


Fall 12-15-2016

Those that Trespass Against Us: Childhood, Violence, and Memory in The White Ribbon

Joseph Kuster
University of New Mexico

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/fl_etds

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [German Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kuster, Joseph. "Those that Trespass Against Us: Childhood, Violence, and Memory in The White Ribbon." (2016).
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/fl_etds/120

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Foreign Languages & Literatures ETDs by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Joseph Kuster

Candidate

Foreign Languages and Literatures (German Studies)

Department

This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Thesis Committee:

Dr. Susanne Baackmann, Chairperson

Dr. Katrin Schroeter

Dr. Jason Wilby

**THOSE THAT TRESPASS AGAINST US: CHILDHOOD,
VIOLENCE, AND MEMORY IN *THE WHITE RIBBON***

by

JOSEPH KUSTER

B.A., German, University of New Mexico, 2014

M.A., German Studies, University of New Mexico, 2017

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2017

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Susanne Baackmann, my advisor and committee chair, for her encouragement and support throughout the process of writing this project.

I also thank my committee members, Dr. Katrin Schroeter and Dr. Jason Wilby, for their assistance and aid.

**THOSE THAT TRESPASS AGAINST US:
VIOLENCE, CHILDHOOD, AND MEMORY IN *THE WHITE RIBBON***

by

Joseph Kuster

B.A., German, University of New Mexico, 2014

M.A., German Studies, University of New Mexico, 2017

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines aesthetic representations of childhood and violence in Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*. I argue that Haneke's film interrogates notions of the idealized child in the context of German history/the history of the *Tätergeneration* in order to question the possibility of affixing particular objective truth to historical or cultural narrative. First, I examine and deconstruct culturally accepted representations of the child as a symbol of innocence and purity, and explore how Haneke's film manipulates and subverts these tropes. I then approach the film using three different theoretical structures: the gaze of the monstrous child in the horror genre, play theory as a tool for framing the children's actions as moral exploration, and a close reading of the film's use of violence and its relationship with the spectator. Ultimately, I contend that both childhood and notions of memory are inherently retroactive constructs. Haneke's depiction of the cultural role of the child in pre-WWI Germany as well as the attempt to explain the history of 20th century Germany are instances of storytelling—an inherently subjective, multidirectional act that questions the stability of both discourses.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2 VIOLATIONS OF IDEALIZED CHILDHOOD	7
CHAPTER 3 DEPICTIONS OF THE MONSTROUS CHILD	22
CHAPTER 4 MORAL GAMES AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES	37
CHAPTER 5 VIOLENCE AND THE SPECTATOR	53
CHAPTER 6 MEMORY AND STORYTELLING	62

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Dinnertime scene, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	12
Figure 2. Communion, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	13
Figure 3. Lakeside, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	20
Figure 4. Attacking the Baron's son, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	20
Figure 5. German propaganda placard 1.	24
Figure 6. German propaganda placard 2.	24
Figure 7. Klara's first scene, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	29
Figure 8. Schoolhouse confrontation, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	31
Figure 9. Communion, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	32
Figure 10. Klara's last scene, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	33
Figure 11. Village children, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	34
Figure 12. Village children, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	35
Figure 13. Children's choir in church, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	36
Figure 14. Martin plays on the log, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	46
Figure 15. The Doctor's accident, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	53
Figure 16. Destruction of cabbages, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	56
Figure 17. Barn fire, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	57
Figure 18. Attacking the Baron's son, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	57
Figure 19. The Farmer's suicide, <i>The White Ribbon</i>	57

Chapter 1

Introduction

“White, as you all know, is the color of innocence”—with these words, a pastor in a pre-WWI German village reminds his children what he expects from them as he carefully ties a white ribbon to their arms—a public token of the ideals they are required to represent. The events depicted in the *The White Ribbon* (2009), written and directed by Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke, however, suggest that the children are anything but what they may seem. In the film, a pre-WWI German village is shaken by a series of mysterious, increasingly horrific crimes. These crimes begin as being perpetrated against adults, but quickly turn against children, taking the form of a punishment ritual—after one particularly violent crime, in which a disabled child is blinded and left in the woods, a bible verse is left at the scene of the crime, claiming that the sins of the parents will be visited upon their children. Only two consistent factors unite the instances of violence—they are most frequently committed against the children of parents who have transgressed (generally sexually—adultery, incest, etc.), and each crime brings in its wake a group of staring children arriving at the scene, asking innocently if they can help in any way. By the end of the film, the narrator—the village school-teacher—infers that the village children have been committing the attacks. His attempts to reveal the truth, however, are met with disgust—he is warned that any attempts to spread his ideas will result in exile from the community.

Ostensibly, Haneke’s film can most easily be read as an attempt to address the lingering questions and trauma left by the crimes perpetrated by Hitler’s Germany. Although the film is itself a period piece, it engages with these questions in a decidedly

modern context—how history reemerges as a retroactively constructed narrative, and how narratives of memory function in the attempt to present or explain cultural trauma. *The White Ribbon* is indicative of many of the themes with which Haneke regularly engages—most notably his tendency to question and probe grand exploratory narratives of historical events that may or may not exist, as well as his fixation with depicting violence. This inclination to interrogate simple or facile answers is indicative of the self-reflexive questions and answers (or lack thereof) that plague Haneke's work. One of the fundamental hallmarks of Haneke's oeuvre is intellectual provocation. His films tend towards the multifaceted and revel in a closed presentation: consider the central mystery of *Caché*, for example, the seemingly senseless violence of *Funny Games*, the tangled intertextualities of *Code Unknown*, etc. Many of these films, like *The White Ribbon*, explore the notion of objective narrative, calling into question notions of truth and spectatorship.

The White Ribbon provides an example of another one of Haneke's most troubling and fascinating motifs: his films' tendency to accentuate intellectual provocations with sudden and transgressive violence—thus eliciting a visceral reaction in addition to the intellectual complexities he presents. Haneke himself explains his own relationship to the brutality of his films, claiming that “the society we live in is drenched in violence. I represent it on screen because I am afraid of it, and I think it is important that we reflect on it” (Haneke, qtd. in Brunette 6). It is interesting to note that Haneke considers violence and its representation as a site for reflection—and sheds light on his impulse to stage social critique via depictions of sudden brutal acts. The questions his films pose— notions of objective truth, an overarching epistemological solution to historical threads, the

relationship between spectator and spectacle, etc.—are inseparable from violence, because the violence itself poses the question. Although Haneke’s positioning of violence in such a central role in his films may be easily read as sensationalist or an unnecessarily brutal provocation, his approach both employs violence as an effective tool for dissecting the issues he examines while critically examining the audience’s relationship with the inhumanity occurring onscreen—a relationship which is itself one of Haneke’s fundamental questions.

One unaddressed question thus far regarding *The White Ribbon* is its sense of time and place—why Haneke chose to explore the past. Worth noting is that *The White Ribbon* is one of Haneke’s only period pieces. His relationship with the past, however, is a simultaneously vertical and horizontal one: *The White Ribbon* both examines pre-WWI Germany as the progenitor for things to come and posits that its various horrors and transgressions are neither gone nor forgotten. Haneke fixes his own intellectual curiosity and aesthetic techniques onto frameworks of the past, creating a jarringly cold-eyed and contemporary rumination on events long past. The result is a scathing critique of memory and narrative itself: Haneke’s film deliberately distances the spectator from his film by placing the film in the past and presenting its narrative as a half-remembered memory, and then proceeds to harshly examine the validity of this memory.

This critique is most readily evident in the film’s plot itself, and the way the film engages with the events it depicts. *The White Ribbon* raises far-reaching questions about history, guilt, and the origins of evil—the film is uninterested, however, in providing answers. Instead, Haneke seems most intent on suggesting that objective truth itself is a concept worthy of skepticism and interrogation. In Haneke’s own words, “every kind of

explanation is just something that's there to make you feel better, and at the same time it's a lie. It's a lie to calm you, because the real explanation would be so complex, it would be impossible to have in 90 minutes of film or 200 pages of a novel" (Haneke, qtd. in Brunette 8). The best example of this suspicious relationship with narrative truth is the film's plot itself. Superficially, *The White Ribbon* follows a traditional mystery structure—crimes are committed, an investigation is led, clues are revealed, etc. This structure, however, refuses to coalesce into anything that will offer closure or narrative satisfaction—instead, the film seems to deliberately undermine the existence of truth or feasible solutions. Obfuscation is the order of the day as *The White Ribbon* repeatedly introduces plot elements that may have provided hints to solve the puzzle in a different film. *The White Ribbon*, however, uses each of these elements to question the reliability with which any puzzle can be solved. The reliability that this film questions is particularly troubling and noteworthy, in that the film's opening lines, in which the narrator claims to be telling a story that may explain what happened to his country in the coming years (aka the Third Reich, the Second World War, and the Holocaust), position *The White Ribbon* and the event it depicts as an examination of historical progression—how the line between points A and B somehow evolved to include genocide. Haneke's mission with *The White Ribbon* seems nothing less than to suggest that any explanation for these events—events that arguably cry for explanation more than any other in 20th Century Western history—will be fundamentally meaningless.

Although *The White Ribbon* inherently frustrates any attempts to assign or sustain any overarching theories or large claims to its structure, in the following chapters I will nevertheless attempt to engage with the film's questions in hopes of exploring any

insights the film might offer. Specifically, I will interrogate the film's use of children in hopes of creating something of a Rosetta stone that can be applied to *The White Ribbon's* other ambiguities. To begin with, I will provide an analysis of traditional and contemporary constructions of childhood, as well as the ways in which Haneke's film engages with and subverts these constructs. I will then continue by offering two different theoretical frameworks with which we can interpret the child subjects in the film: Haneke's engagement with horror genre tropes in his representation of children, and an exploration of potential instances of play, obscured communities, and transitional spaces as enacted by the film's children. Building from these frameworks, I will address Haneke's normalization of violence and manipulation of the spectator in the film—a discussion that will lead to questions of historicity, memory, and how *The White Ribbon* functions as a tool for exploring and explaining cultural trauma.

Ultimately, what unites each disparate element of *The White Ribbon* is a series of contradictions: play used to enact violence, the figure of the idealized and pure child used to subvert the construction of childhood itself, both children and adults simultaneously acting as perpetrators and victims, a mystery whose function is to remain unsolvable, etc. Through an analysis of this film, I hope to examine how these contradictions and binaries place *The White Ribbon* in a larger historical context—namely, the history of the *Tätergeneration* and pre-war German social context. By interrogating representations of childhood, unsolvable mysteries, and the function of memory in *The White Ribbon*, I hope to draw larger conclusions about the way Haneke engages with Germany's history: the narrative functions that shape perceptions of history, and the possibility (or impossibility) of objective truth or reality within the constraints of collective memory.

Haneke's film tells a story—a half-remembered memory—that utilizes one of the most culturally taboo subjects at his disposal: violence committed by and against children. By engaging with and violating notions of childhood innocence, Haneke casts a previously unassailable cultural axiom in a suspicious light, and in doing so opens the audience to question which other previously unquestioned truths may be interrogated. In Haneke's film, the structures that create and support the idealized child are more fragile than previously suspected—and by situating the historical narrative of pre-war Germany on the shoulders of this collapsing framework, *The White Ribbon* posits that this narrative itself, as well as the possibility of a fixed narrative, is a similarly flimsy construct.

Chapter 2

Violations of Idealized Childhood

The heart of childhood and the childhood perspective in film is founded on contradictions—namely, the tensions between the traditional role of children as idealized paragons of innocence and the complicated, often traumatic realities of childhood, as well as youth/childhood as a connoted ‘inferior’ experience that can nevertheless be placed in ‘serious’ or ‘adult’ contexts. In this chapter, I intend to examine the tensions that arise between social and cultural perceptions of idealized childhood subjects and children as individuals with agency. To do so, I will attempt to outline the development of childhood as a culturally constructed space—how children have become defined by the adult gaze, and the ramifications thereof. Having established this, I will examine the ways in which Haneke’s film engages with and subverts this construction, proposing an alternate childhood space in which unruly child subjects are unwilling to conform to the socially legislated behaviors required of them as symbols rather than individuals.

The first and most pressing question is perhaps the simplest one: why children? Haneke’s choice to deploy children in such central antagonistic roles further complicates an already (willfully) obtuse piece of cinema¹. Before unpacking the film’s relationship with its child characters, it may be necessary to establish some basic parameters with which we discuss childhood. The definition of childhood is itself a contested and historically framed term, but is most frequently associated with symbolic innocence—the child as a blank space onto which cultural values and morality may be projected. Henry

¹ Although an automatic response might be to suggest that Haneke uses children as a pragmatic way to connect his film to the time of Nationalsozialismus—and this approach will certainly be addressed—this paper will first examine the social and cultural implications of aesthetic representations of children before approaching *The White Ribbon* through a historical lens.

Jenkins contends that “the myth of childhood innocence... ‘empties’ the child of its own political agency, so that it may more perfectly fulfill the symbolic demands we make upon it. The innocent child wants nothing, desires nothing, and demands nothing—except, perhaps, its own innocence” (Jenkins 11). The child subject he describes here is no ‘subject’ in any meaningful sense—it is instead a carefully structured empty site that a culture may fill with its own enforced sets of rules. It is important under this definition to emphasize the disempowering and disenfranchising of child subjects—enshrining children and childhood as a sacred symbol necessitates the possibility of agency in childhood subjects. Removing child subjects of the first order desires Jenkins mentions (the innocence child wants nothing other than its own innocence) creates an ideal while remaining fundamentally uninterested in the uncomfortable realities inherent to children as individuals.

It may be worthwhile to place these constructions in a larger historical and cultural context. Situating Haneke’s film as such requires mentioning Phillippe Ariès’ *Centuries of Childhood*, a work with which contemporary texts on childhood still grapple. Ariès traces the evolution of social and cultural attitudes toward childhood from the medieval ages to present day—his most significant claim being that the notion of childhood space and the child subject as constructions independent of adulthood and worthy of consideration are relatively recently adopted notions. The consequences of developing childhood as its own independent sphere separate from adult life can be felt in the romanticized projections of childhood still prevalent in our culture. The idealization of childhood finds its roots in this act of setting children apart—creating a separate

cultural space for children necessitated a new cultural attitude. While engaging with Ariès' work, Cunningham contends that:

this new privileged status of childhood entailed more than a perceived separateness of child and adult. From the time of the Romantic poets onwards it is not uncommon to see childhood as a repository of inheritances and attributes which were often lost or blunted in adulthood. The more adults and adult society seemed bleak, urbanized and alienated, the more childhood came to be seen as properly a garden, enclosing within the safety of its walls a way of life which was in touch with nature and which preserved the rude virtues of earlier periods of the history of mankind. ... The child was 'the other' for which one yearned.

(Cunningham 43)

In the historical context of the industrial revolution, childhood drew parallels with nature—both constructs that came to stand for what was perceived as missing from society. Romanticizing childhood/the child in this way enabled the creation of a cultural space in which children and adults became fundamentally separate entities. As such, the child's eventual construction as an inherently and necessarily innocent being may have been unavoidable. Consider the stark comparison Cunningham draws between the 'bleak, urbanized' world of adults and the 'garden' space of childhood. His use of the word garden is particularly interesting—it evokes the kind of pure space that necessitates equally pure inhabitants. This garden could not have been inhabited by simply anyone—hence the creation of the child as a symbol of innocence. It is of course worth noting that alluding to the edenic garden requires coming to terms with the garden as a place of both prelapsarian paradise and where the fall from this status occurred. As such, constructing

this border between ‘pure’ children and the world of the adult is from the outset a complicated, nebulously defined enterprise.

The creation of a fundamentally innocent child creates an idolized and dehumanized child subject—one essentially incapable of existing in the realm of the ‘real,’ i.e. the complicated, politically charged social reality that adults navigate. As such, childhood functions as more than a cultural symbol or a rite of passage event—it becomes a utopian cultural space that requires constant protection to preserve its purity. Jenkins speaks to this construction of childhood space, claiming that “this dominant conception of childhood innocence presumes that children exist in a space beyond, above, outside the political; we imagine them to be noncombatants whom we protect from the harsh realities of the adult world” (11). Here, Jenkins sees the defining factor that removes children from the adult sphere as one of innocence—the symbol of the innocent child requires a space independent of the adult world to maintain its purity. This childhood space is constructed primarily by the adult gaze and the cultural context in which it is situated. Rather than providing a context in which children can act as subjects with agency, this space exists to house adult fears, desires, etc.—it becomes a blank slate onto which different agendas and drives may be prescribed. In addressing this divide between child and adult spaces, Karin Lesnik-Oberstein highlights childhood agency, rather than notions of inherent goodness or purity as mentioned by Jenkins. In *Children in Culture, Revisited*, she considers childhood and argues that:

it was a common observation that children were largely appreciated as people who were on the receiving end in terms of provision and knowledge. Children

were reduced to vulnerable people to be protected without being seen also as participants – in any case, not participants in the larger social fabric, which was an adult privilege and prerogative. ... Was it ‘naturally’ or necessarily the case that children lacked qualities and capacities for participation? (Lesnik-Oberstein 8)

Lesnik Oberstein raises a vital question—namely, what qualities ‘naturally’ belong to the child, and in which ways they necessitate the exclusion of children from the adult sphere. Innocence and purity are certainly potential aspects of the child subject (as defined by an adult gaze) that would preclude children from participating in the ‘real’ world, as Jenkins and Ariès contend, but should we also assume that children simply lack the resources, determination, or wisdom to navigate the morally murky world of grown-ups? Both arguments—protecting children for their innocence or protecting children because of their own shortcomings and vulnerabilities—may be valid, and Haneke and *The White Ribbon* turns both of them on their head.

Let us now consider the film itself, specifically the ways in which children are regarded in the community that Haneke depicts. The expectations placed on the children in the world as depicted by the film are nothing if not unambiguous. The titular white ribbon functions as an oppressive symbol of purity, publicly branding those forced to wear it as representatives of an uncorrupted morality. Worth noting is that these tokens of innocence are only bestowed on children who have transgressed. The two ribbons in the film are given out after the Pastor (the moral center of the community) chastises two of his children for ‘forgetting’ the behavior that is expected of them. These ribbons function as an apt physical manifestation of childhood’s special, protected status—like caution tape around a crime scene, these ribbons declare in the public eyes that their bearers are

beholden to a different set of behavioral expectations. It would, of course, be ridiculous to suggest that any of the film's adult characters be forced to wear a white ribbon after being caught in adultery, incest, corruption, or any of the other myriad of horrors they regularly commit against one another. Being required to publicly display a mark of atonement and innocence for arriving late to dinner feels like an appropriate response, however, when the bearer of this ribbon has been placed in the sacrosanct sphere of the child.

The white ribbon is the most visible and obvious token demarcating the breach and difference between adult and child spheres in Haneke's film, but the two worlds are also clearly delineated in the hierarchies displayed in various rituals, the majority of which revolve around *The White Ribbon's* deeply religious protestant community.

Consider the following images:



Figure 1



Figure 2

In the first shot, Haneke creates a tableau of position and privilege—the father is foregrounded with a line of subservient children expressing their devotion by kissing his hand. The mother, though out of focus, enacts the same power ritual, performing the separation between children and adults—those who must perform subservience and those who are served. The two children who have transgressed linger in the back of the frame, having temporarily lost their access to this world of domestic structure: by violating the innocence that places them in the childhood sphere, they have for the moment been barred from the social position that that sphere affords. The second image (communion) represents a similar hierarchy, this time as manifesting itself as public performance. The pastor dominates the power hierarchy in the shot, towering over his (child) subjects and his daughter, whose behavior has been framed by the submissive children shown before her—offering societal validation in exchange for fealty to the expected behavior set, which in this moment includes public performance of church ritual. In both instances, there is a clearly fixed line between adult and children's worlds—tellingly, we never see adults taking part in these rituals. As such, they become a tool for the adult world to exercise its dominance over the 'otherness' represented by the child world—legislating innocence results in imbalanced power hierarchy defined by the adult gaze, which

maintains the power to construct child subjects as it chooses. This is again part and parcel for children whose place in society requires engaging with the role of the innocent symbol that Jenkins describes: innocent child subjects require political emptiness, which allows the dominant adult culture to use children as blank slates onto which the cultural hegemony they have been elected to represent may be written.

The children's public and private performances of morality (or rather, the expectations that they perform this morality) elicit two important questions: what kind of social role does this performance create, and what happens when it is violated? In *Pictures of Innocence*, Anne Higonnet outlines her concept of the 'knowing child,' a theory which can be applied to these questions. Higonnet proposes this concept as a way of engaging with contemporary aesthetic representations of children, naming her knowing child after the titular figure of Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*: "a child who understood rather more about adults' motives and foibles than their belief in her innocence allowed them to guess" (Higonnet 207). This definition seems to speak to the binaries challenged by *The White Ribbon*, specifically the tensions between the public role of innocent child to which many of the film's children conform, and the behaviors they pursue in private spaces. The nature of the film's crimes—violent acts that suggest punishment for the adults' moral transgressions behind closed doors—certainly evokes tensions between what children know as perceived by adults and what the knowledge the children themselves seem to have obtained. This tension calls into question the children's behaviors as both innocent public subjects and transgressive private subjects: are the children simply mimicking the social role expected of them in the public sphere, and if

so, what ramifications does this have on the concept of the idealized childhood/the innocent childhood as a performative act?

The answer to this question has already been addressed to some extent in the discussion on childhood as an idealized space. In the eyes of the film's adults (and, by proxy, the expectations of the viewer), the children represent an ideal—a pure concept of humanity as yet untouched by the more complicated moral issues that exist in the film's rural community. The myth of childhood is a powerful, socially transformative phenomenon whose existence must continue and be protected at all costs—if there is no Garden of Eden, then how is one to judge the moral turpitude of all that comes after? The film's children become carriers of the community's moral legitimacy—although the adults prefer to exist in an ethical gray area (one which will be discussed at length in later segments), the children are expected to embody the black and white dichotomies between good and evil espoused by the Protestant strictures as imposed by the Pastor and other pillars of the community.

In this sense, *The White Ribbon's* narrative displays similarities with traditional fairy tale structures that also employ reductive binaries. The film, however, presents these binaries with the intention of subverting them. As the plot progresses, it becomes clear that the children have no intention of submitting to the socially prescribed roles inherent to the world they inhabit. Considering Higonet's *Knowing Child* again provides a possible explanation for this behavior, who proposes that closely engaging with a child necessarily results in unknowability: “the more attentive the camera becomes, the more elusive the child. Unlike Romantic children who are arranged and presented as a delightful spectacle to be enjoyed, *Knowing Children* are neither available nor

controllable” (Higonnet 211). We will return later to the close relationship between the camera and the child on screen—what is worth making clear for now is the presentation of a new child subject that resists being defined by an adult gaze.

Haneke’s film is acutely interested in interrogating the complex points of tension that arise between cultural constructions of childhood as a utopian space, the child as deprived of political agency, and the uncomfortable realities that arise when dealing with children as individuals. Specifically, Haneke uses his child protagonists to engage with and problematize concepts of the ‘innocent’ child and its existence as a non-political subject—simply stated, his children refuse to remain innocent, regardless of the cultural pressure enacted on them to do so. Importantly, *The White Ribbon* aggressively challenges the empathy that children/child protagonists inherently evoke, specifically by contrasting this response with the notion that children may also act as agents of pain and chaos. Kümmerling-Maibauer argues:

dass Kinder, sei es durch familiäre, gesellschaftliche oder zeitgeschichtliche Umstände, allerlei Unbill ausgesetzt sind und oft in die Rolle von hilflosen Wesen schlüpfen, die an das Mitgefühl der Umgebung und der Leserschaft appellieren, ist in der Weltliteratur immer wieder thematisiert worden. Dass Kinder allerdings selbst zu Tätern werden können, die Schwächere tyrannisieren und ihre Intelligenz und ihr Weltwissen dazu ausnützen, um anderen Schaden zuzufügen und für die eigenen Zwecke einzubinden, kommt weitaus seltener vor.

(Kümmerling-Maibauer 60)

Cultural representations of childhood must necessarily play with the dichotomy that Kümmerling-Maibauer describes—helpless, sympathy-inspiring beings vs. antagonizing

agents whose cruelty and selfishness can equal or even surpass their adult counterparts. *The White Ribbon* flaunts this dichotomy, refusing to position its viewer firmly in either camp. While the children in *The White Ribbon* generally seem anything but innocent or sympathetic, Haneke nevertheless deploys two young characters that seem to embody traditional concepts of the innocent child. Consider for instance, the Pastor's youngest son, or the doctor's son. Both characters, though granted little screen time, are memorably portrayed as being naïve in just the ways we might expect from children—displaying the limitations of knowledge and experience inherent to the 'innocent child' trope. The depiction of these children, however, is presented manipulatively—Haneke utilizes these tropes of innocence to throw into even starker relief the ways in which the other children deviate from the culturally perceived norm. An example of Haneke's manipulation can be found in one scene featuring the doctor's son in a lengthy conversation with his sister, in which he learns about death. The child (by far younger than his other onscreen counterparts) seems genuinely taken aback by the revelations that the people around him will die:

Rudolf (the son): must everyone die?

Anna (his older sister): Yes.

...

Rudolf: But not you, right Anni?

Anna: Yes, me too.

Rudolf: but not Dad?

Anna: Also Dad.

Rudolf: and me too?

Anna: yes, you too, but not for a long time.

Rudolf: And you can't do anything about it? (*The White Ribbon*)

This scene plays into audience expectations for innocent children—figures who know nothing of the mysterious world of adults, who, if they manage to stumble into spheres more terrible than their own, must be kept separate for their own good. This

innocence, however, is perverted by the vague and permeable boundaries between the realms of childhood and adult knowledge. A particularly unwholesome demonstration of innocent children stumbling into the adult world in the film comes when Rudolf discovers his father molesting his daughter. In this moment we have three worlds converging—the ethically questionable adult world, the projection of a pure and separate world of children, and the liminal space into which the daughter has been dragged by her father. This scene eloquently summarizes some of the tensions at the heart of Haneke’s film: the audience is simultaneously confronted with the innocent child that symbolizes and demonstrates a lack of knowledge (Rudolf, who does not understand what he sees) and the real child (Anna, an individual who has been forcibly placed in the adult sphere). The scene’s tension comes from the stark similarities and differences between both characters: Anna still belongs in the same sphere as Rudolf—that of the innocent child—but her father’s actions have imposed on her an adult-connoted knowledge and experience. Anna the child has been forcibly confronted with the problematic realities of the adult world as represented by her father, and must now contend with this new knowledge—an event which has yet to happen to Rudolf.

Anna is an unfortunate example of childhood innocence thrown into question—in this context, the loss of innocence has nothing to do with structures of childhood and everything to do with the moral transgressions of the adult sphere (two concepts which, although inherently connected, cannot necessarily be controlled by Anna in her situation). The film’s other children, however, provide multiple examples of Haneke interrogating the concept of the innocent child subject. One of the more powerful tools in Haneke’s arsenal is how his children behave—both publicly and privately, onscreen and off-screen.

Integral to the film's exploration of its child characters is the concept or possibility of agency—how the children act in the binary culture strangle-hold constructed and enforced by the adults vs. how their actions subvert or uphold a particular conception of culture and morality. Traditionally constructed conceptions of childhood place children as unbound subjects in a “utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries” (Jenkins 15). It is fitting, then, that the film problematizes and questions this notion of childhood by contesting both the notion of childhood innocence and the concern that children must be protected for their own safety.

Although presented as the public truth, the image of the innocent child is subverted in the private sphere—whether through implied violence (the violent crimes in the film allegedly perpetrated by the children) or explicit social transgressions (Klara killing her father's bird, Martin, the pastor's son, throwing the Baron's son in the river and stealing his flute, etc.). The idealized role of the child is questioned whenever the perspective of the child is considered—childhood can only remain idealized when viewed through the eyes of the adult. When the child characters take control of the narrative/the film's use of perspective, however briefly, the film casts a suspicious light on any notions of childhood as an innocent or ideal time. This questions the traditional desire to construct children through a sympathetic/empathetic gaze—the trope of the suffering or innocent child is constantly subverted in favor of a darker, more complicated representation of childhood. Consider again the few moments of explicit violence committed on screen by the children in the film—all occur in typically idealized or positively connoted domestic or childhood spaces. The attack against the Baron's son in particular is presented as a subversion of an apparently idyllic space.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Aesthetically, this scene suggests the kind of lazy summer afternoon commonly depicted in romanticized versions of childhood. The content, however, undermines this representation, bringing violence (albeit a slightly tamer version than much of the violence the film has previously presented) into an idealized space in which violence should be unthinkable. This disruption is brought by the children themselves employing with their own agency, rather than simply embodying the social roles legislated by the construct of the innocent child. This agency, used to introduce complex and dark drives into a space perceived as simple and innocent, further subverts cultural constructs of the innocent child—and will be further examined in later chapters.

Ultimately, children are more comfortably discussed and represented aesthetically when they are considered as a symbol of innocence and purity and are placed in a utopian

sphere independent of the adult world. Haneke's project in *The White Ribbon* is to violate this construct—to lay bare the artifice behind the concept of the innocent child, and to challenge the assertion that children can realistically be kept separate from the world they inhabit. In the following pages, I intend to show some of the various tools Haneke uses to dissect this construction. I will begin by further analyzing the children—who they are, how they are depicted, and why. Then, I will attempt to probe their behavior—what they do, how they do it, and how it is cinematically represented. Ultimately, this will lead to the question of storytelling and memory itself—how *The White Ribbon* engages with and subverts the possibility of narrative truth.

Chapter 3

Depictions of the Monstrous Child

Having established the culturally legislated behaviors affixed to the child subject and child spaces, it is worth further examining the ways in which *The White Ribbon* attacks and undermines these expectations. In this chapter, I will examine and interrogate the film's approach to contemporary constructions of childhood and the child subject and how the film challenges and subverts the viewer's expectations while viewing child subjects. By employing a cultural/analytical approach to the hegemonic structures of control and dominance to which children are subjected, and engaging with the potential horror tropes to be found in Haneke's film, I intend to demonstrate the perfect storm of moral expectations and their frustration that potentially cast children as monsters, thus subverting cultural myths of childhood and forcing viewers to engage with their own relationship to children as portrayed on screen.

To begin, I would like to briefly re-approach the way children are constructed in culture. Contemporary constructions of childhood require a delicate interplay between the notion of childhood as a politically and culturally neutral space and the cultural expectations projected onto that space. In *The Children's Culture Reader*, Henry Jenkins claims that

The myth of childhood innocence... 'empties' the child of its own political agency, so that it may more perfectly fulfill the symbolic demands we make upon it. The innocent child wants nothing, desires nothing, and demands nothing—except, perhaps, its own innocence... this dominant conception of childhood innocence presumes that children exist in a space beyond, above, outside the

political; we imagine them to be noncombatants whom we protect from the harsh realities of the adult world. (Jenkins 17)

Jenkins identifies a crucial aspect of the position childhood has assumed in the collective consciousness—that children are necessarily, fundamentally innocent. The effects of this assumption, however, empty a child of political and cultural agency, making it an easily manipulated object of a controlling adult gaze. As such, children become symbolic representatives of a community's values—a figurative blank slate onto cultural values are inscribed. Because of this status, an innocent child—a helpless, pure being that requires the utmost care and protection—necessitates a visceral cultural response; threatening a child becomes synonymous with threatening the moral sanctity of a community, and failing to protect a child becomes equivalent to failing to defend the fundamental values being instilled in a child.

A current example of this manipulation can be found in the story of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian refugee who drowned in an attempted ocean crossing. In a statement about Kurdi's death, Turkish president Recep Erdogan claimed that “what has drowned in the Mediterranean is not only the refugees...Humanity has drowned in the Mediterranean” (“Images of drowned Syrian boy...”) His statement was echoed by major European media outlets—the German news magazine ‘Der Spiegel’ described the picture of a drowned Kurdi as “a picture to stun the whole world into silence...if this photo does not change the world, then we have all failed” (“Ein Bild, eine Botschaft”). The message in this instance is clear—the image of a drowned child becomes synonymous with the moral failure of an entire continent. The opposition response, however, deploys the same techniques—in response to pro-refugee sentiments, German right extremist political

groups deploy anti-refugee placards of their own—ones emblazoned with pictures of fresh-faced children claiming ‘Home is where German children laugh’ and ‘this country needs German children.’



Figure 5



Figure 6

The responses of both groups—both who use Kurdi’s image as a clarion call for immigrant reform and political groups that call for the need to protect German children—reflect one popular use of children in public discourse: the image of the child as a politically neutral, innocent being is easily manipulated for cultural and political means.² Calling on a population to ‘think of the children’ is a public provocation eliciting protective feelings, since protecting the children ultimately means defending the values that define a community—an inherently, slippery, easily manipulated concept of a community that excels at creating false binaries.

Cultural conceptions of childhood follow similar patterns with respect to the function of the child. Specifically, childhood serves as an idealized utopian space

² A recent political example of this manipulation can be seen in the performance held by the “USA Freedom Girls” at a Trump political rally—three young girls who sang upbeat songs about the ‘enemies of freedom.’

separated from ‘adult’ realities. In *Geographies of Young People*, Stuart Aitken contends that “childhood is an innocent space onto which adulthood is mapped”—a fundamentally separated temporal and cultural space in which children negotiate the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

This interplay between perceptions of the innocent child, utopian childhood space, and projected adult expectations create a reality in which children become necessarily othered individuals separated from the ‘real’ or ‘normal’ world. Modern constructions of the child’s role in culture, however, represent this as a positively connoted separation. Philippe Ariès’ claims that “this new privileged status of childhood entails more than a perceived separation between child and adult...it is not uncommon to see childhood as a repository of inheritances and attributes that were lost and blunted by adulthood” (Ariès, qtd. in Jenks 66) . Ariès’ language evoking walls and yearning touches on the vital importance placed on maintaining childhood as a separate and preserved space—doing so protects both cultural values and the nostalgic impulses to which the adult community retreats in times of crisis. Children are precious—not simply because of their perceived innocence and fragility, but because of the implied fragility of the social system created to protect them, as well as the fragility of the retroactively constructed notion of childhood experienced by every adult. As such, Jenks contends “the child has come to symbolize all that is decent and caring about a society. It is the very index of civilization” (Jenks 67).

Of course, something as sacrosanct and fragile as projections of utopian childhood innocence must find a way to be violated. The most swiftly damaging and shocking event to rattle the foundations of contemporary perceptions of childhood is the introduction of

violence—particularly when perpetrated by children against children. Haneke’s *The White Ribbon* portrays just such a violent act with a merciless gaze. Notably, the community depicted in the film never openly acknowledges the violence which has infiltrated its domestic and public spheres. In fact, the film concludes with an attempt to bring these events to light—an attempt which is met with threats of exile. The act of even entertaining the notion that the community’s children may be capable of violence is regarded as a radical, borderline treasonous act that must be suppressed at all costs. This reaction to the possibility of violence committed by children—even to suggest that the village’s children are capable of evil is met with denial and disgust--is perhaps an inevitable one. In “The Death of Childhood,” Jenks contends that

The view of children as being in possession of a special and distinctive nature, which is both innocent and dependent, is what makes any link between children and violent crime particularly problematic, for the imagery of childhood and violent criminality are iconologically irreconcilable... [with violence] the traditional image of the child has been shattered through the dramatic denial of childhood innocence. (Jenks 125)

The problem is not only the shattered illusion of childhood—it is that this illusion represents the moral legitimacy of a society, and as such must be preserved at all costs. This illusion bears particular weight in the context of Haneke’s film, which takes place in an intensely religious community—a society in which children can commit violence is a society whose fundamental values have failed.

For a proper analysis of children and violence in *The White Ribbon*, it is necessary to turn toward horror. Haneke’s film is no horror film in any traditional sense of the

word, but the director is no stranger to the genre. His deconstructive film *Funny Games* demonstrates a keen knowledge of how horror tropes are deployed, and his portrayals of childhood trauma and the act of surveillance in *Caché* show a prior engagement with how images of children can be manipulated via the gaze. As such, viewing *The White Ribbon* through a similar lens provides a useful approach for analyzing a dense film that purposely obfuscates any notion of objective truth or reliability.

In this regard, Isabel Cristina Pinedo's work to define and categorize postmodern elements of horror film may be applied. Pinedo claims that "the postmodern horror film revolves around the monster's graphically violent rampage and ordinary people's ineffectual attempts to resist it with violence. In the end, the inefficacy of human action and the repudiation of narrative closure combine to produce various forms of the open ending...The postmodern genre promotes a paranoid worldview in which inexplicable and increasingly internal threats to the social order prevail" (Pinedo 90). If these are potential benchmarks to identify a postmodern horror film, then *The White Ribbon* certainly checks the correct boxes—the film provides a violent rampage, ineffectual attempts to stop it, and an ending that questions the possibility of resolution or narrative truth. Most relevantly, perhaps, the threats in *The White Ribbon* certainly come from within—a community is ravaged by an unseen monster that cannot be fought without threatening the values on which that community has been founded.

Although violence committed by or against children is a taboo subject, evil and monstrous children have enjoyed a privileged role as a villain of choice in horror films since the inception of the genre. Films such as *Children of the Corn*, *The Exorcist*, *The Bad Seed*, *The Omen*, etc. have all gleefully deployed angelic, dead-eyed villains to

subvert and transgress societal expectations of children. Dominic Lennard argues in *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors: The Child Villains of Horror Film* that:

Conceptualizations of the child as innocent circulate so powerfully and without critique as to be rendered ‘natural.’ Consequently, the child’s contradiction of the powerless image ascribed to him or her, such a demolition of the hierarchy between adult and child, attaches to this child a kind of horrific cognitive dissonance. (Lennard 12)

Simply stated—the image of an evil child elicits such a visceral, contradictory response in the viewer that the only logical response is to remove the child subject from the sphere of the human and place it in the realm of the monstrous.

Haneke’s film presents two different modes of the monstrous child—the ‘staring child’ that upends traditional child/adult power hierarchies, as represented by Klara, the pastor’s daughter and apparent leader of the village children, and the group of children as homogenized, unknowable other, as seen in the roving groups of children who are drawn to each crime scene.

We will begin with a filmic analysis of Klara’s role in the film, specifically her relationship to the camera and the adult characters around her. Klara, the pastor’s daughter, quickly rises to the forefront of the film. While the film presents a variety of children during its running time, Klara arguably possesses the most agency—and most obviously relishes her role as the terror of the community. The ways in which she is regarded, and the way she comes to re-appropriate the adult gaze, is typical behavior of a familiar horror monster: the ‘staring child.’ Lennard defines this trope as follows:

the child is conceived as an Other, but one who must be regulated according to a given set of cultural norms: he or she is seen as the object of a dominating cultural discourse and visually interpreted as ideologically complacent...through the adult gaze and its expectation of children's passivity, the child's behavior is neatly confined within the sphere we know as 'childhood.' Because of the power wrapped up in the way we look at the child, in what we expect to see when we do it, the superficially unremarkable spectacle of the staring child assumes explosive significance. The staring child is a figure who not only rejects the 'childish' passive position prescribed for it but also powerfully refutes the entire adult-child hierarchy. (Lennard 60)

Both cultural and filmic norms dictate that anything regarded from a child's-eye perspective must be regarded passively—childhood anger is seen as cute—even the words 'temper tantrum' evoke oohs and awws rather than fear, insights from children are seen as naïve and wise (from the mouths of babes), etc. Reversing this dichotomy, however—when adults are subjected to the gaze, rather than controlling it—represents a transgressive, unsettling act—one that leads the viewer to challenge and re-think their notions of childhood innocence and begin to see the child on screen as something evil.



Figure 7

To illustrate this point with Klara, it is worth briefly examining both her first and last scenes. Her first appearance in the film is a close-up in which she stares almost directly into the camera, quietly saying “forgive us father” without context. The next cut positions Klara in relation to her father—as the film views Klara from this perspective, the camera assumes the position of the father, implicitly casting the viewer in the role of the adult authority. This jarring introduction force-feeds the audience what they might expect from children—a passive, angelic-looking child begging for forgiveness and reaffirming its place in the social hierarchy. Even this introduction, begins subverting these expectations; Klara may be asking forgiveness and submitting to her father, but the film choreographs this moment with Klara staring almost directly into the camera—an inherent aggressive and challenging depiction in a theoretically submissive moment. The details we learn later—she has come home too late and has missed dinner, resulting in the entire family refusing to eat, as well as the further punishment of being spanked by her father—quickly defines the role children will play in this community: Klara has made a minor transgression, and is punished for her sins with swift and extreme justice. Klara’s place in the power hierarchy is clearly delineated—punishment is controlled by her father, and she must prostrate herself in the face of paternal authority.

This scene takes place in the beginning of the film, however—the next two and a half hours subvert this hierarchy with a series of violent crimes which undermine the notion of paternal authority and power. At the center of these actions is Klara—consistently appearing after the crimes, her gang of children in tow. She is, notably, the one of the only children whom we see actively choosing to commit violence—beheading her father’s pet bird after he has publicly punished her.



Figure 8

The scene preceding Klara's violent act is worthy of close examination. Here we see a direct line drawn between the veiled face of authority and the children—some of them facing the camera, with Klara directly opposite the adult that would exercise power over her. Interestingly, this moment can be seen as a pivot point between power expressed on and by Klara in the film. In this scene, Klara is publicly berated by her father for her seemingly rowdy behavior (although the audience is aware that her father has misinterpreted her behavior—Klara is in fact attempting to control and discipline her unruly classmates). We see Klara in a moment of transition: the composition draws a clear parallel between Klara and her father—both potential authority figures attempting to exercise that authority in a public sphere. The other village children sit between them, eyes downcast—potential pawns in the play between Klara's emerging agency and the rigid hierarchies as represented by the pastor. Here we can comfortably see the dynamics working through both Klara (the monstrous child) and the other children: even by association, the children in the middle of the frame are placed in opposition to the pastor, who, despite being in the foreground of the shot, is slowly losing the battle for relevance against the emerging new order offered by his daughter. This scene has two immediate

consequences: Klara faints, and shortly thereafter kills her father's bird—two quickly juxtaposed moments of weakness and strength that illuminate her character's arc from victimized child to a newly emerging force in the current cultural situation.

Klara's scene in the schoolhouse represents the last time she is publicly controlled by her father's authority. Contrast this moment, for instance, with the film's communion scene—a public ritual of forgiveness and renewed innocence between the pastor and the community's children. The father hesitates when he comes to Klara—knowing that she is most likely the culprit behind the decapitated bird—but the rules of the ritual he is enacting require him give her the same deference he gives the other children—to do anything otherwise would be to publicly admit to his daughter's own transgressions, thus undermining his own role as parent and moral compass for the community.



Figure 9

Klara may be kneeling before her father, but she arguably has as much power in this moment as he does. Her gaze can be interpreted one of two ways: she may be participating in the ritual genuinely searching for forgiveness, or she may be openly defying him in his own place of authority—daring him to try and publicly shame her again. The ambiguity of this scene is striking and evident, with Klara's behavior readable as both conforming to and subverting what is expected of her.

Klara's metamorphosis from passive subject to monstrous, active object is clear by the end of the film.



Figure 10

Consider her final scene, in which she is confronted by the school-teacher, who charges her with the crimes. Where previously she was submissive, she now holds the school-teacher's gaze. Similarly, the camera recognizes the newfound power of Klara's gaze—rather than framing the scene to give the school teacher (and by proxy the audience) authority, Haneke composes the scene so that audience sees only the teacher's out-of-focus back as Klara stares him defiantly in the eye. Klara's transformation into a watcher rather than an object of the gaze is now complete. Sabine Bussing examines the idea of the child watcher, wondering “if the steady look of the child's huge eyes is not a further sign of an unspeakable secret, an expression of evil experience, and if the little observer really conceals something dreadful, it is therefore infinitely superior to its adult environment.” (Bussing, qtd. in Lennard 16). With the violent crimes she has committed, Klara has willfully severed herself from the idealized childhood space in which she is expected to reside—more monstrously, however, is that in her exit from the proverbial

garden, she has appropriated the knowledge and power that ought to have been denied to her. In this way she becomes something more than human—a monstrous, empowered other being who belongs neither in the realm of children nor adults.

Having discussed Klara, it is worth mentioning the band of roving children she leads. Although bands of laughing or inquisitive children might normally have positive connotations, the events of the film place any such activity in a suspicious light. This is compounded by the fact that these groups of children most frequently appear directly after crimes have been committed—always with the offer to help. Haneke frames these groups in deliberately alienating and othering ways. We often see children from behind—obscuring their faces, thus obscuring their motives, desires, etc.—or in direct opposition to the adults around them (as previously discussed in the scene with Klara in the schoolhouse).



Figure 11

One particularly memorable moment shows the children arriving to ‘check on’ the disabled child who has just been attacked. Although the children have never paid attention to this child before, they are now intimately curious about how he is doing. As in the scene in which Klara claims her innocence to the school-teacher, the scene is again

framed with the adult faceless and out of focus, confronted by a group of children with hidden motives.



Figure 12

The combination of both the staring child—a monster in her own right—and the removal of traditional aesthetic representations of children via groups of children subverting adult hierarchies is a provocative one. We, the viewer, are still treated to images of children existing in a temporal and cultural space removed from the adult world, but despite the fact that these beings on the screen are still recognizably children (and should carry everything that word entails), their world is no longer subject to our expectations—or perhaps it never was, and only pre-conceived expectations for the children led the audience to position the children in this space. Led by a staring child who has learned to resist and subvert the constructive power of the adult gaze, the children in *The White Ribbon* have appropriated their own otherness. By portraying the children as roving constellations of mysterious, possibly violent beings, *The White Ribbon* subverts traditional constructions of the child which suggests that children should be constructed

by and controlled by adult agents. Instead, they become something totally unknowable—a secretive group that has weaponized the outsider status granted by childhood.

In no scene is this more evident than the last shot of the film.



Figure 13

As the entire community unites in church on the eve of WWI, the community's children assemble to sing in the children's choir. The film has ensured that there is no possibility of punishment or of the truth being revealed—everyone who knew what the children have done has either disappeared or been threatened into silence. In the film's last moments, the children now hover over the adults—a group of avenging angels who have transgressed and come out on top. This shot makes one point clear—the children have been separated from the community, and in doing so have come to control it. The historical and societal implications of this new hierarchy are all too clear—these children, who will come of age at the onset of the third Reich, will soon grow up, inherit the world, and remake it in their own image--the results of which lead to something truly monstrous.

Chapter 4

Moral Games and Imagined Communities

Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* depicts a close-knit, strict community whose moral structures are enacted most harshly on its children. The configurations of public versus private morality, and how both adolescent and adult characters should navigate the differences between domestic and public spheres, takes on particular thematic relevance in light of the film's central set of mysterious crimes. In a series of violent punishments and rituals, the socially constructed morality of the town is confronted by a new imagined community—one created by the town's children and used to enforce their conception of absolute morality. Invoking Benedict Anderson's conception of nation and community is telling, in that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail [...] the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7). The illusion of communal belonging—and the way a community's citizens are abused in the name of creating unity—lie at the heart of Haneke's film, as well as its conception of space and morality. In this chapter, I intend to contextualize the children's actions in this community as a form of play—specifically an instance of transitional phenomena that allows for moral exploration and the creation of community in an uncontested third space. These moral games both mirror and diverge from the cultural context in which they occur, and allows for the introduction of a new moral order made possible by the agency-granting powers inherent to creative improvisation in transitional spaces.

It is essential to begin this chapter with an appropriate definition of what 'play' entails. Most play theorists remove the word from its traditional sphere of connotation—fun, amusement, methods to pass time, games played by children, etc.—in favor of a

purposive and generative space of signification and self-exploration: it is a productive act defined by its functions and how it operates in its social and cultural context. This re-contextualizing of play from a frivolous action connoted as something inherently childish to something more universal and primal is a cross-disciplinary impulse. Educationalist Sandra Smidt, for instance, claims that “all play is purposeful... [it] may well be pleasurable or fun, but it may also be deeply disturbing or traumatic” (Smidt 2). Drawing from an entirely different discipline, Brian Upton—a video game designer and theorist—states that “all that play requires is the construction of a system of rules and the freedom to move within them (Upton 15). As a final example, cultural historian Johan Huizinga poetically characterizes the act of play as a function of its space in reality: “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally... i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (Huizinga 10). When discussing play in this chapter, I would like to emphasize these characteristics of play—play as an exploratory, potentially traumatic act, play as an action within a set of constraints, play as the performance of an act apart—while leaving behind traditional constructions of play as something done to while away the time.

Before analyzing the children’s play behaviors, however, it is necessary to ground them in a specific place and time. In *The Geographies of Young People*, Aitken asserts that childhood and its effects on identity is a function of place. He compares the childhood structures of disparate nations and social climates—street children in Indonesia as compared to middle-class French adolescents, for example—to assert that “the

plasticity of terms such as child and adolescent begs for more nuances than offered by traditional educational and developmental theories...Children grow into the pretension of identities that reflect race, class, gender, bodily appearance and other socially constructed differences. These axes of difference are not singular or additive but they constitute rather multiple transgressive and transformative features of identity” (Aitken 7). The children in *The White Ribbon* are a product of their specific time and place—namely the strict Lutheran upbringing present in northern Germany at the turn of the century. As such, it is important to remember that we are not simply dealing with childhood as a nebulous term, but rather as a specific social condition defined by its cultural and temporal context.

Aitken offers one particular insight that may be of use in this context: “rules are embodied and encoded within a home’s physical elements so that seemingly neutral space can be understood as a stimulus that is also a transformation of one or more ‘voices’ (such as capitalism, social constructions of gender, or concepts of social class). These voices operate at the intended level of action, the child” (17). Taken in this context, *The White Ribbon*’s acute interest in interrogating the permeable borders between social institutions and domestic space becomes a tool with which to examine constructions of the kind of religiously dominated, north German childhood as factors that might have fueled the catastrophes to come. It is worth noting that none of the adult characters are given names—they exist solely as their titles/social roles. Additionally, each primary adult character represents a certain pillar of traditional societies of the time: the teacher, the pastor, the doctor, the baron, etc. Each of these characters are presented with unblinking sharpness within their own domestic spheres in a series of vignettes, drawing a line between the public performance of authority and the personal lives held behind

closed doors. Similarly, the most important child characters are closely connected to the domestic spaces of authority—the children of the pastor, doctor, and baron all play significant roles.

The interplay between these archetypal characters and their domestic lives becomes an unsavory game between private moral transgression and public obsequiousness to established moral codes. The film, of course, makes no secret of its characters' unethical choices: the audience witnesses beatings, humiliations, physical and sexual abuse, and violent retribution—many of which are committed by or against children. These sharp cuts between various scenes of domestic trauma—which seem designed to deny the viewer any kind of reprieve—are, however, also sharply juxtaposed with public rituals and celebrations of gratitude, punishment, and atonement. Examples include the harvest celebration in which the film's characters break bread together after a successful autumn, or the film's multiple scenes inside the town's church. These scenes establish an ever-present context of community: the private sphere of the domestic is constantly enveloped, questioned, and at times reflected in a public context.

This is particularly true for the children, for whom the distinction between public and private lives is not as sharply delineated as for the adult characters. Their lives become structured around two particular elements: the rules and behaviors expected in home spaces, and the ramifications for transgressing these rules, which tend to occur outside of the domestic realm. Public performances of shame and innocence become an integral part of the children's lives—consider for instance, the public humiliation the Pastor gives his daughter, Klara, by accusing her of being unruly and immoral in a crowded school room, and the same daughter's Communion afterwards. Although the

Pastor ostensibly publicly chastises his daughter for the rowdiness of her school class, his reaction is intimately tied with his daughter's misbehavior at home. Her atonement, then, also becomes public—rather than asking for his forgiveness in his study or the dinner table, the possibility of Klara's forgiveness becomes a public spectacle during Communion: a public performance of innocence. These events, as well as the discipline and abuse enacted in private, take on a ritual structure: they are repeatedly enacted, strictly structured community events with a specific purpose—namely the support and upkeep of a rigid social morality.

These rituals of private moral degradation followed by public, communal shaming create an ethically ambiguous, fraught environment that comes to define the community in which it occurs. The children's place in such a community—as primary recipients of the violent and disruptive behavior displayed by the adults as well as representatives of the community's pure morality—is a necessarily difficult one. Magdalena Zolkos' article on *The White Ribbon* and the origins of European fascism claims that the children “occupy marginal and passive positions within the family and the rural society of Eichwald. They are ‘listeners, bystanders, eavesdroppers, receivers of command.’ At the same time, however, they are central to the way that community comes to collectively imagine itself” (Zolkos 212). This passivity grants the children a particular status in their community: they are simultaneously outsiders and insiders, simultaneously participating in the community as children and stepping outside the community to exist as detached, fundamental symbols of innocence. Zolkos' description of the children in *The White Ribbon* positions them as liminal subjects wielding dual roles—the passive, performative

role of child in an adult-oriented domestic sphere, and the representative of a collective communal fantasy of itself.

This duality is reminiscent of D.W. Winnicott's notion of the transitional space, which is a similarly liminal and transitional experience. The children's placement in society as conceived by *The White Ribbon* operates in the interstices between what can be imagined and what has actually been created; the space between idealized Lutheran morality and the messier real-world performance of that morality is the space in which the children must operate. In regards to inner and outer realities, as well as the spaces between, Winnicott claims that:

of every individual who has reached the stage of being a unit with a limiting membrane and an outside and an inside, it can be said that there is an *inner reality* to that individual...My claim is that if there is a need for this double statement, there is also need for a triple one: the third part of the life of a human being is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.

(Winnicott 3)

Of particular interest here is Winnicott's last conjecture: the need for a third, uncontested space in which the interplay between inner and outer realities may be negotiated. The community represented in *The White Ribbon* has all but thrown their children into just such a space—the children's status as idealized symbols who also act as flawed participants in said community clearly dramatizes the tensions between inner and outer

realities. Indeed, the tensions between these two dialectic opposites—cultural projections of innocence vs. agents of social and moral transgression—is the inner vs. outer reality conflict writ large. This space and its contradictions enables the explorative act of play, the precariousness of which, according to Winnicott, “belongs to the fact that it is always on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived”—in other words, in the tensions between inner, imagined spaces, and outer, objective realities (68).

To this end, it is worth briefly discussing Winnicott’s notions of transitional phenomena and cultural experience. In *Playing and Reality*, he posits that cultural experience, transitional spaces, and play are closely interrelated:

1. The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment (originally the [transitional] object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play.
2. For every individual the use of this space is determined by *life experiences* that take place at the early stages of the individual’s existence. (135)

‘Potential space’ in this context may refer to the gap between the children as individuals and the children as the symbols of purity they are expected to be—positioned between their actual life experiences (filled with brutality and moral transgression) and the expectations of their community (black and white moral certainty).³ Existing in this interstice—children whose roles as individual subjects with agency conflict with the

³ This space between child and adult is often demarcated by the film’s totemic fascination with objects that can be associated with childhood. Cathected props that play a significant role in both the plot and the film’s representation of children and childhood spaces include the titular ribbon, Siggie’s flute, and the pet birds (both the Pastor’s bird as well as the bird his son finds).

symbol that the community requires them to embody—creates an environment in which a myriad of personal and cultural borders may be tested. Simply stated, being constantly confronted with rules, codes, and expectations provides the children in *The White Ribbon* the opportunity to explore the limits of their world and their behavior—an action in keeping with Winnicott’s conception of creative living manifested in play.

The identities and worldviews created by a constantly marginalized (a word which here must be both positively and negatively connoted) social role elicit another indicator of Winnicott’s transitional phenomena: the state of simultaneously existing in reality and being apart from reality. This again recalls the cultural construction of childhood space—a separate, idealized space legislated by an adult gaze. Not content to present this space as unreal in the sense that it exists only as a social construct, Haneke’s film briefly introduces fantastic elements as a way of further probing the ramifications of removing the childhood sphere from the ‘real’ world of the adult. One memorable scene manifests the simultaneous reality and non-reality of Winnicott’s transitional phenomena. One of the film’s children confesses that she has somehow gained the art of clairvoyance, and has seen visions of violent acts before they occur. Although the adult characters in the film dismiss her claim as childlike silliness, this scene is worth examining as proof of the children’s engagement with transitional phenomena. Garrett Stewart questions “what [to] make of her claim: second sight, magic omen, or as they all think, a mere guilty slip about a perhaps overheard and repressed conspiracy? In raising the question, the film calls to mind the structural definition of ‘the fantastic’ as operating only when you can’t tell if abnormal events are psychological anomalies or supernatural interventions”

(Stewart 45). His use of ‘the fantastic’ is telling—he interrogates how the audience should engage with the child’s seeming break from reality.

In the context of Winnicott and transitional phenomena, however, the presence of the fantastic is a clear representation of a potential space in which events and perceptions exist in a third space which is simultaneously part of and independent from perceived reality. Simply put—the child has momentarily lost herself in the game. The ‘truth’ of the scene—whether the child can actually see the future, or if she is only attempting to assuage her own guilty conscience—is irrelevant in this context.⁴ The character is employing something fantastic—separated from reality—in order to further explore her own relationship to the reality of the events around her. This can be read as an act within a transitional play space—a third space in which the distinction between reality and fantasy are blurred in order to explore boundaries and more accurately define the player’s placement in his or her world. Returning to Higonnet’s *Knowing Child* enriches the placement of the child in a transitional space. Higonnet claims that the *Knowing Child* is inherently unknowable, particularly in the attempt to define them with a gaze. In regards to the *Knowing Child* itself and its gaze, she claims that “they themselves are looking at an inner world of the imaginary, or at the adult world” (Higonnet 210). But why not both? By claiming clairvoyance, the child in this scene momentarily straddles both worlds—she uses a fanciful concept to concretely position herself in regard to the violence being committed around her and how this violence is being interpreted in the adult sphere.

⁴ Worth noting is that the ‘truth’ of this scene is also irrelevant to the film itself, which summarily drops the plotline without further exploration after the scenes with the girl have concluded, and neither she (nor her purported clairvoyance) are mentioned again.

Although I have at length discussed the environment in which the children are playing, I have yet to speak of the game they play. At first glance, it might seem strange to position the series of violent crimes that occur in the film as a kind of play, but one scene in particular provides the key to decoding acts of violence as engagement with Winnicott's transitional phenomena. Martin, the pastor's son, balances on a log over a sharp drop—a fall could clearly be disastrous for him. He is saved by the teacher, who threatens discipline and tries to find a motivation for Martin's actions:



Figure 14

der Lehrer: have you gone mad? Did you want to break your neck? [...] You saw me and wanted to impress me?

Martin: I gave God a chance to kill me. He didn't do it, so he's pleased with me.

(The White Ribbon)

This scene functions as a microcosm for the world of the film as experienced by its children: presented with a world that is inherently adult-centered ('you wanted to impress

me?’) and controlled by a strict and violent higher power (fittingly, both God and the parents may function as such), a child enters into an arbitrary, potentially lethal game as a way of negotiating the morality of his actions⁵. Martin’s reasoning suggests a set of rules followed by potential consequences or victories (punishment or pleasure), depending on the outcome. This moment provides a context with which to understand the children’s actions throughout the rest of the film—in the world of *The White Ribbon*, cultural experience can be navigated through moral contests, rules, and games that exist in the potential space between children as agents and children as symbols.

Taken in this context, the film’s central crimes assume a different role than the mystery plot that is presented. If we are to assume that the children are indeed responsible for the violence unleashed on the community, then we may infer that the sins of the parents are being visited on their children. The Baron is blamed for the suicide by hanging of a local farmer, and his son is found beaten and hanged shortly after. The doctor commits adultery with the midwife; her child is found shortly thereafter with his eyes gouged out.⁶ The ritualistic elements of these crimes cannot be missed—they are staged with an eye toward provoking fear, emotion, and ultimately submission. Thus, the children’s game of violence takes on a twofold purpose. First, it allows the children to explore and mimic the brutal moral system in which they have been indoctrinated. Secondly, as James S. Williams argues, these violent acts “represent perhaps the only

⁵ It should be noted that ‘game’ in this context lacks the fun normally associated with the word—‘game’ should instead be read as an exploratory, arbitrarily defined act. An apt filmic comparison for Martin’s game can be found at the end of Tarkovsky’s *Nostalgia*, in which a character crosses and re-crosses a pool with a lit candle, as if to prove some unspoken claim or negotiate some unspoken conflict.

⁶ The perpetrators of this heinous act have also been courteous enough to leave a slip of paper that quotes Numbers 14:18, which helpfully reminds us that God will not clear the guilty, and will visit the iniquities of the fathers on their children, thus lending further credence to the motif of children reaping the benefits of their parents’ moral transgressions.

means of individual expression and freedom in such a repressive and collectively defined culture” (Williams 55). The contradiction between these two functions—that the same game can be used to both mimic and break away from the oppressive moral world of the community—can be addressed with the way the film engages with space, specifically the interplay between open and closed spheres. The violence the children enact is in one way a simple mimicking of the world they inhabit. Adults hurt and punish children, who in turn replay this pattern of violence and punishment against each other or against the adults—a set of behavior which, however shocking, is of a piece with the what the children have come to accept as normal. The way these children use violence to target moral transgressions in the adult community, however, suggests an independence and agency impossible for the children within the constraints of their community. As such, their actions simultaneously support the closed sphere of the adult world—in which children are to symbols of innocence and not individuals—while undermining it with the creation of a new, open space in which the children use violence as a means of asserting their own agency in the face of adult authority.

Fittingly, the children’s play begins in domestic space. As previously discussed, the film depicts a sharp line between public and private manifestations of morality—what occurs behind closed doors differs greatly from the kind of pieties that are expressed in a public space. This principle is, of course, different for the children, whose imagined role as symbols of purity are a full-time occupation. For them, the home is a site of inherent violence, humiliation, and sexual transgression. As such, notions of ‘privacy’ take on a more sinister light. Aitken contends, however, that for children “privacy opens up a space of transgression that enables a special kind of reprieve from social control, a relief from

power, and a removal of disciplining gazes” (Aitken 59). Although the empowering aspects of privacy are impossible in the domestic spheres presented in *The White Ribbon*, the opportunity for privacy arises in a different space—the liminal third space created in the act of playing moral games.

The children form a new community within a community—one that play-acts the same kind of moral enforcement they have internalized in their home space. Fittingly, this newly created community is never explicitly revealed, and the true identities of the perpetrators and their actions remain hidden—the audience is only shown the aftermath of the latest violent entanglement, as a homogenized group of children floats on the periphery. The children’s play-space is a transitional one—a space fixed in the interstices of reality and imagination—and as such cannot be revealed by the eye of the camera. Instead, it allows the children the privacy they require to explore the boundaries of their world in a productive (albeit barbaric) way. The invisibility of the children’s actions may be attributable to the act of play itself. Winnicott argues that play is “not *inside* by any use of the word...nor is it *outside*, that is to say, it is not a part of the repudiated world, the not-me, that which the individual has decided to recognize (with whatever difficulty and even pain) as truly eternal” (Winnicott 55). Because of its constantly modulated not-inside/not-outside status, the transitional space of play is necessarily invisible: it simultaneously exists independently of reality and functions to shape reality. Similarly, Sicart argues that “play [is] a portable tool for being. It is not tied to object but brought by people to the complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life” (Sicart 2). For both theorists, play occurs in the interstices and is created by the subjects who play.

The new private space created by playing with social morality embodies the kind of productive privacy Aitken contends is necessary for children and play: “play may potentially transform the process of social reproduction, and, in this sense, play is more than a practice and rehearsal for a known adulthood” (176-177). Although the punishments that the group of perpetrators commit may mimic the actions of the adult community at large, it also represents a distinct movement in a different direction—a new community whose private actions are punished in the most public environment possible. The violence that results from this group’s moral play becomes a site of authority and power. The town depicted in the film finds itself gripped by fear—not simply fear of violence, but of a new regime whose disciplinary power controls both public and private spaces.

Indeed, committing violence is an act that allows the children to take control of their world—a control only made possible by their engagement with and in transitional spaces. Their crimes become an act of expression: “through violence the marginalized and oppressed group asserts its political presence—the direct violence is a performative locution of ‘I am here’ and ‘I have a voice’” (Zolkos 211). Zolkos suggests a performativity that mirrors the rituals of punishment and atonement performed by the adult characters throughout the film—in this context, violence becomes an extension of the same impulses that led the children to kneel for confession. Instead of kneeling, however, they are experimenting with the boundaries of a new potential community by re-possessing and violently enforcing the rules of the old community. A new order is evoked: “rather than resisting the interpellations to the absolute values of loyalty and obedience to authority, the alleged juvenile culprits turn to physical rampage as a way of

asserting these values as absolute” (Zolkos 211). The message here is evident—the children’s moral play results in violence, and this violence results in the introduction of an absolute worldview whose ramifications in the times leading up to *Nationalsozialismus* are all too clear. This game, then, is a clear example of what Sicart contextualizes as ‘dark play:’ “play is a dance between creation and destruction, between creativity and nihilism...Dark play, with its potential dangers and exhilarating results, is another example of the nature of play as a way of being in the world—a dangerous one” (Sicart 3). The children have formed a new community through play, but it lacks many of the positive connotations associated with the concept of play—Sicart’s definition, however, clearly positions the children’s actions as a form of play that fully engages with the dangerous elements of re-appropriating and re-building a new world.

This new community results in a de facto surveillance state, as both children and parents monitor one another’s behavior with increasing skepticism and horror. The underlying ambiguity at the heart of the film’s mystery is inherent to the success of the children’s new community and space. This space can be contextualized by the act of seeing: “the children increasingly attract [the audience’s] attention as potential suspects, yet...succeed in finding spaces to commit their crimes unseen and unobserved... Strangely, this *panoptic* situation, in which a *few* parenting and educating adults monitor the *many* children, increasingly turns into a *synoptic* situation in which *many* adults seek to identify the *few* terror-inducing criminals” (Blumenthal-Barby 98). Because of the new, transitional community the children have created in order to facilitate their actions, there are no visible perpetrators, which means that guilt must remain a private rather than public concern.

Ultimately, the children's moral games function to upend the adult community which made them necessary. The rules espoused by the adults in *The White Ribbon*—harsh moral guidelines for children and adults in public, murkier ethics in private spaces—are enacted with a vengeance, creating a world in which terror and violence are used to guarantee desired social behavior. That this new world results from play is a result of the inherently dangerous, transgressive elements of play; its reliance on creative exploration, transitional spaces, and the privacy mixes with the transgressive impulses and potential for rule-breaking that play affords. The result is a harrowing but productive aesthetic experience: a new community is created through play and interaction, but the community created is an undeniably bleak one. The children of *The White Ribbon* accept play as a fraught, potentially traumatic experience that is best used to examine boundaries, interrogate and re-write definitions of appropriate behavior, and engage with the adult world in a meaningful way. That this engagement results in a violent world of brutal moral absolutes is a product and reflection of the time in which it transpires. The merciless play of the children in *The White Ribbon* mirrors the time and place that constructed them, and lays a foundation for the *Tätergeneration* they would become.

Chapter 5

Violence and the Spectator

If we are to interpret the children's behavior in *The White Ribbon* as a form of dark play used to probe the boundaries of the cultural roles in which they have been placed, the next question to pose regards the nature of the game itself—what kind of game are they playing, and why? Unfortunately for the residents of Haneke's fictional Eichwald, the name of the game is violence, and it is played with grim efficiency by both the film's children and Haneke himself.

Before considering the film's specific manipulation of violence in regards to children, let us first establish some conception of how violence functions in the film in general. Rather than sensationalizing, emphasizing, or otherwise shaping his violence according to commonly employed filmic tropes, Haneke's project seems to be one of normalizing—depicting atrocities in such a way that they seem of a piece with the world they inhabit.

To begin with, we can examine the film's first scene (in which the doctor's horse is felled by a tripwire) as a microcosm for the film's general approach to violence in hopes of glimpsing some of the underlying machinery that shapes Haneke's film.



Figure 15

The first scene employs a triple normalization to distance the audience from the gruesome events depicted on screen. First, the film begins with a narrator describing the events on screen to us before they occur. Although the use of a narrator itself effectively creates distance between the spectator and the film by suggesting an additional layer of spectatorship (the events are perceived by the narrator, who is in turn perceived by the audience)⁷, choosing to let the narrator ‘spoil’ the surprise of the doctor’s sudden accident helps to remove some of the shock of the action itself. Rather than simply being treated to a shot of a man whose horse ride is cut brutally, suddenly short—an effective and memorable jump scare with which to open a film—the audience is drawn in by the expectation of violence. From the opening words and first shot of the film, Haneke trains his audience to expect bloodshed; rather than being horrified by its sudden appearance, we instead lean into the screen, straining to catch a hint of the accident that we know will soon surprise a blissfully naïve doctor. The message is clear: Haneke’s intention is not to shock with violence (although he will certainly manage to do that), but rather to force his audience into complicity through acceptance.

Much like in *Funny Games*, Haneke engages his audience’s eye in order to legitimize the crimes he depicts. Cinematically, this is accomplished with both camera and sound techniques—both of which are visible in the first scene. Haneke’s framing of the accident contributes another layer of remove already introduced by the narrator, and introduces a perspective whose intention is to place the spectator as both impartial viewer and complicit spectator. Rather than using any of the traditional filmic tropes—close-ups, quick edits, etc.—to emphasize or foreground the violence displayed, Haneke chooses to

⁷ This technique also implies an authoritative omniscience—a perspective hovering both inside and outside of the film that will be explored in later sections.

let the entire moment play out in one unbroken long shot. The film fades in on a bucolic pastoral scene; a man rides his horse toward the camera as we are calmly told that soon he will have an accident; the accident itself occurs. All of these beats play out through the same dispassionate perspective. Rather than immersing his viewers in the violence itself, this composition encourages the viewer to consider the violence as part of its environment—the pastoral elements surrounding the doctor and his accident demand as much attention in the shot as does the accident itself. Through this technique we might make a second claim: *The White Ribbon*'s violence is an organic part of the community landscape surrounding it. Furthermore, this violence is further shaped and contextualized by an audience that is aware of the massive weight of catastrophe and chaos encompassed by the historical context in which the film is situated. As such, Haneke's violence becomes doubly expected—both as a part of the community depicted in the film, and as part of a larger historical narrative.

Finally, it is worth briefly considering Haneke's use of sound. Similar to his reliance on the long take, Haneke eschews traditionally employed techniques for heightened drama—most notably non-diegetic music—and opts for a more naturalistic approach. The first scene's soundtrack is dominated by insects, the breeze, etc.: all ambient noises that one comes to expect from a summer's day in an open field, but not what one might expect during the depiction of the inciting act of violence in a film about a series of violent crimes. Like the camera technique, the sound does much of the heavy lifting in instructing the viewer on how to view violence in the context of Haneke's world. Where other films might emphasize the violent aspects of the scene—snapping bones, the anguished sounds of the horse—*The White Ribbon* downplays these elements

in the moment in favor of the ambient noises surrounding the violent center— grasshoppers, a summer breeze, etc. Just as with the camera techniques, Haneke’s use of sound normalizes the sounds of violence, depicting them as nothing special in the context of a larger world.

If this triptych of distanciation were only to be found in the first scene, then we might disregard its importance. This pattern, however, is one that Haneke employs for almost every act of violence in the film. Almost every violent action that occurs within the frame (to say nothing of the horrors perpetrated off-screen) follow a similar outline: although the narrator is not always present to warn the audience beforehand, the violence itself is almost always framed in long shot, dominated by its surroundings, and accompanied by an ambient soundtrack. Examples include, among other scenes, the discovery of the farmer who has committed suicide, the destruction of the Baron’s cabbages, the barn fire, and Martin assaulting the Baron’s son in the river.



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

As this motif repeats, the film establishes a brutal rhythm—violence occurs with regularity, is absorbed by the world around it, and leaves a trail of suffering in its wake—a trail whose presence is felt in its subtle aftereffects, rather than any immediate or dramatic processing of the trauma that created it. In his essay on the film, Garrett Stewart

describes *The White Ribbon*'s savage sense of pacing, claiming that "there is no foreplay in Haneke's editing...as we lunge from one burst pustule of humiliation and brutality to another" (Stewart 43). This is certainly an accurate depiction of Haneke's wicked sense of juxtaposition: we leap from admonishments against masturbation to mid-coital extramarital affairs, incest to concerned meetings about children's wellbeing, etc. One vital observation to bear in mind, however, is how lovingly the film lingers on the suffering of its characters. Violence occurs quickly and unfussily, if it is seen at all, but the aftereffects are lavished with attention. Consider, again, the film's first scene: the doctor's accident is presented in one long shot. The aftermath, however, is treated to the kinds of cinematic techniques we might have earlier expected—the film quickly cuts to a close-up of a bloodied doctor in the grass, followed by a cut to his daughter running to his aid, and back to the doctor, all accompanied by his screams of pain. Violence may be a mundane affair that can quietly dissolved into its surroundings, but the suffering that follows in its wake demands to be felt—and the viewer is encouraged to stare at both the crimes and their gruesome effects for as long as Haneke sees fit.

Of course, brutal crimes and graphic violence provide their own heinous, train-wreck attraction (as Haneke has so giddily reminded his viewers throughout his career), but showcasing this violence as being committed by and against children represents a particularly off-putting transgressive action. As Jenks phrases it, "the view of children as being in possession of a special and distinctive nature, which is both innocent and dependent, is what makes any link between children and violent crime particularly problematic, for the imagery of childhood and that of violent criminality are iconologically irreconcilable" (Jenks 125). To consider that a child is capable of violence

is to put into question the moral legitimacy of our culture itself—the image of the child cannot sustain under the weight of accusations of violence. Nevertheless, Haneke treats his audience to the repeated implication that his children are capable of torture, mutilation, and other acts of barbarism—and to go even further, he cinematically implicates the viewer as a complicit witness in their crimes.

Haneke is no stranger to directly engaging the audience and its participation in his films. *Funny Games*, with its antagonists who speak directly to the audience and gleefully subvert notions of ‘reality’ as depicted in film, is the most obvious example thereof, but his *Caché* even more adroitly captures this fraught relationship, torturing its characters with a series of unexplained surveillance tapes—tapes that may represent the audience gaze itself. Haneke echoes this technique in *The White Ribbon*, casting the audience as an essential spectator whose presence can be felt in the film itself. The repeated long shots and uninterrupted takes that fragment his violence perhaps call to mind the curious gaze of a perpetrator watching the fruits of his labors—but if this is the perspective of the perpetrator, how to react to the fact that we as spectators are seeing through the same eyes? Martin Blumenthal-Barby has a similar explanation, contending that in moments throughout the film, “the policing, probing gaze of the camera does not appear to be launched as a point-of-view shot from the perspective of some-*one*; the camera rather enacts a seemingly agentless authority outside of the film diegesis, a surveillant perspective outside the frame and its epistemic order” (Blumenthal-Barby 99). The camera assumes the act of surveillance, not necessarily performed by anyone so much as performed by a series of ‘any-ones;’ a group of unattached and indifferent spectators with unfettered access to the brutality plaguing the village. It is no particularly large leap to

imagine that this position of free-floating, complicit spectatorship is one commanded by the audience itself. This perspective evokes that of an impassive bystander to violence—a perspective with clear implications within the larger framework of the German history in the 20th century.

If we accept that Haneke willingly casts his audience as a surveillant voyeur, then his frequent positioning of the camera to align with the children assumes frightening connotations. Consider Blumenthal-Barby again: “there are myriad moments in which the camera appears to hover at the children’s eye level, assuming a seemingly agentless gaze that, without being associated with one child in particular, seems to extend the children’s perspective” (103). We have previously discussed perspective as controlled by children in the film—both through the eyes of Klara, the Looking Child who appropriates the adult gaze, as well as the roving constellations of children who spread like disease through the film’s community. What are the implications if this group—a band of ‘othered’ children who have proven themselves capable of horrendous crimes—sees with the same perspective as the group of non-diegetic spectators who have taken to haunting the film, i.e. we as viewers? Haneke positions his audience in a lateral relationship to his group of pint-sized perpetrators—encouraging us to view the chaos they bring as a member of their group.

There are three pertinent conclusions to be drawn from these thoughts on *The White Ribbon*’s relationship to its own brutality: first, Haneke intentionally normalizes the violence being depicted, placing it in the larger day-to-day context of the fictional Eichwald. Secondly, having normalized the cycle of violence the film depicts, Haneke quietly undermines every construction of the child subject by insinuating that this

normalization of violence is just as possible when committed by children as it would be if it were being performed by adults. Finally, Haneke positions his viewer as a group of spectators who occupy the same filmic perspective as the child perpetrators, making the viewer in at least some sense complicit to the acts depicted on screen. Rather than legitimizing his community by upholding notions of children and purity, Haneke forces legitimization via the gaze—we are forced to watch violence, suffering, and its variations languorously unfold, and in doing so become unwitting participants in the crimes we silently watch.

Chapter 6

Memory and Storytelling

In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as a concept that:

describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. ... These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (Hirsch 5)

She outlines the process by which the memories of traumatic events can be passed from survivors to their children, creating a retroactive chain affixing the scars of previous generations to those that follow. The process is a profoundly personal and intimate one—processing trauma becomes a palimpsestic circle as one generation attempts to engage with traces of pain that have long since become internalized. What remains is the act of storytelling as a means for both transferring traumatic memories and attempting to examine them: attempting to exorcise trauma by allowing itself to manifest in the stories we tell ourselves and the ones we tell to the people who will listen. In this manner, processing horror becomes the repetitive action of forcing into the light, as if calling something by name will rob it of its power. Although co-opting the narrative of postmemory and the narratives of survivors and their children in hopes of creating an overarching collective context for trauma is inadvisable, it is nevertheless worth questioning if the structures inherent to postmemory can be found writ large in a

culture—if there are similar transferences of awareness of trauma across generations, and in what ways a society chooses to approach these cultural phenomena.

To return to the beginning: the first question we may choose to ask is why: what does *The White Ribbon* hope to illuminate, and why does it attempt to accomplish this through unflinching brutality? Like so many other ruminations on the atrocities of history, *The White Ribbon* is an act of storytelling—one which, on the surface, attempts to provide explanations. The first words we hear in the film assure us that the narrator will do his best to provide answers: “I don’t know if the story I want to tell you is entirely true. Some of it I only know from hearsay. After so many years, much of it is still obscure, and many questions remain unanswered. But I think that I must tell of the strange events that happened in our village. They could perhaps clarify some of the things that happened in this country” (*The White Ribbon*). Even with this introduction, the film betrays its own ambivalence in its role as the conveyor of narrative truth. Despite the narrator’s opening assurances that he will provide some explanation for ‘what happened,’ the film deliberately obfuscates any attempt at transparent motives, clear narrative cause and effect, or the possibility for resolution.

Consider, for instance, the film’s ending—a massive red herring placed with the intention of reminding the viewer that some truths remain unknowable. The midwife comes to the school teacher, claiming that she knows exactly who committed the crimes, and then disappears without ever divulging her secrets. The film offers us the chance for resolution and then just as quickly removes it from reach. We are instead left with the school teacher’s own attempts to resolve events—an ill-advised confrontation with the pastor that results in the pastor threatening the teacher with exile from the community if

he does not remain silent. The final shot of the film shows, finally, a united community—one brought together by silence, fear, and the communal guilt of forcing skeletons to remain in the closet.

With this ending, Haneke makes clear what his narrator stated at the outset: what we have witnessed is just a story. And stories, though useful for attempting to deal with trauma in the open, are fallible, inherently subjective constructions, and cannot be invested with anything resembling full or even partial truth. Indeed, the concept of narrative truth is one that *The White Ribbon* questions—there is no objective reality in the film, only a jumbled hodgepodge of different perspectives coming together to create the deliberately opaque story which we have been told.

The narrator's desire to 'explain some things that happened in this country,' at face value, may seem to shed light on at least one question—why Haneke chose to make a film about the children who would later become the *Tätergeneration*. Haneke himself mentioned this in an interview, connecting the Nazi mentality with the same kind of religious devotion depicted in *The White Ribbon*. When asked why he set the film in this particular region and time, he states: "Because of a particular form of Lutheran Protestantism that's there in northern Germany. When I was first thinking about this project, I kept asking myself why so many Nazis, in explaining their actions, would reply—like Eichmann, with no apparent sense of guilt or conscience—that it had been their duty as loyal servants of the Reich. I felt that this way of thinking about one's responsibilities to a superior was closely linked to the Protestantism of Luther" (Haneke, qtd. in Blumenthal-Barby 212). Here, Haneke seems to offer at least one concrete answer in a film constructed almost entirely out of enigmas—we are subjected to watching

children commit horrible crimes because these same children will one day commit crimes that are even worse. The world that created them—one of rigid Protestant ethics—elicited the same kind of mindset that allowed human beings to harvest the gold fillings from teeth before mechanically executing millions. In this context, the violence in the film seems tame—a children’s primer for the atrocities to come in the following decades.

To hide behind this answer, however—*The White Ribbon* shows pre-Nazi children as an attempt to explain their adult behaviors—is to embrace the easy solution for an inherently difficult film for which there is no simple explanation. Although I cannot deny the inherent power of Haneke’s words, or the specter of genocide that hangs over his film, I tentatively offer a different solution—one that does not seek to replace Haneke’s answer, but rather seeks to enrich our understanding of it. *The White Ribbon* is a product of generations haunted by the traumas of the past; an attempt to clarify a cultural wound that defies any simple explanation. Simply put—his film is a story; a fragile, subjective construction that relies on our ability to look back and appreciate its history in hindsight. And how is this different from childhood itself? Childhood is an inherently retroactive construction. The childhood other for which we yearn is not the child itself, but for our own prelapsarian selves—the idealized version of ourselves to which we are still drawn, the best version of ourselves who was cast from the garden years ago.

Remembering childhood is a delicate, culturally fraught activity that every person must negotiate—and how better to negotiate this than through storytelling? The traumas of our past and present stretch across memories like gossamer skin, obscuring the harsh truth about childhood: it is no more of a utopian space than the ones we currently inhabit.

Childhood, like memories of trauma from worlds long gone, is nothing more than a story we tell to help us understand why. Haneke and *The White Ribbon* understand this—they place two fragile inventions on top of each other to show that both are inherently unstable. Seeking for truth through storytelling is as improbable as returning to childhood, because both concepts only exist insofar as they are culturally constructed. Haneke violates the myth of the innocent child, and, in doing so, calls into question the act of fixing truth onto any particular narrative. Stories, after all, are mutable, fickle, and subject to change—even the ones that try to explain away the evils that have occurred for no reason. As in *The White Ribbon*, history exists without any simple solution—it simply *is*. Some of the children in *The White Ribbon* will grow up to be *Täter*, and some will grow up to be *Opfer*, and both of these futures defy explanation. They will, however, all grow up to be human beings—adult creatures as capable of violence and depravity as they were when they were children.

List of References

- Aitken, Stuart C. *Geographies of Young People: The Morally Contested Spaces of Identity*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. and extended ed. London: Verso, 1991.
- Blumenthal-Barby, Martin. "The Complicit Gaze: Michael Haneke's Cinema of Guilt." *The German Quarterly* 89.2 (2016): 202-220.
- Blumenthal-Barby, Martin. "The Surveillant Gaze: Michael Haneke's *the White Ribbon*." *October* 147. (2014): 95-116.
- Brunette, Peter. *Michael Haneke*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- "Ein Bild, eine Botschaft." *Der Spiegel Online*. 3. September 2015.
<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/foto-von-ertrunkenen-fluechtlingskind-geht-um-die-welt-a-1051155.html>. Accessed 5. Jul. 2016
- George-Cosh, David, and Parkinson, Joe. "Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Echoes around the World." *The Wall Street Journal*. 3. September 2015,
www.wsj.com/articles/image-of-syrian-boy-washed-up-on-beach-hits-hard-1441282847. Accessed 5. Jul. 2016
- "Heimat ist da, wo deutsche Kinder lachen." *Pierre Vogel und seine Welt*. 15 November 2012. <http://boxvogel.blogspot.com/2012/11/heimat-ist-da-wo-extremisten-keine.html>. Accessed 3 Jul. 2016
- Hernandez, J.R. "Deutsche Kinder braucht das Land." *J.R. Hernandez: Wake Up World!* August 2011. <http://www.jrhernandez.org/leserbriefe/august/august-leserbriefe.htm>. Accessed 3 Jul. 2016

- Higonnet, Anne. *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*. New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hud, 1998.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1955.
- Jenks, Chris. *Childhood*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Jenkins, Henry. *The Children's Culture Reader*. New York: NYU Press, 1998.
- Kümmerling-Maibauer, Bettina. "‘Ich bin böse. Ich kann's nicht verhindern.’ Störungen der Kindheit im Spiegel von Literatur und Film." *Kindheiten*, ed. Koebner, Thomas. München: Et+k, Edition Text + Kritik, 2013.
- Lennard, Dominic. *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors: The Child Villains of Horror Film*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014.
- Lesnik-Oberstein, Karín. *Children in Culture, Revisited: Further Approaches to Childhood*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Lury, Karen. *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears, and Fairytales*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010.
- Pinedo, Isabel Christina. "Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film." *The Horror Film*. Ed. Stephen Prince. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004.
- Rudnytsky, Peter. *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

- Scahill, Andrew. *The Revolting Child in Horror Cinema: Youth Rebellion and Queer Spectatorship*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Sicart, Miguel. *Play Matters*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014.
- Smidt, Sandra. *Playing to Learn: The Role of Play in the Early Years*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Stewart, Garrett. "Pre-War Trauma: Haneke's the White Ribbon." *Film Quarterly* 63.4 (2010): 40-7.
- Upton, Brian: *The Aesthetic of Play*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015.
- The White Ribbon*. Dir. Michael Haneke. Pictures Home Entertainment, 2009.
- Williams, James S. "Aberrations of Beauty: Violence and Cinematic Resistance in Haneke's *The White Ribbon*." *Film Quarterly* 63.4 (2010): 48-55.
- Winnicott, D.W., *Playing and Reality*. New York: Routledge, Inc., 1971.
- Zolkos, Magdalena. "The Origins of European Fascism: Memory of Violence in Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*." *The European Legacy* 20.3 (2015): 205-223.