

## The White Ribbon

A new German film has opened in Washington. "The White Ribbon," by the inimitable Michael Haneke, arrives here having attained international success, receiving considerable critical praise, and being nominated for an Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film of 2009.

It is a strange, unnerving work, beautifully photographed (in crisp black-and-white) and sturdily acted but containing overlays of doom and providing no easy answers. It is a careful chronicle of a German village in 1913, some of whose inhabitants have fallen victim to strange accidents and vicious crimes for which no one claims responsibility. Some of these actions are directed at village children, but the townspeople come to realize that the nefarious doings are, in fact, being perpetrated by them.

Varying reaction from town authorities come from both the local aristocrat, the baron (Ulrich Tukur again), who employs many of the townspeople, and the town's pastor, a stern character, who suspects the devil is tempting his own children. It is the latter who places white ribbon armbands on his kids to remind them to maintain their purity. One commonsensical, humane voice is heard from the town's teacher, an easy-going and decent nerd who tries to understand what is really happening while he also gently romances a young governess. The film brings out hints of both "The Crucible" (in plot) as well as the monumental 1984 German mini-series "Heimat" (in its closed village setting).

Like a number of Haneke films (e.g., "Caché" from 2005) "The White Ribbon" is equivocal and open-ended, leaving the viewer to speculate on whether the film means to be a harbinger of the upcoming war or not. Whatever its final meaning, it is intriguing to watch this microcosm of a village develop through a fine ensemble of actors.

(March 2010)