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**Coming to Terms with the Past:  
Voice-over Narration in *The White Ribbon***

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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**STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY**

I declare that the research presented here is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the question of meaning in *The White Ribbon* through an analysis of the film's voice-over narration. The topics of setting and audience are discussed in relation to Haneke's previous films as a means to contextualise the various reactions to *The White Ribbon*, which are then surveyed. Whilst it becomes clear that opinion remains divided over whether the film depicts a quintessentially German scenario or not, only a small percentage of reviews and analyses discuss the film's voice-over narration. By considering influences on voice-over narration and drawing connections to other media, the special characteristics of this film technique are detailed. This leads into a discussion of relevant theory on voice-over narration. Utilising elements of existing theories, this thesis develops an original methodology that focuses on aspects and interactions that are often overlooked in other studies, such as the vocal characteristics of the narrator, and the interaction between other sound elements and the voice-over narration. Using the findings of this analysis, an interpretation of the film is given that focuses on the concepts of nationality, history and memory and seeks to address the questions raised in reviews of the film.

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# I

## Introduction

On a cold Viennese night in early 2010, I remember the lights dimming in a warm, packed cinema, just around the corner from the university where I was studying on exchange. As the simple credits for *The White Ribbon* unfolded on screen – small white words against a black background, fading in and out – the elderly woman to my right stirred. Underneath the film’s title on the screen, an invisible hand was scrawling a series of words in a Germanic gothic script commonplace a hundred years ago. As more of the phrase became visible, the woman started reading aloud, perhaps to her elderly companion to her right, perhaps to reassure herself that, after so many years, she could still understand a style of writing embedded in her memory. In the international versions of the film, these few words are never translated and the subtitle is rarely mentioned, even though it has a special significance. In the German-speaking world the film is not known as simply *The White Ribbon*, but rather as *The White Ribbon: A German Children’s Story*. Whether it is seen as a story for German children or a story about German children, or whether indeed ‘story’ is better translated as ‘history’<sup>1</sup>, the film references national and historical dimensions from the very beginning.

Winner of the *Palme d’Or* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009, Michael Haneke’s *The White Ribbon* provoked varied and contradictory responses from its premiere. When discussing the film in academic journals, in newspapers, and on radio, viewers would rarely confine themselves to a subjective appraisal of the film’s merits, choosing instead to deliberate on an additional, far more interesting question: “what is *The White Ribbon* about?” Depending on how broadly or specifically the context of the film was interpreted – characterising it

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Die Geschichte’ can be translated as both the story and the history.

as a film about Germany, about twentieth Century Europe, or about a repressive society, anywhere, at any time – viewers gave manifold readings, for the most part grounded in language that made particular reference to nationality and history. Such a foregrounding of questions about the film’s meaning made it particularly strange that there was such a relative scarcity of sustained and thorough analysis of the voice-over narration in the film, especially considering its prominence and the extent to which it contributes to how the film could be understood.

In film theory there have often been biases against voice-over narration, based on a predilection for oversimplified dichotomies: image versus sound, showing versus telling, objective versus subjective. As applied to film and voice-over narration, these are not binary distinctions. As part of everyday human processes, information is gathered in complex ways from multisensory stimuli. Human voices have always told stories, explained images, and conveyed information from one person to another, whether at the antediluvian fireside or the cinema multiplex. The cinema has always narrated through intricate processes; processes that involve visual, written, verbal and sonic expression. Whilst voice-over narration carries the hallmarks of its own development – stylistic similarities to other media such as literary texts and radio broadcasts – it is not the insertion of something foreign into the cinematic form, but rather an important constituent part that interacts with the other elements in a dynamic way: sometimes overlapping; sometimes complementary; sometimes disparate. It is in the latter category – when the voice-over and film seem to be conveying different information – when questions about the narrator’s reliability arise.

There seems, therefore, to be an opening for further analysis, utilising a film whose voice-over narration has not been comprehensively analysed to investigate a method of narration that has often been marginalised in academic study. In order to analyse the voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon* a detailed methodology will be developed, one that is sensitive to the origins and characteristics of cinematic voice-over narration, and one that develops previous scholarship in the field. By considering the voice-over narration in-depth, an interpretation of the film will be posited. This interpretation will consider

whether the film is quintessentially German or not, will discuss the interesting way history is portrayed in the film, and will illustrate how the concept of memory, in light of the voice-over narrator's statements, contributes to the film's meaning. It was these three interrelated concepts – nationality, history and memory – that found expression in the elderly woman's recollection of an old and outdated Germanic script, back in that crowded cinema, on a cold night over two years ago.

# II

## Reactions to *The White Ribbon*

When surveying the many and diverse reviews of *The White Ribbon* since its release, a key tension in the responses is evident. Viewers are divided over whether the film should be regarded as quintessentially German or rather if it should be given a broader meaning that encompasses many different contexts. Michael Haneke is known for using a particular narrative as a framework for a broader exploration and the extent to which the film is able to go beyond a specific reading and speak to a wider context is a source of much discussion. This tension between the particular and the universal, or between the national and the European or global, will first be elucidated through a discussion of its significance in understanding Haneke's previous films, then through its important role in the critical reception to *The White Ribbon* in the media, its appearance in the academic literature on *The White Ribbon*, and how an appreciation of this theme allows one to better understand Haneke's own comments in interviews. Finally, the discussions about the use of voice-over narration in Haneke's films and *The White Ribbon* up until this point will be surveyed, which will be a starting point for an analysis of voice-over narration and how it can affect how the film is understood.

### Setting and Audience in Haneke's Films

Michael Haneke's films share thematic similarities and utilise similar cinematic techniques. Two common concerns in his films are a conscious ambiguity with regards to setting and a shrewd awareness of audience. Both these aspects have

provoked much discussion and divergent opinion in academic literature and are central to any interpretation of meaning in his films, including in *The White Ribbon*. Setting and audience more broadly embody the tension between the particular and the universal, between reading a film into an identifiable setting and deeming it intended for a specific audience, or rather considering the film to deal with more general thematic concerns that transcend time and space. It is with this long-standing tension in Haneke's oeuvre in mind that the variety of opinions on the meaning of *The White Ribbon* must be understood.

Haneke started making films for the cinema in 1989. Disregarding his made-for-television adaptation of Kafka's *The Castle* for the moment, he has made eleven films in three languages (German, French, English), filmed in Austria, France, Romania, America and Germany.<sup>1</sup> None of these films, apart from *The White Ribbon*, incorporates a voice-over narrator. Many of these films were co-productions between various European countries. *The White Ribbon* itself is a German-Austrian-French-Italian co-production. Haneke, who was born in Germany, but has lived most of his life in Austria, is called both "Austrian"<sup>2</sup> and "European,"<sup>3</sup> with the latter especially popular, as critics are particularly eager to embrace the idea of Haneke as "Euro-auteur,"<sup>4</sup> a cosmopolitan who divides his time between Paris and Vienna.<sup>5</sup> What becomes clear very quickly is that

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<sup>1</sup> *Der siebente Kontinent or The Seventh Continent*, directed by Michael Haneke (1989, Austria: Kino Films, 2006), DVD; *Benny's Video*, directed by Michael Haneke (1992, Austria/Switzerland: Artificial Eye, 2006), DVD; *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls or 71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, directed by Michael Haneke (1994, Austria/Germany: Artificial Eye, 2006), DVD; *Das Scholß or The Castle*, directed by Michael Haneke (1997, Germany/Austria: Kino International, 2007), DVD; *Funny Games*, directed by Michael Haneke (1997, Austria: Artificial Eye, 2006), DVD; *Code inconnu: Récit incomplete de divers voyages or Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys*, directed by Michael Haneke (2000, France/Germany/Romania: Artificial Eye, 2006), DVD; *La pianiste or The Piano Teacher*, directed by Michael Haneke (2001, Austria/France/Germany: Artificial Eye, 2006), DVD; *Le Temps de Loup or Time of the Wolf*, directed by Michael Haneke (2003, France/Austria/Germany: Artificial Eye, 2004), DVD; *Caché or Hidden*, directed by Michael Haneke (2005, France/Austria/Germany/Italy: Artificial Eye, 2006), DVD; *Funny Games US*, directed by Michael Haneke (2007, USA/France/UK/Austria/Germany/Italy: Artificial Eye, 2009), DVD; *Das weiße Band: Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte or The White Ribbon*, directed by Michael Haneke (2009, Germany/Australia/France/Italy: Artificial Eye, 2010), DVD. *Amour or Love*, directed by Michael Haneke (2012, France/Germany/Austria: Les Films du Losenge, 2012), Sydney Film Festival release.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver C. Speck, *Funny Frames: The Filmic Concepts of Michael Haneke* (New York: the Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2010), back cover.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Galt, "The Functionary of Mankind: Michael Haneke and Europe," in *On Michael Haneke*, eds. Brian Price and John David Rhodes (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 230.

<sup>5</sup> David Ng, "Memories of Murder," *Village Voice*, December 6, 2005.

Haneke's films, with regards to both their financing, shooting and their ticket sales,<sup>6</sup> cut across various national contexts.

In Haneke's first three German-language films made in Austria, a distinction must be made between where a particular film is set and where it was filmed. *The Seventh Continent*, Haneke's first feature, is about a family who decide to destroy all their property and take their own lives. According to Haneke's statements to Serge Toubiana on the Kino Films DVD,<sup>7</sup> the film is not to be limited to present-day Austria, "where the film is ostensibly set."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the film takes place in a de-specified depiction of Linz, "rendered as a wasteland of industry, Autobahn and terraced houses."<sup>9</sup> Georg, Anna and their daughter Evi, whose surnames are never mentioned, "represent 'the' family rather than any specific family."<sup>10</sup> The removal of specific markers of place and identity, however, directly contrasts with the specific details we are afforded: the three parts of the film are titled '1987', '1988' and '1989', and the film is based upon a real event in Austria, publicised in the media, where a family committed suicide. The film ends with this final written statement, stressing the veracity and specificity of what the viewer has witnessed:

The S. family was found on February 17, 1989. Because of the wife's brother's concerns, the house was broken into. The family was buried on February 20. Georg S.'s parents, despite the farewell letter he left behind, did not believe it was suicide, and filed a murder complaint against 'unknown persons' with the police. The investigation which the police undertook because of this complaint yielded no results. The case was placed in the Unresolved Files section.<sup>11</sup>

Geographical ambiguity and a lack of character details (such as surnames) are a hallmark of all of Haneke's films, which often stand in direct counterpoint to the specific associations and meanings that can be drawn from his films. In *Benny's Video*, Benny is "presumably from Vienna,"<sup>12</sup> as the city is never directly referenced, even though it is identifiable upon close viewing. Often the lack of

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<sup>6</sup> Based on box office returns, Haneke's films are particularly popular in Germany, Austria, France, Italy and Spain.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Haneke, interview by Serge Toubiana, *The Seventh Continent*, DVD.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Brunette, *Michael Haneke* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema*, 57

<sup>10</sup> Brunette, *Michael Haneke*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Translation from DVD.

<sup>12</sup> Brunette, *Michael Haneke*, 22.

geographical specificity is also contrasted to clarity with regards to time or as to when the film is set. *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, starts with an inter-title informing the audience that on December 23, 1993, Maximillian B. (19) shot three people in a bank and then committed suicide. What follows are news stories that bookend the film, contextualising the film “in the moment of its creation,”<sup>13</sup> with the war in Bosnia and Michael Jackson’s alleged child abuse. Although the film is also based on a true story (an event that occurred in Austria), it does not actively reference its national setting, apart from the Austrian German that is spoken and a few geographical and cultural references.<sup>14</sup>

Haneke’s four French language films made in the 2000s further grapple with ways of using a particular setting for filming whilst at the same making ambiguous where the film is intended to be set. *Code Unknown*, which explores the challenging interactions of a seemingly multicultural society, has been interpreted in different lights depending on how specifically its setting is read. Some viewers see an inherently French paradigm, with the story of the black African extended family struggling to make ends meet and integrate into Parisian society. However, the story of the Romanian beggar could take place in any European city. In fact, *Code Unknown* was “seen in French intellectual circles as a comment on contemporary French politics,” even though Haneke saw it as describing a wider European problem, “claiming that the film could have been set in London or Vienna.”<sup>15</sup> *The Piano Teacher* directly challenges the idea that a film must have a particular setting. An adaptation of Austrian author Elfriede Jelinek’s novel, the film is set in Vienna, clearly identifiable by numerous landmarks. However, the Vienna that the audience is confronted with is entirely Francophone, with all the major parts played by French actors and the entirety of the film in the French language. The artificiality is heightened by the fact that some of the German-speaking actors, such as Susanna Lothar, deliver their lines in German and are then visibly dubbed over into French. Clearly, the construction of such a setting seeks to show the contextual permeability of the themes on display and to absolve the film of having any specifically identifiable

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<sup>13</sup> Wheatley, *Michael Haneke’s Cinema*, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Certain Viennese landmarks can be spotted and a sign in a store uses the word Kassa for cashier, which is the Austrian variant of the German word Kasse.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

context. The sexual repression and deviancy of the titular character is neither specifically a French nor an Austrian malaise, rather the film can be more properly seen as documenting a European situation, one that is both strange and familiar to its audience. Most often designated as a post-apocalyptic thriller, *Time of the Wolf* exists in a featureless rendering of what is presumably the French countryside, though the name of the country and the “city” is never referred to. The ambiguity afforded by a rural setting contrasts with the indeterminate yet always identifiable urban settings of Haneke’s earlier films. The general lack of specific markers in the film reaches its apotheosis in the final shot, concisely described by Brunette:

A sudden cut takes us inside a speedily moving train on a bright and beautiful day, from which we see the lovely green countryside. We have no idea who is running the train or where it is going. And whose point of view is being represented here? It is impossible to say, as there are no reverse shots that would reveal the source of the gaze.<sup>16</sup>

*Hidden* returns to an urban setting as it is presumably set in Paris, but at the same time seeks to overwrite any local references in its narrative space.<sup>17</sup> This film presents perhaps the most potent expression of the tension between particularity and universality in its treatment of French colonial history. Whilst it makes specific references to the 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris, Galt sees in the film a “figuration of European violence” and would not limit the film’s discussion of colonial culpabilities to its French setting.<sup>18</sup>

Along with setting, the question of audience also plays into the dichotomy between a particular context and a universal or nationally interchangeable context. Are there specific meanings reserved for specific audiences? A particularly good exploration of meaning and how it relates to the idea of an intended audience are Haneke’s films *Funny Games* and *Funny Games US*. *Funny Games* concerns a seemingly happy well-to-do family who, at their picture-perfect holiday house, are terrorised by two young men. The film is normally used as the basis for a discussion about spectatorship in the thriller and horror

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<sup>16</sup> Brunette, *Michael Haneke*, 112-3.

<sup>17</sup> Galt, “The Functionary of Mankind,” 228.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

genre, as it subverts many conventions and effectively neuters the voyeuristic pleasure normally associated with watching such films. What is discussed less often, and which is by no means less interesting, is the fact that Haneke remade the film ten years after the original was released into cinemas. Called *Funny Games US*, the second film swapped the original German actors (Ulrich Mühle, Susanna Lothar, Arno Fleisch, Frank Giering) with English-speaking ones (Tim Roth, Naomi Watts, Michael Pitt, Brady Corbet), and changed the setting from Austria to the United States, possibly the Hamptons outside of New York City. Such surface changes aside, *Funny Games US*'s "structure and mechanics remain identical"<sup>19</sup> to its predecessor, as it is "a (more or less) shot-by-shot remake."<sup>20</sup> This has led many people to wonder "Why was this remake ever undertaken in the first place?"<sup>21</sup>

Wheatley constructs a detailed argument that *Funny Games US* is Haneke making a film for the American market, with an American/British/French co-production and art-house stars. She believes that *Funny Games US* "comes with a new set of intertexts"<sup>22</sup> or films that inform its meaning, based on the influx of Asian horror remakes<sup>23</sup> and 'torture porn' thrillers<sup>24</sup> in the United States in the decade since the original *Funny Games*. However, this argument is undermined by data that Speck found on [boxofficemojo.com](http://boxofficemojo.com): namely, that *Funny Games US* made only 16.7% of its total income from ticket sales in the United States, and 83.3% from foreign markets,<sup>25</sup> predominantly ticket sales in western European countries.

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<sup>19</sup> Brunette, *Michael Haneke*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema*, 191.

<sup>21</sup> Brunette, *Michael Haneke*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema*, 193.

<sup>23</sup> Examples include *The Ring*, directed by Gore Verbinski (2002, USA: DreamWorks Pictures, 2003), DVD is a remake of *Ringu*, directed by Hideo Nakata (1998, Japan: Toho Company Ltd, 2001), DVD; *The Grudge*, directed by Takashi Shimizu (2004, USA: Columbia Pictures, 2005), DVD is a remake of *Ju-on*, directed by Takashi Shimizu (2002, Japan: Toei, 2004), DVD; and *Dark Water*, directed by Walter Salles (2005, USA: Touchstone Pictures, 2005), DVD is a remake of *Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, directed by Hideo Hakata (2002, Japan: Toho Company Ltd, 2005), DVD.

<sup>24</sup> The most well-known examples being *Saw*, directed by James Wan (2004, USA: Lionsgate, 2005), DVD and *Hostel*, directed by Eli Roth (2005, USA: Screen Gems, Lions Gate Films, 2006), DVD both of which have spawned numerous sequels.

<sup>25</sup> Speck, *Funny Frames*, 14-1.

This presents a very interesting case study: an Austrian film remade shot-by-shot for the US market, that alienated its American audience,<sup>26</sup> and ended up making most of its money in Europe. In numerous interviews Haneke has stressed that both the original *Funny Games* and *Funny Games US* were intended “with American audiences in mind,”<sup>27</sup> but as the original “didn’t get through to the people who most needed to see it,”<sup>28</sup> the remake was conceived to remedy this situation. Yet, absent subtitles but with English-speaking actors, the newer film was not a commercial success. It is possible that the negative reactions and limited box office receipts may have been expected by Haneke all along, as the premise of the film was to chastise the audience “for liking the kind of film that he was proposing they buy tickets to see.”<sup>29</sup> A didactic film that, underneath a typical horror film marketing façade, abrogates enjoyment and engenders disquiet was always going to be a hard sell, in any national context. *Funny Games US* highlights that Haneke is clearly worried about the specificity of location and audience in his films, so much so that he felt he needed to remake the entire film. There remains, therefore, a distinct tension between the specificity necessary to convey a particular meaning and Haneke’s desire to keep his films ambiguous and relevant in different contexts. By utilising a certain framework, such as the Algerian massacre in *Hidden* to, in his own words, talk about a broader theme, such as violence committed by the state, Haneke risks having his films interpreted in many different permutations from the national to the international, permutations that do not necessarily accord to his own beliefs. This tension between specificity and universality similarly animates the reviewers’ discussions of *The White Ribbon*, as will be discussed below.

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<sup>26</sup> For an overview of the negative American reviews, see Brunette, *Michael Haneke*, 70-1.

<sup>27</sup> John Wray, “Minister of Fear,” *The New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/23/magazine/23haneke-t.html?scp=1&sq=Haneke&st=cse>.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart Jeffries, “Master Manipulator,” *The Guardian*, March 31, 2008, <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,%20,%2022269560,%2000.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Brunette, *Michael Haneke*, 69.

## The Critical Reception of The White Ribbon

Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* received a great deal of critical attention during its staggered release across Europe, North America and, eventually, Australia. An analysis of this critical attention necessarily must distinguish between the German-language reviews and the English-language reviews, given the importance of audience to interpretations of Haneke's films.

### German-language Reviews

*Die schmerzhafteste Kinderstube der Nazi-Generation.*

(The painful nursery of the Nazi generation.)<sup>30</sup>

*Von diesen Kindern stammen wir ab?*

(We are descended from these children?)<sup>31</sup>

*Im Dorf der Verdammten.*

(In the village of the damned.)<sup>32</sup>

*Schrecken eines Jahrhunderts: Das weiße Band.*

(Horror of a century: The White Ribbon.)<sup>33</sup>

*Monster im Dorf.*

(Monster in the village.)<sup>34</sup>

Most of the German reviews of *The White Ribbon* manage a delicate balance: whilst acknowledging that the film presents a German context that has many relevant associations for their German readership, they at the same time reject a narrow reading of the film that seeks to pigeon-hole it too squarely as a film

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<sup>30</sup> My translation. Peter Zander, "Die schmerzhafteste Kinderstube der Nazi-Generation," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Die Welt*, October 15, 2009, <http://www.welt.de/kultur/article4843004/Die-schmerzhafteste-Kinderstube-der-Nazi-Generation.html>.

<sup>31</sup> My translation. Peter Kümmel, "Von diesen Kindern stammen wir ab?" review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Die Zeit*, October 8, 2009, <http://www.zeit.de/2009/42/Das-weisse-Band>.

<sup>32</sup> My translation. Fritz Göttler, "Im Dorf der Verdammten," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 14, 2009, 8.

<sup>33</sup> My translation. Andreas Kilb, "Schrecken eines Jahrhunderts: Das weiße Band," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kino/video-filmkritiken/video-filmkritik-schrecken-eines-jahrhunderts-das-weisse-band-17006.html>.

<sup>34</sup> My translation. Christian Buß, "Monster im Dorf," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Der Spiegel*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/oscar-kandidat-das-weisse-band-monster-im-dorf-a-654825.html>.

about the precursors to German fascism. Other German-language reviews have a more specific German reading of the film, seeing in a historical German setting and a contemporary German audience the necessary preconditions for a reflection on the complexity of the German past. Whilst there are differences between them, in all the reviews there is an abiding reticence to simple interpretations of *The White Ribbon*, possibly born from Germans' sensitivity to the complexity of questions about their relatively recent history.

Some reviewers disavow any specific interpretation of the film. Koltenschule in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* warns against the oversimplification that can occur when the children in the film are identified as the grown-up Nazis of two decades later. As he explains:

...die Reduzierung der Figuren auf wenige, exemplarische Eigenschaften führt zu einer unglücklichen Holzschnitthaftigkeit.

(The reduction of the characters into a few exemplary characteristics leads to an unfortunate simplification.)<sup>35</sup>

Writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Köttler stresses that *The White Ribbon* is "ein deutscher Film" (a German film), but at the same time he tacitly endorses Haneke's statements that the film has a broader message. Paraphrasing Haneke, he says:

Keine Studie zum Ursprung des Nationalsozialismus, [Das weiße Band] geht generell um Fundamentalismus und Terrorismus.

(Not a study of the origin of National Socialism, [The White Ribbon] is more generally about fundamentalism and terrorism.)<sup>36</sup>

Also taking its cue from Haneke's comments, the review in *Die Welt*<sup>37</sup> sees not a film about fascism, but all absolute principles, ideologies and religions. In its opinion, the film is primarily a discourse about youth violence and the cycle of abuse from parents to children, and from those children against others. The

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<sup>35</sup> My translation. Daniel Kothenschulte, "Die Logik des Traums," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, May 23, 2009, <http://www.fr-online.de/film/filmfestival-cannes-die-logik-des-traums,1473350,2864242.html>.

<sup>36</sup> My translation. Fritz Göttler, "Im Dorf der Verdammten," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/im-kino-das-weisse-band-im-dorf-der-verdamnten-1.28208>.

<sup>37</sup> Zander, "Die schmerzhafteste Kinderstube."

review ends by mentioning two recent acts of youth violence: the killing of a whole group of children by other children in London, and the death of an adult at the hands of youths in the Munich S-Bahn. This violence, and by association the reviewer's interpretation of *The White Ribbon*, is clearly not limited to any specific national context. Placing the film squarely in its historical context, Kilb in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* says the following about the children in the film:

Man verlässt sie am Ende mit dem unguuten Gefühl, dass sie die Jugend des Jahres 1919, die Väter und Mütter von 1933, die Großeltern von 1949 sein werden.

(One leaves them at the end with the uneasy feeling that they will be the adolescents of 1919, the fathers and mothers of 1933, and the grandparents of 1949.)<sup>38</sup>

Although these specific dates hold particular significance in German history, the review does not limit itself to a German context. The horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century were inculcated in the family unit, according to Kilb's reading of the film, and in the family unit lies the key to the present. This chain of mistreatment across generations finds its expression in the present which, as Kilb sees it, was portrayed in Haneke's other films such as *Benny's Video* and *Hidden*, one set in Austria, the other in France, both about acts of mistreatment and violence against children and, arguably, by children.

Some reviews, on the other hand, read the film in a more specific light. The review in *Die Zeit* also takes inter-generational violence as its focus, but this time looks at its effects for Germans, who it says are descended from the children in the film. War is the result of a collective breakdown and derailment, with the children bringing to completion what the adults have initiated. Analysing the final scene of the film, where the villagers all take their assigned places in the church, the review hits an unsettling note:

Das könnte bedeuten: Die Leute aus dem Dorf sind alle noch da. Oder: Sie sind alle untergegangen. Oder: Sie sind in uns aufgegangen. Keine Frage, welcher von den drei Schlüssen der schlimmstmögliche, der Haneke-Schluss ist.

(This could mean: the people from the village are still all there. Or: they have all

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<sup>38</sup> My translation. Kilb, "Schrecken eines Jahrhunderts."

perished. Or: they have merged into us. No question which of the three possibilities is the worst possible one, the Haneke answer.)<sup>39</sup>

The review by Buß in *Der Spiegel* is unequivocal in its specific reading of the film. The main figures are “so etwas wie faschistische Prototypen, die soldatisch einstecken, um sadistisch auszuteilen” (something like fascist prototypes, who insert themselves as soldiers in order to mete out sadistically.)<sup>40</sup> According to Buß, Haneke invites such a reading, whilst at the same time not explicitly demanding it. In regards to later German history, the writing is on the wall:

Das Dorf Eichenwald (sic), diese Monstrosität en miniature, ist Brutstätte der heranziehenden Menschheitsverbrechen des 20. Jahrhunderts.

(The village of Eichenwald (sic), this monstrosity in miniature, is the hatchery of the oncoming human rights crime of the twentieth Century.)<sup>41</sup>

Such sensitivity to and awareness of German history is especially evident in the discussions about the name of the village in the film. Three of the German reviews discussed - yet not a single one of the many English-language reviews to be discussed below - make particular reference to the village name of “Eichwald” and its associations to “Eichmann” and “Buchenwald.”<sup>42</sup> Eichwald, meaning ‘oak forest’, is an existing place name both in Germany and in former German territories,<sup>43</sup> and as such is perfectly standard name for an (albeit fictional) small village in Germany. Clearly, however, the name has a resonance beyond the simple meaning of the word in everyday usage, a resonance far less obvious to foreign audiences, but which preoccupies some German viewers of *The White Ribbon*.

## English-language Reviews

The English-language reviews of *The White Ribbon* are in general more receptive to a German reading of *The White Ribbon*, with terms such as ‘fascism’ and

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<sup>39</sup> My translation. Kümmel, “Von diesen Kindern stammen wir ab?”

<sup>40</sup> My translation. Buß, “Monster im Dorf.”

<sup>41</sup> My translation. Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> They are the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, and *Der Spiegel*.

<sup>43</sup> According to Wikipedia, there is an Eichwald in Hessen, Brandenburg, Bavaria, and Baden-Württemberg. It is also the German name for a town in Alsace and a town in the Czech Republic.

'Nazism' being invoked again and again. In one of the earliest reviews in *Variety*, Todd McCarthy said the film "goes beyond its general analysis of humanity to implicitly suggest some tendencies in the German character and culture that could point to certain developments in the subsequent three decades."<sup>44</sup> According to another narrow interpretation, *The White Ribbon* is a film in which "the seeds of fascism are sown,"<sup>45</sup> where the audience is shown "a microcosm of the conditions that spawned Nazism,"<sup>46</sup> "an almost forensic historical examination of the pre-history of German fascism in microcosm"<sup>47</sup> and where "brutal fathers produce children who will kill for the fatherland."<sup>48</sup> In a similar vein, questions such as "where was Nazism really born"<sup>49</sup> and "what predisposed this group of people, and by extension any such group, to eventually endorse a totalitarian regime?"<sup>50</sup> predominate in many reviews. Is an answer that "the parenting and education German children received in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century made them morally susceptible to Nazism?"<sup>51</sup> Is the film meant to explain "the horrendous war that breaks out at the very end of the film, and the fascism that quickly followed in its wake,"<sup>52</sup> are we shown what "led to one war, possibly two,"<sup>53</sup> and is the film, in a nutshell, "*National Socialism: The Prequel*?"<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Todd McCarthy, "The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Variety*, May 20, 2009, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117940328?refcatid=31>.

<sup>45</sup> Jamie Graham, "The White Ribbon: Haneke's Village of the Damned," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Total Film*, November 3, 2009, <http://www.totalfilm.com/reviews/cinema/the-white-ribbon>.

<sup>46</sup> Larushka Ivan-Zadeh, "The White Ribbon Takes an Age to Tie Up," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Metro*, November 13, 2009, <http://www.metro.co.uk/metrolife/768587-the-white-ribbon-takes-an-age-to-tie-up>.

<sup>47</sup> Julie Rigg, "The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *ABC Radio*, May 7, 2010, 07/05/2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/movietime/the-white-ribbon-das-weisse-band---eine-deutsche/3105044>.

<sup>48</sup> Cosmo Landesman, "The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Sunday Times*, November 15, 2009, [http://timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/film/film\\_reviews/article6912868.ece](http://timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/film_reviews/article6912868.ece).

<sup>49</sup> Damon Wise, "The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Empire*, December 7, 2009, <http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=136551>.

<sup>50</sup> Rick Groen, "The Sins of the Fathers, the Perversion of the Fatherland," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Globe and Mail*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/the-white-ribbon/article4302022>.

<sup>51</sup> Mick LaSalle, "The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 2010, <http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Review-The-White-Ribbon-3275853.php>.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Brunette, "Film Review: The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *The Independent*, July 30, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Nigel Andrews, "Film Releases," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Financial Times*, November 11, 2009, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/58bf10d8-cee6-11de-8a4b-00144feabdc0.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Sean Burns, "The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Philadelphia Weekly*, January 19, 2010, <http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/screen/reviews/the-white-ribbon.html>.

Alternatively, there are those reviews that take a broader interpretation of film. Of these, some quote Haneke directly, such as that the film is about “every kind of terrorism,”<sup>55</sup> and others attempt to second-guess him:

This is art, not science, and I don't think that even Haneke, that most rational of filmmakers, believes one could trace a direct line from his village to the behaviour of a nation two decades later [...] I'd hesitate, too, to assume that Haneke is saying something specific about the German national character at this time.<sup>56</sup>

Often a less specific interpretation is an invitation to hypothesise. As one review says “the British might have been fascists as well. Could *The White Ribbon* have been plausibly set in Devon or Berkshire. I wonder.”<sup>57</sup> Another critic believes a message of “this disturbing, nihilistic film is that we're all Nazis at heart.”<sup>58</sup> The meaning for the modern, international audience is also the focus of other reviewers' attention. As one elaborates: “Whatever responsibility we might feel for future generations after seeing a cautionary tale like this one, well that's just one of the questions Haneke leaves us to figure out.”<sup>59</sup> Sometimes reviewers toss up several possibilities without themselves being sure of the answer. With regards to the film's title, that “[t]he white ribbon could be the ancestor of the Jewish yellow star, or the Nazi armband. Or both. Or neither.”<sup>60</sup> Some links “can never be clearly, definitively made.”<sup>61</sup> Or, in the words of another critic discussing whether the film explains things that happened in Germany, “I'm not so sure.”<sup>62</sup> Within this ambiguity, one reviewer simultaneously sees both a specific and a broad meaning to the film as “The White Ribbon ties a meticulous

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<sup>55</sup> Mary Colbert, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, August 3, 2009, <http://www.sbs.com.au/films/movie/4752/The-White-Ribbon/type/trailer/id/245472>.

<sup>56</sup> Dave Calhoun, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Time Out*, November 12, 2009, <http://www.timeout.com/film/reviews/86771/the-white-ribbon.html?cpage=2&ccat=11>.

<sup>57</sup> Evan Williams, “Fascism Through the Eyes of Children,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *The Australian*, May 8, 2010, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/film/williams-film-review-white-ribbon/story-e6fgr8pf-1225862092825>.

<sup>58</sup> Sophie Lister, “The Roots of Evil,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *The Times*, November 13, 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Betsy Sharkey, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Los Angeles Times*, December 30, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/dec/30/entertainment/la-et-white-ribbon30-2009dec30>.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Bradshaw, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *The Guardian*, November 13, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/nov/12/the-white-ribbon-review>.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Chris Tookey, “Pessimistic, Gruelling, and Monochrome – It Would Make the World's Most Depressing Musical,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Daily Mail*, November 13, 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-1227372/The-White-Ribbon-Pessimistic-gruelling-monochrome-make-worlds-depressing-musical.html>.

bow on a big theme, that of the roots of fascism in any society, and the malignancy, as Haneke perceives and infers, in Germany's national character in particular."<sup>63</sup> Utilising imagery from the film, one review expressed the perceived interpretability by asking "Is there a line between the disturbing events of the teacher's memories and the Third Reich? Perhaps one as hard to see and as impossible to avoid as a wire strung between two trees."<sup>64</sup>

### **The White Ribbon in Academic Sources**

Until recently there was a real dearth of literature in English and German on the films of Michael Haneke. In 2009 one reviewer of a work on Haneke welcomed "the first English-language study of Michael Haneke and the games his films play."<sup>65</sup> Since Wheatley's book which applied spectatorship theory to Haneke's films<sup>66</sup> but did not consider *The White Ribbon*, another book has applied Deleuzian film theory and mentioned the film in passing,<sup>67</sup> two companions to Haneke's films have likewise discussed *The White Ribbon* far more fleetingly than they discussed his other films,<sup>68</sup> and a series of anthologies on Haneke's films have been released, one titled *Fascinatingly Disturbing*<sup>69</sup> and the other *On Michael Haneke*,<sup>70</sup> both of which do not consider *The White Ribbon*. Having come into theatres only in 2009/10, not enough time has elapsed for detailed academic study on the film in published books, however several journal articles do consider the film in more depth.

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Phillips, "The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Chicago Tribune*, January 14, 2010, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-01-15/entertainment/1001140510\\_1\\_white-ribbon-stars-developmentally-disabled-boy](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-01-15/entertainment/1001140510_1_white-ribbon-stars-developmentally-disabled-boy).

<sup>64</sup> Chris Knight, "Children of the forlorn," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *National Post*, January 14, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Christoph Huber, "Review: Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image," *Sight and Sound* (2009): 92.

<sup>66</sup> Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema*.

<sup>67</sup> Speck, *Funny Frames*.

<sup>68</sup> Brunette, *Michael Haneke*; Roy Grundmann, ed., *A Companion to Michael Haneke* (Chicester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> Alexander D Ornella, ed., *Fascinatingly Disturbing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Michael Haneke's Cinema* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2010).

<sup>70</sup> Brian Price and John David Rhodes, eds., *On Michael Haneke* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).

In *Funny Frames* Oliver Speck strongly argues against a narrow German reading of *The White Ribbon* and against applying relativism in general to Haneke's films. As Speck observes:

Any story – film or historical novel – that is set in the past, especially one that takes place at the eve of an important historical moment, will be read as a comment on those events since it invites the recipients' historical hindsight.<sup>71</sup>

In answer to this observation, Speck believes the “promise to provide an explanation for the rise of fascism in Germany [...] will be disappointed,” as the film “invites neither a symbolic or allegorical reading.”<sup>72</sup> He believes the setting is a red herring that invites a specific reading that is in no way justified. The agrarian setting is “not specific to Germany,” “no reference to Germany or the German nation is ever made,” nor is any nationalistic sentiment expressed. As Speck continues:

The film could be remade into “The White Ribbon U.S.,” or “The White Ribbon France” without much change and it appears that Haneke poses the German question, the “how could it happen?,” only to show that there is no German exception. Certainly, there are no structures to be found that could be called protofascist, such as anti-Semitism, nationalism or militarism. Indeed, the question that *Das weiße Band* poses appears to be: how could it not happen?<sup>73</sup>

This discussion leads Speck to divulge what he believes the film is actually about: an examination of biopower, or the modern state's regulation of its subjects through techniques to subjugate bodies and control populations.<sup>74</sup> Eschewing contextual specifics, the audience is shown a society where “those in power demand the truth from their subjects,” with camerawork and spatial dynamics that underpin the related topics of interrogation and punishment.<sup>75</sup>

Unlike Speck, for Stewart *The White Ribbon* is a German parable of “social brutality and national crisis,” “the private ferment of German national violence in the oppressions of domestic hierarchy,” where “social pathology marks the path

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<sup>71</sup> Speck, *Funny Frames*, 99-100.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>74</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York City: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 140.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

to National Socialism.”<sup>76</sup> After mentioning and dismissing Haneke’s comments that the film probes “the general origins of human evil,”<sup>77</sup> Stewart elaborates:

Yet the particular national context of *The White Ribbon* remains hard to deny, even as it intersects with much-debated psychohistorical claims about a homosocial youth culture that had grown up under the shadow of absent fathers at the front, later mutilated or dead on return, and broken households in the meantime, emaciated mothers too overwrought for nursing or nurture, with the lack of paternal identification further exacerbated by national humiliation in defeat.<sup>78</sup>

The symbolism, according to Stewart, also foreshadows a particular reading. The white ribbon of the film’s title anticipates, perhaps, “the black arm bands of the Hitler Youth as compensatory badges of dominion,”<sup>79</sup> the attack on the midwife’s disabled son reminds Stewart of “racial cleansing and eugenics,”<sup>80</sup> the pastor’s browbeating of the teacher summons “the twin spectres of appeasement and denial in the rise of fascist terror,”<sup>81</sup> and the closing images of lifeless and fallow lands pre-empt that they “will soon be killing fields.”<sup>82</sup>

Brunette seemingly agrees with both Speck and Stewart in part. Like Stewart he sees the film presenting a national paradigm:

it seems clear that it [*The White Ribbon*] meant to be a portrait of German society prior to the beginning of World War I, with a hint of the fascism to come.<sup>83</sup>

However, Brunette, like Speck, believes that the German setting of the film should also not be overemphasised, for the problem of absolute forms of thinking “concerns everyone [...] in every nation, and perhaps now more than ever.”<sup>84</sup> In his view, *The White Ribbon* is a “powerful sociohistorical critique,”<sup>85</sup> where the German example is used to elucidate broader, contextually

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<sup>76</sup> Garrett Stewart, “Pre-War Trauma: Haneke’s *The White Ribbon*,” *Film Quarterly* 63(4) (Summer 2010): 40.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>83</sup> Brunette, *Michael Haneke*, 135.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

interchangeable themes, or where “the particular is given the resonance and importance of the universal.”<sup>86</sup>

## **Haneke’s Comments**

*If you take the viewer seriously as your partner, the only thing that you can do is to put the questions strongly. In this case, maybe he will find some answer. If you give the answer, you lie*<sup>87</sup>

*I have no interest in self-interpretation. It is the purpose of my films to pose certain questions, and it would be counterproductive if I were to answer these questions myself.*<sup>88</sup>

*The only thing you can do in your role as an artist is thematize things. I don’t suggest solutions.*<sup>89</sup>

- Michael Haneke

For over two decades, Michael Haneke has commented widely on his cinematic creations and spoken openly about his unwillingness to tell the audience what his films mean. As someone who is “notoriously publicity shy,”<sup>90</sup> Haneke still manages to give his fair share of interviews and, notwithstanding his statements above, the discussion more often than not falls back on interpretations of his films. When asked a pointed question Haneke often does provide answers and solutions of sorts. In response to a question about the foreshadowing of fascism in *The White Ribbon*, Haneke replied:

This is your own interpretation. Everyone needs to make his or her own decision here. The film itself says nothing about fascism. We simply depict a

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>87</sup> Scott Foundas, Interview: Michael Haneke, the Bearded Prophet of *Code Inconnu* and *The Piano Teacher*,” *Indiewire*, December 4, 2001; November 23, 2011, [http://www.indiewire.com/article/interview\\_michael\\_haneke\\_the\\_bearded\\_prophet\\_of\\_code\\_inconnu\\_and\\_the\\_piano1/](http://www.indiewire.com/article/interview_michael_haneke_the_bearded_prophet_of_code_inconnu_and_the_piano1/).

<sup>88</sup> Christopher Sharrett, “The World That Is Known: An Interview with Michael Haneke,” *Cineaste* 28(3) (2003): 29.

<sup>89</sup> Roy Grundmann, “An Unsentimental Education: An Interview with Michael Haneke,” *Cineaste* 35(1) (Winter 2009): 10.

<sup>90</sup> Wheatley, *Michael Haneke’s Cinema*, 30.

group of children who absolutize the ideals preached to them by their parents.<sup>91</sup>

Clearly, conclusively stating “the film itself says nothing about fascism” involves Haneke suggesting a solution of sorts. Once it is accepted that he does provide some answers to questions about the meaning of his films, with his public disavowals to the contrary taken with a grain of salt, a further complication arises when Haneke then makes a seemingly contradictory statement, such as this one at the New York Film Festival:

Mr Haneke nevertheless broke into laughter when asked whether viewers of “The White Ribbon” would find thoughts of fascism unavoidable. “I hope so!” he replied.<sup>92</sup>

The enigmatic, ambiguous and even sometimes contradictory nature of Haneke’s statements has led Speck to believe “it is futile to wonder whether Haneke is serious in his interviews or not.”<sup>93</sup> Other sources also eschew using his commentary at all.<sup>94</sup> These sentiments notwithstanding and although his comments can be difficult to decipher, Haneke keeps being interviewed and many academic sources make liberal use of his quotations.<sup>95</sup> Much can be gleaned from what he says, provided one does not take his comments as definitive and instead conceives of them as consciously thought out public statements by a director on the films he directed. Although the focus of Haneke’s emphasis changes from interview to interview, when placed in their proper context his comments provide perspicacious insights into his intended meanings for his films.

The interviews with Haneke concerning *The White Ribbon* accompanied the film’s release into European and American cinemas, appearing between September and December 2009 in various publications. As the completed film had premiered at Cannes in May 2009, Haneke had a period of months to reflect

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<sup>91</sup> Grundmann, “An Unsentimental Education,” 10.

<sup>92</sup> Stuart Klawans, “Fascism, Repression and ‘The White Ribbon’,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2009.

<sup>93</sup> Speck, *Funny Frames*, 14.

<sup>94</sup> Stewart, “Pre-War Trauma” and James S Williams, “Aberrations of Beauty: Violence and Cinematic Resistance in Haneke’s *The White Ribbon*,” *Film Quarterly*, 63(4) (Summer 2010): 48-55 do not quote Haneke in their discussions of *The White Ribbon*.

<sup>95</sup> Wheatley, *Michael Haneke’s Cinema*; Brunette, *Michael Haneke*, and so forth.

on *The White Ribbon* and his feelings towards it before the majority of press interviews were undertaken. This is particularly important for a filmmaker and film academic like Haneke who has such a strong understanding of his own identity within the film medium. The interviews were conducted in German (for a German and Austrian readership) and in English (predominantly for British and American readers). It is vital to distinguish these two audiences, as Haneke sometimes consciously alters the emphasis of his statements depending on the context. The interview questions normally fall into one of three categories: questions about Haneke's background, questions about the making of the film, and questions about the meaning of the film. Discussions about his background tend to focus on his religious upbringing from a mixed-faith family (Protestant and Catholic) and the fact that he was raised by his mother, aunt and grandmother, and not by his father. This information is then used to try and explain religious themes and gender relations in his films.<sup>96</sup> When the interviews turn to discussing the making of *The White Ribbon*, the emphasis falls on the difficult logistics of the shoot (casting, costumes, extras) and on the technology needed to produce the distinct aesthetic appearance of the film (special lighting system, visual effects, use of black and white film). It is the final group of questions, those about the meaning of the film, that are the focus of this thesis.

When *The White Ribbon* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in May 2009, the Reuters article reporting this fact, which was syndicated to media outlets around the world, stated the following:

Austrian director Michael Haneke won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival Sunday for "The White Ribbon," a chilling exploration of the roots of Nazi terror.<sup>97</sup>

First and foremost, the media at Cannes positioned the film as a German film about the Nazis. Asked in an interview in *Falter* whether the film was about the roots of National Socialism, Haneke answered that "with such a thought one does

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<sup>96</sup> "Spiegel Interview with Director Michael Haneke," *Der Spiegel*, October 21, 2009; Anthony Lane, "Happy Haneke," *The New Yorker*, October 5, 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Mike Collett-White and James Mackenzie, "Haneke's Chilling 'White Ribbon' Wins at Cannes," *Reuters*, May 24, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/05/24/us-cannes-idUSL049211320090524>.

not get very far”<sup>98</sup> and in another interview he stated “I want to avoid the misunderstanding that gets incurred when critics receive the film exclusively as a film about German fascism.”<sup>99</sup> It is in many ways astonishing how closely these comments mirror those Haneke made in 2005 about *Hidden*. When asked if that film was a reference to the massacre of Algerians by police officers and auxiliaries in Paris in October 1961, Haneke replied:

I don't want to call too much attention to this issue, because I don't want the film to be regarded primarily in that light at Cannes. It's only an element which supplies a framework [...] You could find a similar story in any country, even though it took place at a different time.<sup>100</sup>

According to Crowley, *Hidden* is about “the dynamics of memory and forgetting and their implications for the present.”<sup>101</sup> Haneke referenced a sore spot in France's history, and his decision not to give easy answers, to leave the questions “preserved and negated like the events of October 17, 1961,”<sup>102</sup> provoked a response in the media and filmgoers that “exceeds the director's desire to downplay the specific event and has contributed to a wider debate about France's colonial past and the politics of the present.”<sup>103</sup> Going even further back, Haneke was confronted with similar questions about context during media interviews in 1989 for his first film for the cinema, *The Seventh Continent*. As related by Wheatley:

Ever since a journalist asked him, at the Cannes screening of his debut feature, whether ‘Austria is really that bad [as it seems in Haneke's films]?’ the director has stressed the universality of his films' ‘messages’, stating that, ‘my films don't specifically target Austria,’ but ‘have to do with the entire advanced industrialised world’.<sup>104</sup>

Having seen the public discussion that accompanied his earlier films, Haneke would be hard pressed to claim that he could not foresee spectators interpreting

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<sup>98</sup> My translation of “Damit kommt man aber nicht sehr weit.” Michael Omasta and Michael Pekler, “In jedem meiner Filme muss ich laut lachen,” *Falter* 38 (2009).

<sup>99</sup> Grundmann, “An Unsentimental Education,” 9.

<sup>100</sup> Karin Schiefer, “Caché von Michael Haneke – Interview,” *Austrian Film Commission*, 2005.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick Crowley, “When Forgetting is Remembering: Haneke's *Caché* and the Events of October 17 1961,” in *On Michael Haneke*, eds. Brian Price and John David Rhodes (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 268.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 277

<sup>104</sup> Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema*, 21

*The White Ribbon* as a comment on German fascism. In many ways Haneke has, through his comments, also invited such a reading. When asked about influences on his film, Haneke gave an intriguing response:

What made a big impression on me was a documentary about Eichmann and his trial in Israel. I was stunned by this man, who completely lacked any conscience, and by his attempt at justification: that he was a dutiful civil servant, that he merely did his job for the benefit of the state, and that he was actually uncomfortable with the fact that he had to do what he did. This mentally dumbfounded me. This fanaticism – that people don't realize what kinds of things they cause.<sup>105</sup>

This statement brings to mind the associations drawn in several German reviews of the film, namely that the village's name Eichwald, is a portmanteau of Eichmann, a bureaucrat of mass-murder, and Buchenwald, a concentration camp.<sup>106</sup> In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Haneke addresses this issue directly:

Spiegel: And 20 years later these children, as adults, are prepared to form the foundation of German fascism. Is that what you're driving at?

Haneke: You could see it that way. It isn't a coincidence that the village is called Eichwald.<sup>107</sup>

A further insight into Haneke's somewhat abstruse answers lies in the film's subtitle, which reads *Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte* or *A German Children's Story*. The subtitle is never translated from the gothic German script that appears on screen, which Haneke explains is so that foreign audiences do not think the film is "about a specifically German problem," however with Germans he "was quite happy for them to think it was about that."<sup>108</sup> This explains Haneke's annoyance that the film was perceived by *foreign* journalists at Cannes as a film about the Nazis, and the reason why he was so open and frank in discussing specifically German concerns in interviews with the German media. Therefore it

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<sup>105</sup> Grundmann, "An Unsentimental Education," 10.

<sup>106</sup> "Stille Monster gebärt dieser Ort, dessen Name Assoziationen an den Massenmordbürokraten Eichmann oder das Konzentrationslager Buchenwald nahelegt." Christian Buß, "Monster im Dorf," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Der Spiegel*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/oscar-kandidat-das-weisse-band-monster-im-dorf-a-654825.html>.

<sup>107</sup> "Spiegel Interview with Director Michael Haneke," *Der Spiegel*.

<sup>108</sup> Michael Haneke, interview by Geoff Andrew, *British Film Institute Live*, January 3, 2010, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/live/video/135>.

seems that Haneke wishes to see the meaning of *The White Ribbon* in both a particular national context and a pan-national universal light depending on which audience he is talking to.

Because Haneke's films provide no easy answers, there has been much debate among academics, among journalists and commentary by Haneke himself on questions of meaning and interpretation. These discussions have relied closely on differing perspectives as to the films' setting and an awareness of the changing perspectives that different audiences bring to his films. The variety of opinions on *The White Ribbon's* meaning in film reviews, in academic publications and in Haneke's comments illustrate that these discussions on context continue unabated to the present day. What this thesis will argue is that the question of meaning in *The White Ribbon* is made more complicated by the presence of voice-over narration in that film, a technique or device that is absent from Haneke's previous films for the cinema and which has, up until now, not been sufficiently discussed in analyses of *The White Ribbon*.

## **Voice-over Narration: Haneke and The White Ribbon**

### **Voice-over Narration: Haneke's *The Castle***

Some reviewers of *The White Ribbon* wrongly believed it was Haneke's first foray into voice-over narration. This is not the case, as one other film made by Haneke since 1989 – a television adaptation of Kafka's *The Castle* in 1997 - has utilised this technique.<sup>109</sup> Based upon Kafka's posthumously published 1926 fragment, Haneke transposes the setting to a German village in the nineteen fifties. There are several distinct differences between the use of voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon* and the use of voice-over narration in *The Castle*. Firstly, unlike *The White Ribbon* that has an original screenplay by Haneke, both the character

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<sup>109</sup> Haneke employed voice-over narration in some of his made-for-television films of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Having never been released on DVD or ever been available for commercial purchase, they are not considered in this thesis.

dialogue and the voice-over narrator's text in *The Castle* are lifted directly from Kafka's literary source material, so much so that the film ends in mid-sentence, mirroring Kafka's incomplete novel. At the end of the film, in simple white text on a black background, an inter-title states "An dieser Stelle endet Franz Kafkas Fragment" (At this point the manuscript ends).<sup>110</sup> Secondly, the voice-over narrator in *The Castle* is omniscient and remains unidentified, unlike the elderly Teacher – *The White Ribbon's* voice-over narrator – for whom certain events remain outside his purview. Thirdly, in terms of the interaction between the voice-over narration and the rest of the film, *The Castle* presents a narrator whose statements adhere closely to the simultaneously shown visual images, only embellishing with any background information where necessary. The elderly Teacher's narration in *The White Ribbon* has a more complicated relationship to that film: at times the voice-over is complementary to the dramatic action, at other times it is disparate, presenting information that undermines what the audience is shown. Fourthly and finally, the voice-over narrator in *The Castle* presents a more authoritative and reliable image in comparison to the uncertain, meandering and at times emotional voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon*. Such a brief survey of the two films highlights in general terms some of the major concerns that any analysis of voice-over narration will have to confront: who the narrator is, when the narrator speaks, how the narration interacts with the rest of the film, and how reliable the narrator's comments are. It is from these initial questions that a more detailed methodology will be developed.

### **Voice-over Narration: Critics' Reviews**

The voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon* is mentioned in only around 10% of the English-language and German-language critical reviews on the film.<sup>111</sup> What does this minority of reviewers think about the voice-over narration? Whilst some reviews discuss general characteristics of the narration, such as that the narrator is "relating events to us from the perspective of the 1960s or '70s,"

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<sup>110</sup> My translation.

<sup>111</sup> Specifically 12 of the 103 reviews surveyed.

using “the past to reflect on that era’s future”<sup>112</sup> or that stylistically the “ruminative voiceover and stark, shimmering visuals suggest dream and parable”<sup>113</sup>, most make reference to the narrator simply in order to openly or subtly question his reliability. One review states that the voice-over narrator is “weaving his tale from memories, rumour and hearsay, and leaving many questions unanswered.”<sup>114</sup> Sometimes the comments are directed squarely towards the narrator’s perspective, stating that he is a “less-than-omniscient narrator”<sup>115</sup> or more blatantly that he is “the antithesis of the omniscient narrator.”<sup>116</sup> A lot of the time, however, the comments directly attack his reliability, stating that his “memories may have been distorted”<sup>117</sup> or that the film has “an awful lot of (unreliable) narration”<sup>118</sup> or that the film’s narrator is “actually that familiar figure ‘the unreliable narrator.’”<sup>119</sup> This unreliability is even given a historical basis by one reviewer:

And what is the narrator’s motive in remembering or misremembering these events? Could it be that, having presumably lived through both world wars, and very possibly achieved an important social standing in Germany, his own hindsight is questionable?<sup>120</sup>

Another reviewer contextualises the unreliability in terms of the ambiguity around historical meaning:

It [The White Ribbon] is not, finally, a repository or blank canvas, and its secretiveness might even be justified as reticence – the narrator’s lack of

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<sup>112</sup> Dave Calhoun, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Time Out*, November 12, 2009, <http://www.timeout.com/film/reviews/86771/the-white-ribbon.html?cpage=2&ccat=11>.

<sup>113</sup> Jamie Graham, “The White Ribbon: Haneke’s Village of the Damned,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Total Film*, November 3, 2009, <http://www.totalfilm.com/reviews/cinema/the-white-ribbon>.

<sup>114</sup> Emma J Bell, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Medical Humanities*, 36 (2010): 63-64.

<sup>115</sup> J Hoberman, “Certainty and a Sure Hand Behind The White Ribbon’s Unsolved Mystery,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Village Voice*, December 29, 2009.

<sup>116</sup> Alan A Stone, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Psychiatric Times*, May 1, 2010.

<sup>117</sup> Alistair Harkness, “Film Review: The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *The Scotsman*, November 13, 2009.

<sup>118</sup> Damon Wise, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Empire*, December 7, 2009, <http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=136551>.

<sup>119</sup> Philip French, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *The Observer*, November 15, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/nov/15/white-ribbon-review>.

<sup>120</sup> Peter Bradshaw, “The White Ribbon,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *The Guardian*, November 13, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/nov/12/the-white-ribbon-review>.

reliable information as a complement or equivalent to his uncertainty about the historical significance of what he is recounting.<sup>121</sup>

Clearly, unreliability is a major concern of many reviewers who choose to engage with the voice-over narration in the film. Any detailed analysis of the voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon* will therefore need to substantiate or disprove these claims of unreliability, as a finding of unreliability would influence any assessment of the possible meanings of the film.

### **Voice-over Narration: Academic Sources**

The best analysis so far of *The White Ribbon's* voice-over narration by an academic is in a journal article by Williams that focuses on the soundtrack and editing of the film.<sup>122</sup> The article covers many of the points enumerated in the reviews – the structure of the voice-over narration, its style, and questions of reliability – but does so in a more detailed manner. According to Williams' analysis, the narrator is “expressionless, seemingly detached, always earnest” and has “full confidence that he will emerge remarkably well from this terrible tale.”<sup>123</sup> Expanding on the latter statement, Williams questions the narrator's past:

What actions, we may wonder, were committed by the narrator to ensure his own survival through two world wars up to the indeterminate present moment of his narration?<sup>124</sup>

Williams actively questions whether the entire film is an artificial construction by the narrator. The most important part of his article on this topic is a discussion of three scenes: the caning of Martin by the Pastor, the Teacher dancing with Eva at the harvest festival, and the Teacher and Eva on a horse-drawn cart heading on a picnic. What links the three scenes, according to Williams, is “the narrator's free-flowing desire or invention,” his “speculative overdrive,” echoed through the use of disorientating circular camera movements.

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<sup>121</sup> Leo Robson, “Children of the rapist,” review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *Times Literary Supplement*, November 20, 2009.

<sup>122</sup> Williams, “Aberrations of Beauty.”

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

All three extended, uninterrupted scenes reinforce a view of events favourable to the Teacher: the beating, which he did not witness, showing the children “sealing their own fate,” the dancing stressing how enraptured the Teacher is with Eva, and the picnic, where he “scrupulously respected the wishes and honour of Eva.” In all three scenes “time appears arrested” and “realism veers into the realm of personal myth,” and what we are shown is “the narrator’s desire to lead the viewer up the garden path.”

An in-depth analysis of the voice-over narration is not Williams’ aim, as the focus of his writing lies in a discussion of the film’s soundtrack and editing. However, the fact that he devotes such a sizable part of his article to questions about the narrator’s reliability only further stresses the necessity of engaging with such questions in this thesis’ analysis.

### **Voice-over Narration: Haneke’s Comments**

The final source of statements on *The White Ribbon’s* voice-over comes from short excerpts of interviews with Haneke himself. According to the director, voice-over was deployed “to create distance and avoid any false naturalism,” while at the same time emulating literary narrators from books of the period when the film is set.<sup>125</sup> Haneke agrees with an interviewer that the use of voice-over in *The White Ribbon* is highly unconventional, “a slap in the face of what is seen as up-to-date and necessary in storytelling today,”<sup>126</sup> and that the voice-over narration asks his audience to consider questions that other films do not, such as the narrator’s reliability. As Haneke elaborates:

...herein lies the irony of deploying a narrator: that he says he isn’t fully in the know and that some of it is based on hearsay immediately signals that one should distrust the reality of what is shown and claimed.<sup>127</sup>

As usual, Haneke’s answers follow his strategy of seeking to inject further layers of meaning into every aspect of his films. Touching on the creation of aesthetic

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<sup>125</sup> Alexander Horwath, “Michael Haneke Interview: Uncut,” *Film Comment* (November/December 2009): 29. For an example of similar narration, see Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest* (London: Penguin Books 2000).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>127</sup> Grundmann, “An Unsentimental Education,” 11.

distance, the literary style of narration and the question of reliability, his statements cover aspects that will be discussed at length in this thesis' analysis of the voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon*.

### **Meaning and Voice-over Narration**

At the very start of *The White Ribbon*, the voice-over narrator makes a frank admission about the voice-over narration that is to follow:

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, a lot of it is still obscure and many questions remain unanswered.

These opening remarks mirror the uncertainty felt by the audience watching the film. From the beginning, Haneke has always made movies that require interpretation and which do not lend themselves to being easily understood. Whether his films are interpreted more broadly or more specifically affects their meaning, and Haneke, with his focus on setting and audience, has encouraged the idea that his films have multiple meanings, and different meanings for different audiences. The responses to *The White Ribbon* in the media, in academic journals and books, and in statements by Haneke himself, have further reinforced this idea, with a wide variety of opinions on what messages *The White Ribbon* conveys. The discussion on voice-over narration in the film has been limited to a handful of reviews and one journal article. Many comments have been made about the voice-over narrator's supposed 'unreliability', yet these comments have remained mostly unsubstantiated claims. What is required is a thorough methodology that can guide a detailed analysis of the voice-over narration in the film, for there are many questions that do remain unanswered.

# III

## Voice-Over Narration in the Cinema

An oft-repeated quote of Walter Benjamin's is that "[g]eschichte zerfällt in Bilder, nicht in Geschichten" (history breaks down into images, not into stories), which succinctly describes the uncanny ability of images to embody epochs and remain lodged indelibly in the human consciousness. Erich Salomon's dignified photos of diplomats and politicians in the Weimar Republic, Leni Riefenstahl's Olympian rendering of the Nuremberg rallies or the unforgettable images of emaciated bodies in the Holocaust all have become synonymous with the events and eras that they depict. Films set in a particular historical context have long sought to create an impression of authenticity and truth. One way to achieve this is to incorporate so-called historical images into a broader narrative. Classen, in his discussion of *Schindler's List*, describes how "remnants of the deported," such as suitcases and piles of clothes and shoes have become "monuments of collective memory"<sup>1</sup> and "icons of extermination."<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, *The White Ribbon's* design and cinematography specifically emulate the photographs of August Sander, a portrait and documentary photographer, best known for his series *People of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Sander's stylised portraits portray the broad spectrum of German society, gazing intently and directly at the camera; these abstract images speak multitudes even whilst their subjects remain silent. The little or no descriptions accompanying Sander's photography stands in contrast to *The White Ribbon*, where the images are mediated through sounds, music and, importantly, voice-over narration. Because of this, Benjamin's

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<sup>1</sup> Christoph Classen, "Balanced Truth: Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* Among History, Memory, and Popular Culture," *History and Theory* 47 (2009): 90.

<sup>2</sup> Cornelia Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung: Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1945), quoted in Classen above.

statement proves less than definitive when applied to the presentation of history in film. There, in the dark of the cinema, history breaks down into not just images but both into images and sounds, for it is with both the visual and the auditory, through visual depiction and voice-over narration, that a film's narrative is told.

This chapter will explore the intriguing role played by voice-over narration in this sometimes calm, sometimes choppy confluence of sound and image. Firstly, the origins and influences of voice-over narration will be explored, from off-stage voices in the theatre and on-stage voices in magic lantern shows, to inter-titles in the silent cinema, to narration in literature, all with a particular emphasis on voice-over narrators who are also characters in the stories they narrate. Thereafter, three important topics will be discussed: finding a definition for voice-over narration, commonly held biases against voice-over narration and the role of voice-over narration in discussions about narrative origin and unreliable narration. Finally, extensive examples of cinematic voice-over narration will be given. This will all provide the necessary context for the development of a methodology to analyse the voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon*, which will be the subject of Chapter III.

## **The Origins of Cinematic Voice-over Narration**

Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents his research so that human events do not fade with time. May the great and wonderful deeds – some brought forth by the Hellenes, other by the barbarians – not go unsung; as well as the causes that led them to make war on each other.<sup>3</sup>

From the outset, a clear distinction must be drawn between the different definitions of the word 'narration'. Generally, it means "a thing narrated or recounted; a story, an account," or "the action or an act of narrating or recounting something; the fact of being narrated." Additionally it has a more

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<sup>3</sup> Herodotus, *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, ed. Robert S Strassler and trans. Andrea L Purvis (London: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group: 2009), 3.

specific meaning ascribed in mediums that have a visual element: “spoken commentary on film or television; a voice-over.”<sup>4</sup> Even though this thesis is concerned with the latter, the etymology of ‘narration’ highlights that cinematic voice-over is but a modern iteration of an old practice, namely, the art of storytelling.

Herodotus presents one of the earliest examples of an individuated narrator, one that openly interjects his own comments and opinions directly into the narrative. By having an identified personality as the source of the narrative, the reader is made more aware of the subjectivity of a singular vision and the shortcomings of a narrator’s perspective. When we are told by Herodotus that “I cannot speak with certainty, however, about the marginal regions which lie toward the west, in Europe”<sup>5</sup> we hear a distant echo of *The White Ribbon’s* Teacher, who in that selfsame Europe many years later does not know “if the story I want to tell you is entirely true.”

The literary origins of cinematic voice-over narration are often overlooked by academics working in the film studies discipline. Chion, in *The Voice in Cinema*, ignores any mention of narrators in literature as precursors to cinematic narrators.<sup>6</sup> Kozloff, in *Invisible Storytellers*, downplays their importance:

Because theatrical narration, like voice-over, is first, intermittent; secondly, interwoven with dramatic scenes that are not mediated through that narrator; and thirdly – crucially – spoken aloud, it parallels voice-over narration’s formal characteristics much more closely than novel narration [...] just because many voice-over narrators masquerade as novel narrators does not mean that the device itself is essentially literary.<sup>7</sup>

Kozloff is correct insofar as she stresses that literary narrators do not share many of the formal characteristics of cinematic voice-over narrators due to their inhabiting different media. However, she understates the stylistic similarities between the two, which extend much further than mere masquerade, especially

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<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. “narration.”

<sup>5</sup> Herodotus, *The Landmark Herodotus*, 261

<sup>6</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 18-19.

when one considers character narrators.<sup>8</sup> From Jane Eyre to Huckleberry Finn, narrating characters have been a mainstay of literature, and the internal viewpoint of a subjective character's consciousness is also a common choice in cinema. A specific example illustrates the extent of this similarity.

Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*<sup>9</sup> centres on the fictional life of the musical composer Adrian Leverkühn, from the late nineteenth Century up until his death in 1940. The story's narrator is Serenus Zeitblom, a friend of Leverkühn, who narrates the story between the years 1943 to 1945. The use of two different time periods, similar to *The White Ribbon*, enables the narrator to use his memory of the past to comment on the present political situation and vice versa. As Vogt explains:

Er [Mann] will die Lebens- und Leidensgeschichte Leverkühns, geboren 1885, und damit die Vorgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus in Deutschland mit dessen katastrophaler Schlußphase verschränken. Deshalb lässt er [Mann] den Erzähler/Biographen [Zeitblom] die Datierung seiner Schreibgegenwart mit persönlichen, aber auch historisch-politischen Kommentaren verbinden, so daß sie trotz geringeren Umfangs als Kontrapunkt zur Verganagenheitsebene und der dort erzählten Biographie wirkt.

(He [Mann] wants to take the sad life story of Leverkühn, who was born in 1885, and the early history of National Socialism in Germany and interlace it with the catastrophic end phase of National Socialism. Therefore he [Mann] allows the narrator/biographer [Zeitblom] to contextualise the time of his writing with personal, historical and political commentary, so that even with minimal communication the commentary acts as a counterpoint to the biography set in the past).<sup>10</sup>

A clear example of this interplay between past and present occurs at the beginning of the novel:

Es mag mit an dieser Jugenderfahrung liegen, aber auch an der spürsinnigen Aufgeschlossenheit jüdischer Kreise für das Schaffen Leverkühns, daß ich gerade in der Judenfrage und ihrer Behandlung unserem Führer und seinen Paladinen niemals voll habe zustimmen können.

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<sup>8</sup> Narrators who are also characters in the stories they relate.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Frankfurt am Main: S Fischer Verlag GmbH, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Jochen Vogt, *Aspekte erzählender Prosa*, (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 75.

(It may be because of this experience in my youth or also the serendipitous open-mindedness of the Jewish community for Leverkühn's work, that I cannot now agree fully with the 'Jewish Question' and its handling by the Führer and his paladins).<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, at the start of *The White Ribbon* the narrator makes a comment about the influence of the past on later events:

But I feel I must talk about the strange events that occurred in our village. They could perhaps clarify certain things that happened in this country.

The narrators are both chronicler and witness, yet when they are no longer an eyewitness and must rely on what others have seen or heard, the limitations of their knowledge become apparent. As the teacher in *The White Ribbon* explains:

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, a lot of it is still obscure and many questions remain unanswered.

In a similar vein, Zeitblom elaborates:

Bei meiner Darstellung, meinen Berichten möge der Leser nicht fragen, woher denn das Einzelne mir so genau bekannt ist, da ich ja nicht immer dabei, dem verewigten Helden dieser Biographie nicht immer zur Seite war. Es ist richtig, daß ich wiederholt durch längere Zeiträume getrennt von ihm lebte.

(The reader may question how I know certain things in my account and my statements, seeing as though I was not always present or always alongside the eternalised hero of this biography. It is correct that I repeatedly lived separated from him for long periods).<sup>12</sup>

Whilst the differences between character narrators in literature and the cinema are numerous – the existence of a visual track in the cinema being a prime example – the influence of the former on the latter is hard to ignore. This is especially the case with a film such as *The White Ribbon* that feels stylistically like it was adapted from a book,<sup>13</sup> and a book like *Doktor Faustus* that employs

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<sup>11</sup> Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Mann, *Doktor Faustus*, 200.

<sup>13</sup> James Kendrick, "The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *QNetwork*, June 29, 2010. where it is stated that "the film [has] a particularly literary feel (many people have asked him [Haneke] what book he adapted)" and the reference to the "novelistic voice-over" in Garrett Stewart, "Pre-War Trauma: Haneke's *The White Ribbon*," *Film Quarterly* 63(4) (Summer 2010): 40.

techniques and styles that have become a mainstay of cinema.<sup>14</sup> Thematic and stylistic influences can transcend art forms and a certain mode of expression – such as narration from a character in the story – should not simply be analysed in isolation from kindred spirits in other media. There are many close parallels between *Doktor Faustus* and *The White Ribbon*, parallels that are no mere surface trappings but are rather deeply ingrained in how the story is told and framed and the way meaning is conveyed. As such a connection makes clear, theory devised in the context of literature can have applicability when analysing cinematic voice-over narration, as will be made evident later in this chapter.

Although it takes many stylistic cues from literary narration, an important distinction remains: cinematic voice-over is spoken aloud and does not remain as text on the page. Voice-over is part of a wider oral tradition of storytelling and communication that has long been a central element of human society. As Chion somewhat poetically elaborates:

Since the very dawn of time, voices have presented images, made order of things in the world, brought things to life and named them. The very first image presenter is the mother; before the child learns any written signs, her voice articulates things in a human and linear temporality.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike when someone speaks who is present and nearby, cinematic voice-over narration is characterised by a visual absence: we do not see the person in the act of speaking their lines, we only hear them. Similar to an off-stage voice in the theatre or opera, narration accompanying a visual presentation remains disembodied and removed. Like a voice overheard or “the voice of the mother or father talking to the child they hold on their knees and who hears them overhead, their voices enveloping him like a big veil,”<sup>16</sup> voice-over narration acts as a commentary on, as an explanation of and as a complement to, visual stimuli. In this way it has a natural ancestor in the narrators of magic lantern shows in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A magic lantern was an early image projector that was originally used to conjure up phantasmagoria, or

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<sup>14</sup> Namely, in the cinema it is common to use flashback and constantly intercut between two time periods and to have a distinct and identifiable narratorial figure through which the story is filtered. Finally, the historical biography is a familiar film genre.

<sup>15</sup> Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 49.

<sup>16</sup> Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 50.

“supernatural” images in front of an audience, whilst the conjurer narrated at the audience, in an early forerunner of the more humble family slideshow. Later, the presentations included texts read aloud as “talking journals.”<sup>17</sup> Although they are both voices that accompany images, an important distinction must be drawn between the magic lantern narrator who was *onstage*, therefore visible and present to the audience, as compared to *offstage* voices in the theatre or opera, which belong to persons often never seen and whose authentication relies on their very absence, much like voice-over narrators in the cinema.

For the first thirty years of its existence, so-called silent films were the output of the cinema. Having no synchronised recorded sound or spoken dialogue and initially consisting of just one unbroken take, films in the nascent age of cinema were often presented with a commentary for the audience by a specially employed lecturer.<sup>18</sup> These lecturers reached their peak of popularity in the United States in the 1910s,<sup>19</sup> where it would already have been commonplace to associate both visual and aural modes of communication with the cinematic experience. Contemporaneously to lecturers, intertitles or subtitles were born from a similar narrative necessity to convey expository information. Whilst originally spare and terse in their prose, filmmakers more and more experimented with different typeface, graphics, and even how the titles were inserted into the film to produce a certain rhythm. As Kozloff explains:

Sometimes overzealousness led to ghastly purple prose, but the writers often succeeded in creating a legendary atmosphere for Westerns and epics or in adding a witty perspective to comedies.<sup>20</sup>

Spoken and written forms of narration have therefore played a role in the cinema from the very beginning. Stylistically, voice-over borrowed heavily from radio, which was another emerging communication medium. Radio serials and radio plays both rely wholeheartedly on voiced exposition as a narrative device. Orson Welles, who would later achieve fame directing and acting in films that often employed voice-over narration, was himself “immersed in radio,” taking

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

part in nearly eighty radio plays in a three-year period in the late 1930s.<sup>21</sup> He is just one example of many individuals who worked across radio and cinema and cross-pollinated styles and techniques between the media. Another early influence on voice-over was the newsreels that often preceded the film proper. Due to technical limitations – the size of recording equipment and microphones' inability to isolate individual sounds – it proved far more convenient to shoot footage silent and to add narration later.<sup>22</sup> Voice-over proved a useful method for linking discrete and sometimes disparate pieces of footage and information, a method that is still used in many modern documentary films and news broadcasts.

Due to its complex nature, cinematic voice-over narration has many influences that shaped its development. Initially there is a text – the words that are spoken – that harkens back to narrators in literature. This text is then spoken aloud, referencing oral storytelling and also narration in the theatre, opera and magic lantern shows. The narration is then recorded and transmitted, like serials on the radio. Finally, this audio is placed alongside visual elements, and then further contextualised by sound design and music. It is then that cinematic voice-over attains its distinctive and special form, a form which itself reflects the character of the film medium.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 28.

## The Academic Debates About Voice-over Narration

### What is ‘voice-over narration’?

A suitable definition of voice-over narration must do justice to its special form.

Chion, in *The Voice in Cinema*, gives the following definition:

The French term for the word “voiceover” is “voix-off” (as if any voice could be off), and it designates any acousmatic or bodiless voices in a film that tell stories, provide commentary, or evoke the past.<sup>23</sup>

Chion qualifies this by stating that acousmatic is “said of a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen”<sup>24</sup> and bodiless includes being “placed outside a body temporarily, detached from a body that is no longer seen, and set into orbit in the peripheral acousmatic field.”<sup>25</sup> According to this definition voice-over narration extends to encompass two interesting situations. Firstly, where the audience hears the character’s voice saying their present thoughts out loud, yet visually the character does not move their mouth and seems to remain silent.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, where a character says a line of dialogue to another character but is outside of the shot, maybe because the camera is focusing in a different direction.<sup>27</sup> Both of these examples are not considered voice-over narration in Kozloff’s narrower definition:

Voice-over narration can be formally defined as oral statements, conveying any portion of the narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented on the screen.<sup>28</sup>

The first special example that Chion’s definition encompassed – the thoughts spoken out loud by a visually present character whose mouth is not articulating

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>26</sup> For a voice to fit Chion’s definition of bodiless it does not need to be both “placed outside a body temporarily” and “detached from a body that is no longer seen.” Rather a bodiless voice may be “placed outside a body temporarily” but does not need to be “detached from a body that is no longer seen.” Accordingly, a voice is still bodiless where the source of the voice is still visible in the shot. This is made explicit when Chion uses Marion Crane’s verbalised thoughts in *Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1960, USA: Shamley Productions, 2001), DVD as an example of voice-over narration (which implies that Marion Crane’s voice is bodiless, as it is definitely not acousmatic, as Marion remains in the centre of the shot). In that particular scene, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is driving her car, looking towards the camera, whilst her thoughts are spoken out loud, yet her mouth remains closed and unmoving.

<sup>27</sup> In this example the voice is acousmatic, as the sound is heard but its cause or source is not seen.

<sup>28</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 5.

the words – does not meet Kozloff’s criterion of “an unseen speaker.” The second example – a character speaking dialogue outside of the shot – is *not* a speaker “situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented on the screen.” This thesis will follow Kozloff’s definition and exclude aforementioned special examples from the definition of voice-over narration. This is a pragmatic decision, as in *The White Ribbon* there are several examples of voices being heard which emanate from outside of the visual shot but come from characters present in the scene.<sup>29</sup> Such examples are a consequence of how the scene is put together through the selection of certain camera angles. They should not be confused with the elderly Teacher’s voice-over narration many years after the events depicted. This is a distinct phenomenon and remains squarely the focus of this thesis.

Additionally, it is necessary to mention that dubbing foreign-language films into the language spoken by the audience is not voice-over narration. Much to the chagrin of cinéastes whose preference for subtitles is well known, dubbing mimics the style of voice-over narration by layering a voice or multiple voices over the rest of the film. In this process however, dubbing seeks to translate all verbal communication in the film (which not only includes voice-over narration but also includes dialogue) and does not add any new information or narration to the extant film. A film without voice-over narration remains a film without voice-over narration, notwithstanding that it is dubbed into a different language.

## **Biases Against Voice-over Narration**

According to Sarah Kozloff, there have long been many biases against voice-over narration both in critical film scholarship and in mainstream attitudes to cinema. Firstly, there is an ingrained preference for images over words. The origins of this preference can already be found in the formative years of the cinema, when sound was entirely absent and words, in the form of inter-titles, were kept to a

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<sup>29</sup> The most common general example is where shot-reverse-shot is used to film a conversation between two characters and the camera chooses to focus on the party listening rather than the party speaking. Specific examples include the Farmer’s “Get out!” to the women cleaning his wife’s dead body and the unknown and unseen characters that say “Here, he’s here” and “Out of the way” when Karli is found. There are no examples of a character’s thoughts being spoken out loud in *The White Ribbon*.

minimum. Initially these titles were very basic and lacked the psychological depth and narrative complexity of the visual scenes, which bred a dismissive attitude to words in what was increasingly considered a visual medium. In a world where images embodied the poetry of art over the cool rationality of language, sound and speech were relegated to a subsidiary role, for the aural “explains and deepens the image; but the image continues to rule the screen.”<sup>30</sup> Whereas images can be viewed and understood, albeit understood very differently, outside of specific linguistic or nationalistic contexts, language is seen as a hampering marker of identity and place in an art form that is romantically and financially thought of as a universal form of entertainment. Studio business models nowadays express cinematic value through the ticket sales of blockbuster entertainment, with film dialogue necessarily playing second fiddle to the drawcard of a visual spectacle; one needs only look at the current marketing of ‘3D films’ by Hollywood studios to get an up-to-date example of this bias. The natural consequence of such misguided thinking is that, as Kozloff notes, “if one believes that all true film art lies in the images, then verbal narration is automatically illegitimate.”<sup>31</sup>

Another reason for bias against voice-over narration is a preference for ‘showing’ as opposed to ‘telling’. ‘Showing’ the audience through visual depiction is supposed to be more objective, realistic and perspective-neutral than ‘telling’ the selfsame audience through verbal exposition. Any voice that speaks and ‘tells’ necessarily comes from a cognisant human source and is therefore tainted with the subjectivity of a singular perspective. Likewise, ‘telling’ actively selects certain information for the audience – the words that are spoken – and actively withholds other information – the words that are not spoken – and therefore performs a didactic function. Thankfully this false dichotomy between showing and telling has been greatly undermined, both in literature and in film. In literature, Booth has shown that fiction need not be realistic, that “showing” is often a disguised form of “telling” and that “showing” is just as divorced from reality as “telling.”<sup>32</sup> In the cinema, Kozloff highlights the large amounts of

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<sup>30</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957), iv.

<sup>31</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961).

“meaningful manipulation” that take place behind the camera, particularly in a fiction film;<sup>33</sup> this is what Bordwell deems ‘style’ or a film’s “systematic use of cinematic devices.”<sup>34</sup> The non-exhaustive list Kozloff compiles of methods of cinematic manipulation includes where the camera is positioned, how a shot is composed, the editing, sound design, music, titles and credits, special effects, use of colour or black and white, lighting and set design. Clearly ‘showing’ is not realistic, objective and perspective-neutral. Anything shown to the audience has been manipulated in order to stress certain information and the decisions have come from some unifying consciousness: whether called Haneke, the director or the implied author. Whilst the manipulation may be subtle, visual depiction is no more realistic or no less subjective or didactic than a voice that is imparting verbal information.

Another common bias is the belief that voice-over narration is a redundant form of storytelling, in that it effectively reproduces what is shown visually in another form. Such an argument is based on two misconceptions. The first is that visuals and voice-over always convey similar information. The second is that when they convey similar information it is redundant. Neither of these statements hold true. The existence of two main distinct tracks of information in a film – namely, the voice-over narration as opposed to the rest of the film<sup>35</sup> – allows additional layers of meaning to be conveyed through their interaction. When the two tracks of information convey similar information this is not a redundant use of narration, rather the repetition can emphasise certain statements and images. Alternatively when the two tracks diverge and tell different and even contradictory information, it can create ambiguity, dramatic irony and aesthetic distance.

The final misguided belief is that voice-over narration is a literary device and “inappropriate in a pure film.”<sup>36</sup> Whilst this thesis has argued strongly that literary and cinematic character narrators share many stylistic similarities, there remain several distinctions in how narration operates in books and in films, due

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<sup>33</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 14.

<sup>34</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985), 50.

<sup>35</sup> “Rest of the film” will be the description used in this thesis to define the film absent the voice-over narration.

<sup>36</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 17.

to the different characteristics of the two media. Quoting Brian Henderson, Kozloff mentions three of these distinctions to literary narrators: cinematic narrators are not always consistently present; they are not as well integrated into the narrative discourse; and their point of view does not necessarily wholeheartedly impose itself upon the film narrative.<sup>37</sup>

## **Narrative Origins and Unreliability**

### *The Origins of the Implied Author*

At the start of this chapter two different definitions of narration were given: “a thing narrated or recounted; a story, an account,” and “spoken commentary on film or television; a voice-over.”<sup>38</sup> The former conceives of narration in its broadest meaning, encompassing the entirety of a story, whether as a book, film, play or opera. The latter concerns solely the verbal voice-over statements by a character or non-character narrator, the “experiencing mind whose views of the experience will come between us and the event”<sup>39</sup> and “who does not create a world but simply reports on it.”<sup>40</sup> These two definitions of narration refer to two distinct phenomena, which emanate from different sources. In *The White Ribbon* it is easy to identify the source of the voice-over narration: the Teacher, now an old man, many years after the events he is narrating about. The more complicated question, however, is how to best characterise the narrative source of the entire story or account. When the elderly Teacher is silent, who or what is narrating *The White Ribbon*? This is the question that lies at the heart of the debate about the existence of an implied author.

The implied author – or the author’s second self – is a term coined by Booth to characterise in literature the “implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, or puppeteer, or as an indifferent God.”<sup>41</sup> He or she is the undramatised narrator of the entire story, the conduit

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>39</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 151-2.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Burgoyne, “The Cinematic Narrator: The Logic and Pragmatics of Impersonal Narration,” *Journal of Film and Video* 42(1) (Spring 1990): 7.

<sup>41</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 151.

through which the words flow. Unlike the voice-over narrator who “is conceptualized as a product of the work itself,” the implied author is the external source of the fiction, but whose “mental economy does not necessarily correspond to that of the actual author.”<sup>42</sup> Naturally, literature scholars’ opinions have divided over the existence of the implied author and how to conceptualise her. Is she “an individuated but unknown human being” or “an abstract construct deprived of a human dimension” or is she even logically necessary?<sup>43</sup> To conceive of the debate surrounding the implied author as a quintessentially literary debate accords with statements stressing the particularity of literature in this regard:

For, unlike most other narrative forms, the purely verbal narrative (novel, short story, tale etc.) always presents itself...as the production of a unified organizing consciousness.<sup>44</sup>

However, the very same arguments about narrative origin have been transposed into film studies and adapted to the exigencies of the film medium. Echoing the ‘unified organising consciousness’ above, Metz explains:

The spectator perceives images which have obviously been selected (they could have been other images) and arranged (their order could have been different). In a sense, he is leafing through an album of predetermined pictures, and it is not he who is turning the pages but some ‘master of ceremonies’, some ‘grand image maker.’<sup>45</sup>

Naturally, opinion is also divided in film studies over the existence of the implied author and how to conceptualise her.

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<sup>42</sup> Gregory Currie, “Unreliability Refigured: Narrative in Literature and Film,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53(1) (1995): 20.

<sup>43</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, “Pragmatics of Personal and Impersonal Fiction,” *Poetics* 10 (1981): 519.

<sup>44</sup> André Gaudreault, “Narration and Monstration in the Cinema,” *Journal of Film and Video* 39(2) (Spring 1987): 29.

<sup>45</sup> Christian Metz, *Film Language*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 21.

## Narrative Origin and Unreliability

The relevance of this debate to the current thesis lies in the fact that the implied author was originally used by Booth as a constituent piece of his definition of unreliability in literary narrators:

For the lack of better terms, I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not.<sup>46</sup>

With this definition as a starting point, academics in literature studies have sought to further develop Booth's theory or disregard it entirely and find another pathology of unreliability. Nünning, for instance, disregards the implied author as a necessary constituent of a finding of unreliability. In her view, unreliability is born from the divergence between the reader's and the narrator's worldview.<sup>47</sup> Yacobi reconfigures unreliability as one of five 'integration mechanisms', whereby readers account for incongruities in the text<sup>48</sup>. Phelan and Martin define six types of unreliability – misreporting, misreading, misregarding, underreporting, underreading, underregarding<sup>49</sup> – whereas Fludernik categories three sorts – factual inaccuracy, lack of objectivity, ideological unreliability<sup>50</sup> – and Cohn two, namely:

...a factual type of unreliability that is attributed to a mis- or disinformed narrator, unwilling or unable to tell what 'actually' happened...and an ideological kind that is attributed to a narrator who is biased or confused...<sup>51</sup>

Olson believes that a distinction must be drawn between narrators that are fallible – “to what extent the narrator mistakes the information he has access to

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<sup>46</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 158-9.

<sup>47</sup> Ansgar Nünning, “Unreliable Narration zur Einführung: Grundzüge einer kognitiv-narratologischen Theorie und Analyse unglaubwürdigen Erzählens” in *Unreliable Narration: Studien zur Theorie und Praxis unglaubwürdigen Erzählens in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur*, eds., Ansgar Nünning (Trier: WVT, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Tamar Yacobi, “Package Deals in Fictional Narrative: The Case of the Narrator's Unreliability,” *Narrative* 9 (2001): 223-29.

<sup>49</sup> James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin, “The Lessons of ‘Weymouth:’ Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics and *The Remains of the Day*” in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, eds., David Herman (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 88-109.

<sup>50</sup> Monika Fludernik, “Defining (In)sanity: The Narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the Question of Unreliability” in *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext/Transcending Boundaries: Narrative in Context*, eds., Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), 76-77.

<sup>51</sup> Dorrit Cohn, “Discordant Narration” *Style* 34(2) (2000): 307.

and the perception he has”<sup>52</sup> – and those narrators that are untrustworthy or unreliable due to their disposition, namely their behavioural traits or current self-interest.<sup>53</sup> In addition to this, Zerweck posits that literary narrative unreliability is both historically and culturally dependent, as both the production and reception of a text, and both the world of the text and the world of the reader, are informed and influenced by extra-textual elements and signs that are subject to historical and cultural change. In his approach focused on the consumers of texts, he makes the valid point that unreliability is not a static concept and is dependent on personality models, values, norms and notions of ‘normal’ behaviour, all of which are contextually dependent.<sup>54</sup>

Speaking outside of the specific context of literature, the differing opinions about narrative origin have also influenced how unreliability is diagnosed. A detailed comparison of three theories, each with different opinions with regards to narrative origin, each with different criteria for unreliability, will provide a clear illustration of the close association between questions of narrative origin and questions of unreliability. According to Bordwell the narration itself is the source of the story. Narration is a process, one that involves “the activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on the perceiver.”<sup>55</sup> Whereas in literature “any utterance can be construed with respect to a putative source,”<sup>56</sup> an ‘implied author’ “adds nothing to our understanding of filmic narration,” as it is an “anthropomorphic fiction”:

No trait we could assign to an implied author of a film could not more simply be ascribed to the narration itself: it sometimes suppresses information, it often restricts our knowledge, it generates curiosity, it creates a tone, and so on.<sup>57</sup>

In Bordwell’s theory, when a film has an identifiable narrator, the narrator herself is a construction by the spectator at the behest of the broader narration.

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<sup>52</sup> Greta Olson, “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators,” *Narrative* 11(1) (January 2003): 103.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>54</sup> Bruno Zerweck, “Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction,” *Style* 35(1) (2001): 158.

<sup>55</sup> Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, xi.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

The narrator is not a primordial constituent of a story, but is rather created according to “specific organizational principles, historical factors, and viewers mental sets.”<sup>58</sup> According to Bordwell, the narration creates the narrator, not the other way around.

Unreliability according to Bordwell therefore has nothing to do with an implied author and rather turns on three core concepts: the knowledge, self-consciousness and communicativeness of the narration.<sup>59</sup> Knowledge consists of its range or lack of restriction (how much does the narration know) as well as its profoundness (how subjective or objective is the knowledge available to the narration). Self-consciousness is measured by the extent to which the narration recognises it is addressing an audience. Communicativeness relates to how much of the narration’s knowledge is communicated to the audience and how much is deliberately withheld.

Unlike Bordwell, Chatman believes there is still a place for the implied author, especially when one encounters unreliable narration. As he elaborates:

If the sole source of the ostensible story is a narrator, and if we come to believe that the “facts” are not as the narrator presents them, there can only be some other and overriding source of the story, the source we call the implied author.<sup>60</sup>

Whilst Chatman agrees that Bordwell’s use of terms such as knowledge and self-consciousness have “a certain viability,” he conceives of them in a different way. Reconfiguring ‘knowledge’ as analogous to point of view, Chatman sees it as a hallmark of the overall design of a text or the overall textual intent, equivalent to the implied author. As he explains:

In my theory, the narrator communicates all of and only what the implied author provides...the question is one not of knowing but of how much and what information the cinematic narrator is programmed by the implied author to present.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>60</sup> Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990), 131.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 130.

Regarding self-consciousness, Chatman has trouble following Bordwell when he conceives of an abstract concept, such as the narration, being able to acknowledge the presence of an audience. Instead he sees self-consciousness as a character attribute, evident to variable extents in individual characters, but not an overall impression created by a text. What makes Chatman's theory more complicated is that he believes that all films have an additional narrative component, what he calls the 'narrator', that sits between the implied author and the voice-over narrator and between the implied author and the audience. It is someone or something within the discourse that is seen to be the presenter or transmitter of the story, including all of its communicating devices. The analogy Chatman makes is to a narrator in a literary work, who is in total domination of a novel, but who is not the implied author or inventor of the text. As a consequence of this, Chatman explains that there can be "partial unreliability" when there are disparities between the voice-over narrator and the narrator.

Unlike Bordwell and like Chatman, Currie believes that narrative unreliability requires an implied author. When Bordwell utilises knowledge deprivation as a trait of unreliability, Currie believes this necessarily presupposes the existence of an implied author. When the viewer feels that a film is deliberately depriving her of information for a dramatic or emotional purpose, the film is evidencing an agent as sender, one that is communicating to the viewer with intention.<sup>62</sup> As Currie succinctly states, "the implied author, we may say, is an absolute presupposition of unreliability."<sup>63</sup> Unlike Chatman, Currie believes the additional designation of a 'narrator' is redundant. The implied author is responsible for the story, which involves the decision whether or not there is a narrator. Perhaps the implied author intends that someone other than her is telling a story, perhaps she may wish to just tell a fictional story without a narrator.<sup>64</sup> In every case, Currie says that all actions proscribed to Chatman's narrator are more rightly attributed to the implied author. It is therefore unsurprising that Currie believes unreliability occurs when there is a disparity between what the implied author narrates and the intentions of the voice-over

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 27

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

narrator concerning “what she would have the reader believe occurred.”<sup>65</sup> Currie also specifically delineates general unreliability from unreliability that is to some degree hidden. The latter he defines as ‘ambiguous’, when “it raises a question in the viewer’s mind which it fails to answer, and where the raising and the non-answering seem to have been intentional.”<sup>66</sup> Ambiguity is distinct from unreliability, but they are compatible and often found together.

### *Narrative Origin and Voice-over Narration*

There are several characteristics of cinematic voice-over narration that make it useful to believe in, and refer to, an implied author. In the world of narrative, where it is commonplace to “invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme,”<sup>67</sup> voice-over is a technique that creates temporal distance between the event and the account of the event. Characteristically, voice-over also makes the audience directly aware that they are being informed simultaneously from two different tracks of information.<sup>68</sup> What a viewer feels a film is telling her may be antithetical to what the identical viewer feels a voice-over narrator in that same film is telling her. Any convergence or divergence between what is conveyed by the voice-over and the dramatic action make it logical to impute two sources that are conscious and act with intention, but retain enough distance from the actual author so as not to be conflated as one and the same. By using the terms ‘implied author’ and ‘voice-over narrator’ one also sidesteps the confusion that would undoubtedly arise with the more complicated distinction by Bordwell between narration and (voice-over) narrator.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>66</sup> Currie, “Unreliability Refigured,” 24.

<sup>67</sup> Metz, *Film Language*. See also Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 53.

<sup>68</sup> The narrative source of the film, which this thesis will define as the implied author, is of course also the source of the voice-over narrator and by extension the voice-over narration, for both voice-over narration and voice-over narrator are contained within the narrative world of the film. Therefore, the two tracks of information – the voice-over narration and the dramatic action of the film – both emanate from the implied author. However, there does remain a difference between the two: the voice-over narration is directly reflected through the consciousness of the voice-over narrator, whereas the dramatic action remains distinct from the narrator or, in a very small minority of films, is only indirectly reflected or only fully reflected for a short amount of time – as an example see *Stage Fright*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1950, UK: Warner Bros, 2004), DVD with its famous flashback where both the voice-over narration and the dramatic depiction are later exposed as false and an invention by the voice-over narrator. For the sake of brevity and clarity, this thesis will continue to refer to the voice-over narration and dramatic action as distinct tracks of information, notwithstanding the aforementioned complications.

Whereas the implied author proves a valuable aid in conceptualising the constituent parts of a narrative and how a film's message is conveyed, Chatman's concept of the 'narrator' is an added complication without any discernable benefit. Films like *The White Ribbon* already have a (voice-over) narrator and distinguishing between him and Chatman's 'narrator' proves especially unwieldy. Film is also more resistant as a medium to the concept of an overarching narrator within the fictional world of the narrative.<sup>69</sup> Literary narrators are often depicted as being in total control of the written narrative, from the first word until the last, however in film there is far more opposition to this idea, for, as Wilson expounds "[w]e simply have no clear, general idea of film narrative being rendered by a kind of 'visual' narrator in the required sense."<sup>70</sup> In literature "the text constitutes the reader's sole source of information about the represented state of affairs,"<sup>71</sup> whereas in film voice-over narration is just one "of many elements...through which the cinematic text is narrated."<sup>72</sup> Even though certain factors can induce the viewer to think that the voice-over narrator is the narrator of the entire story, there will always be some aspects of the film that are outside of the voice-over narrator's ambit, such as the credits, music, sound and editing techniques. Voice-over narrators may take on hallmarks of Chatman's 'narrator', but there is no room between the implied author and the voice-over narrator for another distinct narrating agent. As such, this thesis will adopt Currie's position - originally elucidated in the context of literature but here transposed to the cinema - that there is an implied author but no 'narrator'.

### Unreliability and Voice-over Narration

Although this thesis is concerned with cinematic voice-over narration, theory on unreliability in literature can still be utilised where it remains applicable in the medium of the cinema. Phelan and Martin's six types of unreliability - misreporting, misreading, misregarding, underreporting, underreading,

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<sup>69</sup> As opposed to the implied author, who is outside the diegesis or fictional world of the narrative.

<sup>70</sup> George Wilson, "Film, Perception, and Point of View," *MLN* 91(5) (October 1976): 1027.

<sup>71</sup> Ryan, "Pragmatics of Personal and Impersonal Fiction," 530.

<sup>72</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 43-4.

underregarding<sup>73</sup> - are useful guides to hallmarks of unreliability and can be applied to the cinema, focused as they are on the readers' - or in this case the viewers' - responses to the text. Regarding the characteristics of unreliable narrators, Olson's distinction between fallible narrators and untrustworthy narrators<sup>74</sup> is pertinent and can be applied to cinematic voice-over narrators. Just because Bordwell ascribes unreliability to the narration and not the implied author does not mean one should disregard his thorough discussion on unreliability. His use of terms such as knowledge, self-consciousness and communicativeness could equally be applied to voice-over narrators. Zerweck's comment that unreliable narration is historically and culturally variable is just as useful in a cinematic context. Where, when and by whom a film is made, and where, when and by whom the film is viewed are important pieces of information that affect how unreliability is determined. Currie's additional category of 'ambiguity', where there is an intentional vagueness rather than flat-out unreliability, is better included within the normal broad definition of unreliability. Making it a discreet category gives it an undue prominence, as it really is just a mixture of a lack of communicativeness with an ideological or untrustworthy slant.

### **Examples of Cinematic Voice-over Narration**

Voice-over narration is a common element in many films, but especially so in documentary films, harkening back to the close association between the communication of factual information and the authoritative voice-over, common to television news broadcasts and radio programs. Staged dramatic action is less common in documentaries<sup>75</sup> and reliance on interviews and stock footage often necessitates unifying exposition provided through voice-over. Certain

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<sup>73</sup> Phelan and Martin, "The Lessons of 'Weymouth.'"

<sup>74</sup> Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability," 102.

<sup>75</sup> Although dramatic staging, coupled with voice-over narration, has been used to profound effect in films such as *The Thin Blue Line*, directed by Errol Morris (1988, USA: Miramax Films, 2005), DVD and *Touching the Void*, directed by Kevin Macdonald (2003, UK: Pathé, IFC, MGM, 2004), DVD.

documentary directors not only make a point of using voice-over narration, but also provide the voice-over narration themselves, and in the process become a character and a focal point in their cinematic creations.<sup>76</sup>

The focus of this discussion however is voice-over narration in fiction films. Within this, there are different ways in which voice-over can be utilised. One important distinction is whether, on the one hand, the voice-over narration frames the rest of the film or is embedded within the main story of the film. Some voice-over narration only provides an introductory and closing statement that frames the story,<sup>77</sup> whilst at other times there can be frequent insertions of voice-over during the film.<sup>78</sup> Sometimes, the voice-over narration is incorporated into flashbacks.<sup>79</sup> On rare occasions, there can be multiple flashbacks and multiple levels of voice-over narration.<sup>80</sup> Distinctions can also be made between narrators who are characters in the film they narrate over,<sup>81</sup> and narrators who are outsiders and have no physical presence in the film.<sup>82</sup>

Sarah Kozloff, writing in 1988, found that voice-over narration was still being routinely criticised and ignored in academic study.<sup>83</sup> Seemingly incongruous to this is the fact that many highly regarded American fiction film directors are particularly well known for their preference for and use of voice-over narration as a cinematic technique. Orson Welles made extensive use of the

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<sup>76</sup> Specifically Werner Herzog in (among others) *Grizzly Man*, directed by Werner Herzog (2005, USA: Lions Gate Films, 2005), DVD and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, directed by Werner Herzog (2010, Canada: IFC Films, Sundance Selects, 2011), DVD and Michael Moore in *Bowling for Columbine*, directed by Michael Moore (2002, USA: United Artists, 2003), DVD and *Fahrenheit 911*, directed by Michael Moore (2004, USA: Lions Gate Films, IFC Films, Dog Eat Dog Films, 2004), DVD.

<sup>77</sup> Examples include *War of the Worlds*, directed by Steven Spielberg (2005, USA: Paramount Pictures, DreamWorks Pictures, 2005), DVD and *The Third Man*, directed by Carol Reed (1949, UK: British Lion Films, 1999), DVD.

<sup>78</sup> Examples include *Million Dollar Baby*, directed by Clint Eastwood (2004, USA: Warner Bros Pictures, 2005), DVD and *Andrei Rublev*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1966, Soviet Union: Mosfilm, 2007), DVD.

<sup>79</sup> Examples include *Stage Fright* (1950) and *Rashomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa (1950, Japan: Daiei Film Co Ltd, RKO Radio Pictures, 2001), DVD.

<sup>80</sup> See *The Saragossa Manuscript*, directed by Wojciech Has (1965, Poland: Film Polski, 2002), DVD and *La mala educación* or *Bad Education*, directed by Pedro Almodovar (2004, Spain: Warner Sogefilms, Sonic Pictures Classic, 2005), DVD.

<sup>81</sup> Examples include Nicole Burnell (Sarah Polley) in *The Sweet Hereafter*, directed by Atom Egoyan (1997, Canada: Fine Line Features, 1998), DVD and Damiell (Bruno Ganz) in *Der Himmel über Berlin* or *Wings of Desire*, directed by Wim Wenders (1987, Basis-Film-Verleih GmbH (West Germany), Argos Films (France), Orion Classics (USA), 2003), DVD.

<sup>82</sup> Examples include Ricky Jay in *Magnolia*, directed by Paul Thomas Anderson (1999, USA: New Line Cinema, 2000), DVD and the unnamed narrator in *Y tu Mamá También*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón (2002, Mexico: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2002), DVD. Directors such as Orson Welles and Jean-Luc Godard are known for inserting their own voices reading the voice-over narration in their films.

<sup>83</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 8.

technique as a way of conveying narrative.<sup>84</sup> Stanley Kubrick likewise often made use of voice-over narration.<sup>85</sup> Terrence Malick is yet to make a film that does not use voice-over narration.<sup>86</sup> Many of Martin Scorsese's most highly praised and memorable films have passages of voice-over narration.<sup>87</sup> Sam Mendes also often incorporates voice-over narration into his films, including in *American Beauty* (2000), which won Best Picture and Best Director at the Academy Awards.<sup>88</sup> Clearly, the technique is not only widely used, but also an important element in memorable, award-winning and classic films.

It is not only specific directors who often use voice-over narration; it is often used in specific circumstances, when dealing with certain topics and in certain genres. One prevalent use of the technique is when a film is adapted from a book – often that had a narrator – or when a film wishes to simply emulate a literary style. With regards to books turned into films, there are numerous examples of literary adaptations that, by using voice-over narration, kept the style and method of exposition of their source material.<sup>89</sup> Sometimes films seek to mimic the feel of a book without actually adapting a literary text. A good

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<sup>84</sup> See *Citizen Kane*, directed by Orson Welles (1941, USA: RKO Radio Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros, 2001), DVD; *The Magnificent Ambersons*, directed by Orson Welles (1942, USA: RKO Radio Pictures, 2004), DVD; *The Lady from Shanghai*, directed by Orson Welles (uncredited) (1947, USA: Columbia Pictures, 2000), DVD and *Chimes at Midnight*, directed by Orson Welles (1965: France, Spain, Switzerland: Continental Film Distributors, 2000), DVD.

<sup>85</sup> See *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1964, UK: Columbia Pictures, 2001), DVD *A Clockwork Orange*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1971, UK: Warner Bros, 1999), DVD; *Barry Lyndon*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1975, UK/USA: Warner Bros, 1999), DVD and *Full Metal Jacket*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1987, USA: Warner Bros, 1999), DVD.

<sup>86</sup> See *Badlands*, directed by Terrence Malick (1973, USA: Warner Bros, 1999), DVD; *Days of Heaven*, directed by Terrence Malick (1978, USA: Paramount Pictures, 1999), DVD; *The Thin Red Line*, directed by Terrence Malick (1998, USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1998), DVD; *The New World*, directed by Terrence Malick (2005, USA New Line Cinema, 2006), DVD and *The Tree of Life*, directed by Terrence Malick (2011, USA: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011), DVD.

<sup>87</sup> See *Taxi Driver*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1976, USA: Columbia Pictures, 1999), DVD; *Goodfellas*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1990, USA: Warner Bros, 1997), DVD *The Age of Innocence*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1993, USA: Columbia Pictures, 2001), DVD; *Casino*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1995, USA: Universal Pictures, 1998), DVD and *Gangs of New York*, directed by Martin Scorsese (2002, USA: Miramax Films, Entertainment Film Distributors, 2003), DVD.

<sup>88</sup> *Road to Perdition*, directed by Sam Mendes (2002, USA: DreamWorks, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2003), DVD and *Jarhead*, directed by Sam Mendes (2005, USA, Germany: Universal Pictures, 2006), DVD Mendes' second and third films, also incorporate voice-over narration.

<sup>89</sup> See *The Tin Drum*, directed by Volker Schlöndorff (1979, West Germany, Yugoslavia, Poland, France: United Artists, New World Pictures, 1999), DVD based on the novel of the same name by Günter Grass, *The Shawshank Redemption*, directed by Frank Darabont (1994: USA, Columbia Pictures, Warner Bros, 1998), DVD based on the Stephen King novella *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher (1999, USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2000), DVD based on the novel of the same name by Chuck Palahniuk, and *American Psycho*, directed by Mary Harron (2000, USA: Lions Gate Films, 2000), DVD based on the novel of the same name by Bret Easton Ellis.

example is Wes Anderson's film *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001).<sup>90</sup> The film opens with a shot of the first edition of a book titled 'The Royal Tenenbaums': a book that does not exist outside of as a prop in the film. The book then opens to 'Chapter One', as the voice-over narration begins. The narration, which continues throughout the film, delivers exposition, introduces characters and provides an ironic counterpoint to the dramatic action. The audience is repeatedly given glimpses of the 'book' contemporaneously to the voice-over narration, as a reminder of the (fictional) source material.

Another subset of films that often utilise voice-over narration is war films, and in particular films about the Vietnam War.<sup>91</sup> Films in this genre seek to throw the cinematic audience immediately and directly into the soldier's perspective and make them experience the life of a soldier – armed combat, comradeship, psychological instability – first hand. Voice-over narration facilitates this process, giving access to the thoughts, opinions and feelings of an eyewitness to conflict. In Francis Ford Coppola's seminal film *Apocalypse Now* (1979)<sup>92</sup> Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) is tasked with killing Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), who has gone rogue in the Cambodian jungle. Whilst the voice-over conveys much expository information, it also reflects the film's aesthetics, by reinforcing the unsettling mood and atmosphere. Discussing Kurtz's camp, Willard says in the film's voice-over narration:

Everything I saw told me that Kurtz had gone insane. The place was full of bodies [...] It smelled like slow death in there, malaria, and nightmares. This was the end of the river, all right.

The audience takes the journey with Willard up the river and it is through his eyes, through his iconic battle-hardened language, through his hallucinatory experiences and through his voice-over narration that the true folly of the Vietnam War is brought into sharp relief.

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<sup>90</sup> *The Royal Tenenbaums*, directed by Wes Anderson (2001: USA: Touchstone Pictures, 2002), DVD.

<sup>91</sup> Examples include *The Boys in Company C*, directed by Sidney J. Furie (1978, Hong Kong, USA: Columbia Pictures, 2008), DVD; *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone (1986, USA: Orion Pictures, 1997), DVD; *Full Metal Jacket*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1987, USA: Warner Bros, 1999), DVD and *The Iron Triangle*, directed by Eric Weston (1989, USA: Eurobrothers, 2011), DVD.

<sup>92</sup> *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (1979, USA: United Artists, 2001), DVD.

Voice-over narration is also a hallmark of many crime fiction films, particularly those with hard-boiled detectives, which fit within the stylistic parameters of 'film noir.'<sup>93</sup> In such films, the detective is often a morally ambiguous yet charming individual who fights a lone battle against criminals, corrupt officials and businessmen and, more generally, the forces of evil at large. Through the voice-over narration, the audience follows the detective as he works through the mystery or crime of the film, expressing his thoughts about the failings of society in laconic, cynical and ironic language. In a classic of the genre that nevertheless subverts many stereotypes – Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)<sup>94</sup> – Joe Gillis is an unsuccessful screenwriter who narrates what happened in the lead up to his own death:

Come think of it, the whole place seemed to have been stricken with the kind of creeping paralysis...out of beat with the rest of the world...crumbling apart in slow motion. There was a tennis court...or rather the ghost of a tennis court...with faded markings and a sagging net...And of course she had a pool. Who didn't then? Mabel Norman and John Gilbert must have swum in it ten thousand midnights ago...It was empty now. Or was it?

This description of the murder scene in Joe's voice-over narration exhibits the clipped laconic sentences, the bleak and depressing cynicism, ambiguity and the ironic black humour that is synonymous with the cinematic portrayal of detectives in the American crime fiction genre.

Another group of genres that conspicuously employ voice-over narration are epics<sup>95</sup>, fantasy films and fairy tales,<sup>96</sup> and westerns.<sup>97</sup> As Kozloff explains:

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<sup>93</sup> Examples include *Laura*, directed by Otto Preminger (1944, USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2009), DVD; *Double Indemnity*, directed by Billy Wilder (1944, USA: Paramount Pictures, Universal Studios, 1998), DVD; *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (1982, USA: Warner Bros Pictures, 1997), DVD in its original theatrical cut, *The Big Lebowski*, directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen (1998, USA: Gramercy Pictures, 1998), DVD; and *The Usual Suspects*, directed by Bryan Singer (1995, USA: Spelling Films International, Gramercy Pictures, Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 1999), DVD.

<sup>94</sup> *Sunset Boulevard*, directed by Billy Wilder (1950, USA: Paramount Pictures, 2002), DVD.

<sup>95</sup> Examples include *Ben Hur*, directed by William Wyler (1959, USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2005), DVD; *Spartacus*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1960, USA: Universal Pictures, 2011.), DVD; *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, directed by Anthony Mann (1964, USA: Paramount Pictures, 2001), DVD and, more recently, *Troy*, directed by Wolfgang Petersen (2004, USA: Warner Bros Pictures, 2005), DVD.

<sup>96</sup> Examples include *Conan the Barbarian*, directed by John Milius (1982, USA: Universal Pictures, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2000), DVD; *The Princess Bride*, directed by Rob Reiner (1987, USA: MGM Studios, 1999), DVD; and most recently, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, directed by Rupert Sanders (2012, USA: Universal Pictures, 2012), DVD.

<sup>97</sup> Examples include *The Searchers*, directed by John Ford (1956, USA: Warner Bros Pictures, 1997), DVD; *How the West Was Won*, directed by John Ford (1962, USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2006), DVD; *Dances with*

In these genres filmmakers need to impart a great deal of expositional information or unify a story that ranges widely in time and space; narration accomplishes both tasks effortlessly. Furthermore, precisely because it is oral, voice-over can remind views of traditional storytellers, and so evoke the proper atmosphere for the legendary or pseudo-legendary subject matter.<sup>98</sup>

In Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001),<sup>99</sup> Cate Blanchett – in character as the elf queen Galadriel – narrates the film's prologue. It not only conveys a great deal of exposition by describing the history of Sauron's rings, it also helps establish the grand scale and inflated emotion of the scene:

A last alliance of Men and Elves marched against the armies of Mordor. On the slopes of Mount Doom they fought for the freedom of Middle- Earth... It was in this moment, when all hope had faded, that Isildur, son of the king, took up his father's sword.

Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007)<sup>100</sup> explores the nature of celebrity in the Wild West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. After the titular act has taken place, Robert Ford (Casey Affleck) attracts public opprobrium rather than the heroic notoriety he envisioned. At the end of the film he is himself assassinated and, in an ironic manner, the unnamed voice-over narrator 'historicises' his ignominious death and subsequent reputation in the poetic and legendary language of the frontier:

There would be no eulogies for Bob, no photographs of his body would be sold in sundries stores, no people would crowd the streets in the rain to see his funeral cortege, no biographies would be written about him, no children named after him, no one would ever pay twenty-five cents to stand in the rooms he grew up in. The shotgun would ignite, and Ella Mae would scream, but Robert Ford would only lay on the floor and look at the ceiling, the light going out of his eyes before he could find the right words.

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*Wolves*, directed by Kevin Costner (1990, USA: Orion Pictures, 2003), DVD and, more recently, *True Grit*, directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen (2010, USA: Paramount Pictures, 2011), DVD.

<sup>98</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 73.

<sup>99</sup> *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, directed by Peter Jackson (2001, New Zealand: New Line Cinema, 2002), DVD.

<sup>100</sup> *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, directed by Andrew Dominik (2007, USA: Warner Bros Pictures, 2008), DVD.

Finally, there are several films that use voice-over narration in a creative or unorthodox manner that challenge traditional modes of analysis. For instance, the narration may be or become unreliable, due to, among other things, a discrepancy between what the narrator says and what the audience sees and hears. This may occur because the audience is given different versions of events or different impressions from multiple characters in various pieces of voice-over narration.<sup>101</sup> Alternatively, sometimes the voice-over narrator is immature;<sup>102</sup> sometimes he or she suffers from a mental or psychological disorder.<sup>103</sup> In Martin Scorsese's film *Taxi Driver* (1976),<sup>104</sup> Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) becomes less and less attuned to what is happening around him. Early in the film his statements are coherent, have authority and realistically convey information:

The days go on and on [...] they don't end. All my life needed was a sense of someplace to go. I don't believe that one should devote his life to morbid self-attention...

However, as the film progresses, his statements becoming increasingly disorientated and unreliable, expressing his transformation into a frantic psychopath:

The idea had been growing in my brain for some time. True force. All the king's men cannot put it back together again.

Unreliability is not the only prism through which voice-over narration can be subversive and inventive. A film (originally transmitted on television) that makes a confronting use of voice-over narration is Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*,<sup>105</sup> which itself adapts the narration in Döblin's 1929 novel. The film employs insertions of text that are read aloud in voice-over narration that

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<sup>101</sup> This is used to particular effect in *Citizen Kane*, directed by Orson Welles (1941, USA: RKO Radio Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros, 2001), DVD; and *Rashomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa (1950, Japan: Daiei Film Co Ltd, RKO Radio Pictures, 2001), DVD.

<sup>102</sup> Holly (Sissey Spacek) in *Badlands*, directed by Terrence Malick (1973, USA: Warner Bros, 1999), DVD; being a good example of a narrator who is unreliable due to her young age, immaturity and impressionability.

<sup>103</sup> In *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher (1999, USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2000), DVD; Edward Norton (The Narrator) suffers from multiple personality disorder that renders his statements unreliable.

<sup>104</sup> *Taxi Driver*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1976, USA: Columbia Pictures, 1999), DVD.

<sup>105</sup> *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1980, West Germany: Teleculture, 2007), DVD.

feel artificial and in the process violates the aesthetic distance<sup>106</sup>. For instance, in the first episode there is a flashback to Fritz Bieberkopf (Günter Lamprecht) brutally beating and killing Ida (Barbara Valentin). Throughout this, the voice-over narration by Fassbinder himself – which confuses the distinction between the voice-over narrator and the implied author – is calm and clinical, creating juxtaposition with the violent action presented:

Was die Sekunde vorher mit der Brustkorb der Frauensperson geschehen war ging zusammen mit den Gesetzen von Starre und Elastizität, und Stoß und Widerstand. Es ist ohne Kenntnis diese Gesetze überhaupt nicht verständlich. Man wird folgende Formeln zu Hilfe nehmen: Das erste Newtonsche Gesetz, welches lautet: ein jeder Körper verharrt im Zustand der Ruhe, solange keine Kraftwirkung ihn veranlaßt, seinen Zustand zu ändern klammer auf, bezieht sich auf Ida's Rippen, klammer zu.

(What had happened to the woman's rib cage a second before has to do with the laws of rigidity and elasticity, impact and resistance. Without a knowledge of these laws, the case cannot be understood. The following formula may be applied: Newton's first law says that a body remains in a state of rest unless acted upon by an external force, open parentheses, which applies to Ida's ribs, closed parentheses).

Another film that famously has cryptic voice-over narration and upon which critics and academics have written extensively is Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).<sup>107</sup> The voice-over narration in the film sensitises the audience to how voice-over is being used, both in this film and in other films. Firstly, as a viewer one is acutely aware that the volume of the voice-over goes up and down, which draws attention to the mix levels and the sonic composition of the film. Secondly, much of what is said is repeated again and again, reinforcing the information being conveyed, yet also highlighting the information being conspicuously denied. Thirdly, the identity of the speaker is kept secret, forcing the audience to speculate on who it might be. Fourthly, there is a blurring between off-screen dialogue and voice-over, emphasising their similar characteristics. Finally, there is juxtaposition created through keeping the voice-

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<sup>106</sup> The term *Verfremdungseffekt* or distancing effect was famously coined by Bertolt Brecht to describe the violation of aesthetic distance in the theatre.

<sup>107</sup> *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* or *Last Year at Marienbad*, directed by Alan Resnais (1961, France/Italy: Fox Lorber, 1999), DVD.

over recording very flat, yet allowing the sound design to reflect the acoustic characteristics of the grand spaces through echoing and muffled talking from behind walls, highlighting the artificiality of the mixing process.

Voice-over narration is an important element in many films from different genres, from different countries, and from different periods of cinematic history. It is with knowledge of this broad context, as well as the varied uses and effects that this technique produces, that the voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon* must be assessed.

# IV

## **A Methodology for Analysing Voice-over Narration in *The White Ribbon***

Sarah Kozloff in *Invisible Storytellers* has devised the most complete methodology to date to analyse cinematic voice-over narration. She adapts Gérard Genette's structuralist discussion on narrative discourse to a cinematic context. Whilst a lot of what Kozloff has to say – particularly regarding the interplay between narration and images – is very useful, there are some limitations to her methodology. Her book's subtitle is 'voice-over narration in American fiction film', which means that she does not consider films made outside of the American studio system. This is not to say that the films Kozloff selects epitomise mainstream values and eschew any degree of inventiveness when it comes to voice-over; the opposite is the case. Rather, the issue lies in the fact that, by limiting her study to films from a single cultural context, national and historical concerns are marginalised. This then becomes important when discussing a film like *The White Ribbon* that is from a different cultural context and therefore has different national and historical concerns that need to be taken into account. Another limitation to Kozloff's work is that it is now nearly a quarter of a century old and only deals with films from 1944 to 1978. It is not untoward to consider that the cinema has developed in new directions in the last thirty years and that recent films utilise voice-over narration in new ways, according to new contextual concerns.

Cognisant that voice-over narration belongs to a long history of narration in many art forms, this thesis' methodology undertakes a step-by-step approach that is sensitive to the origins and nature of cinematic voice-over narration. However, devising a thorough revision to Kozloff's methodology would be

beyond the scope of this thesis, as it deals specifically with a single film, not a representative variety. What the thesis can do, however, is draw attention to how *The White Ribbon* utilises voice-over narration in an interesting way. Few studies have looked at how voice-over narration can be used in conjunction with a specific historical and cultural context to facilitate the depiction of the past in cinema.

This methodology has four different parts. The first three discuss how to analyse the voice-over narration in isolation from the rest of the film. They focus on the general characteristics of the narration, the aural or sound aspects of the narration and the textual aspects of the narration. The final and longest part looks at how the voice-over interacts with the rest of the film. Small details of the voice-over narration (for example, the grammatical form of the language or the vocal characteristics of the speaker) tend to be overlooked in the 'visual' cinematic medium and it is hoped that analysing the voice-over in an environment quarantined from the visual track in the first three sections will remedy this situation. Isolating the voice-over element of the film will also more readily allow insights from other media (primarily literature but also theatre and radio) to be utilised. This methodology will also follow the development of the narrative art form from oral stories (the sound of the narration) and written accounts (the text of the narration) to its unique position as voice-over narration in cinema.

## **Characterising the Narrator**

The narrator and voice-over narration can be characterised according to a series of different definitions. The first question is: Is the narrator a first-person or a third-person narrator? Although this definition is "imprecise and misleading"<sup>1</sup> for a variety of reasons, it provides an initial and most basic distinction regarding

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 42.

the narrator's perspective. This leads to the next question, Genette's refinement of the 'person' question: Is the narrator heterodiegetic or homodiegetic? The former refers to a narrator absent from the story he tells (Homer in the Iliad) and the latter to a narrator present as a character in the story he or she tells (Huckleberry Finn).<sup>2</sup> An interesting effect occurs when there is a degree of temporal distance between the character and the homodiegetic narrator. Due to formative experiences or changes of opinion in the intervening time period, a narrator may regard his or her former self with shame, criticism, irony or reflection.

Another distinction that can be applied, but which is limited in use, is that between the protagonist-narrator and the witness-narrator, similar in substance to what Vogt identifies as the 'erlebendem Ich' and the 'erzählendem Ich':

Grammatisch verdeckt der durchgängige Gebrauch der Ersten Person Singular die Tatsache, daß zwei verschiedene Ich-Instanzen auftreten: Ein "Ich," das einst gewisse Ereignisse erlebte, und ein anderes das sie nach mehr oder weniger langer Zeit erzählt.

(The use of the first person singular grammatically hides the fact that two different I-instances appear: An "I" that experiences events, and another that relates the events after a more or less longer time).<sup>3</sup>

According to Genette, when speaking of literary narrative any narrator can be categorised as either a protagonist or a witness, but not both at the same time. Speaking of Zeitblom in *Doctor Faustus* as a witness narrator, Genette says:

...it is as if their role of narrator and their function – as narrator – of setting off the hero tended to eclipse their own behaviour or, more exactly, to make it, and their own character along with it, transparent.<sup>4</sup>

In cinema, however, the distinction between a character voice-over narrator's narrative function – the voice-over narration itself - and their character function – their presence as an entity in the dramatic action of the film - seems far clearer.

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<sup>2</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E Lewin (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1980), 244.

<sup>3</sup> Jochen Vogt, *Aspekte erzählender Prosa*, (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E Lewin (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1988), 102.

Both functions can exist independently and the distinction between protagonist and witness narrators is far less relevant.<sup>5</sup> What the narrator says in the voice-over and what the individual says in dialogue are different enunciations from different levels of the diegesis.<sup>6</sup> The voice-over narrator and character are more readily defined than they would be in a novel, where the narrative is transmitted solely through written text, often mediated through a singular voice. However, one needs to be careful, as in rare instances a cinematic narrator may similarly control the rest of the narrative and muddy the waters between the narrator and the character (as in the famous flashback in *Stage Fright*), however this does not occur as often as in literature.<sup>7</sup>

The next question concerns the 'narrative level' from which the narrator speaks. Genette explains this as follows:

Any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed.<sup>8</sup>

So if a narrator relates a story, the story related is one level higher than the narrator relating the story. Kozloff utilises this to clarify the distinction between a framing and an embedded narrator. A framing narrator frames the entire story (Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*) whereas an embedded narrator tells a story-within-a-story (Scheherzade in *The Arabian Nights*). In Kozloff's opinion all cinematic voice-over narrators are embedded, as they are one level higher than the implied author, the source of the diegesis.<sup>9</sup> Even so, viewers often embrace the narrator as the principal storyteller, ignoring the narrative reality.<sup>10</sup> Such a belief is facilitated by several techniques. Firstly, how does the film imply that the story originates from the narrator? Is the narrator shown in the act of narration, does the narrator tell the audience explicitly that it is his or her story, or are conventional film techniques employed, such as dissolve transitions,

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding cinematic voice-over character narrators, the question is more along the lines of whether one could define their character as either more active or more passive.

<sup>6</sup> Diegesis is synonymous with the fictional world of the story – see Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Literary character narrators may not control or mediate the entirety of a diegesis either. In Ismail Kadare, *Chronicle in Stone*, trans., Arshi Pipa (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2007) a young boy's eyewitness account of wartime Albania is interspersed with fragments of newspaper reports and official proclamations. At no stage is reference made to the fragments by the narrator.

<sup>8</sup> Genette *Narrative Discourse*, 228.

<sup>9</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

zooming in on the narrator's face, dreamy music? Additionally, what is the degree of coordination between what the audience is told and what is represented in the film? Finally, how frequently does the narrator narrate? Therefore, the important question is not whether a narrator is framing or embedded but rather whether the impression is created of a framing or an embedded narrator. Further to this, Kozloff stresses that a distinction should be drawn between embedded narrators whose story is nearly the entire film – with only a slender frame of titles and credits for example – and narrators who just recount a dream or an event in flashback. The latter she refers to as 'micro-narrators' who provide an isolated interlude, rather than the former who mediate much of the story.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Narrator's Voice**

In the second part of the methodology the focus is on the sound of the narrator and what the audience hears. What characteristics of the narrator can we learn from the voice – the gender, the age? Does the narrator speak quickly and with an impatient tone or rather speak slowly in a considered and reflective manner? What overall impression is instilled in the mind of the audience? Additionally, does the narrator's voice conform to Chion's definition of the 'I-voice', the normal vocal characteristics of voice-over narrators? To do so, it must "solicit the spectator's identification"<sup>12</sup> as well as "avoid that which designates it as a tangible object."<sup>13</sup> This involves two specific technical criteria that are also utilised on the radio. The first is close miking, with its interrelated audio qualities of vocal presence and definition. The narrator's intimate voice feels right nearby, as if he or she is speaking directly to the audience. Regardless of what happens in the film, whether there is background noise, characters are shouting or music is swelling, the voice-over narration remains clear and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 51.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 53.

perceivable, above the sonic variety of the rest of the film. The second criterion is dryness or absence of reverberation in the voice. If a voice reverberates, it immediately becomes apparent that the voice inhabits a concrete identifiable space, whereas “it must be its own space unto itself.”<sup>14</sup> The closeness of the voice comes from it being everywhere at once, a warm enveloping glow situated in the indiscriminate foreground, rather than being projected like public oratory.

### **What the Narrator Says**

The third part of this methodology deals with the content of the voice-over narration. Firstly, this involves considering the grammar and language used. Does the narrator speak in the present or the past tense? Does he or she use strange syntax? Is the language descriptive, with an abundant use of adjectives and adverbs, or rather terse and abrupt? Secondly, what does the narrator talk about? Is it self-contained and able to be understood on its own, without accompanying imagery or scenes? Or is it a direct commentary on things that are being simultaneously shown? Is what the narrator says repetitive? Are the statements vague, unclear or uncertain? Thirdly, does the narrator speak a lot? Does he or she tend to talk for extended passages or just in brief statements? How many times does the narrator interject and how often does this occur? Kozloff understates the importance of this aspect when she says that “frequency of narration per se does not make that much difference.”<sup>15</sup> A film with constant voice-over changes the focus back onto the narrator, an effect not created if a film briskly introduces a narrator at the start who may well then be ignored up until the very end. Finally, does the narrator mention that he or she is speaking to a specific audience? If so, this contextualises the comments and draws out the speaker’s underlying motivation.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>15</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 45.

## How the Voice-over Narration Interacts with the Rest of the Film

Kozloff gives a list of the constituent parts of the film that the voice-over interacts with, enumerating “dramatic activity, camera position and movement, lighting, scenery, properties, dialogue and music,”<sup>16</sup> to which it is necessary to add sound, special effects and the use of colour and black and white. Generally, voice-over narration is seen as asynchronous in relation to the images presented, as it cuts across editing and seems physically layered on top of the dialogue and sound. Discarding such a simplified analysis, Kozloff envisages a spectrum from overlapping narration and images, through complementary narration and images, to disparate narration and images.<sup>17</sup> Starting at one extreme is a situation where a voice speaks what is simultaneously written as text on the screen. More generally, overlapping is used to emphasise particular elements or messages and to heighten the audience’s awareness of the filmmaker’s control. Complementary narration is where the narration informs the images or the images illuminate the narration by presenting information “not accessible, or not highlighted, in its companion.”<sup>18</sup> In such a case, there is a “general harmony between the words, the tone of voice, the attitude of the narrator, the style of the images, and the mood of the music.”<sup>19</sup> Finally, disparate narrative situations are those where there are contradictions between what is said by the voice-over narrator and what is detailed in the rest of the film. This creates a certain degree of ironic distance that can be used to comedic effect through understatement, overstatement or general irony<sup>20</sup> or it can be used to undermine the narrator’s unreliability.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>20</sup> Understatement would be where a voice-over narrator calls a palatial residence “cosy,” with the inverse, where a voice-over narrator describes a small cottage as “palatial,” being an example of overstatement. A good example of general irony can be found in *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes (1999, USA: DreamWorks Pictures, 2002), DVD when Carolyn Burnham (Annette Benning) is shown, prim and proper and immaculately dressed, tending her rose garden. The voice-over narration by her husband Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) makes light of this serious image by saying “That’s my wife Carolyn. See the way the handle on those pruning shears matches her gardening clogs? That’s not an accident.”

When the film and voice-over narration convey disparate information, it can undermine the authority of the voice-over narrator. There are different ways of conceptualising the voice-over narrator's failings. One way is to draw a distinction between unreliability by action and unreliability by omission; on the one hand narrators who spread misinformation and on the other hand narrators who are silent and fail to convey the correct information. This distinction lies at the heart of Phelan and Martin's six types of unreliability – misreporting, misreading, misregarding, underreporting, underreading and underregarding.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, one can emphasise where the narrator's misperceptions are coming from. Is the narrator making misperceptions due to external circumstances or misperceptions due to their internal characteristics: are they fallible or untrustworthy?<sup>22</sup> Bordwell's theory can be adapted to look specifically at the characteristics of the voice-over narrator, specifically their knowledge, self-consciousness and communicativeness.<sup>23</sup> The range of knowledge available to a narrator and the extent of its objectivity is a likely indicator for unreliability if the range is limited and the information is more subjective. Similarly, self-consciousness or awareness of an audience can affect the narrator's intention and hence their trustworthiness. Finally, reliability can also be assessed on how forthcoming a voice-over narrator is. His or her communicativeness can therefore influence the viewer's opinion of his or her frankness and willingness to convey information. Additionally, when considering unreliability one can include reference to contextual concerns such as the context of a film's production and the context of the film's reception. This accords with Zerweck's belief that unreliable narration is "culturally and historically variable."<sup>24</sup> Finally, it is important to mention that unreliability as a characteristic can only be assessed across a whole film, as a small piece of information can drastically alter all the information that has come before or that will come after.

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<sup>21</sup> James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin, "The Lessons of 'Weymouth:' Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics and *The Remains of the Day*" in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, eds., David Herman (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 88-109.

<sup>22</sup> Greta Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators," *Narrative* 11(1) (January 2003): 102.

<sup>23</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985), 58.

<sup>24</sup> Bruno Zerweck, "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction," *Style* 35(1) (2001): 151.

Voice-over may not be used evenly throughout a given film, nor is it often confined to a specific scene, as voice-over often acts as a bridging technique, connecting disparate information and scene changes. Even within a given scene, the nature of the voice-over can change dramatically and quickly, from overlapping to disparate, from poetic and nostalgic language to a dry description of facts. This presents distinct problems for any analysis of voice-over narration across a whole film. If one focuses on isolated scenes, then specific techniques and effects can be grouped together, and patterns, repetitions and differences more readily grasped. The problem with this approach is that it can seem piecemeal and choppy, with each scene ripped out of the surrounding context. Alternatively, if one follows the film chronologically, then the flow of the voice-over narration can be better appreciated. The problem arises, however, that the analysis is beholden to the film's structure that, by presenting techniques and examples in the chronological order in which they appear, may not convey the information in a particularly clear manner.

This thesis will adopt a hybrid approach. Firstly, several aspects of the film and its voice-over narration will be discussed, grouped under the appropriate headings. Firstly, the frequency of the voice-over narration will be considered. Thereafter, three sections will discuss the voice-over narration in isolation from the rest of the film, looking at the characteristics of the narrator, the voice of the narrator and the content of what he says. Then, the voice-over narration's interaction with three technical elements of the film will be explored: the use of sound, the use of visual effects and the use of editing. The analysis will then consider examples where the voice-over narration is overlapping or complementary with the rest of the film, followed by examples where the voice-over narration is disparate. After this, a section will then specifically detail the effect of the voice-over narration on the character of the Teacher. Four detailed scene analyses will then bring all these different elements together. A final section will then discuss the question of the voice-over narrator's possible unreliability.

# V

## Voice-over Narration in *The White Ribbon*

### Frequency of the Narration

The following table (see below) shows the rough breakdown of the film into voice-over narration and scenes. Of course, the voice-over narration is normally layered across multiple scenes, which is more difficult to convey in a table. What the table does show is that the narrator speaks at least every fourth or fifth scene, and on quite a few occasions two instances of narration sandwich a single scene. More often than not, the voice-over narration begins during a scene in which the Teacher is not present and leads in to a scene in which he is present. This is especially the case if one ignores short interjections – such as a line of dialogue or a short scene, which are both shaded light grey in the table – and instead considers the pieces of voice-over narration either side of such an interjection as constituent parts of a whole. As is clearly evident in the table, the narrator speaks not only often (in quantity) but also frequently (in short intervals). The audience is constantly reminded of the narrator's presence, which, as has been previously mentioned, heightens the association of the narrator with the broader narrative and increases the likelihood of the audience assuming the voice-over narrator to be the principal storyteller of the film.

<u>Location</u>	<u>Characters Present</u>
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Village Street	Martin, Klara, Midwife, Students, Teacher
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Doctor's House	Anna, Rudolph, Klara, Child
Scene of the Doctor's Accident	Baron, Steward
Music Room, Baron's Estate	Tutor, Baroness, Sigi
Pastor's House	Pastor's family (Pastor, Wife, Klara, Martin, other children)
Scene of Doctor's Accident	Policemen, Anna, Midwife
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Farmer's Bedroom	Farmer, Women cleaning his deceased wife's body
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Woodland Stream	Teacher, Martin
Sawmill	Farmer's Son, Sawmill worker
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Village Street	Teacher, Eva
Doctor's House	Anna, Rudolph
Pastor's House	Pastor's Wife, Martin
Farmer's House	Farmer's Son
Steward's House	Midwife, Steward's daughter, Steward's son
Farmer's Field	Farmer, Farmer's eldest son
<b>Voice-over (Harvest Festival)</b>	
Baron's Manor	Entire Village
Pastor's Study	Pastor, Pastor's son
Farmer's House	Farmer's Family

Baron's Manor	Baron, Tutor
Outside Baron's Manor	Baron, Steward
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Church	Entire Village
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Schoolroom	Teacher, Eva
Farmer's Stall	Farmer, Eldest Son
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Doctor's House	Doctor, Anna, Rudolph
Pastor's Study	Pastor, Martin
Doctor's House	Doctor, Midwife
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Steward's House	Doctor, Steward's Family
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Eva's Parents' House	Teacher, Eva's Family
Pastor's House	Pastor's Family
Doctor's House	Doctor, Midwife
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Pastor's House	Pastor's Family
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Baron's Manor	Baron's Family, Italian Nanny
Schoolroom	Children, Teacher, Pastor
Doctor's House	Doctor, Anna, Rudolph
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Steward's House	Teacher, Erna
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Country Road	Teacher, Eva
Church	Entire Village

Woods, at night	Search party
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Schoolroom	Teacher, Erna, Policemen
Midwife's House	Doctor, Midwife, Karl
Pastor's Study	Pastor, Pastor's son
Lake	Sigi, Steward's sons
Steward's House	Steward's Family
Baron's Manor	Baron, Baroness
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Village Street	Teacher, Midwife
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Doctor's House	Teacher, Children
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Doctor's House	Teacher, Children
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Pastor's House	Teacher, Pastor's Wife, Klara, Martin, Pastor
<b>Voice-over</b>	
Doctor's House	Teacher, Steward
<b>Voice-over (Church)</b>	

### **The Figure of the Narrator**

From the outset, with the comment that “I don’t know if the story I want to tell you is entirely true,” the audience is confronted with a first-person narrator. This is a common form of voice-over for fiction films, especially in literary adaptations or, in the case of *The White Ribbon*, a film that emulates a literary style. The use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ accentuates that the voice-over narration emanates

not from a disembodied voice but from an individuated person. Such a naturalisation of the source of the narrative is but one of the elements that this style of narration effects: it increases identification with the character of the narration; can prompt elements of nostalgia; but also brings with it an instinctive assumption of subjectivity in perception and storytelling.<sup>1</sup>

However, the more telling question concerns whether the narrator is homo- or heterodiegetic. The narrator of *The White Ribbon* is the former, being a character present in the story he tells. After the Doctor's riding accident, which opens the film, the Midwife picks up her son Karl from the schoolhouse. The other students are departing, saying "Guten Tag Herr Lehrer" (Good day Sir) to the teacher. Immediately afterwards the narrator states:

If I remember rightly, it seemed odd to me that the children with Klara, instead of scattering after school to their homes, headed together to the outskirts of the village.

With this, the audience becomes aware for the first time that the narrator and the Teacher are the same person. This is made explicit a few scenes later, when the narrator says he had "a strange encounter" whilst fishing. We are simultaneously shown the Teacher with a wooden rod, crouching alongside a small woodland stream, placing a captured fish in a net.

Whilst they are instances of same person and inhabit the same world, the Teacher and the narrator are two distinct entities, separated by a temporal distance of many years. This is made unambiguously clear in the final credits, where Christian Friedel is credited as "Lehrer" (Teacher) and Ernst Jacobi is credited as "Die Stimme des alten Lehrers (Erzähler)" (The voice of the old Teacher (Narrator)). Whilst Jacobi lends his voice to the voice-over narration, his character of the elderly Teacher exists only as a voice and does not take on physical form in the film. It is through their plainly distinct voices that Jacobi and Friedel distinguish the two narrative elements that they personify: the character and the voice-over narrator, each from different levels of the diegesis. Because the voice-over narrator's comments are not instantaneous reactions to what is

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 41

occurring but rather considered statements with the benefit of hindsight, it is open to him to regard his former self and the story he tells with criticism, irony or reflection. What is intriguing about *The White Ribbon* is how little the narrator chooses to make use of this possibility. Outside of a few specific instances, such as the opening – “After so many years, a lot of it [the story] is still obscure and many questions remain unanswered” – and the ending – “now everything was going to change” – the narrator’s comments actively disavow self-reflexivity, direct irony or criticism and instead opt for neutral description, such as in the following example:

Shortly after Easter, in the last week of April, the Baroness came back with the children. She was accompanied by a new nanny. My secret hope that Eva could come back here was definitely dashed. The new nanny was an Italian woman who came from the area on the Mediterranean coast where the Baroness had spent the winter.

The first, second and fourth sentences are pure description, without any direct comment, value judgments or opinion added. The third sentence, detailing the teacher’s innermost thoughts, is likewise a statement of what the teacher was feeling at that moment in time. Nothing expresses how the narrator’s view has altered in the intervening years and hence no effort is made to reflect the temporal gap.

The narrator in *The White Ribbon* is characteristic of both Genette’s protagonist-narrator and witness-narrator at different points in the story. When the Teacher is present in the foreground of a scene with voice-over narration, the voice-over narration reflects a protagonist-narrator: “It was on my way home, after that strange encounter with Martin, that I first met Eva.” In such scenes, the Teacher as a character is not rendered transparent by the voice-over narration, with his behaviour and actions remaining centre stage. This is in contrast to scenes where he is either not present or else simply one of many in a scene of village life. Here the voice-over is that of a witness-narrator, such as after the Baron’s speech in the church:

The landowner's speech frightened the locals. The Baron wasn't popular, but as a powerful figure and employer of half the village, he was respected. His

statement on the community's peace was ominous. And the mysterious character of these criminal deeds awakened the old mistrust of the farmers.

The voice-over narration thus reflects the Teacher's dual nature as a character in the film: sometimes as a protagonist of the story; and sometimes as a witness of events. At times he actively drives the story forward, such as in his courtship of Eva, yet at other times he passively plays catch-up to the events happening around him. This is most notable in the Teacher's inability to solve the various crimes committed in the village and his confinement to a role where he is constantly reacting to both the violent events and the actions of the more important and more powerful members of the community, such as the Baron, the Pastor and the Steward.

In terms of narrative structure, *The White Ribbon* operates on three distinct levels. The highest diegetic level, according to Genette's theory, is the events directly recounted by the narrative, namely the snapshot presented of the village of Eichwald in 1913/4. The second level is the voice-over narration, from a later, probably postwar context. It acts as a mediator between the rest of the film and the audience, providing commentary and interpretation. The voice-over narration begins before any images have been shown at the start of the film and in the final scene explains events that occur after the end of the film's narrative. On top of the voice-over narration is placed the non-diegetic role of the implied author, under whose purview fall such things as the editing, camera angles and the credits. What this means is that the elderly Teacher, by starting and closing the film with voice-over narration, effectively frames the dramatic scenes of the film, but is himself embedded in the broader filmic narrative, which includes the film's credits.

A further question, which can only be sketched briefly at this initial stage, is whether the voice-over narrator's portrayal invites the audience to see him, rather than the implied author, as the principal storyteller.<sup>2</sup> Do the scenes between the inhabitants of Eichwald emanate directly from the memories of the elderly Teacher? Whilst the audience is never specifically shown the narrator in the act of narration, he does tell the audience at the outset that this is his story: "I

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 45..

don't know if the story I want to tell you is entirely true." Additionally, the prolonged fade-in and fade-out at the start and end of the film can be interpreted as the narrator slowly awakening his memories and then drifting away again from his past.<sup>3</sup> With regards to the frequency of the narration, the narrator in *The White Ribbon* speaks on at least twenty-two separate occasions,<sup>4</sup> normally for at least a few sentences at a time. This means that his presence as a narrative source in the film is constantly reinforced in the audience's mind, with the voice-over narration doing a large share of the exposition. What remains uncertain however is the degree of coordination between what the narrator tells the audience and what the audience sees and hears in the rest of the film. Only with an understanding of this element can an answer be posited about whether the voice-over narrator is presented as the source of the narrative.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Voice of the Narrator**

The first sound the audience hears in *The White Ribbon* is the narrator's voice over a black screen. One can assume two important pieces of information: the narrator is male and the narrator is old. The latter is an intuitive assumption based on the timbre of the voice, with its deep quaver in the throat and husky quality, characteristic of old age. The sound of the voice remains distinct throughout, never wavering off into nothingness and never ending mid-sentence. The narrator speaks quite quickly, yet enunciates his words clearly. Whilst one needs to pay attention to catch all the detail, the narrator's voice remains pleasant to listen to. Although speaking at a fast rate, one never gets the impression that the narrator is impatient; in fact the opposite is the case, with

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<sup>3</sup> See Garrett Stewart, "Pre-War Trauma: Haneke's *The White Ribbon*," *Film Quarterly* 63(4) (Summer 2010): 47, "the film whose opening shot seems dredged up, as if dimly and resistantly, from the black back-ground of memory, speculation, and denial ends symmetrically in a literal foreshadowing, dissolving separate perplexities into national disgrace, the baffling into the unspeakable."

<sup>4</sup> Coming to such a figure involves a degree of estimation, as there are a few examples where the voice-over is briefly intercut with a line of dialogue from one of the characters. If one considers the interjection of a line of dialogue to designate a new piece of voice-over narration, then the number is higher than twenty-two.

<sup>5</sup> The degree of coordination between the voice-over narration and the rest of the film will be analysed later in this chapter.

the voice sounding both considered and reflective. The fast and deliberate pace makes what he is saying sound nearly as if it has been learnt off by heart or as if the narrator is reading off a piece of paper. In terms of overall effect, it sounds as if the narrator is intimately related to what he is saying, perhaps through having relived his memories so many times over so many years.

Following Chion's definition of the normal vocal characteristics of voice-over narration,<sup>6</sup> the narrator in *The White Ribbon* captures the audience's attention, yet avoids being tied down to a physical object. The voice is direct and authoritative, whilst at the same time remaining abstract and intangible. This result is created through close miking and a lack of reverberation. Whenever the elderly Teacher speaks, it is as if he is just nearby, with everything he is saying being directed squarely at the audience. There is no background noise in the voice-over narration, we hear only one man's voice. This voice is layered over the top of the rest of the film. When he is speaking, it is the other sounds that make way and go quiet for his voice, which remains at the same volume level and retains the same vocal characteristics throughout. Due to the lack of reverberation in the narrator's voice, we do not know anything about the physical space that he inhabits as he is talking. Because of this, not only does the audience never see the elderly Teacher, the audience is given no identifiable markers as to where the voice emanates from. The narrator thus feels at once incredibly close and warm, whilst retaining a degree of aloofness and distance through his consistently neutral delivery.

### **What the Narrator Says**

Because the voice-over narration is in the past tense, it is clear from the outset that the narrator is speaking from a later temporal context and reflecting on events in his past. The syntax used is orthodox and the words and expressions of

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 51.

the voice-over narration are easy to understand, as the narrator often uses short, somewhat terse sentences and clauses. For the most part, the language used is high in detail and very functional, yet not overly colourful or poetic. A good example of this functionality can be found in the following extract:

The steward's children said they'd only seen Sigi very briefly, that he'd gone off with other children. They didn't pay much attention to it. The search began shortly after midnight. The searchers, tired, some still drunk, split up into two groups: one searched all the buildings on the estate, the other combed the countryside. Around 2:30am, the siren sounded again, calling the men back to the estate. Sigi had been found.

However, there is a marked difference when the subject changes to Eva, the object of the Teacher's affection. The language is at once more personal and more emotional:

Since the night she came to shelter in the school, when until dawn, we told each other the story of our short lives, her pale face, her shy but frank personality, were constantly on my mind.

The subject of the Teacher's narration is a chronological recount of events in the village of Eichwald in 1913 and 1914. The only exceptions to this are at the beginning, where he briefly makes reference to his status as narrator and reflects on the entirety of the story he is about to tell, and the end, where he selectively details what happened to him after 1914. The voice-over narration's most obvious role therefore is to express detailed expository information. However, these statements by the narrator, in and of themselves, only tell an incomplete story, as the voice-over narration is only coherent within the context of the film. For example, the voice-over narrator tells the audience, near the beginning of the film: "On the same day, I had a strange encounter." Shortly thereafter, the voice-over narrator says "It was on my way home, after that strange encounter with Martin, that I first met Eva." Were the audience not shown the "strange encounter with Martin" in a scene sandwiched between the narrator's two statements, there would be an obvious and inexplicable hole in the voice-over narration.

At this stage it is important to detail two recurrent motifs in the narration that occur time and again throughout the film. The first is a constant reference to temporal detail that seeks to situate the narrator's comments and scenes in the film at a certain time. The narration is replete with statements such as "the day after the doctor's accident," "on the same day," "next Sunday, after the service," "the next day, after school" and "a few days after Klara's fainting fit" that seek to contextualise one event in light of a preceding event. The narration is therefore able not only to aid in the structuring of the film – making the sequence of events temporally more coherent to the audience – but also on occasion to provide a smooth transition between scenes. The narration also makes constant reference to measures of time not only based on everyday events in Eichwald, but also on the months, holidays and seasons. Phrases such as "after those two days in July," "until the end of summer," "for Reformation Day, on the first Sunday of November," "snow came early that year," "in mid-December," "the day after Christmas," "shortly after Easter, in the last week of April," "on the eve of Whitsun," "on July 28<sup>th</sup>" and "on Saturday, August 1<sup>st</sup>" situate the film in the more objective timeframe of times of the year.<sup>7</sup> Time is marked therefore according to both religious holidays and Arcadian statements about the changing of the seasons, highlighting the dominance to village life of both the church (and by extension the Pastor) and rural agriculture (and by extension the Baron who is the majority landowner). The voice-over narration at the start of the film details the Doctor's 'accident' in July and ends nearly a year to a day later, just after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, 1914, the news of which "spread around the village like wildfire" according to the elderly Teacher. The assassination is the only reference to an external event that precisely dates the film, as the narrator's previous comments contextualised events only within village life during a year, not the specific year from the middle of 1913 to the middle of 1914.

Another important recurrent pattern in the voice-over is the constant references made by the voice-over narrator to the collective feelings and opinions of the village. The audience is told "life in the village got back to normal"

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<sup>7</sup> This is similar to the use of seasonal markers to designate chapters in a book or scenes in classical English plays.

“until...the harvest festival reunited the whole village, first in a joyful mood, then in horror and perplexity.” Later, that the “landowner’s speech frightened the locals,” that the disappearance of Rudolph “upset everyone,” that the Baron’s absence in church was taken by the villagers “as a sign of anger,” or that “we thought of ourselves as united in the belief that life in our community was God’s will, and worth living.” These comments allow the voice-over narration to assume a privileged position: on the one hand to assert authority as the voice of the village, yet at the same time absolve his own individual responsibility. As the only entity consciously aware of an audience, he can presume to speak for the characters in the film, his younger self included, with his voice-over statements literally talking over the characters’ dialogue. Equally, his statements make clear the primacy of a village group mentality that subsumes individual identity. Whereas the narration gives a surfeit of intricate detail about the time and place of events, often the narrator does not detail his own opinion but hides behind vague generalisations. It is therefore a seismic shift when he says “I never saw any of the villagers again.” Severing his connection to that close-knit society, this is where the film ends, as his own individual exploits in the intervening years – no longer within the protective yet murky moral greyness of Eichwald – are not divulged.

### **Voice-over Narration and the Use of Sound**

After ninety seconds of silent credits, a voice begins to speak. It commands the audience’s attention as the first sound heard in the film, absent any competing visual or aural stimuli. Slowly, other sounds are heard, sounds of nature, sounds of the summer meadow not yet seen: buzzing insects, running water, chirping birds. This textured soundscape, this foregrounded voice-over narration, this extended visual blackout; all are heralds of things to come in *The White Ribbon*, a film where important information will often be expressed sonically.

The interaction between dialogue, narration and sound design is layered in a complex manner, presenting a tableau of information that may reinforce a certain mood or moment or undermine a previous statement and in the process challenge a previous emotional response. When the village children depart the schoolroom at the start of the film, the hubbub of many voices and direct, fast-paced, accusatory dialogue dies down. All that remains is the rhythmic sound of the children's feet on the gravelly road and the buzzing of insects and the chirping of birds. Placed over this is one of the narrator's shortest pieces of narration: "If I remember rightly, it seemed odd to me that the children with Klara, instead of scattering after school to their homes, headed together to the outskirts of the village."

A few scenes later the narrator speaks again, over the image of two women cleaning a corpse, visually unidentifiable and only visible from the waist down: "The wife of a tenant farmer died in a work accident. The woman, who had an injured arm, was discharged by the Steward from harvesting duties and assigned to lighter work in the sawmill." Throughout this narration, the sound of the older woman scrubbing down the skin of the deceased woman can clearly be heard; a reminder of the tactile, corporeal reality of death that continues to be heard once the narrator stops. The woman then says "Stay outside, I'm not done" to a figure only visible as a shadow to the left of frame. A male voice, emanating from the shadow then says "You get out." Once the woman stops scrubbing we see that the corpse is naked, with pubic hair visible, and that numerous flies are flittering about the room. Only now are we given visual confirmation of what our ears have already perceived: the immediate physicality of death. After the woman leaves, the Farmer walks into frame and touchingly adjusts the dress now covering his wife's body. He sits down, half out of shot, and can be heard sobbing, but his remains invisible to the audience. Like later scenes where the Steward, in a fit of anger, whips his son or where the cold and calculating Pastor canes Martin, violence and any expression of strong emotion is heard but not seen. At once a confirmation of the emotional impact of sonic expression, this technique also embodies the broader trend of information suppression in the

film, asking the audience to engage with and extend the incomplete information they are given, in this case by putting a visual image to Farmer's stifled sobbing.

When the Pastor and Teacher walk in on an unruly classroom the children's noisy and undisciplined behaviour produces an angry reaction from the Pastor; his public ear-pinching and vocal berating of Klara in turn causes her to faint from stress. From this scene where emotion, violence and repression are shown visually yet find their most affective expression through sound, there is a quick transition to a scene where visual depiction is conspicuously denied. The audience experiences, from young Rudolph's perspective, the Doctor's sexual abuse of Anna. After long continuous shots of Rudolph walking through the dark, deserted rooms, plaintively calling for his sister, we hear the sexual activity between father and daughter. One of the worst transgressions depicted in the film is only glimpsed through its aftermath: in this case the compromising position and the disingenuous cover-up story with its horrific sexualised imagery. Anna says she is getting her ears re-pierced, but that the holes have closed up so it is painful, and this is all filtered through Rudolph's immature incomprehension. It is at this point that the voice-over narrator interjects, completely unaware of this abuse and more concerned with other things: "A few days after Klara's fainting fit, that frightened us all, and left her feverish and weakened, I went to see the steward, on the eve of Whitsun to borrow the carriage again."

The interaction between various sound elements and the voice-over narration often is used to foreshadow future events. At the start of the film, through an extended fade-in, a scene becomes visible, fitting with the sounds of a summer meadow that have been heard over black for the past several seconds. Just as we hear the sounds of untrammelled nature in summertime before it was shown visually, so too were we told that "it all began, I think, with the doctor's riding accident"; in this case well before witnessing the doctor falling from his horse. Over the next twenty seconds, the audience sees the Doctor approaching and awaits the inevitable. This idea of powerlessness against the inevitability iterated by the voice-over narrator resurfaces again at the end of the film. When war breaks out, once again it will be the narrator who is the harbinger of doom:

in his own words, “now everything was going to change.” This use of foreshadowing also creates dramatic tension. The narrator alludes to the death of the farmer’s wife when he says:

The day after the doctor’s accident brought no solution to the mystery. Then a second far more tragic accident almost made people forget the previous one.

A scene change presents an image of the direct consequences of the second ‘accident’ foreshadowed in the voice-over narration: in a dark shabby interior, two women clean a corpse, with the scrubbing of the skin clearly audible. Likewise, the voice-over narrator also forewarns the audience about the destruction of the cabbage crop when he says, over the villagers’ celebrations with the sound of accordions, cheering and clapping, that “the harvest festival reunited the whole village, first in a joyful mood, then in horror and perplexity.”

### **Voice-over Narration and the Use of Visual Effects**

The Midwife and her son Karl walk off into the distance, followed by the Policeman. The camera shot remains motionless, the characters walking further and further away, as the voice-over narrator speaks: “The day after the doctor’s accident brought no solution to the mystery. Then a second far more tragic accident almost made people forget the previous one.” After a brief scene in the dark and dank rotting sawmill there is a scene change to the bright, open street. The editing cut is accompanied by the narrator’s voice: “It was on my way home, after that strange encounter with Martin, that I first met Eva.” Concurrently with this statement, we see Eva approach on a bicycle, with the camera remaining stationary throughout. The film often employs a stationary camera during shots where a person or object is either approaching or retreating from the camera, and such a shot is always accompanied by voice-over narration. The very first scene of the film, with the Doctor approaching on his horse, destined to fall, is another example. Once Eva approaches on her bicycle, the audience is witness to

a naïve, bumbling, yet somehow beguiling conversation between Eva and the Teacher, audible over the constant sound of birdsong. The scene ends with Eva riding off into the distance, once again with a fixed camera shot, the sound of the bicycle on the gravel loud and foregrounded. Such scenes as these are evidence of *The White Ribbon's* repeated use of certain visual film techniques, accompanied by a conspicuous use of voice-over narration.

Snowflakes gently fall silently outside the church. The setting is familiar; the audience has seen it before. In summer, the villagers were in vigorous discussion in exactly the same spot after the Baron's speech. On both occasions, the voice-over narrator speaks. The use of identical camera angles at different times of the day – during sunlight and at night – and at different times of the year – in summer and in winter – not only emphasises the passage of time, but also draws attention to the change in mood. Where the previous scene was marked by the whisperings and discussions of the villagers, the current scene is emotionally colder and absent of sound, that is, until the narrator begins speaking: "Winter came early that year. For Reformation Day, on the first Sunday of November, a blanket of snow covered the village." The use of voice-over narration, spoken directly at the audience, draws their attention to a particular scene or, as here, a series of scenes and their use of repeated visual techniques, such as scene compositions and camera angles. Once the audience is aware of the visual repetitions, the next logical step is for them to view these scenes as stylised or perhaps staged arrangements, accompanied by a bodiless and evanescent voice.

## Voice-over Narration and the Use of Editing

In nearly a hundred disjointed episodes, the story comes across like hacked diagnostic fragments on a dissecting table, cross-sections of a systemic malady.<sup>8</sup>

Stewart's comment rightly highlights the self-contained nature of the scenes in *The White Ribbon*, with each interaction between the allegorical characters somewhat abstract, like jigsaw pieces. Stewart's mention of "disjointed episodes" is potentially misleading, as the scenes in *The White Ribbon* are actually 'jointed', and although temporally abstract, they are edited together purposefully and smoothly just as jigsaw pieces fit together to form a larger image. The editing creates meaning – analogy and causation for example – and with the aid of voice-over narration material is drawn together, transitions smoothed over and the film is given a rhythmic tempo and flow. In *The White Ribbon*, editing cuts normally fall at the end of a completed sentence by the voice-over narrator. After the Doctor falls from his horse, the voice-over narrator tells us that "His daughter saw the accident from a window and informed a neighbour who informed the estate's steward, so that the doctor, who was in agony, could be transported to the district hospital over 30km away." After stating "...over 30 km away," the elderly Teacher's intake of breath at the end of the sentence is in unison with an editing cut: the scene has changed from the doctor writhing in pain, to a woman walking purposefully down a street. So too does the subject of the narration change to a description of this woman, the Midwife, illustrating the close harmony between voice-over narration and image in this scene. A scene change, when it is within an extended stretch of voice-over narration will always be reflected by a change in the topic of the voice-over. Over a painterly image of villagers reaping wheat, with the rhythmic sound of the scythes cutting the stalks, the narrator intones: "After those two days in July, life in the village got back to normal. The daily harvesting chores exhausted everyone. Most of the children pitched in to help their parents." An editing cut then shows us a large mechanised threshing machine, loudly chugging away. The voice-over narration now changes tack, to reflect the change in scene: "I took up

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart, "Pre-War Trauma," 40.

the Steward's offer to be his secretary during the harvesting, as I hoped it would enable me to see the young girl again. I couldn't get her out of my mind after our meeting. But she rarely came out of the manor house."

Sometimes the editing cuts are purposefully sudden to heighten the contrast between two scenes. From the dark, claustrophobic room inhabited by the corpse of the Farmer's wife, there is a sudden cut to a bucolic woodland stream with the Teacher fishing, in an image seemingly lifted from a romantic poem. The scene is tonally the antithesis of the previous meditation on death, and the voice-over narrator gives an explanation:

On the same day I had a strange encounter. The weather was beautiful and hot, so I decided to improve my meagre menu with some brown trout which are plentiful in the river. The Baron allowed me to fish there.

This voice-over facilitates the sudden change of scene and tone by characterising the shift as the narrator jumping to a new thought, linked temporally – "on the same day" – yet not thematically. The voice-over smooths over stark transitions – here between dark room with the Farmer's Wife to the bright white light of the stream – by providing a continuous narrative told in a reassuringly predictable tone of voice. At the same time the voice-over narration does the proverbial lion's share of the exposition, conveying information directly and succinctly, which permits dramatic editing cuts that can then be explicated through voice-over.

Whilst fishing at the stream, the Teacher comes across Martin, dangerously walking a tightrope, high off the ground. Martin's belief in a religiously-infected fatalism is simply expressed: "I was giving God a chance to kill me. He didn't do it so he must be pleased with me." From a discussion on death, there is a cut to a scene of death: the sawmill where the Farmer's wife died, now being inspected by the Farmer's son. Editing, therefore, can be used to connect thematically similar material or link scenes that convey a similar meaning. One after the other, two scenes explore the relationships between parents and their children in different ways, but with similar effect: one takes place in the Baron's manor and the other in the Pastor's house. Slowly, a picture is built of adults who have less than desirable relationships with their seemingly

insouciant, yet deeply dissatisfied children: from the Baroness's irritation reflected by Sigi's boredom and barely concealed sadness, to the Pastor's stern admonishment of his children and warning of tomorrow's physical punishment directed into Martin and Klara's defiantly unmoving, cold faces.

Sometimes the connections in meaning are present in broader, less immediate patterns. First there is a scene about death: Anna and Rudolph discuss the inevitability of dying; then comes a scene with violence at its core as the Pastor canes Martin and Klara; then there is another scene about death featuring the young child of the Farmer looking at his mother's corpse and being comforted by an unidentified person; and then another scene with violence with the Steward's older son hitting his younger brother, the younger brother punching him back, and in turn being slapped by the Midwife. A fifth scene, once again about death, takes place between the Farmer and the Farmer's son discussing the accident that killed their wife and mother, which ends with the Farmer's emphatic and aggressive "Shut up!" Such a use of alternation can also create dramatic tension. At the village harvest festival, the setting alternates from the main festivities in the courtyard of the Baron's manor to a field of cabbage just outside the town. Over view moves from the Baron and Pastor's address in the courtyard, to a quick cut to the Farmer's son destroying the cabbage crop, to the Teacher talking to the Baroness and the Steward talking to his wife and Eva, back to the ruined cabbage crop where the children arrive, back again to the courtyard before the Baron's manor where the Teacher dances with Eva, only to return again to the ruined crop with the Baron, Baroness and Steward looking on in dismay and disbelief. This constant intercutting ratchets up the dramatic tension, but also makes an obvious contrast between the upbeat festivities and the violent act of vandalism; a dichotomy that is signposted in an earlier scene by the ironic juxtaposition of the voice-over's "horror and perplexity" with the villagers' cheering.

After the Baron addresses the villagers in the church, the voice-over narration ends with "and the mysterious character of these criminal deeds awakened the old mistrust of the farmers." The ending of the narrator's sentence is in unison with a sudden dramatic cut in sound and image to the Teacher

playing a brisk and loud piece of music on the piano. The effect achieved is to throw the audience headlong into the next scene, rather than give them time to further mull over the Baron's comments. In this way, the voice-over narration and editing can be purposefully dramatic, can change the flow of the film and can intentionally draw attention to the change of scene.

The editing can also seek to make a pointed comment about what is happening in one scene through a cut to another scene. The Pastor interrogates Martin in his study about the moral impropriety of his acting on his sexual urges through masturbation. The whole conversation is farcical, as the Pastor's ultimate aim in the conversation is clear from the start.<sup>9</sup> There is then a deliberate editing cut to the Doctor and the Midwife having sex, illustrating the duplicitous double standards, with adults preaching a moral code to which they themselves do not adhere. In a similar way, an editing cut can also undermine the audience's trust in a character. The Teacher's discussion with the Steward's daughter Erna further illuminates the distinction between what the audience knows and what the Teacher knows. When Erna speaks of 'dreaming' about Karli – the Midwife's disabled son – being violently attacked, the audience attaches to it a degree of ominous dread, knowing full well that such an act is not beyond the village children and indeed may full well be in their sights. The Teacher, on the other hand, deems it "nonsense" and tells Erna not to worry about such visions, completely mischaracterising Erna's warning as childhood fright about nightmares and the supernatural. The folly of such a response is further emphasised by the cut from the Teacher's "That's nonsense!" to the Pastor seeing his pet bird impaled upon his scissors in the shape of a crucifix; from child's plea to listen, violent action is but a moment away.

Even more directly, the editing can also imply causation. After a close-up shot of a burning building, we see the Steward's children watching through a window, with the conflagration reflected in the glass. Although never explicitly stated, the assumption is there: some children, though perhaps not these children, are responsible. The film then cuts to the Farmer's son who discovers

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<sup>9</sup> See Oliver C Speck, *Funny Frames: The Filmic Concepts of Michael Haneke* (New York: the Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2010), 191-2 for a discussion about "funny" moments in *The White Ribbon*, including this scene and the one that directly follows.

that his father has hanged himself. The editing cut suggests causation. Has the Farmer killed himself because he thinks his son may have been responsible for the fire? Are the shame and his wife's recent death just too much? From the daughter's unawareness of her father's death as she prepares a meal in the kitchen, the scene changes to the sexually active Midwife and Doctor, however the scene quickly degenerates into the Doctor's callous tirade about the Midwife's appearance, hygiene and age, a tirade which itself "constitutes violence of the most unmitigated sort."<sup>10</sup> Ending with the Doctor's "My God, why don't you just die" there is a thematically appropriate cut to the Farmer's cortege. Like the previous scene where the Farmer's body was discovered, there is no dialogue, only the sound of footsteps in snow and the creaking of the wagon: this is both an emotionally and barometrically cold scene. The eldest son appears, takes his hat off, and greets the members of the funeral procession. One directly snubs him. He then takes his place at the front of the group, displacing his sister. The retinue moves on.

Scenes are frequently situated to directly imply cause and effect. The Steward's son and another boy are with Sigi, by the lake. Sigi is playing energetically on his new whistle, the other two boys seek to fashion their own from pieces of wood. By painfully highlighting the impact of material inequality, this scene suggests wealth distribution as another dimension in the pathology of violence. When Sigi is thrown into the water, he floats face down for several seconds until one of the Steward's sons fishes him out. Either giving in to a melancholic urge to contemplate death or intimately aware of the social hierarchy and the inevitability of rescue, Sigi acts as part of a link in the causation of violence. Where jealousy found expression in Sigi being thrown into the water, so the parental or societal response comes two scenes later: the Steward punches his son in the head, demanding Sigi's whistle back. The defiance shown by his son leads to a further bout of violence, for the son could get away unscathed but actually wants to be punished.<sup>11</sup> As the Baroness sums up in the next scene: "I'm sick and tired of persecutions, threats and perverse acts of revenge." It is at the end of her discussion with her husband that the force

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Brunette, *Michael Haneke* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 133.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

of history comes into the story, with the assassination of the Habsburg Archduke in Sarajevo.

### Overlapping and Complementary Narration

After the Doctor's accident, the narrator says "His daughter saw the accident from a window and informed a neighbour," and the audience is shown a young woman – the Doctor's daughter – running out of the house to help her father. Over shots of the daughter coming to his aid and him writhing in pain, the voice-over narration elaborates additional, yet complementary information: "...who informed the estate's steward, so that the doctor, who was in agony, could be transported to the district hospital over 30km away." A few scenes later, the audience is transported to a dark shabby interior – in marked contrast to the bright light of the earlier scene – where a woman cleans a corpse. In an example of complementary voice-over narration, where the narrator presents information "not accessible, or not highlighted, in its companion,"<sup>12</sup> we are told:

The wife of a tenant farmer died in a work accident. The woman, who had an injured arm, was discharged by the steward from harvesting duties and assigned to lighter work in the sawmill.

Later, the Midwife fixes an oil lamp whilst looking after Karli and Rudolph. The voice-over delivers explicatory information, the first sentence complementary, the second more overlapping, and the third complementary again:

The Doctor was still in the hospital. Anna and Rudolph, his two children, were cared for meanwhile by the Midwife. After the Farmer's wife's funeral, attended by the whole village, both accidents were forgotten.

Clearly, the alternation between overlapping and complementary narration is dynamic, with the voice-over both reinforcing and elaborating on the visual images, reflecting Kozloff's insistence that overlapping, complementary and

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<sup>12</sup> Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers*, 104.

disparate narration are not opposites, but rather all exist on a continuous spectrum.<sup>13</sup>

When the Baron's son Sigi disappears, both the Tutor and the Steward are unsure of his whereabouts. After the Baron's angry exclamation "That he's disappeared, damn it!" the sound of his voice is toned down and the elderly Teacher's voice speaks over the scene, offering an explanation: "The Steward's children said they'd only seen Sigi very briefly, that he'd gone off with other children. They didn't pay much attention to it." The scene cuts to the Steward organising search parties, his voice incomprehensible underneath the voice-over narrator's. Various shots of men with gas lanterns searching in the darkness follow, as the narrator explains: "The search began shortly after midnight. The searchers, tired, some still drunk, split up into two groups: one searched all the buildings on the estate, the other combed the countryside." Here the images and narration are overlapping: we are shown in images exactly what we are told in words. The narration continues, over further shots of the search parties: "Around 2:30am, the siren sounded again, calling the men back to the estate. Sigi had been found." Here the scene changes to the Baron's courtyard, reminiscent of scenes at the harvest festival, earlier the same day. Sigi is at the bottom of the stairs, his form visible but mostly obscured by members of the search party. The Baroness runs down the stairs, as the narrator describes what happened: "He was in the sawmill, tied upside down. His trousers were pulled down, his buttocks bleeding from lashes. He was in a state of shock, unable to walk. Lying on his belly, he was carried home on a makeshift stretcher." The detailed description of Sigi's injuries by the voice-over narrator allows the film to deny the audience a visual depiction of the very same injuries. This is just one of many examples of the film denying or limiting the information given to the audience.

On the main village street, the Teacher and Eva approach in a carriage. The voice-over narrator provides the necessary context:

The next day, after school, I went to the estate to inquire about Sigi's health and to intercede for Eva's reinstatement. I was told the Baroness had left that

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 103.

morning with her children. Reluctantly, the Steward lent me a carriage to take Eva home.

It is only now, after the explanation, that the audience understands the scene they are being shown: that is, why the Teacher and Eva are in the carriage. Just as the Teacher and Eva's carriage disappears into the distance and passes the Doctor's carriage coming towards camera, so too does the topic of the narration reflect the change in the camera's focus:

As we left the village, we crossed the Doctor. A few days after the Thanksgiving Feast, Rudolf, his four-year-old son, had suddenly disappeared. This upset everyone in view of the previous events. The boy was finally found on the main road, scantily dressed for a trip, walking eagerly towards the town. When asked where he was going, he said he wanted to visit his father. He fought tooth and nail against being taken home. The Doctor was told about this and, due to be released anyway, he decided to cut short his stay at the hospital.

Whilst some of the scenes in the film are not directly referred to by the narrator and possibly outside of his purview, here we have the opposite situation: we are given a description of an event – Rudolph's adventure – that is visually denied to the audience, who only hear about it at second-hand through the voice-over narration. Therefore not only does the film deny or limit information in general, but it consciously assigns pieces of exposition to a combination of the dramatic action, the dialogue or the voice-over narration. The audience may witness an event visually or hear about an event through characters in dialogue or from the voice-over narrator. It is the dynamic and complementary combination of these possibilities that constitutes the information provided to the audience.

Three shots of lifeless, snow-covered countryside are shown while the voice-over narrator speaks:

The year ended with fine weather. The snowy landscape sparkled so brightly that it hurt the eyes. None of us suspected it'd be our last New Year in an era of peace, and that this year would bring a radical change, of a magnitude we couldn't foresee.

In these empty white landscapes one finds a complement to the narration's talk of a coming "radical change." These untouched fields at the start of 1914 present

a tabula rasa from which all preconceived notions or heretofore concepts of suffering will be redefined; mud, men and blood will soon defile the pristine scenery. With a cut to the Pastor and his family in front of their Christmas tree, the narrator continues: “Despite the strange events that had unsettled the village, we thought of ourselves as united in the belief that life in our community was God’s will, and worth living.” As he says this, the Pastor removes the white ribbon from Klara’s hair. Here, as in the scene before, the relationship between the voice-over narration and the rest of the film is complementary in a subtle way, linked by theme, symbolism and mood. The Teacher was not present in the Pastor’s house to witness the Christmas festivities and consequently the voice-over narration lacks the specificity of other instances of voice-over narration. Clearly there is a thematic relationship between the final line of narration – about the religious belief underpinning the village – and the Pastor addressing his family, especially as he then talks about the children’s preparation for their confirmation. Likewise when the Teacher is fishing by the stream, the embellished language, with a heavy use of adjectives, complements the aesthetics of the natural surroundings: “The weather was beautiful and hot, so I decided to improve my meagre menu with some brown trout which are plentiful in the river.”

### **Disparate Narration**

From a distance, the Doctor approaches on his horse. Matter-of-factly the voice-over narrator tells us:

It all began, I think, with the doctor’s riding accident. After his dressage session on the Baron’s estate, he was heading home to see if any patients had arrived. On entering the garden, his horse tripped on a wire strung between two trees.

The calm, staid narration jars with the violent scene of the Doctor being thrown headfirst over the front of his horse. Later, when the Policeman interrogates Anna and the Midwife after the accident, his clipped, aggressive intonation is in

marked contrast to the narrator's placid and neutral tone of voice, as the next piece of voice-over narration then begins. In both of these scenes there is a juxtaposition created between the voice-over narration and the dramatic scene on stylistic grounds. Sometimes the disparity created between voice-over and the rest of the film can be used to facilitate contrasts, emphasise the privileged position of the audience, undermine the authority of the voice-over narrator, and even engender feelings of disquiet.

With the Baron, Baroness and Sigi facing with their backs to camera, we look between them onto three young girls, in festive dress, holding up a totemic offering. The narrator tells us: "both accidents were forgotten. Until the end of summer when the harvest festival reunited the whole village, first in a joyful mood, then in horror and perplexity." Throughout, the narrator is talking over the middle girl, who is giving a rehearsed speech to the Baron. We can hear she is speaking, but we cannot understand her words. Suddenly, the voice-over narration becomes disparate and ironic distance is created to the dramatic action when, just as the narrator says "...then in horror and perplexity," accordion music starts up and the crowd erupts into loud clapping, the girl having finished her speech. Whilst it makes clear that violence is never far away in the village of Eichwald, this scene speaks to something deeper about the privileged position of the voice-over narrator. By foreshadowing something horrendous and perplexing, the voice-over narrator is reinforcing that his presentation of information is being made with considered reflection or, at the very least, with an idea of how certain events relate to one another, a luxury not afforded to the characters in the film who are living in the moment. In addition, the disparate narration also builds dramatic tension and undermines the joyous celebration at the harvest festival. If the villagers knew what was coming, surely they would have refrained from such an open expression of positive emotion.

Klara – in revenge for the public shame meted out by her father two scenes before – ominously takes a pair of scissors and opens the cage of the Pastor's pet bird. Layered over this, the voice-over narrator intones: "A few days after Klara's fainting fit, that frightened us all, and left her feverish and weakened, I went to see the Steward, on the eve of Whitsun to borrow the

carriage again.” Whilst the voice-over narration seems to intimate a close knowledge of Klara’s state and what occurs in the Pastor’s house, the audience – as a firsthand witness to this scene of avian murder – knows differently. In this example of disparate narration, the audience sees that Klara seems neither “feverish” nor “weakened” but rather steadfastly determined to exact vengeance. At once, the voice-over narrator’s authority is undermined, the limits of his knowledge exposed, and the audience’s and implied author’s privileged position clarified.

### **Voice-over Narration and the Character of the Teacher**

Fields covered in blinding white snow on either side of a tree-lined road present a painterly landscape. Over what seems at first a static, lifeless image, the voice-over narration gives an explanation:

In mid-December, I finally got a letter from Eva. Her father had found her a job in town, that she'd start early in the New Year. Since the night she came to shelter in the school, when until dawn, we told each other the story of our short lives, her pale face, her shy but frank personality, were constantly on my mind.

Halfway through the narration, we realize that the tiny form of the Teacher in the distance is walking purposefully down the road, the explanation for which is given in the final line of the narration: “The school holidays lasted until January 2nd, but already on the day after Christmas, in the cold but sunny weather, I headed for Treglitz to visit Eva and her parents.” During the harvest, the Teacher can be spotted by the eagle-eyed viewer on the left of frame, performing his secretarial duties, sidelined during the communal village activities, his voice unable to be heard over the loud threshing machine. Later in the film, across a motionless shot of wheat fields and forest, a horse and cart moves from right to left as the narrator speaks: “We arranged to meet at the railway station, as Eva wanted to avoid being seen with me. She was living with distant cousins, who gave her parents regular reports on her behavior.” Without seeing their faces or

hearing their voices, the audience knows through the voice-over narration that this must be the Teacher and Eva. In all these wide shots with accompanying voice-over narration, the Teacher is relegated to a corner of the shot or is a barely discernable figure in the distance. This recurrent motif in *The White Ribbon* seeks to accentuate the smallness and relative unimportance of the Teacher. In village life he has a certain standing, yet remains subservient to the Baron, the Pastor, the Steward and the Doctor. In the wide and open natural landscapes he is but an individual, one teacher in one village, affected by forces outside of his control: the weather; the seasons; and the strictures of society.

The Teacher practices piano and Eva arrives, distraught. As in all his interactions with the object of his affections, the Teacher embodies a caring, thoughtful and respectful suitor, ever helpful, and not demanding in his sexual advances. As part of the only romantic subplot in the film, scenes such as this endear the Teacher and Eva in the viewers' affections over and above the other characters, who remain, for the most part, cold, distant and not understood. Through the insight provided into the Teacher and Eva's emotional landscapes, the strictures of the society in which they live become all the more evident. Eva's emotional immaturity and the Teacher's propriety are socially conditioned, yet stand in stark contrast to the sexual licentiousness of the Doctor abusing his daughter, or the underlying sexual nature to Sigi's injuries detailed in an earlier scene. This contrast between the Teacher and Eva versus the rest of the village is articulated by both characters in this scene, with Eva asking "Who does things like that? [...] Beating a child like that," with the Teacher replying "I don't know." Unlike all the other adults in the film, the Teacher and Eva are never seen enacting physical or emotional violence against children.

Over a shot of the Baroness, Sigi and the new Italian nanny arriving at the Baron's estate, the voice-over narrator provides expository narration:

Shortly after Easter, in the last week of April, the Baroness came back with the children. She was accompanied by a new nanny. My secret hope that Eva could come back here, was definitely dashed. The new nanny was an Italian woman who came from the area on the Mediterranean coast where the Baroness had spent the winter.

Within this seemingly objective statement of facts, the elderly voice-over narrator infuses the personal emotions – “My secret hope [...] was definitely dashed” – felt by the Teacher at the time. This is a clear reminder that the voice-over narration, being from a singular perspective, is necessarily subjective. However, it also makes clear that the purpose of the narration is not just to give an account of what happened, but also to allow the audience to enter the mind of elderly version of one of the characters, and understand to a certain extent the feelings and motivations of his younger self. That is why, in this scene, the audience is told not just what happened but also the effect of this on the Teacher.

Often a scene will give several different insights into the character of the Teacher, not all of them positive or negative. When the Teacher and Eva are in the cart in the countryside, he comes across not only as chivalrous in his interactions with Eva, but also ignorant of what is happening in the village. The voice-over narration states: “She had become thinner, which made her even prettier. I was ravished again by her mixture of shyness and almost childlike outspokenness.” Critic Williams distrusts the Teacher’s portrayal in this scene, as an example where “time appears arrested and realism veers into the realm of personal myth.” The use of a backward-tracking shot, the Teacher’s continually demonstrated gentlemanly virtue and Eva’s intimate and beguiling tenderness underscore a “disorientating sequence” and “coy arc of visual excess.”<sup>14</sup> What Williams does not mention is the placement of this scene, bookended by the shocking image of the Pastor’s dead bird and the violent attack on Karli. This is as an escapist romantic interlude, a frivolous flight of fancy, emphasised by the voice-over narration’s colourful and romantic language. The narration makes no reference to Erna’s warning about Karli being attacked and the scene in fact takes place around the time of the attack; not the first time the Teacher will choose inaction with serious consequences or the last time that serious questions will be swept under the proverbial carpet through omission. In this scene he may accede to Eva’s wish not to be alone with him in the woods, however in another scene his abdication of his own wishes can quickly seem like kowtowing to authority. At the dining table of Eva’s parents, Eva’s father drives

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<sup>14</sup> James S Williams, “Aberrations of Beauty: Violence and Cinematic Resistance in Haneke’s *The White Ribbon*,” *Film Quarterly*, 63(4) (Summer 2010): 52.

the conversation and dictates the terms. It is with certain dramatic irony that the audience hears his (with hindsight, misguided) comment: "A year goes by fast. The world won't collapse." Although the tenor of the conversation remains amicable, we are once again given an example of a parent dominating and controlling their child, the effect of which is captured in the final moment of the scene, as Eva shyly, uncertainly, slowly takes the Teacher's hand in hers. The Teacher says nothing more, resigned to waiting a year before officially proposing marriage. In a film where the children are given proper names and the adults are referred to by their professions, it is telling that Eva is categorised by her name as one of the former.

## **Scene Analysis**

### **Village Street**

We are shown a woman walking purposefully down a street. This woman does not get a name but a profession, and a small background sketch courtesy of the narrator:

The neighbour, a single woman of around 40, was the village midwife. Since the doctor's wife had died in childbirth, she had become invaluable to him as a housekeeper and receptionist.

With the mention of dying in childbirth, the audience's attention is drawn to the numerous children both in the background and foreground of the shot. This is a first allusion to the psychologically complex and violent relationships between parents and children in the film: in this case the deathly violence that can be brought about upon the mother by the birth of a child. The final sentence of narration is an explanation and foreshadowing of the following visually depicted action, with the narrator saying: "After tending to the doctor's two children, she went to the school to fetch her own son, Karl." Immediately after the narrator finishes, the dialogue between the Midwife and the children and Teacher begins,

a seamless transition illustrating the efficient incorporation of the voice-over narration into the film. With the children walking away down the village street from a static camera shot, the narrator speaks again. Placed over this is one of the narrator's shortest pieces of narration: "If I remember rightly, it seemed odd to me that the children with Klara, instead of scattering after school to their homes, headed together to the outskirts of the village." Coupled with what the audience were shown but a few moments before – Klara's insistent questioning of the Midwife about how the Doctor is, her sharing a suspicious glance with her brother Martin, her stern demeanour as she walks off with the other children – the narration makes explicit what has already been hinted at: that the children are up to something and know more than they are letting on. In many ways a whodunit where the answer is clear to the audience from the very beginning, the purpose of the film is not really to investigate who perpetrated the crimes, but rather why they did it. For the voice-over narrator and the rest of the film have different aims: where the film seeks a pathology of violence in children; the voice-over narrator, in the guise of a bumbling detective, wants to get to the bottom of the mystery of who is responsible. During all of the scenes that attempt to explicate the behaviour of the children – the sexual abuse, the psychological repression and the physical violence meted out against them – the Teacher is absent and the voice-over narrator is mute.

### **Winter Church Service**

Snow is falling outside the church and in the background choral singing can be heard, heralding the next editing cut. The voice-over narration continues, over the snow-blown scene: "Unusually, the Baron, whose family had not yet come back, didn't attend the service." The scene changes to the inside of the church and with this change the singing comes to full volume. Three shots inside the church follow: the first of the men on one side of the aisle, then the women and young children on the other side, and finally the school-aged children singing on the floor above. Whereas the men, women and young children look around in all directions, with heads tilted left, right, up and down, the children stand uniformly facing the camera, looking ahead. Visually, this distinguishes the final

shot from the other two and marks the children as a distinct group in the village, isolated from direct parental oversight, as there are no adults in the shot with them. Over these images the narrator speaks:

The villagers took that as a sign of his anger. Indeed, no leads had been found to a possible culprit, although the Baron's appeal had led to a flood of mutual suspicions, even to some attempts at denunciation, that had all turned out to be untenable.

The final words are spoken over the shot of the children, making patently obvious what has been hinted for quite some time: the children are responsible, yet no one in the village can see, or chooses to see, the truth. The Bach Chorale the children sing - 'Befiehl du deine Wege' - adds a further dimension to the scene's meaning. The relevant excerpt is as follows:

<i>Und ob gleich alle Teufel</i>	Even though all devils
<i>Hier wollten widerstehn,</i>	Tried to resist here,
<i>So wird doch ohne Zweifel</i>	Without a doubt
<i>Gott nicht zurückgehn;</i>	God will not retreat;
<i>Was er sich vorgenommen,</i>	What he made,
<i>Und was er haben will,</i>	And what he wants to have,
<i>Das muß doch endlich kommen</i>	That must come at last
<i>Zu seinem Zweck und Ziel.</i>	To his purpose and goal. <sup>15</sup>

The relevance of these words to the situation is clear: after the many violent attacks over the past months, a song that emphasises the power of God to eventually triumph over evil is intended to remind the village that God can and will protect them. The singing of this chorale, meant as an act of community

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<sup>15</sup> My translation.

solidarity against the evil that has befallen them, does not breed the expected defiance; instead the silent villagers all seem bored, looking about the church with absent expressions. For ironically it is the children – themselves perpetrators of horrendous acts – not the adults who are calling on God to hold fast against evil. Perhaps the children are crying out against the violence and repression meted out against them, rather than that done by them unto others. For the adults are guilty too: of sexual abuse, psychological manipulation, violent punishment and even the hidden, quiet repression of everyday life. Interestingly, the scene ends before the verse of the chorale can be completed – there is a cut after “und was er haben will” leaving out the last two lines. That which is unspoken – *Das muß doch endlich kommen / Zu seinem Zweck und Ziel* (That must come at last / To his purpose and goal) – is exactly the unanswered question that the film grapples with: what is God’s purpose and goal, or in other words, in what form will the retribution for these evil acts finally come? Will it be on the desolate battlefields in the next few years, or even further afield in the destruction of Germany in the final days of the Second World War? Is the absence of the final lines – God’s reassertion of his control – evidence of the ineffectuality of religion to stem this dark tide? The sudden cut to a baby crying, a baby whose window was opened during the night by some of these selfsame children, reminds the audience that, the angelic voices and demure uniformity of their church performance aside, these young adults are the executors of a violent inheritance.

### **Erna’s Interrogation**

The narrator speaks:

After the atrocities committed on the retarded boy, the Baron was finally convinced it was smarter to enlist the help of the county's police force. So a few days later two plainclothes policemen arrived, who, after visiting several of the crime scenes, inquired if anyone had noticed anything suspicious.

Interestingly, this narration is spoken over a shot of Martin joining the other schoolchildren to eavesdrop, further solidifying the disconnect between the

official response of the authorities – detailed in the voice-over narration – and the perpetrators in their midst, who hear everything and are one step ahead. We cut into the schoolroom, where two policemen surround and domineer Erna, while the Teacher looks on and the voice-over narration continues:

When I learnt of Karli's torture, I didn't think of what Erna had told me. When I remembered, I hesitated to tell the authorities. Such an absurd coincidence might jeopardize the reputation and inner peace of the steward's family. But when I heard that Karli might lose his eyesight, I made Erna come to the school and tell the policemen about her dream.

By justifying the actions and inaction of his former self to the audience – a recourse unavailable to the other characters in the film – the narrator exploits the privilege afforded to him in the telling of the narrative. Despite the editing cut to the policemen interrogating Erna, the context has not yet been explicated to the audience. As the visual cut is instantaneous, whereas the narration takes time to be delivered, the audience will make the assumption in the interim, based on the Teacher's previous conversation with Erna, that the Teacher has informed the authorities about her strange 'dreams'. In order to confirm our suspicions, we listen intently to the foregrounded voice-over narrator tell us just that: he has informed the authorities. The vocal iteration of information that overlaps with what the audience has already processed visually places added emphasis on the meaning of the scene. The audience learns twice that the Teacher has finally been forced into action: an assumption based on visual information which is then confirmed vocally. The badgering of Erna by the policemen while she weeps fits into the already established profile of parental-child relations in the film. The incredulity of the Teacher on finding the children eavesdropping and his thinking nothing of it supports the already formulated assertion that he is, to a certain extent, negligently ignorant of the true nature of his pupils.

### **The End of the Film**

The village of Eichwald is glimpsed from afar through dark trees. The voice-over narrator begins to speak:

The news spread around the village like wildfire. What would the consequences be? The first who said "war," was severely contradicted. But once the word had been uttered, it remained stubbornly at the center of all our thoughts. I wanted to go to town quickly to discuss with Eva what we should do if war broke out. Maybe her father would now agree to an earlier marriage. I asked the Baroness for the bicycle that Eva had borrowed previously.

Four shots of wheat fields are shown: the first and third completely motionless and looking like an image frozen in time; the second and fourth with the wheat stalks swaying rhythmically in the breeze. The coming war, explicitly referenced in the narration, facilitates an interpretation of these images. The village was for a long period a timeless pre-modern image of the past, like a wheat field in stasis. That is about to change for, just as half of the heads of wheat are shown moved by the invisible wind, so too will unseen external events come to unalterably dictate life in the village. The voice-over narrator's comments present a mix of the general and the personal: the reactions of the village to war and his own feelings for Eva. Whereas this analysis situates the context of these scenes in the coming war, Williams provides an alternate reading of the same scene, based on the narrator's romantic feelings:

The few wide-shot views of nature, such as the searingly beautiful images of pristine summer cornfields, are always mediated by the narrator's voiceover and should be read as a form of pathetic fallacy, part of his nostalgic projection of the mood of young yearning and love.<sup>16</sup>

A scene change takes us from natural imagery to everyday life, with the Teacher pulling a bicycle along the village street. The context, once again, is given in the narration: "I planned to use it to visit her Sunday. Friday when I went to pick up the bicycle, I witnessed a strange confrontation." This foreshadowing leads directly into the aforementioned cryptic confrontation that takes place between the Teacher and the Midwife. After the Midwife successfully inveigles the bicycle from the Teacher, the voice-over narrator – due to his privileged position in the narrative – is able to provide a justification on behalf of his former self: "I was so sorry that I gave in. But the state of that woman, usually so level headed, upset

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<sup>16</sup> James S Williams, "Aberrations of Beauty: Violence and Cinematic Resistance in Haneke's *The White Ribbon*," *Film Quarterly*, 63(4) (Summer 2010): 49.

me. What had she found out that she didn't dare tell?" The use of a rhetorical question by the voice-over narrator, aimed at the audience, seeks to elicit sympathy from them for his behaviour. The Midwife rides off down the street, increasing the distance from the static camera, in an oft-repeated technique. Voice-over narration is then used as a bridge over the editing cut to the next shot of the Teacher approaching a door to find it locked. The audience is given the necessary exposition: "Back in the village, I decided to investigate."

The Teacher's investigation again catches the children in a compromising position and again their presence and insufficient explanation for eavesdropping does not seem to concern him overmuch, at least initially. He is more interested in the Midwife: "I wondered why the Midwife had closed the shutters. Nobody in the village locked their house. Why had the Midwife locked in her son?" As the Teacher paces around the house, the voice-over narration continues, emulating the thought processes of a detective in the crime fiction genre, working out a mystery:

I thought of Erna's dream again. What if Erna hadn't dreamt it, but knew that Karli would be tortured, who had told her? Who wouldn't she denounce? The kids' interest in Karli seemed strange to me. Usually, because of his disability, they had no contact with him, or treated him disdainfully. When the midwife couldn't take care of him, she entrusted him to me or the doctor. But since his mishap, I hadn't seen him again. Worried, I decided to ask the doctor.

After seeing that the Doctor is not home, there is a direct cut to the Pastor's house, with the Teacher being admitted by the Pastor's wife. What follows is the longest scene in the film. After questioning Klara and Martin, the Teacher lays out his hypothesis to the Pastor: the children are responsible for the series of violent crimes. The Pastor's aggressive reaction is significant for several reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, he cannot entertain the fact that the village children, his own children included, could be responsible for the crimes. Also, he is damning of the Teacher, whose actions are "repulsive," whose "sick mind" makes the Pastor question "How did they let you loose among those poor creatures." As previously mentioned, the Teacher is the only adult who never is violent to or uncompromising with the children, and who genuinely has their best interests at

heart. The Pastor's language therefore exposes his blatant hypocrisy, for his actions – the violence, the sexual and psychological repression and the humiliation of Klara and Martin – have played a contributing role in escalating the violence. Instead of acknowledging this complicity, he “displaces the content of the violence onto the form of the accusation itself”<sup>17</sup> during a withering tirade directed at the Teacher, ending with “I don't want to see you here again.” The scene then cuts to outside the Midwife's house with the Teacher, Steward and Steward's wife.

Remarkable for what it does not say – the altercation with the Pastor is not mentioned here – the voice-over narration instead tells the audience what happened directly afterward:

The midwife didn't come back. I waited until morning, two days later. Then I went to the manor house to inform the Baron. He told the steward and said to open the house and take care of the disabled boy.

It turns out that Karli has disappeared for good, foreshadowing the following years when the handicapped would themselves disappear en masse – into institutions and to death – under the discredited 'science' of eugenics:

I'd never been in the midwife's house and felt uncomfortable barging into somebody else's place without asking. It was strange, but while we still searched and called out Karli's name, I already knew our search was in vain. Anyone who knew how devoted the midwife was to her son, knew she'd never have abandoned her wounded Karli.

The town church, close-up, in sunlight, is the geographic centre of the village, as well as its spiritual core. Over this image, which begins the following scene, the voice-over narrator speaks:

During the next few weeks, the village gossips worked overtime. Some claimed the doctor was Karli's father. He and the midwife had tried to abort the child so their relationship wouldn't be found out, and that's how the child was disabled.

The coupling of image and voice-over narration leads to an interesting conclusion: the village, at heart is nothing but a rumour-mill, a place for half-

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<sup>17</sup> Stewart, “Pre-War Trauma,” 45.

truths to take on the trappings of credibility, whilst actual concerns – the livelihood of the children and their guilt and responsibility – are ignored by the villagers, the Teacher, and the voice-over narrator alike. A cut to a wider shot, more distant from the church, gives the impression of zooming out. A cloud comes before the sun, throwing the buildings into shadow, as the voice-over narration itself becomes darker in tone: “Some even claimed that the death of the doctor's wife was suspect, and the two might very well be responsible for it.” Another cut, to an even wider shot of the buildings and the whole village street bathed in deep shadow, brings the most troubling insinuation:

Better still, the doctor and the midwife, as potential murderers, had also perpetrated all the other crimes. Wanting to spare his legitimate children and himself from public disclosure of his guilt, the doctor had fled with them.

Placing all the blame on those who are absent, even when it is deeply illogical – surely the Doctor himself did not set the trip-wire that caused his own grave injuries – absolves those who remain in the village, who clearly still share in the ultimate blame. The cumulative effect of these three progressively wider shots, in tandem with the narrator's description of the increasingly incredible village rumours, is to illustrate the growing distance between the narrator and his subject matter. Approaching the end of the film yet the start of the war, hearsay gains currency at objectivity's expense. The three shots prefigure the Teacher's decision to leave the village; the drawing away of the camera embodies the Teacher's physical retreat away from village life. The atmospheric next shot, used on promotional material for the film, shows a dark vestibule, with pitch darkness framing the perfectly symmetrical, yet restricted image of the lifeless courtyard of the Baron's manor beyond. Like a still image from an old photo album, like a visual historical record, the cold emptiness of the scene is symptomatic of the absent young men and all the casualties of war in the years to come. History is waiting in the wings, as the narrator tells us: “On July 28th, Austria declared war on Serbia. On Saturday, August 1st, Germany declared war on Russia, and on France the following Monday.” A simple listing of dates and facts, told over an image bereft of life, speaks multitudes about cause and effect and the devastation born from decisions made far away, decisions that can be

innocuously described in two terse sentences of voice-over narration, but which will have grave consequences for Eichwald and its inhabitants.

In the final scene change of the film, we cut to a fixed camera shot of the inside of the church, facing the congregation, roughly in the position where the Pastor would deliver his sermon. Members of the congregation enter the church and file to their seats, whilst the children upstairs near the organ speak to each other in small groups, standing stiffly with formal decorum. Just as the film starting with voice-over narration, so too will it come full circle and end with the voice-over narrator's words:

The solemn service next Sunday was attended by the whole village. A feeling of expectation and departure was in the air. Now everything was going to change. Eva's father, in the face of the coming war, had taken his daughter back home, and, at her pleading, had come to Eichwald where his future son-in-law lived and worked, to look it over. The prospect of soon calling this beloved creature my wife also made this a festive day for me.

This final piece of narration carries many of the important hallmarks and motifs that have previously defined it: an expression of communal feeling as "expectation and departure was in the air"; the narrator's love for Eva his "beloved creature"; and the provision of temporal context with "next Sunday." The children line up in two lines before the organ, as everything is readied for the coming service. The Teacher takes his place directing the children's choir, relegated to the far top left of shot and not obviously visible. At once isolated from the rest of the village, he is also connected to the children, knowing their true nature. Even so, this scene makes clear that the Teacher never took his allegations further and his obsequiousness forces him to literally play along to the tune of others. The voice-over narrator mentions the altercation with the Pastor, yet skips over the fact that Pastor's threats worked successfully on him: "The Pastor never mentioned our conversation again. And apparently never went through with his threat to denounce me." It will be the Pastor's entry into the church that closes the film, taking his privileged and allocated place within the congregation. The narrator's final words leave the church service behind and jump into the future, briefly and selectively detailing what happened after the

service, in the following days, months and years. Except for the beginning of the film, this is the only time that events outside of 1913-1914 are referenced by the voice-over narration:

I was drafted at the start of 1917. After the war, as my father had died meanwhile, I sold his house in Vasendorf, and with the money opened a tailor's shop in town. I never saw any of the villagers again.

Whereas his experiences in the First World War are dealt with perfunctorily in one and a half sentences wherein he is drafted and survives until “after the war,” nothing is mentioned of his experiences after becoming a tailor, but before the date of this voice-over narration as an old man. Arguably the most turbulent period in modern European history is left unaccounted for. The Teacher’s final words “I never saw any of the villagers again” mirror the Pastor’s earlier words to him: “I don’t want to see you here again.” He has chosen to flee, like the Baroness, the Midwife, Karli and the Doctor before him. Exile may provide respite from the claustrophobia of Eichwald, but the Teacher never really managed to confront the societal malaise, browbeaten as he was by the Pastor into not saying anything. After the voice-over narrator’s last words just before the sparse, black and white credits, the children’s choir begins to sing a Bach cantata “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott.”<sup>18</sup> In a society where the children abuse and are abused, where religion is used to hide but not counter this abuse, the irony of having this cantata sung by these children, in this village, is self-evident:

*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott,*

*Ein gute Wehr und Waffen;*

*Er hilft uns frei aus aller Not,*

*Die uns itzt hat betroffen.*

*Der alte böse Feind,*

*Mit Ernst er's jetzt meint,*

*Groß Macht und viel List*

A Mighty Fortress is our God,

A good shield and weapon,

He helps us willingly out of all troubles,

That have now befallen us.

The old, evil enemy

Means it with great earnest,

Great strength and much deceit

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<sup>18</sup> A Mighty Fortress is Our God.

*Sein grausam Rüstung ist,  
Auf Erd ist nicht seinsgleichen.*

Are his horrid armaments,  
There is nothing like him on earth<sup>19</sup>

## **Unreliability**

Often it is easy to instinctively diagnose some sort of unreliability in a narrator; maybe the narrator is unbelievable, maybe what they say is unbelievable or maybe something just does not seem right. Moving beyond such unqualified, often affective, reactions and identifying specific hallmarks of unreliability is itself a much harder prospect. Different systems have been devised and different important factors identified, with each theorist distinguishing their model from other extant examples. Here, four have been identified as especially pertinent and each will be applied to the voice-over narrator in *The White Ribbon*.

In terms of method, three points must be clarified at the outset. Firstly, apart from two specific examples, the voice-over narrator abstains from jumping around chronologically and from referencing future events or information well in advance of their happening in the film. For instance, at the start of the film he says: “If I remember rightly, it seemed odd to me that the children with Klara, instead of scattering after school to their homes, headed together to the outskirts of the village.” It would be open to him to elaborate on this event in light of his knowledge of the children’s culpability, knowledge gained around the time he makes his unsolicited disclosure to the Pastor, many months after the children headed to the outskirts of the village that fateful afternoon. He refrains from doing so however, choosing to disclose information incrementally, in the order he once found it out. This does not make his earlier statements unreliable due to omission, rather unreliability must be assessed across the film as a whole. Come the end of the film, if there remains pertinent information unstated or false testimony uncorrected, then this may be the basis of a finding of unreliability. Secondly, it is important to emphasise that this section will focus on the

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<sup>19</sup> This cantata remains untranslated in the film and this is my own translation into English.

unreliability of the voice-over narrator and his voice-over narration, not the unreliability of the Teacher or the unreliability of the film's narrative in general. Having said this, there is an argument that the entire film – both the voice-over narration, visuals and sounds – is filtered through the unreliable consciousness of the voice-over narrator. What the audience sees and hears, so this theory goes, is what the voice-over narrator wants us to experience<sup>20</sup> or what he himself wrongly believes to have taken place. Were this to be the case, it would place *The White Ribbon* in a very small category of films, as voice-over narrators hardly ever control the visual or sound tracks of the film<sup>21</sup>. Whilst the sympathetic portrayal of the Teacher – who chooses eventually to leave the village<sup>22</sup> – can seem out of place, due to it standing in such sharp contrast to the violence and repression in the village,<sup>23</sup> the idea that the entirety of the dramatic action in the film is unreliable does not pan out logically.<sup>24</sup>

On February 12th 2002, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (as he then was) held a press briefing at the White House. Asked by a reporter whether the state of Iraq was supplying weapons of mass destruction to terrorists, Rumsfeld gave a response that, whilst convoluted, made a significant point about perception and knowledge:

there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Williams alludes to this when he says "Expressionless, seemingly detached, always earnest, he chatters on for 143 minutes in the full confidence that he will emerge remarkably well from this terrible tale." Williams, "Aberrations of Beauty," 48.

<sup>21</sup> *Stage Fright*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1950, UK: Warner Bros, 2004), DVD being the famous exception.

<sup>22</sup> The motif of escape or departure from the village is well established: the Baroness, the Doctor, the Midwife, Karli, and of course the Teacher all leave in the hope of something better. However, fleeing also means not directly confronting the problems inherent in village society, leaving them to continue festering.

<sup>23</sup> The dramatic portrayal of the Teacher presents an unambiguously positive picture of a considerate educator who is not violent or repressive to the children under his instruction. He tries to do his best for everyone, but is threatened into silence when he tells the Pastor of his suspicions. Is he really that much more understanding and that much less angry and violent than the other adults?

<sup>24</sup> What about scenes where the Teacher is not present? Is he reconstructing them from hearsay? The irony created through the juxtaposition of scenes by editing and the deliberate use of certain sound and visual techniques also suggest a deliberate cinematic consciousness, rather than simply a collection of one person's memories. Whilst certain motifs and techniques suggest the infusion of memory and history, it is overly simplistic to suggest that the entire film is 'remembered' by the Teacher.

<sup>25</sup> Donald H Rumsfeld, "DoD News Briefing," *United States Department of Defence*, February 12, 2002, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636>.

This statement is particularly relevant to the first of Bordwell's factors<sup>26</sup> that can illustrate unreliability – knowledge. This has two dimensions: how much the narrator knows and how subjective or objective that knowledge is. In *The White Ribbon*, the voice-over narrator is not omniscient and his knowledge is limited to what he has personally witnessed and that which he has gleaned by hearsay. To follow Rumsfeld, there are “known knowns:” events and information of which both the audience and the voice-over narrator are aware.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, there are “known unknowns”: events and information of which the audience is aware, but to which no specific reference is made by the voice-over narrator.<sup>28</sup> Finally there are the “unknown unknowns”: information and events denied to the audience, but of which the voice-over narrator may or may not be aware. It is the “known unknowns” that provide the basis for any finding of unreliability, being information we know to be outside of the elderly Teacher's knowledge. The voice-over narration is based on subjective rather than objective knowledge, coming as it does from the voice-over narrator's own personal eyewitness accounts or the hearsay of the village rumour mill. It is also worth mentioning that many years have passed between the events of 1913/4 and the time of the voice-over narration, with the voice-over narration's subjectivity increasing with the growing distance to the actual events. The second of Bordwell's factors is the narrator's self-consciousness or awareness of an audience. This is made patently clear in the first sentence of the voice-over narration: “I don't know if the story I want to tell you is entirely true.” The elderly teacher recognises that he is addressing an audience and he understands that others will assess him on what he says. The explicatory nature of the narration therefore makes sense: he wants to explain what happened so that his audience can understand. The third factor is the narrator's communicativeness or how forthcoming he is with information. With regards to certain pieces of information, *The White Ribbon's* narrator is very accommodating: dates and times of the year; events in village life; his feelings for Eva. However, other information he is less willing to divulge, such as

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<sup>26</sup> See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985), 57-61.

<sup>27</sup> Examples include the Teacher's interactions with Eva, his discussion with Erna, most of the festivities at the Harvest Festival.

<sup>28</sup> The intimate familial scenes in the Pastor's house, Doctor's house, Farmer's House, Steward's house and Baron's estate being cases in point.

his feelings towards others in the village, his own feeling about events, as well as his own history since 1914. He also never openly criticises or doubts his younger self.<sup>29</sup> Although the latter is outside of the 1913-1914 setting of the film, it is still noteworthy for its absence, especially after the narrator's openly cryptic statement at the outset that the events in Eichwald "could perhaps clarify certain things that happened in this country." With regard to Bordwell's three factors of knowledge, self-consciousness and communicativeness, several hallmarks of unreliability are met: the narrator's knowledge is restricted and subjective; he is self-conscious; and he displays a lack of communicativeness on certain topics.

Phelan and Martin identify six types of unreliability that the audience assesses with their own particular values and beliefs: misreporting (falsely reporting events), misreading (making mistakes of perception), misregarding (falsely evaluating events), underreporting (not telling enough about what is happening), underreading (failing to understand events) and underregarding (making incomplete value judgments). The first three concern the narrator spreading misinformation, the second three involve the narrator omitting to mention certain information. The closest one could come to an example of the first three in *The White Ribbon* is the elderly Teacher's misguided statement that Klara was "feverish" and "weakened" after her fainting fit. Whilst he says this, we see her, apparently neither feverish nor weakened, walk into her father's study and kill his pet bird. Outside of this example, nothing that the narrator says is so patently false as to be openly contradicted by the rest of the film. Underreporting and underreading are ripe for further discussion. The voice-over narrator makes an open admission of underreading by failing to understand the broader meaning of events. In his own words: "I don't know if the story I want to tell you is entirely true [...] a lot of it is still obscure and many questions remain unanswered." Some important events are not mentioned at all by the narrator: the fire on the estate, the Doctor's abuse of his daughter, the Doctor's sexual relationship with the Midwife, and the falling apart of the Farmer's family. Their absence is either a case of underreporting if the narrator knew of these events but did not mention them or underreading if the narrator was unaware of these

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<sup>29</sup> Williams, "Aberrations of Beauty," 48. However he does seek to explain some of his actions.

events. By couching so much of his voice-over narration in dry description and specific detail, by limiting his more verbose, emotional statements to pining over Eva and the feelings of the village community as a whole, the voice-over narrator demonstrates a reticence to discuss his own opinions. What does he actually think about the Pastor, the Baron and the violence and abuse he is aware of? According to Phelan and Martin's diagnosis of unreliability, several types are identifiable in the voice-over narrator of *The White Ribbon*.

Olson draws a distinction between fallible narrators, whose unreliability is born from situational limitations, and untrustworthy narrators, who are unreliable because of behavioural traits or self-interest.<sup>30</sup> It is arguable that the narrator in *The White Ribbon* exhibits elements of both fallibility and untrustworthiness. It is clear that external circumstances make him, to a certain extent, fallible: he is not present for all the events he talks about and he must naturally rely on the eyewitness accounts of other people. The more controversial question concerns where the narrator is dispositionally unreliable or untrustworthy. Because we are not given insight into other characters' thoughts, there is subjectivity to how the film discloses information. The voice-over narration contributes to the sympathetic portrayal of the Teacher in the film, gaining empathy through verbalising his romantic feelings for Eva and providing a commentary on his seemingly dogged attempt to solve the mystery of the violent attacks. This insight into his character does not make him unreliable per se, however the vagueness and limited nature of the voice-over narration can create doubt in the mind of the audience, who may be sceptical about what has been consciously omitted or painted over in a good light.

Unreliability itself is very contextually dependent. Both the context of production and the context of reception impact on values and norms and what is considered 'normal' behaviour, as Zerweck has shown.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, a film like *The White Ribbon* has a quintessentially European context of production<sup>32</sup> and

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<sup>30</sup> Greta Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators," *Narrative* 11(1) (January 2003): 102.

<sup>31</sup> Bruno Zerweck, "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction," *Style* 35(1) (2001): 158

<sup>32</sup> An Austrian/French/German/Italian co-production by an Austrian/German director who has also worked extensively in France.

reception.<sup>33</sup> This means that it is important not to downplay certain elements that European filmmakers and audiences would be well aware of. In particular, the somewhat abrupt ending to the narration, with the narrator's unwillingness to disclose what happened to himself after the First World War, must be seen in light of modern European history. Many have drawn connections between the content of the film and what subsequently happened in Germany and Austria in particular,<sup>34</sup> yet few have seen the narrator's silence on what he did or did not do during the Nazi period in a similar light. It is mentioned here because it plays directly to his unreliability: someone who is concerned about his past is likely to sanitise his account when speaking to an audience.<sup>35</sup>

Unreliability is often an instinctive reaction to a text and quantifying and qualifying it is often an imprecise process. The threshold is very high to call a narrator unequivocally reliable or unreliable, and often the audience is not given sufficient information to make a complete judgment. What can be stated wholeheartedly is that the narrator in *The White Ribbon* evidences many unreliable characteristics that leave it open to an audience to question what he says in the film's voice-over narration. Evidence of unreliability naturally complicates how the film is understood, infusing uncertainty as to the meaning of the film. With the detailed preceding analysis of voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon* in mind, it is this question of meaning – a question that commandeered such attention in the reviews and statements about *The White Ribbon* in the media – to which this thesis will again turn.

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<sup>33</sup> Over 85% of the box office returns for the film came from ticket sales in European countries, which presumably reflects the markets in which the film was heavily promoted.

<sup>34</sup> See Chapter 1, where many such comments are detailed.

<sup>35</sup> This idea will be further developed in the next chapter.

# VI

## Nationality, History and Memory: The Meaning of *The White Ribbon*

The various reactions to *The White Ribbon* were canvassed in the second chapter of this thesis. Whilst they originated from different sources, were written in different languages, varied in length and were focused on different elements, one common thread was evident: they all discussed the meaning of the film. In these discussions both nationality – “national origin or identity”<sup>1</sup> – and history – “the formal record or study of past events, esp. human affairs”<sup>2</sup> – were routinely invoked, most obviously in reviewers’ and academics’ references to the film’s foreshadowing of the Nazi period. Whereas national and historical dimensions were sought for clarification, the film’s voice-over narration was strangely sidelined and left unmentioned in the great majority of reviews. More than anything else in the film, the voice-over narration embodies the concept of memory: “the faculty by which things are remembered; the capacity for retaining, perpetuating, or reviving the thought of things past.”<sup>3</sup> A significant part of the film’s meaning lies in the elderly Teacher’s memory of things past, in his recollection of village life so many years ago. Therefore the concept of memory, alongside nationality and history, must be included in any analysis. By focusing on the voice-over narration, this chapter will explore two important questions under the umbrella of nationality, history and memory. Is *The White Ribbon* specifically German or can it equally be interpreted into other national contexts? What meaning can be drawn from *The White Ribbon*’s recreation of the past?

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, s.v., “nationality.”

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, s.v., “history.”

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, s.v., “memory.”

## Nationality – The Question of Germany

*The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.<sup>4</sup>*

– Ernest Renan

Is *The White Ribbon* a quintessentially German film? With a German-born, Austrian director who has worked extensively in France and production companies from Germany, Austria, France and Italy, the film has obvious pan-European production credentials. *The White Ribbon's* setting and context provide lots of scope for discussion. On the one hand, the film never ventures outside close proximity of the fictitious village of Eichwald, a self-reliant and autonomous crucible of violence, an abstract construct isolated from identifiable cities, states or governments, with allegorically-named inhabitants lacking in psychological depth. Therefore, it is understandable that many reviewers and academics, Haneke himself included, presented the film more as an exploration of topics such as ideology, violence, childhood psychology and indoctrination in general terms, not tied to any one national context. On the other hand, the film is in the German language and it is set in 1913/4, two contextual elements that can lead to a different interpretation, one that is narrower in scope and sees the film exploring the specific pathology of German fascism in the early twentieth century. In this way, the discussions on *The White Ribbon* mirror those surrounding earlier films: whether *Hidden* and *Code Unknown* present a particularly Parisian paradigm, where *The Seventh Continent*, *Benny's Video* and *71 Fragments in a Chronology of Chance* are set, whether *The Piano Teacher* is properly described as French, Austrian or European, and whether the change of setting, actors and the inclusion of two extra letters in the title makes *Funny Games US* any different to the original *Funny Games*.

However, there remains one important difference between the discussions on previous films and this one: *The White Ribbon* has a voice-over

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<sup>4</sup> From a lecture given at the Sorbonne on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 1882 entitled "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?".

narrator. This factor proves determinative in any exploration of the film's national context, as several statements by the elderly Teacher invite a German reading to the exclusion of all others. When the narrator tells the audience that events in the village "could perhaps clarify certain things that happened *in this country*," it is an invitation to find a pathology for *German* extremism. In this light, the film brings to mind the analyses that were influential after the Second World War – by Arendt<sup>5</sup>, Adorno<sup>6</sup> and Reich<sup>7</sup> – that saw things such as childhood violence, sexual assault, dictatorial parenting and psychological aberrations as precursors to, or causation for, authoritarianism, totalitarianism and fascism, with Arendt, Adorno and Reich using the German example as a primary focus. A film that sought to explore the causes of the German reaction to dictatorship was *Die Welle*<sup>8</sup>, released a year before *The White Ribbon*. A high school teacher creates an unusual experiment with his class to simulate life under a totalitarian dictatorship, which quickly spirals out of control and leads to violence. The fact that the film made over \$20 million in ticket sales in Germany alone, with over 2.3 million tickets sold, emphasises the importance this subject matter – how a population's children can be psychologically unhinged and manipulated to do unseemly acts – has in the German context.<sup>9</sup>

The narrator's constant comments about the collective feeling of the village – that the disappearance of Rudolph "upset everyone" for example – is redolent of a familiar German historical scenario: the absolving of individual responsibility for collective feeling. In 1967, two German psychologists, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, published a popular and influential study, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (the Inability to Mourn).<sup>10</sup> The basic premise of the work was that, whilst there was an official recognition of responsibility by the West German government, there had been no individual recognition by Germans of responsibility in Nazi evil. The restriction of emotional responses to a

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> T.W. Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950).

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> *Die Welle or The Wave*, directed by Dennis Gansel (2008, Germany: IFC, 2011), DVD.

<sup>9</sup> The decision to make this film and its subsequent financial success are even more interesting when one considers that the film is actually based on an earlier American film, which used real events at a Californian High School as inspiration.

<sup>10</sup> My translation. Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (München: Piper Verlag GmbH, 2004).

community or national level – “the landowner’s speech frightened the locals...” – denies private emotional engagement (we do not know if the Teacher himself was frightened) and abrogates individually directed culpability (no one child or parent is singularly responsible).

The abrupt narration at the end of the film, where the narrator says he was drafted into war service, sold his father’s house and opened a tailor’s shop and never saw any of the villagers again, also finds a German historical precedent. The narrator’s inability, from a post-war perspective, to discuss his experiences during and after the First World War can be seen as part of a wider, particularly German trend:

In the circumstances of 1945 in a continent covered with rubble, there was much to be gained by behaving as though the past was indeed dead and buried and a new age about to begin. The price paid was a certain amount of selective, collective forgetting, notably in Germany. But then, in Germany above all, there was much to forget.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, it is in particular the German reviews of *The White Ribbon* that exhibit a telling characteristic of contemporary European society, namely an astute awareness of the not so distant past:

The first post-war Europe was built upon deliberate mis-memory – upon forgetting as a way of life. Since 1989, Europe has been constructed instead upon a compensatory surplus of memory: institutionalised public remembering as the very foundation of collective identity.<sup>12</sup>

Several German reviews – but not a single English language review – made the connection between the village’s name of Eichwald and the executed war criminal Adolf Eichmann and the concentration camp Buchenwald. That this connection was made illustrates that the film carries specific associations for a German audience.

Stylistically, the film carries many specifically German influences. The voice-over narration in the film hearkens back to two classics of modern German literature. Theodor Fontane’s *Effi Briest* is well-known for its realist, period

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<sup>11</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Penguin Press, 2005), 62.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 879.

narration which shares many similarities with the elderly Teacher's comments – a foregrounding of dates and events, an emphasis on communal feelings and actions – as evidenced in the similarities in the following comparison between an example of *Effi Briest's* narration and the voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon*:

Ende August war da, der Hochzeitstag (3. Oktober) rückte näher, und sowohl im Herrenhause wie in der Pfarre und Schule war man unausgesetzt bei den Vorbereitungen zum Polterabend.

(The end of August arrived, the date of the wedding (October 3rd) came closer, and in the manor, rectorate and school the preparations continued without pause for the eve-of-the-wedding party).<sup>13</sup>

After those two days in July, life in the village got back to normal. The daily harvesting chores exhausted everyone.

The other literary influence is Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. This thesis has already discussed the structural and thematic similarities between the two texts, born from the elderly Teacher's and Zeitblom's belief in the German past's ability to influence future German events. The visual look of the film distinctly emulates the photographs of August Sander, a portrait and documentary photographer who is most well known for his photographs of everyday people during the Weimar Republic in *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (People of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century).<sup>14</sup> These photos eschew names and contextual details and instead are divided into seven sections that mirror *The White Ribbon's* use of allegorical titles: Der Bauer, Der Handarbeiter, Die Frau, Die Stände, Die Künstler, Die Großstadt, and Die letzten Menschen (The Farmer, The Skilled Tradesman, Woman, Classes and Professions, The Artists, The City, and The Last People).<sup>15</sup> In terms of cinematic forbears, two films are obvious influences on *The White Ribbon* and, whilst not German, have clear connections to modern Germany history. Henri-Georges Clouzot's film *Le Corbeau*<sup>16</sup> (The Raven) concerns a small village in the French countryside where poison-pen letters lead to accusations between the villagers

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Susanne Lange, *August Sander: Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (München: Schirmer/Mosel Verlag GmbH, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> The Last People covers the disabled, orphans, war veterans and the homeless, among others.

<sup>16</sup> *Le Corbeau or The Raven*, directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot (1943, France: Tobis Films, Paris, 2004), DVD.

concerning abortion and illicit affairs, which then bring on threats of violence. There, too, it is the children who are ultimately responsible, however the whole village is brought into disrepute. Filmed during the German occupation, co-produced by a German production company and released in 1943, the film was banned after the war, and so was the director from filming in France.<sup>17</sup> Made in the same year in Nazi-occupied Denmark and similarly showing the fractious nature of a society under pressure, Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vregens Dag*<sup>18</sup> (Day of Wrath) is set in a small Danish village in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century during a series of witch trials. The accusatory and violent climate – echoing the voice-over narrator's statement in *The White Ribbon* about a "flood of mutual suspicions...some attempts at denunciation" – is clearly a metaphor of the war years under German occupation. The film's focus on social realism, its use of religious imagery and the contrast of light and dark in the black and white film stock are all similarly hallmarks of *The White Ribbon*. Thanks to these stylistic influences and, most importantly, the voice-over narration, *The White Ribbon* remains, as its untranslated subtitle states, A German Children's Story; a film where the national context remains resolutely present.

### **History and Memory – Recreating the Past**

*The White Ribbon* is a history film<sup>19</sup> that seeks to recreate the past, specifically one year in the village of Eichwald, in 1913-1914. In order to understand how the film does this, the interplay between the voice-over narration and the rest of the film, which has animated so much of the preceding discussion, once again proves particularly relevant. The film presents two different ways of recreating

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<sup>17</sup> The bans were issued "for its perceived vilification of French rural communities." The film challenged the belief of a rural population wholeheartedly united against a foreign invader, and painted a complex picture of collaboration and resistance. Both bans were lifted in 1947.

<sup>18</sup> *Vregens Dag or Day of Wrath*, directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer (1943, Denmark: American Zoetrope DVD Labs, 2001), DVD.

<sup>19</sup> I am applying the definition offered by Natalie Zemon Davis, "Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," *The Yale Review* 86 (1986-87): 459. She states, "by history films I mean those having as their central plot documentable events, such as a person's life or a war or revolution, and those with a fictional plot but with a historical setting intrinsic to the action."

the past: through the oral account of the voice-over narrator, and through the physical depiction of the setting and the events that took place in Eichwald. Although it can seem inviting to fall back on old stereotypes – the oral ‘telling’ of the voice-over narration is subjective and unreliable, the visual depiction of events is ‘showing’ and more objective – the reality is, as always, quite different.

The film’s voice-over narration recreates the past through the oral communication of the elderly Teacher’s personal memories. With the concept of memory, subjectivity and uncertainty are placed centre-stage:

Memory is inherently contentious and partisan: one man’s acknowledgment is another’s omission. And it is a poor guide to the past.<sup>20</sup>

The narrator opens the film with a guarded admission about the limitations of his voice-over narration and his own personal memories:

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, a lot of it is still obscure and many questions remain unanswered.

The narrator’s opening statement raises the spectre of unreliability, one that this thesis has found to be well founded in the narrator’s omissions and manner of delivery. First and foremost, unreliability seeks to heighten the awareness of the audience to the fact that absolute authenticity is unattainable:

The phenomenon of the unreliable narrator...has changed considerably in post-war literature. It could be argued that the representation of narrators’ illusions and difficulties of “making sense” of their fictional worlds is not unreliable at all, but a reliable presentation of the highly problematic human position with regard to cognitive, epistemological, and even ontological certainties.<sup>21</sup>

Whilst it suffers from a degree of inherent unreliability, the voice-over narration also causes the entire film to be unbalanced in the communication of the narrative. Because the characters have no psychological depth and seem bound to their allegorical titles, the fact that we are given insight into the motivations

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<sup>20</sup> Judt, *Postwar*, 829.

<sup>21</sup> Bruno Zerweck, “Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction,” *Style* 35(1) (2001): 163.

and feelings of only one of them – albeit in a limited form, as the elderly narrator and the Teacher are versions of the same character, not one and the same – amplifies the one-sided and subjective nature of the information the audience absorbs. The fact that the Teacher is marginalised and sidelined in nearly every group shot – at the harvest festival, in the church – emphasises all the other villagers, who are often socially more important, often privy to more information, often witness to other events and, importantly, have their own stories, their own emotions and motivations, the knowledge of which is consciously denied to the audience.

In the film's visuals and sound design, there is a detailed, precise recreation of the past, from intricate costumes, non-anachronistic period dialogue, accurate sound design and natural lighting.<sup>22</sup> As presented in the cinema, history is normally concerned with important people during momentous occasions. A good example of this phenomenon is illustrated by the following plot summaries of three films set in a specific historical context, released in the first half of 2012 in Australia:

A look at how the intense relationship between Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud gives birth to psychoanalysis.<sup>23</sup>

A chronicle of a young man's rise to power in Paris via his manipulation of the city's most influential and wealthy women.<sup>24</sup>

A young queen, who is married to an insane king, falls secretly in love with her physician – and together they start a revolution that changes a nation forever.<sup>25</sup>

The contrast to *The White Ribbon* is clear. In Haneke's film, the characters are normal people, not identifiable famous figures, and nothing happens in the film that can be placed on a standard historical timeline.<sup>26</sup> In its portrayal of

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<sup>22</sup> See Michael Haneke, interview by Geoff Andrew, *British Film Institute Live*, January 3, 2010, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/live/video/135>. Haneke describes in detail the elaborate research he undertook before making the film, and the fact that he looked at photos and videos of over 7000 children before selecting the ones who were in the film.

<sup>23</sup> *A Dangerous Method*, directed by David Cronenberg (2011, UK/Germany/Canada/Switzerland: Sony Pictures Classic, 2012), DVD.

<sup>24</sup> *Bel Ami*, directed by Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod (2012, UK/France/Italy), cinema release.

<sup>25</sup> *A Royal Affair*, directed by Nikolaj Arcel (2012, Denmark/Sweden/Czech Republic), cinema release.

<sup>26</sup> The advent of World War I is imposed from outside the film as the characters hear about the assassination of the Archduke and react to it, rather than the characters themselves actively taking part in an identifiable historical event.

everyday lives, its restriction to a local setting and its embodiment of a naturalistic style, *The White Ribbon's* depiction of the past has much in common with the strand of historiography known as 'Alltagsgeschichte.'<sup>27</sup> Beginning in the 1970's and growing in popularity in the following decade, the lives of everyday people were increasingly depicted in academia, museums and in the media.<sup>28</sup> Such accounts of the past allowed "contemporary Germans to identify with the forgotten joys and sorrows of ordinary people"<sup>29</sup> with these historical accounts being aimed at a general audience.<sup>30</sup> Like *Alltagsgeschichte*, *The White Ribbon* seeks a picture of everyday life. The film does this by embodying several cinematic techniques associated with historical authenticity in the cinema. Natalie Davis explains that the "usual marks of historical authenticity" include elaborate period detail in props and costumes, location shooting and use of local, everyday people.<sup>31</sup> However, Davis herself believes this list is incomplete and adds several other attributes to it: reminding viewers of the distance between past and present; suggesting multiple tellings; and showing where knowledge of the past comes from. Interestingly, it is *The White Ribbon's* use of voice-over narration that embodies each of these more detailed authenticity mechanisms. The voice-over narration creates aesthetic distance between the film and the audience by acting as a narrative intermediary from a later and less immediate context than the dramatic setting of the film. It also suggests multiple ways of telling the story, by inserting a different and distinct information track that is sometimes overlapping, sometimes complementary and sometimes divergent from the visuals and sound. Finally, the voice-over narration also provides an ostensible source for the information presented: the elderly Teacher, recounting his memories, at a later date.

*Alltagsgeschichte* often uses memoirs, oral histories, diaries and "eyewitness accounts" as sources.<sup>32</sup> A good example is a groundbreaking study

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<sup>27</sup> This term is commonly translated as "the history of everyday life."

<sup>28</sup> Geoff Eley, "Labor History, Social History, 'Alltagsgeschichte' – Experience, Culture and the Politics of the Everyday – A New Direction for German Social History," *The Journal of Modern History* 61(2) (June 1989): 297-8.

<sup>29</sup> David F Crew, "Alltagsgeschichte: A New Social History 'From Below'?" *Central European History* 22(3-4) (September – December 1989): 395.

<sup>30</sup> Eley "Labor History," 298.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, "Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead," 464.

<sup>32</sup> Eley, "Labor History," 298.

by Lutz Niethammer, who used oral histories to give an account of the history of the Ruhrgebiet between 1930 and 1960.<sup>33</sup> By constantly stressing the context of a particular event – for example “the day after the Doctor’s accident,” “Reformation Day, on the first Sunday of November” – and presenting information in a sequential order as a series of events, the voice-over narration in *The White Ribbon* takes on the characteristics of an oral history, with elements of a memoir and, when he himself was present in a given scene, an eyewitness account. For the elderly Teacher, in his own words, wants to tell a history<sup>34</sup> about “strange events that occurred in our village.” In his belief what happened in Eichwald “could perhaps clarify certain things that happened in this country.” Alltagsgeschichte is similarly predicated on a belief that an individual example – such as the elderly Teacher’s memoirs or the events in Eichwald more generally – is as important as or representative of socio- and geo-political history. *The White Ribbon* and its voice-over narrator present Eichwald as a non-specific German village, representative of other German villages, as the abstract to Stewart’s article elaborates:

The surgical rigor of Haneke’s *The White Ribbon* lays bare the underlying brutality of family life in a German village, microcosm of a social order whose strictures and class resentments fester on the eve of WWI.<sup>35</sup>

In Eichwald, a not particularly noteworthy village in a setting that could be anywhere in north Germany, *The White Ribbon* presents a world where day-to-day concerns are paramount and where “social practice moves to the centre of the stage.”<sup>36</sup> When large processes interrupt – the outbreak of the First World War – they are not caused or instigated by the villagers, but rather passively experienced: in the words of the narrator, “the news spread around the village like wildfire.” The world of *The White Ribbon* is not made up of a simplified chain of cause and effect between important people and distant entities – the narrator’s solemn elocution of the various declarations of war between the

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<sup>33</sup> See Crew, “Alltagsgeschichte,” 397.

<sup>34</sup> The German word “die Geschichte” can mean both a story or a history.

<sup>35</sup> Garrett Stewart, “Pre-War Trauma: Haneke’s *The White Ribbon*,” *Film Quarterly* 63(4) (Summer 2010): 47.

<sup>36</sup> Alf Lüdtkke, “Einleitung: Was ist und wer treibt Alltagsgeschichte?” in *Alltagsgeschichte Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen*, ed. Alf Lüdtkke (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1989), 12.

nation states serves to emphasise their alien artificiality – but a world of everyday concerns, such as social standing, the village rumour-mill, and personal feelings of anger, jealousy and hate transmitted from one individual to another.

*The White Ribbon's* search for historical authenticity is necessarily limited by certain constraints. Some elements cannot be simply depicted, with certain scenes requiring the use of special visual effects, notably the Doctor falling off his horse and several of the shots of the village where modern construction had to be digitally removed. The cinema also brings with it an inherent time constraint, in the fact that a year in the life of the village is synthesised down into two-and-a-half hours of film. By using editing, allegory and symbolism the film is able to hint at deeper meaning, whilst remaining within time limitations. As the analysis in the previous chapter showed, the editing can create meaning in many different ways, such as by imputing causation or highlighting similarities and differences between scenes. The allegorical characters in the film lack psychological depth and are defined by their occupations – redolent of a Brechtian Lehrstück – which hints at further didactic meaning about economic roles and social hierarchy. Eichwald is established as a community based around agrarian and religious practice, with the sirens of history waiting around the corner. Is the white ribbon of the title symbolic of the Jewish star or the Nazi armband or neither?<sup>37</sup> Or is it simply a symbol of control, of purity, of absolutism? The film is permeated with religious symbolism – the Pastor's dead bird in the shape of a crucifix for example – and natural symbolism, with the numerous shots of landscapes at various times of the year. The choice to focus on particular events within the year – the harvest festival, the communion of the older children – further emphasises the religious and agrarian aspects. It is only by summarizing the year around key events – oftentimes the violent acts that remain mysterious to the villagers – that the film can cover the time span that it does. In this, the voice-over narration plays an integral role in reconstructing the past, by connecting different events, providing context, and mentioning certain events that do not physically take place in the film.

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Bradshaw, "The White Ribbon," review of *The White Ribbon*, Michael Haneke, *The Guardian*, November 13, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/nov/12/the-white-ribbon-review>.

Ultimately therefore, the film shows us the different natures of different accounts of the past, from the narrative nature of verbal memories in the voice-over narration, to the detailed recreation of history in the visual and audio aesthetics of the film. Whilst they reconstruct the past in different ways, both are limited in the information they impart and artificial in their reconstruction of the past. The narration, with its subjectivity, its uncertainty and its unreliability, cannot give the full picture, based as it is on memory, which reinforces itself and changes over the years. The rest of the film, with its special effects, its intentional use of editing, its use of allegory and symbolism, and its conscious presentation of only certain scenes and not others, is likewise only able to emulate the past, and remains forever a construction, being a fictional story in a period setting. Therefore, neither the voice-over narration nor the visual depiction is the better guide to the past, as both have their limitations. Throughout its duration, the film sensitizes the audience to the subtle manipulation that takes place in any recreation of the past on screen, and in the absence of a decisive ultimate message, invites viewers to reflect on unanswered questions.

# VII

## Conclusion

A central aim of this thesis was to provide an original contribution to the debate about the meaning of *The White Ribbon* by focusing on the film's voice-over narration. Only ten percent of film reviews mention the voice-over narration and it has not been the subject of any in-depth analysis. There have only been a handful of journal articles on *The White Ribbon*, and when books on Haneke have mentioned the film at all, they have done so only fleetingly. Another aim was to contribute, in a small way, to bringing voice-over narration back from the wilderness. For a technique that has existed in cinema from the very beginning, one that plays such a large role in imparting meaning, the fact that there are very few books devoted to the topic presents a clear gap in scholarship. Two books are also not recent additions to the film studies canon; Kozloff's book *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-over Narration in American Fiction Film* is twenty-four years old; Chion's *The Voice in Cinema* is thirty years old. They also have their own particular interests. Kozloff's analysis is concerned with American fiction films, not European films, and Chion considers many different types of voices in the cinema, not just voice-over narrators. Kozloff and Chion both analyse a representative sample of films with voice-over narration and the space they can give each film is necessarily limited. This thesis, however, seeks to analyse a single film in great depth. Because of these differences, elements of their approaches could be utilised, but an original methodology needed to be constructed.

One section of the analysis was devoted to the characteristics of the voice-over narrator. Applying standard definitions from literature studies – Genette's homodiegetic and heterodiegetic, witness-narrator and protagonist-narrator – it

demonstrated that it is difficult to fully ascribe the elderly Teacher to any one definition. This is because the voice-over narrator in the film is an interesting hybrid. The narrator and the Teacher are the same person, yet at the same time distinguished from one another by years of knowledge and reflection. Whilst not afforded the omniscient viewpoint of a true detached outsider, he does have the benefit of hindsight. Even though he knows more than his younger self, much remains outside of his grasp. This means that characterising him according to Genette as homodiegetic is overly simplistic, as he also exhibits some characteristics of heterodiegetic narrators. At different times, he acts as a protagonist-narrator and like a witness-narrator. Additionally, he takes on many of the trappings of a framing narrator, but is actually embedded in the broader narrative. More generally, this speaks to the inapplicability of supposedly catchall binary distinctions when talking about the characteristics of cinematic voice-over narrators.

Two other sections dealt with the narrator's voice and content of the voice-over narration, with the aim to qualify even basic assumptions with analysis. Statements like "the voice-over narrator sounds like an old man" or "the voice-over narrator is reflecting on his past" – both found in reviews of the film – were qualified with a discussion on vocal characteristics and grammatical structures respectively. Chion's theory on the vocal characteristics of voice-over narrators was applied, and common thematic concerns in the voice-over narration were detailed. By considering the voice-over in isolation from the rest of the film, a large amount of interesting information could be discussed, information that would be overlooked were the review or analysis to focus predominantly on the rest of the film.

Further sections that detailed the interaction between the voice-over narration and the rest of the film were then analysed. Neither Kozloff nor Chion discuss a single film at great length, so neither had to properly confront the question of whether a long and detailed analysis should be done thematically or chronologically. This thesis decided on a hybrid approach that grouped certain elements together thematically, but then also had longer chronological scene analyses at the end. Whilst Kozloff's idea of a spectrum ranging from overlapping

narration to disparate narration was utilised, this thesis found that these terms are only ever approximations and that, within a given scene, the voice-over narration could alternate dynamically between these different options. In Kozloff's study, she focuses on the relationship between the narration and images. This analysis sought to discuss the voice-over narration's interaction with other film elements in just as much depth. It was found that the voice-over narration has its own interesting relationship with the other sound elements, as well as with the film's editing. Voice-over narration was used, time and again, to foreshadow events and imbue a situation with dramatic irony, to smooth over a sudden scene change and to convey expository information. Scenes with voice-over narration also tended to exhibit similar visual effects. The discussion then proceeded to the question of unreliability. Because there are many different definitions of unreliability and many different ways to identify unreliability, this thesis analysed a variety of approaches from both literature scholars and film scholars. Several were then applied to the voice-over narrator of *The White Ribbon*, namely the theories of Bordwell, Olson, Phelan and Martin and Zerweck. Many hallmarks of unreliability were then diagnosed in *The White Ribbon*'s voice-over narrator.

Using the information gleaned from the analysis of *The White Ribbon*, an interpretation of the film's meaning was put forward around three concepts – nationality, history and memory – and two questions: whether it is a film about Germany and what the film seeks to achieve in its recreation of the past. It was posited that the film's voice-over narration ties the meaning of the film to a German national context. By taking this position, the thesis agrees more with Stewart's belief that the film is a parable of national crisis, rather than Speck's assertion that the film is not about a specific context, but rather an exploration of biopower. With regards to the second question, this thesis showed that *The White Ribbon* recreates the past in two ways: through physical representation with costumes, props, sets, locations and black and white film stock, and through the oral recollections of the voice-over narrator. Whilst a lot of effort went into making the former look authentic, many cinematic techniques – editing, special effects – were also used to overcome physical and time limitations. In the voice-

over narrator's commentary, a recollection of the past was conveyed from oral memory, which was sometimes uncertain, sometimes limited in knowledge, and, as the analysis in this thesis has shown, unreliable. By giving us different versions of the same history, both limited in the amount of information they convey, both not always entirely authentic, *The White Ribbon* invites the audience to fill in the gaps, to seek to understand, and to, in their own way, come to terms with the past.

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