by his side (the pastor's wife), satisfies his sexual needs (the midwife having an affair with the doctor or his daughter Anna, with whom too he maintains an intimate relationship). However, Haneke does not create a classic version of the patriarchal world. The stereotype of men exercising power is, therefore, not combined with the stereotype of women whose looks are to make a strong visual and erotic impression⁶. In Haneke's film women do not adorn the screen. In

⁶ L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Polish translation by J. Mach, [in:] *Panorama współczesnej myśli filmowej*, ed. A. Helman, Kraków 1992, p. 100.

showing their unattractiveness, the director is virtually ostentatious, for example in a scene featuring the doctor and the midwife, a scene that could have come straight from Ingmar Bergman's films. After a failed sexual act, the man reveals to the woman the whole contempt and disgust he feels for her. In a true Bergman fashion, the Austrian exposes an ostensible closeness between the two people. Like the Swede, he begins here from the moment in which most directors draw the line when it comes to frankness which the viewers can bear.

The behaviour of children in *The White Ribbon* seems ambiguous. Their acts of vendetta testify to both a rebellion against their father and submission to symbolic power. In this way they manifest their lack of agreement to their father's moral arbitration on behalf of the highest authority – God – and, at the same time, their obedience to God himself. Their imitation of their father (acts of violence against the doctor and others) is, therefore, not a mark of respect but an attempt to depose him and take over his role. The children do not accept the pastor as the one who dispenses divine rights – they will be the ones passing and enforcing moral judgements.

The fact that the youngest inhabitants of Eichwald take the law into their own hands shows that they are under the delusion that there is an order. Their desire for an order that would ensure safety and sense has not been depreciated, despite the fact that the father, who instilled this desire in them, has failed as a figure of symbolic power. Omniscient and all-seeing with regard to his own offspring, the pastor fails as a moral arbiter and guardian of spiritual purity of other inhabitants of Eichwald. The man succeeds neither as a pastor of the local community nor as a carer of his own children. Overzealous in disciplining his offspring, he remains silent about the sins of others. Why is there no punishment for the doctor raping his own daughter or for the baron who decides the fate of the locals, if the children go through the entire process of purification? They listen to a moralising and reproachful tirade, are beaten on the following day and finally receive the white ribbon – a symbol of innocence – from their mother. The children do their father's duty and set out on a mission to punish the sins of others, perhaps in an attempt to make everyone worthy of wearing the white ribbon, like they themselves are after the whipping. Their imitation of their father's behaviour testifies to their commitment to the idea with which they are indoctrinated.

For when we “recognize the obscenity at work in this process, we free ourselves from our investment in this authority”⁷; the children, who, for the time being, do not see it, cannot distance themselves from it. They only see the pleasure of power, not imposing a value judgement on it and not understanding that in its essence it is immoral. The children's involvement in power puts them on the side of ideology, not on the side of lack, i.e. awareness of the fact that ideology conceals insufficiency, that it works thanks to a promise of fulfilling one's desires, but, in fact, it cannot do it.

⁷ T. McGowan, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

Perhaps the youngest residents of Eichwald already sense that the perfect order guaranteed by religion is a mystification. Their acts of violence, intended as punishment for sins, are not yet an attempt to free themselves from the power of ideology, but a desire to move up the hierarchy defined by this ideology. The role of a subject subordinated to the power of gaze that is just and very meticulous in enumerating sins and deciding on the punishment is not comfortable and easy to bear. Much more desired is the position of one administering punishment. Therefore, the children seek to take over the role of the judge of consciences played by the pastor.

EVIL REMAINS HIDDEN

People watching *The White Ribbon* know little or even nothing about the inner conflicts of its protagonists, their emotional tensions, the traces left in them by their relationships with others. Information about these issues concerning the inhabitants of Eichwald comes through the narrator. There are moments when the protagonists expose their emotions, which mostly remain hidden from the viewers. This testifies to some indolence on the part of Michael Haneke in portraying the characters. The director himself realises that: “my films are uncomfortable, because they explain nothing in the psychological sense, leaving the assessment of destructive behaviour to the audience”⁸, he admits.

The Austrian director’s idea is brilliant in its simplicity – to show as little as possible and at the same time to suggest as much as possible. And thus there is not a single shot in the film in which we would see Klara, the ringleader of the group administering punishment to people in the village, confronting the object of her desire. The viewers add what is hidden, but they can never be sure whether they are right. Thus they cannot feel the satisfaction associated with the certainty provided by sufficient information. As viewers we suspect, but we will never be sure whether the girl unflinchingly believes that punishing others is necessary for justice to be done, whether, wanting to take revenge on her father, she thinks cynically and wants to make her actions a caricature of the pastor’s educational endeavours, or, perhaps whether she harms other only for sadistic reasons, to feel the pleasure of inflicting pain on other people. We know at least that the children are not terrified by the consequences of their actions – this can be seen in the fact that they repeat them.

The situation of people watching Haneke’s film is not enviable. The artist places the viewers in a spot from which they cannot see the most important moments of the story and, at the same time, he has the narrator providing them with worrying information about the events in the film. This information, not substantiated by empirical evidence, comprises mainly suppositions. Violence and the scarcity of evi-

⁸ Janusz Wróblewski talks to Michael Haneke, “Zgwałcić widza”, *Polityka* 2009, no. 47, p. 54.

dence available to investigate it worry the viewers. They lose the comfort of being able to anticipate the events in the film and thus the satisfaction of having a sense of control over the world created on screen. What is the most important in the film story is not within their sight. This absence leads to a desire to reach the content remaining outside their sight, which, in turn, launches their imagination. Without the spectators' fantasy, the reception of *The White Ribbon* would have been not so much incomplete but impossible. By leaving many pieces out of the plot, Haneke forces the viewers to fill the gaps with their own interpretation. That is why all interpretations of the film are valid and important.

The Austrian's strategy does not, in fact, elevate the status of the viewers but limits their freedom. The introduction into a world that cannot be made complete without the viewers' imagination does not provoke the viewers to comment on the work but forces them to do so. The dominant impression after watching *The White Ribbon* is a feeling of having experienced a mysterious and important story, one of those that "do not leave anybody indifferent". This impression is a result of the director's decision to use the words of the teacher-narrator to emphasise the mysterious and strange nature of the events in the German village or to suggest that the Eichwald children, fascinated with power, will in a dozen years or so become Hitler's supporters. In other words, acceptance of the invitation to this mysterious world, in which, as the director (regarded, it has to be said, as a great intellectual of European cinema) suggests, we can find the key to understanding such aberrations as Nazism, is an obligation. To remain unmoved after visiting Eichwald would simply be inappropriate.

What is revealed here is Michael Haneke's exceptional managerial talent, perhaps even greater than his directorial skills. The Austrian knows how to turn his weaknesses as a film director into assets. The atmosphere of horror is not a result of what we see in a given scene, but of retardation, which keeps delaying the resolution of ever multiplying puzzles. The psychological depth of the protagonists does not stem from their portrayal, but from the narrator's allusions. An off-screen voice is a simple way of relaying the most important information and directing the viewers' attention. The narrator, when describing the events in Eichwald from the times when he was a teacher in the village, often uses words like "strange", "mysterious", "peculiar". These terms really determine the viewers' perception – if it were not for them, they would not have such an overwhelming feeling of horror.

The directing function of the narrator plays its biggest role in the prologue, when the teacher, sounding like an old man, suggests that the incidents he will talk about "perhaps had something to do with the events in this country"⁹. The future of the country he has in mind is the period of Nazi rule and WWII. The teacher's

⁹ The quote comes from the dialogue script of *The White Ribbon*.

words, to which there is no further reference in the film, were enough for many critics to call *The White Ribbon* a “study into the birth of Nazism”¹⁰.

However, such suggestions may meet with resistance. Hitler won unprecedented popularity and absolute obedience with regard to his criminal concepts among millions of Germans thanks to many determinants which turned out to be a fertile foundation for his ghastly policy. They undoubtedly included political-economic factors. Germans, the great losers of WWI, convinced for a long time that they would certainly win it, found their sudden defeat and difficult economic situation extremely hard to bear. The nation looked for culprits and Adolf Hitler pointed them out.

The teacher’s suggestion is only seemingly innocent and only seemingly does not absolutize the impact of the strict discipline of Protestant upbringing on the history of the German Reich in the first half of the 20th century. The economy of the Austrian’s style has made many people take note of and remember each clue concerning the interpretation of his film. This statement and the raising of the status of the historical context by the fact that the film ends with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo do, however, absolutize the cause of the “future events” in Germany presented by Haneke. Thus the director makes a *pars pro toto* mistake here.

HANEKE, A MAN WITH A MISSION

This is how Michael Haneke talks about his films:

My films are intended as polemical statements against the American “barrel down” cinema and its dis-empowerment of the spectator. They are an appeal for a cinema of insistent questions instead of false (because too quick) answers, for clarifying distance in place of violating closeness, for provocation and dialogue instead of consumption and consensus¹¹.

An example of the cinema which in the Austrian director’s view is in opposition to his own is Quentin Tarantino’s *oeuvre*:

I remember when Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* came out¹². I was sitting in a matinee filled with young people. The famous scene of a boy’s head being blown off caused a huge commotion in the theatre. They thought it was great and they almost died laughing¹³.

¹⁰ Critics who have looked for the roots of Nazism in *The White Ribbon* include Michał Walkiewicz, see “*Totalitaryzm w powijakach*”, *Film* 2009, no. 11, p. 74; Błażej Hrapkowicz, see “*Biała wstążka*”, *Kino* 2009, no. 11, pp. 72–73; or Piotr Pluciński, “*Kino z najwyższej półki*”, *Stopklatka.pl* 22 May 2009; <http://www.stopklatka.pl/film/film.asp?fi=39214&sekcja=recenzja&ri=6166> (access: 5 June 2011).

¹¹ M. Frey, *Michael Haneke*, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/haneke-2/> (access: 5 June 2011).

¹² *Pulp Fiction* — American black comedy directed by Quentin Tarantino from 1994.

¹³ P. Oehmke, L.O. Beier, Interview with Director Michael Haneke, “*Every film rapes the viewer*”, *Spiegel*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,656419-2,00.html> (access: 28 May 2011).

Haneke believes that treating violence as fun is irresponsible. He resists showing scenes of people being killed. Indeed, the Austrian does not show brutality in his films. Despite that his films arouse horror, because, although there is no blood in them, they are full of emotional pathology and cold cruelty.

In Haneke's films violence does not have cathartic powers. The Austrian director strives only for a direct goal on the way to this specific purification through art – he evokes pity and fear. However, he does not pursue a further goal without which, according to Aristotle, we cannot talk of catharsis. This further goal is sublimation of pity and fear or getting rid of them¹⁴. The need to elevate or release these emotions means that if they are felt, especially too strongly, they may be harmful.

Does the European director think that today fear is in short supply? This may be suggested by the horror that fills Haneke's film world. But, according to the Austrian, today people do not lack fear and terror; on the contrary, "we are all obsessed with fear,"¹⁵ claims Haneke. Why then, instead of providing some relief, does the director of *The White Ribbon* want to irritate the viewers' sores?

The charge of opportunism may be justified in this case. The director, of course, does not explain his fondness for pathological relationships and cold, often unexplained cruelty by saying that such a lack of pity for the viewers simply guarantees great publicity for the film. Publicity guaranteed by viewers, who after watching a film by Haneke, must find the causes of evil themselves in order to release the trauma. This evil which, unlike its causes, is the only certainty in the films by the author of *The White Ribbon*. The background is always blurred; even if the viewers do find a clue – the satisfaction from unravelling the sources of cruelty can easily be challenged. The story in the film is constructed in a way that makes even mutually exclusive interpretations valid. As a result, there are many disputes and discussions surrounding Haneke's films, discussions with plenty of references to philosophy, sociology and history.

Haneke reveals his mission, which explains a lot: "I try to give back to violence that what it truly is: pain, injury to another"¹⁶. Thus the director wants to make up for the damage caused by mainstream authors, such as Tarantino, who present violence as something "unreal and therefore consumable"¹⁷. Referring to the scene from Tarantino's film cited by Haneke, in which a boy is killed, we can, however, disagree with the Austrian, who considers films like *Pulp Fiction* to be dangerous,

¹⁴ Here is Aristotle's definition of tragedy which includes the term *catharsis*: "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation [*catharsis*] of these emotions", *Poetics*, Dover Publications 1997, p. 10.

¹⁵ P. Oehmke, L.O. Beier, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ M. Frey, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ P. Oehmke, L.O. Beier, *op. cit.*

because they make people indifferent to violence. First of all, violence in Tarantino's works is one of the elements of the film puzzle. Scenes that feature it are not climactic moments but points used to start other threads. The death of the boy referred to by Haneke is a typical element of black comedy, which does not recognise any taboos and holds nothing sacred. The killing is an unfortunate accident, which is a prelude to ridiculing the gangsters Vincent and Jules as unprofessional losers.

Contrary to what it may seem, *Pulp Fiction* is not an apology for cruelty. Most protagonists perpetrating violence are disgraced in a variety of ways (for instance, the stylish, sexy lover of drugs, Mia Wallace, pays for her immoderation in taking illegal substances with a collapse, from which she wakes up with a syringe in her heart; her husband, the boss of the gangsters, Marsellus Wallace falls victim to a rape by the psychopathic Zed, while Vincent is shot in a situation that is not very honourable not only for a gangster – sitting on the toilet). The main difference in both directors' attitude to violence is that Haneke demands that his stories be treated literally, while Tarantino assumes that scenes featuring killing will be interpreted by the viewers on the level of film convention.

In fact, the strategy employed by the Austrian is more dangerous, because in his case causes of violence are often unknown. Children in Haneke's films are capable of psychological and physical violence, and it is often simply impossible to understand their actions. If the behaviour of children in *The White Ribbon* is blatantly motivated by their strict upbringing, the cruelty of Benny, the protagonist of *Benny's Video* (1992) terrifies by a lack of its explanation in the film. The viewers, watching Benny, a teenager obsessed with videos, who kills a girl with a bolt gun, are disoriented.

It is difficult to find an explanation for his behaviour in his television addiction. Unlike the child protagonists of *The White Ribbon*, whose reactions to suffering inflicted on others remain hidden, we see Benny in the presence of the girl, who is dying before his eyes. Her death makes no impression on the boy. Benny calmly eats a pizza, arranges a meeting with friends, moves around the flat, passing the girl's body as if it were a piece of the furniture. It is difficult to comprehend the reasons of such insensitivity to the suffering of another human being. Can copying of crimes which are unreal because seen on the television screen be so smooth, devoid of any crack in the form of the murderer's trauma caused by his own action?

Tarantino's scenes release the spectators' tension which accompanies them everyday as they live observing the social order. By virtue of the fact that the characters from Tarantino's films are so "cool", their actions cease to be serious and do not cause fear, even when these protagonists kill. In Quentin Tarantino's *oeuvre* violence is not a dissonance, it does not force its way with its destructive nature into a world that is not prepared for it. It is an element of a conventional, thoroughly film world. To sum up, it is difficult to assess Tarantino's grotesque films, which mix a number of conventions, applying moral categories to them. The American's films are camp,

which – to quote Susan Sontag – “is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of ‘style’ over ‘content’, ‘aesthetics’ over ‘morality’, of irony over tragedy”¹⁸.

In the case of Haneke, violence resembles an element causing a huge cataclysm, too great for people to fight against it. Cruelty in his films is like a force of Nature – omnipotent, blind and incomprehensible, totally changing the reality. The director argues that a world which is seemingly quiet and healthy is not neutral but exceptionally dangerous.

His protagonists, for example middle class citizens, though without any noticeable stigma (Benny is healthy, has no problems at school, his relations with his peers and parents raise no objections), are nevertheless potentially capable of cold cruelty. In Haneke’s world there is plenty of dispassionate evil under the cover of normality. Such a strategy instils fear in the viewers. The present author knows a case of a person who after watching *Funny Games*¹⁹ would put a knife under the pillow before going to sleep. Fear used in this manner is not cathartic. People cannot live constantly convinced that some Other threatens them. When they do not let themselves forget that the Other may sometimes be dangerous, with time any Other becomes an enemy²⁰.

In Haneke’s cinema, the child is usually a character who, instead of giving, takes away the hope that in this cruel world full of silent suffering goodness may win in the end. We often say that children are the future. The vision of the future with the world populated by adult children from *The White Ribbon* frightens instead of giving comfort. The youngest residents of Eichwald are not innocent and their gaze does not show vulnerability and sensitivity. In Haneke’s world children’s immaturity is not associated with trust and simplicity, but with cruelty which does not lead to a sense of guilt and pangs of conscience, but only increases the shortage of empathy. We may find comfort only in the fact that the author of *The White Ribbon* not only describes reality but also creates it, exaggerating it for the needs of his mission to instil fear in his viewers.

¹⁸ S. Sontag, *Notes on “Camp”*, <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/sontag-notesoncamp-1964.html>.

¹⁹ *Funny Games* is a 1997 film by Haneke. In 2007 the director made an American version of the film, *Funny Games U.S.*, which is a shot-for-shot remake of its original. A married couple with their little son go to a lake house to take some rest from the hustle and bustle of city life. On their way there, they stop before the house of their neighbour, who introduces them to two young men, Peter and Paul. When the family reaches their house, the young men turn up as well. Soon it turns out that they are cold psychopaths, who in psychological and physical torturing of their victims will not shy away from anything, including murder.

²⁰ This is the theme of Michael Moore’s film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002).