



September 2021

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Recommended Citation

Herling, Bradley L. (2021) "Haneke avec Foucault: The White Ribbon, Religion, and Violence," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss2/5>

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Abstract

This article utilizes Michel Foucault's characterization of the Christian pastorate to examine *The White Ribbon* (2009), directed by Michael Haneke. Foucault's framework assists us in inspecting the nature of the Protestant community depicted in the film, its systems of discipline, repression, and control, and the bond between these systems and the violence that erupts as the plot unfolds. Reading Haneke *avec* Foucault thus sheds light on the broader problem of "religious violence," while also drawing out the sometimes submerged but skillful interpretation of religion proposed by these two *auteurs*.

Keywords

Michel Foucault, Michael Haneke, The White Ribbon, religion and violence, pastorate, religious authority, Christianity and violence, German Protestantism

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Author Notes

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For over three decades, Austrian director Michael Haneke's films have skillfully interrogated consumer capitalism, familial alienation, ethnic conflict, and mass media, culminating in his Oscar-winning *Amour* in 2012 and, most recently, *Happy End* in 2017. However, religion—at least in its more obvious and explicit forms—has largely been absent from his work, with one notable exception: the 2009 tour de force, *The White Ribbon*. In the film, German Protestantism is a dominant force in Eichwald, the small German village that is the center of the action. As the plot unfolds, we as viewers explore the connection between the town's religion and the emergence of an insular cadre that brutalizes unsuspecting victims and terrorizes the community.

Michel Foucault's interventions, particularly the 1977-1978 lecture series *Security, Territory, Population*, can assist us in exposing this connection. The (re)construction of religion in Foucault's work can also be elusive,¹ but in dialogue with *The White Ribbon*, reading Haneke *avec* Foucault, the film becomes an incisive depiction of a religious system of control and enablement. Violence—defined for the purposes of this analysis as an organization of force that perpetrates destructive harm—is a constitutive element of this system, and it has two distinct layers of deployment.

First, the framework of religious authority in the village (the “pastorate,” to use Foucault's term) aims to stamp out transgression, and it uses a variety of violent techniques to achieve this goal. However, in keeping with Foucault's

observations, the governing pastorate also anticipates and *depends upon* disobedience, delinquency, and sin. Despite the perplexity—or perversity—of a system of regulation that expects and even *hopes for* its own violation, this first layer of violent practice remains within a stable “system of the transgressive,” to use Foucault’s provocative phrase from his early work,² or an “economy of every soul’s salvation” from his some of his latest.³ This “system” or “economy” will be the focus of the first part of this analysis.

The second part will examine a realm of spontaneity and liberation that is an unintended outgrowth of the pastorate’s stable system. In Foucault’s early work, this space opened the possibility of “limit experiences” that disrupt the smooth surface of exchange, routine, and regimentation, inspiring novel practices of the self. In Haneke’s film, however, this space is the setting for a theater of cruelty: it contains a series of explosive acts of reprisal that short-circuit the pastoral “system of the transgressive” and afflict the guilty and innocent, but still under the aegis of religious practice and authority. In this realm secrets abound and a distorted version of truth is mirrored back at the stable system—and in reading Haneke *avec* Foucault, we gather important clues about the origins of violent extremism.

The Economy of Authority and Transgression

The Foucauldian themes in Michael Haneke's work have not gone unnoticed. Oliver Speck invokes *Discipline and Punish* in his analysis of *The White Ribbon*, for example, and observes, "everybody seems to be under surveillance and under a constant threat of punishment in the form of torture and imprisonment." Further, "the film consists of short fragments of interpersonal encounters and exchanges that introduce the main characters and map the power structures. Power is foremost patriarchal and clearly hierarchical; the slap in the face is its expression."⁴ *The White Ribbon* is indeed a film about "power structures" and the practices that preserve them. It has often been noted that authority in Eichwald emanates from a set of patriarchal characters—the town doctor; the baron, who employs much of the village on his lands; the baron's steward and his bullying sons; a schoolteacher, the narrator of the film; the (very) occasional policeman; and, of course, the town's Lutheran pastor.⁵

To examine religious authority in the village, however, we need to move beyond *Discipline and Punish* to the *Security, Territory, Population* lectures. In these lectures, Foucault focuses on the broad concept of "governmentality," which represents a more nuanced reconceptualization of "discipline" in the modern social order.⁶ The intimate power to induce and encourage another (or oneself) has a long genealogy, according to Foucault, which was catalyzed by the Christian pastorate.⁷

According to Foucault's account, one of the basic functions of the religious shepherd is to follow and promulgate God's law, but he is also responsible for tailoring God's will to each individual. Guiding the individual is therefore not a matter of following general, anonymous dictates. Instead, it is constituted within the unique relationship between the pastor and each member of his flock. As a result, the authority of the pastor is maximized to the point that "the relationship of the sheep to the person who directs it is one of complete subordination."⁸ This relationship of obedience has obedience itself as its fundamental aim:

The aim of obedience is the mortification of one's will; it is to act so that one's will, as one's own will, is dead, that is to say, so that there is no other will but not to have any will. And this is how Saint Benedict defines good monks, in chapter 5 of his *Rule*: "They no longer live by their free will...in marching under the judgment and the *imperium* of another, they always desire that someone command them."⁹

In *The White Ribbon*, the pastor demands this level of obedience, but when he does not receive it, he engages in stern techniques designed to make his flock—and his children first and foremost—submit.

For example, early in the film, Martin and Klara, the pastor's eldest children, are late for supper. As a result, their father sends the entire family (including his wife and four younger children) to bed without eating because it would be impossible for anyone to enjoy a meal, having heard Martin and Klara's "lying excuses." "I don't know what's worse," the pastor says, "your absence or

your coming back.” The next evening, punishment is issued: ten strokes of the cane. After this “purification,” as the pastor calls it, the two children are forced to wear a white ribbon, Martin on his arm, Klara in her hair, as a reminder of the principles of “innocence and purity.”

At least initially, Martin seems to be the one most deeply affected by his father’s heavy-handed techniques. During the afternoon before his punishment, the village schoolteacher sees him walking on the precarious top rail of a tall wooden footbridge. When questioned about this strange behavior, Martin reveals that he was giving God a chance to kill him, but “he didn’t do it,” so God must be “pleased.” The teacher asks him about why God would want to kill him, but there is no response.

A bit later in the film, we discover that Martin’s situation is even more complicated. He is called into his father’s study and interrogated about some transgression—its nature is at first unclear. The pastor tells a strange story about a boy in a neighboring town who had problems similar to Martin’s: he was always tired, depressed, avoided eye contact, and lied to his parents. This went on for six months, and the boy’s symptoms progressed, until finally, he died. What was the origin of the boy’s malady? According to the pastor, he “had seen someone who was harming the finest nerves of his body in the area where God has erected sacred barriers. The boy imitated this action. He couldn’t stop doing it. In the end he destroyed all his nerves and died of it.” In other words, the boy had been

masturbating. And wasn't Martin doing this also? Martin finally confesses that, yes, he has been doing the same thing. To save Martin from his temptations, the pastor requires that his arms be tied to the bed each night when he goes to sleep.

As Foucault suggests, actions like these have only “an oblique relationship” with religious law¹⁰ and have much more to do with the pastor's individual power to conduct the members of his flock, especially his family. The power of religion in Haneke's film is not the product of theological or doctrinal pronouncement from on high. Instead, in keeping with Foucault's account, Haneke highlights the relationship between pastor and flock as the essential factor in constituting “a subtle economy of merit and fault.”¹¹ This relationship is the crucible of conduction and inducement—pastoral governance.

Foucault examines the “analytical responsibility” that falls upon the pastor, for example: he is responsible for his entire congregation—each individual member of it—and because of this responsibility, “he will also have to consider everything a sheep has done, every merit or fault, as his own act,” in keeping with a “principle of exhaustive and instantaneous transfer.”¹² Here Foucault offers a powerful explanation for the control that the pastor wishes to exercise in *The White Ribbon*: the sins of children fall at his own spiritual doorstep. If his children lack humility and respect, he is responsible, so these failings need to be brought to a halt through the violent force of punishment. In the face of sin he must “manage

the trajectories, circuits, and reversals of merit and fault,”¹³ and if he does not, the economy breaks down.

So, out of a dual and somewhat paradoxical sense of duty and self-interest, the pastoral impulse aims to eradicate all failings, to cleanse all individuals of their sins, and, as a consequence, to do so for the community as a whole, and thus absolve the pastor himself. However, Foucault complicates this picture with an intriguing observation. A “principle of alternate correspondence” also applies to the relationship between the pastor and his community, dictating that waywardness on the part of the sheep is in fact *necessary*: if the flock were perfect, then the pastor would accrue no merit; there would be no need for a shepherd if all of the sheep conformed.

This point is important for the identification of a first layer of violence depicted in *The White Ribbon*, which is situated within a relatively stable system of transgression and punishment: while the pastor is at pains to eliminate transgression, he also anticipates it. Martin and Klara being late for supper gives him a chance to engage in a performance before the entire family that includes statements like “I have to beat you, and the strokes will hurt us more than they hurt you.” When he interrogates Martin about his budding sexual proclivities, he has the stock story of the boy who gets sick and dies at the ready. The pastor is well aware that the violations are coming. He even relishes them, because, following Foucault’s suggestions, they let him practice his vocation.

The white ribbon is another instrument that begs for an occasion to be used. When the children were young, the pastor reports, their mother used to tie a ribbon to them to remind them of the importance of innocence and purity, but he thought that they were “well-mannered” enough to be beyond such childish reminders. “I was wrong,” he says, so it is re-imposed. The practice passes from a gentle motherly reminder into the system of patriarchal discipline, and in between, it is hard to imagine that the pastor actually thought that his children would stay innocent forever and thus the ribbon would always remain in the sewing basket.

Haneke’s portrayal of this looming expectation is evoked, ironically enough, in the schoolteacher’s optimistic voice-over accompanying the happy ritual that unfetters the childrens’ white ribbons in the spring: “we thought of ourselves as united in the belief that life in our community was God’s will and worth living.” Foucault’s analysis, read alongside Haneke’s film, shows that adherence to God’s agent in the community constitutes the security of such beliefs. This necessarily entails oscillations between sin and forceful, corrective punishment at two ends of a bounded, mutually dependent relation.¹⁴

Foucault’s examination of the pastorate contains yet another quintessential characterization. It is the business of the pastor to engage in “spiritual direction”¹⁵ and constant examination of conscience that leads to the “production of an internal, secret, and hidden truth”¹⁶ This practice proves to be the basis for the

pastor's power, as we observe in the memorable interrogation of the boy about his nocturnal forays into "the area where God has erected sacred barriers." We recall the opening gambit—recounting the story about the boy the next village over who "couldn't stop doing it" and as a result "destroyed all his nerves and died of it."

The pastor's naturalized pathology of sexual sin recalls Foucault's colorful description of the hidden meaning elicited in confession in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*:

Discourse...had to trace the meeting line of the body and the soul, following all its meanderings: beneath the surface of the sins, it would lay bare the unbroken nervure of the flesh. Under the authority of a language that had been carefully expurgated so that it was no longer directly named, sex was taken charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed to allow it no obscurity, no respite.¹⁷

This description—and *The History of Sexuality* project in general—builds on Foucault's extensive analysis of masturbation in *Abnormal*, which precisely maps onto the pastor's approach to the "problem," right at the cusp of religious discourse giving itself over to the medicalized body, with the family as the focal point for control and discipline.¹⁸

Haneke brilliantly captures this rupture in his construction of the scene. A crucifix hangs on the wall, just over the boy's right shoulder, as the questioning begins: "What do you think caused these changes that led to that boy's miserable end?" Martin claims that he does not know. "I think you know very well. Won't you tell me? No. Then I will give you the answer." Haneke tightens the shot, as

the pastor gets up from his desk and stands in front of his boy, looking him in the eye, explaining that the boy had been touching himself and thus destroying his nervous system. “I just want to help you. I love you with all my heart...Why did you blush listening to the story of the poor boy?” Martin says that he simply feels sorry for the boy, but surely there must be another reason. “It’s written on your face.” What is it? “Why are you crying? Shall I spare you that confession?” says his father. “Have you been doing what that wretched boy did?” Finally, Martin admits to his transgression.

We can see here that the pastor employs “a technique of...power,” “investigation,” and “the examination of others” that produces “a certain inner truth of the hidden soul” in this scene.¹⁹ The technique first involves the use of the distant story and then a focusing of patriarchal, pastoral power on the individual, which Haneke gives us in his composition of the scene. In this context of “spiritual direction,” or “direction of conscience,” the pastor produces the truth of the confession before the confession itself actually occurs. Martin is *given* the answer and *spared* from a lengthy allocution; the truth resides with the pastor who produces it *in* the boy. As a consequence, a further practice that is designed to remind the boy of this truth, to reinforce the power of the one who elicited it, and to insist on the boy’s good conduct is deployed: tying his hands to the bed at night.

The forms of pastoral guidance that Haneke depicts are most often deplorable, especially because they are exercised on children. Our director relies on the moral shock that his viewers experience as the children are caned, berated, interrogated, tied down, and subjected to public shame. To this extent, these forms of inducement might be characterized as extreme.²⁰ But in the analysis that I have presented thus far, such judgments have to take account of the “economy of merits and faults” that give rise to ritualized practice of discipline and enforcement. The system oscillates between steady state (rules are stated and put into practice), an expansion of the economy (rules anticipate transgressions, transgressions occur, and newly tailored reprisals are invented and employed), and a return to the steady state. Thus the “extreme” acts in this first phase of disciplinary violence depicted in the film result in subjects who are safely “subjected.”

This is *not* the case, however, when the formation of violence shifts into another, more volatile phase, to which we now turn.

Free Play and Counterstrokes

In the late stages of his thought, Foucault often argued that power should not be understood as violent destruction of some target, nor is it reducible to direct physical coercion. These are examples of force, which in fact excludes power

relations.²¹ Power should instead be seen as “an action that acts on actions,”²² an inducement. To this extent, there is always an element of freedom in power relations,²³ or, to be more precise, it is almost always possible to discern *practices* of freedom, for which “[l]iberation” (or we might say “resistance”) “paves the way,”²⁴ giving rise to what Foucault calls a “free play of antagonistic reactions.” Without a doubt, “stable mechanisms” consistently arise and replace this “free play.” “Through such mechanisms,” Foucault argues, recalling his discussion of the pastorate, “one can direct, in a fairly constant manner and with reasonable certainty, the conduct of others.”²⁵ But this stability is prone to breakdowns. If a regime or social system radically constrains the practice of freedom,²⁶ the subject can arrive at a state of “total impotence,” or, alternatively, a new state of confrontation opens up (“free play”).²⁷ This latter eventuality is still a reset of power and its regimes, but now in a newly reconfigured manner that marks moments of significant change (e.g., in the wake of a revolution).

Talal Asad extends these theories in his discussion of “resistance” in *Formations of the Secular*.²⁸ Asad invokes Foucault to make the point that the exercise of power and the experience of suffering are not externalities that are imposed on a subject who is otherwise free to pursue happiness. Instead, resistance is the “‘limit’ of power,” a factor in its unfolding. It can produce a surplus, however, that Foucault described as its “underside” or a “counter-stroke.” “Counter-strokes” may be non-descript or dramatic, but in either case, we are now

pointing towards an excess that transgresses the “system of the transgressive” itself.

The analytical magic of *The White Ribbon* is its presentation of this “free play of antagonistic reactions,” the “underside,” and a series of “counter-strokes” that jar the citizens of the village—and the viewer—because they represent a layer of violence that is profoundly difficult to predict, isolate, or absorb. While Haneke (via the school teacher’s narration) anticipates the transformation of such incidences of “free play” into a new regime of power (namely, the rise of Nazism), the film itself does not establish the closure of a reset, leaving us speculating about life after a sudden insurrection or explosion of violence—life that can go in many different directions.

If Foucault’s observations can help us chart this movement in the film—system/economy to free play/counterstroke—they must be able to account for the actions of Klara, the pastor’s daughter. We recall that early in the film, she is required to wear a white ribbon in her hair because she and her brother are late for supper. A prior demand for obedience (to come home on time) creates its own space for transgression (being late), into which the daughter steps, calling for an expanded and individualized technique of punishment and inducement, the white ribbon. The removal of the ribbon and the renewal of the pastoral rule of obedience (or to use the pastor’s euphemism, “trust”) at the turn of the new year

creates yet another space for transgression, and Klara again falls, but now in a more dramatic fashion.

Later in the film, Klara stands idly by in the schoolhouse as her classmates misbehave. The pastor suddenly enters to teach a confirmation class, and he finds the children behaving like “yelling monkeys.” Klara is blamed for this bad behavior; we can surmise that there is a structural, analogous relation at work here: just as the pastor is responsible for the whole village flock, his eldest daughter is meant to be responsible for the other children. Once order is reestablished, the pastor publicly threatens that she will once again be forced to wear the ribbon. Thus it seems that Klara’s supposed transgression has indeed reinitiated the “system of the transgressive,” and the same cycle will repeat itself: transgression, punishment, renewal.

Instead, now that Klara is publicly identified as a leader of others, something surprising occurs, opening up the antagonistic “free play.” When the pastor enters the schoolhouse, he leads his daughter to the back of the room by the ear and forces her to stand facing the wall. Then he takes his place before her classmates and berates them for their poor behavior. Haneke gives us a medium close-up of the pastor as he makes his pronouncements—we as viewers are seemingly being scolded as well—and then we hear a sudden crash in the back of the room. Haneke quickly cuts to a shot of the classroom from the front, from over the pastor’s shoulder. Klara has fainted, but because of Haneke’s trademark

jagged cut, she has simply disappeared: we *heard* her fall, but we did not *see* it; it is as if we turned our heads too late to see what happened. Klara, in this moment, has disappeared and is now removed from our sight. She has fallen out of stable mechanism of pastoral discipline and now takes up an elusive location in a realm of chaotic “free play of antagonistic reactions.” Haneke seems to be telling us that it is very difficult indeed to catch a glimpse of this dangerous transformation, though it is crucial that the pastor himself must have been witness to it.

Soon after the episode in the schoolhouse, the “counter-stroke” occurs. The pastor enters his study and finds his beloved songbird, Peepsie, on his desk, run through with scissors. In a perverse evocation of the cross, the bird’s wings are spread, and one of the shear blades is driven into the body at the top of the torso; the head lolls to one side, replaced by an empty metal loop. Here we see a clear example of the dynamics at work in the shift from one form of violent practice to another: a creature that is guilty only by symbolic association has received the retaliatory blow.

Klara’s killing of the bird takes its place among a number of other seemingly untraceable “counter-strokes” that plague the village. The first of these shocks opened the film. In a wide shot, the town’s doctor approaches on horseback, and the animal is tripped by a near-invisible wire that has been suspended between two trees in front of his house. The doctor is badly injured and rushed to the district hospital. Later, after his return, Haneke shows the doctor

plying his trade, attending to a sick infant with expertise, if a bit of dispassion. We also discover that he is having an affair with the town's mid-wife, Fräulein Wagner (his wife has died some five years beforehand during childbirth), and in one scene, after they have rather mechanical sex, they share a measure of mutual affection, eliciting our sympathy. Why would someone want to hurt him?

Soon enough the dark side of the doctor's personality reveals itself. He tires of the midwife and subjects her to a vicious verbal attack. Even more disturbingly, Haneke constructs a monstrous inversion of the clinic: the doctor molests his fourteen-year-old daughter, Anna, in his exam room. These abuses seem to shed light on the doctor's mysterious "accident": some secret transmission of reprisal has moved backwards through the narrative, establishing a basis for the attack. This suspicion is heightened when a core group of the village's children bustle off after school to "help" Anna after her father's mishap, making a rather ominous appearance at her window. It is Martin and Klara, the village pastor's eldest children, who are most interested in her condition.

On the day after this incident, the matriarch of the Felders, a family of local farmers in the employ of the town's baron, falls through the floor while working in his saw mill and dies. The eldest Felder son, Max, claims that the baron's negligence is somehow to blame for his mother's death, but nothing comes of his anger until the end of the summer. At that point, the village gathers at the baron's estate to celebrate the harvest, and as the merry-making proceeds,

Max hacks the baron's cabbage patch to bits with a scythe. As the villagers inspect the damage, the core group of children, Klara, Martin, and the children of the baron's steward, Ferdinand, Georg, and Erna, once again appear in the background and then move on, accompanied by the baron's flaxen-haired son, Sigi.

Just as July brought a dyad of disturbing events (the doctor's injury and the death of Mrs. Felder), now the harvest festival also brings the destruction of the cabbage patch and another, much more brutal act. Night falls, and Sigi is missing. After a lengthy search, the boy is found suspended upside-down and caned in the saw mill. The baron later speaks about this assault before the church congregation, calling for the truth to be brought out, and to everyone's surprise, he exonerates Max Felder. Felder destroyed the cabbage patch, but the baron acknowledges that he has an alibi for the time of the attack on Sigi. The baron goes on to link the assault to the doctor's accident earlier in the year. The mystery persists and deepens. As it turns out, the only clue that lingers for the viewer is the children taking stock of the cabbage patch, just as they had come to the doctor's house in the wake of his accident.

The climax of this rash of violence is reached after Erna, the daughter of the baron's steward, confides in the schoolteacher that she has dreams that seem to come true—nightmares about Sigi being hurt, her infant brother falling ill (which happened, calling for the doctor's treatment), and Karli, the mid-wife's

son, who is afflicted with Down syndrome, being tortured. At the time, the teacher dismisses these supposed premonitions, but then Erna's last dream becomes an awful reality: Karli is found in the woods one night, blinded and mutilated. A message is pinned to his writhing body, quoting the Hebrew Bible: "For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" (Ex. 20.5, Deut. 5.9).

These occurrences embody the intimate but convoluted relation between pastoral power and the emergence of extreme acts of violence. It is important, first, to focus on the economy of obedience and transgression, which is so essential to Foucault's account of the pastorate. In Klara's case, one cycle of transgression, reprisal, and reconciliation unfolds, opening the possibility of yet another one. Her initial "crimes" do not increase significantly in magnitude (being late for supper and letting her classmates run amuck), but when the system presses down repetitively, a surplus is created, and her final response—killing Peepsie—is vicious. The suggestion is that the tighter the knot, the more rigid and relentless the "stable mechanism" of conduction and inducement, the more dramatic the "counter-strokes" that attempt to unravel it.

To this extent, there is indeed continuity with the pastoral order, the "system of the transgressive," because these acts represent some kind of response or reaction. But even more fundamentally, they manifest a transmutation of obedience from the established source of outward truth-production (the pastor) to

a secret, esoteric leader. We recall the passage cited earlier, which Foucault highlights in his account of the compliance that is demanded by the shepherd: “They [good monks] no longer live by their free will...in marching under the judgment and the *imperium* of another, they always desire that someone command them.” This line is an important clue to solving the mystery in *The White Ribbon*, which involves a transfer of obedience from one master to another.

Haneke never explicitly reveals the culprits, but it is strongly suggested that the pastor’s children are the prime instigators. Given the clues that Haneke leaves us, we can easily imagine that Martin strung the wire that trips the doctor’s horse, as retribution for the abuse he has perpetrated on his daughter. After being inspired by Max Felder’s destruction of the baron’s cabbage patch, we surmise that the sons of the baron’s steward are encouraged to attack Sigi. And finally, given the numerous similarities between the killing of the pastor’s bird and the maiming of poor Karli, it is plausible that Klara herself commits both acts, or, in the case of Karli, encourages others to do so. The essential insight here is that the “underside” of this community—constituted by its children—has subordinated itself to “the *imperium* of another,” the authority of an unknown ringleader who is very likely the pastor’s daughter.²⁹

So the pastorate has created a distorted image of itself, an esoteric cult, as it were, that trades on a more explosive version of violent discipline and authorizing discourse. To mark the qualitative *difference* of this extreme cadre

and its practice, however, we must probe further. While the explanation of the crimes presented above holds up, we cannot be *certain* about it, especially when it comes to identifying individual perpetrators. As a consequence, Garrett Stewart has argued that the “narrative works to distribute the banality of...evil across a mesh of oblique culpability until its depravities are not just isolated but generalized...”³⁰ This “generalized” depravity constitutes a break from the standard operation of the pastoral order, or even an analogous version of it led by the daughter.

Foucault’s account tells us that the pastorate focuses paradoxically on *both* the whole and the individual in equal measure, for “it is true that the shepherd directs the whole flock, but he can only really direct it insofar as not a single sheep escapes him...He does everything for the totality of his flock, but he does everything also for each of the sheep of the flock.”³¹ In his account of the coeval attention paid to “all and each,” *omnes et singulatim*, within the pastorate, Foucault emphasizes the radical individuation of the members of the flock (the “each”). Individuals are subjected in relation with the pastor, who must take account of their unique character, weaknesses, and limitations. We must also assume, however, that individuals are *also* subjected to the *flock*: the failing of one is the failure of the whole, and Foucault does acknowledge the paradoxical possibility that “saving the whole entails, if necessary, the sacrifice of a sheep that could compromise the whole.”³² Hence the need for strict obedience to hold the

one and the many together, “a field of generalized obedience, strongly individualized in each of its manifestations.”³³

In the “counter-strokes” that Haneke presents us with, there is much that is continuous with this structure, even if it is distorted and exaggerated. These are acts of “generalized [*dis*]obedience,” but they proceed under the “*imperium* of another”; disobedience within one order is obedience within another. Further, as Foucault’s analysis suggests, it appears that some sacrifices are necessary, according to the hidden ethos of the disguised insurrectionist cell. These are scapegoating gestures, the flock seeking to sacrifice individual sheep for the good of the whole. But we must make two important differentiations from this Girardian reading: first, there is no cleansing or redemption that flows from these acts: they are sacrifices without an economy or merit. And second, there is a striking lack of “individualization” that takes place within this “generalized field of [*dis*]obedience.” From a Foucauldian perspective, this second point isolates the core of the Eichwald pastorate’s downfall: the effacement of individualization, which is essential to the maintenance of the pastoral system. Instead of truths being brought out in individuals through the direction of the pastor, the acts of mayhem in *The White Ribbon* have a striking anonymity. A gap has been opened up within the religious order—not necessarily in order to overturn it or overtake it, but instead to run alongside it as a distorted, grotesque reflection.³⁴

We recall that Foucault's account of the pastorate included an analysis of the "reciprocal relations" that obtain between the shepherd and his flock. This co-implication with his community means that the pastor exposes himself to great spiritual risk: the pastor becomes vulnerable by engaging in direction and is more prone to lapses himself. Just as the pastorate is obviated if all the sheep are perfect, the pastor too, while perhaps ideally free of any fault, in practice should in fact "have imperfections" and freely and publicly admit these limitations to his community, conveying his own humility and thus edifying his followers.³⁵

These operations are almost entirely absent in *The White Ribbon*. In coming to grips with his daughter's malevolence, for example, the pastor deflects his responsibility and risk. After the bird is killed, there are no more cycles of punishment, no more white ribbons. The pastor does not confront the act, for to acknowledge it would be a damning self-indictment. In fact, Haneke quickly moves to the scene of Klara's First Communion: instead of being tagged with the shame of the white ribbon, marking the re-entry into a "stable mechanism" of authority and transgression as a penitent, her acceptance of the host consecrates her inscrutable act. In Haneke's construction of the scene, this is hardly a ritual of forgiveness, readmittance to the community, or return to paternal love. Instead, quite to the contrary, the pastor wipes his hands of the matter and leaves it to a higher authority, for as Foucault surmises, opening a very Protestant moment in his analysis, "neither the pastor's nor his sheep's certain and definitive salvation

is guaranteed...In the end, the actual production of salvation eludes one's grasp; it is entirely in God's hands."³⁶

The pastor's radical deflection of his structural role is heightened when the schoolteacher confronts him with his suspicions near the end of the film. The teacher has drawn the conclusion that the children of the town—and the pastor's children in particular—are responsible for the wave of violence. The tables are turned as the teacher slowly pieces together the series of events for the pastor, producing the truth in him and forcing him to pronounce it himself: "You're saying that your pupils, my children included, committed these crimes. Is that right?" "Do you know what you're saying? Do you really know..." At this crucial moment, in this moment of hesitation, the pastor turns away from his interrogator and looks out the window. He knows that the teacher is right, and he stands over the birdcage, which contains a new bird, a gift from his youngest son after Peepsie's death, the emblem of a renewal that will now simply not fly.

In this moment, the pastoral "economy of merit and fault" should continue its circulation: the pastor should acknowledge the truth of the schoolteacher's suspicions, or at least the possibility that they are true, and take on the responsibility of eliciting the hidden reality from the young members of his flock. In addition, he must take account of himself and acknowledge his own failings, in his own conscience, and publicly, before his whole community. Only then, perhaps, could we imagine appropriate acts of penance all around, and a "stable

mechanism” of conduct and discipline would once again emerge to rein in the “free play of antagonistic reactions” that has been set loose.

This shepherd follows a different course, and the Eichwald pastorate displays its fatal flaw, the opening to the brutal extremity that has been its outgrowth. Haneke’s pastor lashes out at the teacher: “If you ever dare to bother others with this, if you ever accuse respectable families and their children, and denounce them publicly, I’ll make sure, take my word for it, that you go to prison.” The schoolteacher is then accused of “repulsive” thoughts that could only emanate from a “sick mind” and summarily dismissed. Invoking modern disciplinary power and the othering effects of pathology as an accusation, the pastor abdicates his role.³⁷

We might imagine that this lack of probity about the “hidden truth” has in fact been a deep problem all along. Or, to be more precise, maintaining a blunt version of power has taken precedence over “spiritual direction,” which would elicit the deeper truths embedded in subjects, and “alternate correspondence,” which would have the pastor disclose his own faults and failings. The “underside” emerges as subjects play their own punitive game, but the children are not called to account, because, in turn, religious authority is not willing to open itself to the risk that is central to its vocation.

There is one other feature to the deeper layer of violence portrayed in the film that deserves our attention: the work of the secret, extremist cadre proceeds

with intense ideological absolutism. At one point Foucault tells us that the pastorate “inculcates...the truth of a dogma at the very moment it extorts...the secret of...inner truth.”³⁸ The discovery of “inner truth” has been disrupted in Eichwald; the “counter-strokes” erupt without clear agency, identity, and accountability—but they still occur under “the truth of a dogma,” which is manifested in theological discourse. As we have already seen, Klara’s acceptance of First Communion ultimately ratifies her actions; the biblical axiom underwrites the attack on Karli: the crimes of the fathers extend outward to later generations. As del Rio puts it, “As they appoint themselves judges and executioners of others...the children do not interrupt, but rather make their own the father’s priestly stance and its reliance on an abstract book of moral/religious law.”³⁹

Perhaps most vivid on this point: we will recall that on the day that Martin is to receive his caning for being late for supper, the schoolteacher sees him walking on the bridge. When questioned about what drove him to this dangerous act, Martin claims that he wanted to give God a chance to kill him, but God didn’t do it, so it is implied that he has received a pardon for some terrible misdeed. Upon first viewing the film, we might very well assume that the poor boy is seeking expiation to trump his domineering father, who is about to brutalize him for a minor transgression (being late for supper). Looking back, however, we know that Martin’s crimes are likely more serious: he has already stepped outside

of the regime of pastoral discipline and now seeks God's direct acceptance for injuring the doctor—and in his mind, he gets it.⁴⁰

With the imprimatur of religious discourse, the appropriated emblem of the “truth of the dogma,” the violent practice of the extremist becomes all the more dangerous. As I have described it, this rupture within the pastorate is a potent form of religious extremity because its range is dangerously self-permitting. If disobedience is both general and non-individualized, and no truths about it can or wish to be told, then the subjects of this metastasized pastorate are radically unaccountable, but their acts are still authorized by a theological aegis that has been bequeathed to them by their tradition.

Excursus on Silence and Speaking Truth

We can imagine many alternate Foucauldian endings to Haneke's *Kindergeschichte*. In a medieval finale, the baron orders the village purged and sovereignty is viciously reinstated, with an accompanying orgy of public humiliation and executions. A modern scenario has the police investigate the crimes and collect all the relevant evidence; then the courts have their say and the criminals are put in punitive institutions for “rehabilitation.” In a more contemporary biopolitical ending, “experts” are called in to scrutinize the village,

and they recommend broad surveillance but also predict, based on statistics, that a certain degree of violent, insubordinate behavior is to be expected.

Haneke offers us none of these resolutions, of course. World War I cuts the mystery short, and we are left with the haunting reminder that in another twenty years the children of this pastorate will join another regime, another cycle of atrocity, but on a much grander and more monstrous scale. The Nuremberg Laws and then Krystallnacht and then the Holocaust are the next evolutions of the community depicted in the film writ large, generated in thousands of Eichwalds all throughout Germany.

These world-historical intimations form the horizon of Haneke's investigations in *The White Ribbon*, but at a more intimate level, we might focus on the *silences* that bring the film to a close—and this too is a Foucauldian ending. As Haneke has affirmed, “Refusing to communicate is a terrorist act that triggers violence.”⁴¹ As we have seen above, within the Eichwald pastorate, “communication,” in the form of pronouncements, denunciations, interrogations, and extracted confessions, is not without its terrorizing effects. However, we can discern Haneke's broader point, for the genuine “terrorism” in Eichwald emerges within a shroud of non-disclosure that is a central feature of the second layer of violence I have described. In the dialectic of first layer, a ritualized game unfolds that keeps its players in circulation with each other. While there may be nothing pleasant or edifying about corporal punishment, public shaming, or the extraction

of truth in the pastoral confessional, in these cases, at the very least, the dialectic exists. As soon as the children in Eichwald no longer confess, however, the situation becomes dangerous. In Haneke's portrayal, the children refuse to admit their misdeeds, and he never even depicts the children talking amongst themselves, conspiring, talking about what has happened, what they have done, and so on. The second layer of violence has a generalized, ambient character where much is left unspoken and unprofessed, and it seems to have a life of its own once it emerges.

If Haneke is right in the spirit of his statement, then we might imagine that an antidote to the silences of extremism is in fact *speaking*, some ritual or form of truth-production that would lay the whole dynamic bare. Foucault's last lectures were in fact devoted to precisely this theme, *parrhesia* among the Greeks, or "speaking frankly." According to Foucault, the parrhesiast speaks the truth without hesitation and does so at the risk of ruining the relationship with the person who is addressed, even risking violence and death in the process.⁴² Perhaps it was the child, Erna, in Haneke's film who came closest to performing this role, when she told the schoolteacher about her dream that Karli would be hurt. Of course, in a child's hands, the responsibility of such truth-telling is too much, and she transposes truth-production into the unreliable oneiric realm. The mid-wife too claims to know the truth at the end of the film, but she lacks the courage to speak it to her community. Instead, she absconds, never to be seen again,

providing the village with the easy answers they are looking for: she ran away, so obviously she is responsible. Why else would she have left?

Finally, there is the schoolteacher who narrates the film and thus has supposed control over the art of speech and disclosure, and he finds himself in a quintessential parrhesiastic position near the end of *The White Ribbon*. Unfortunately, the exchange with the pastor does not go well, and when threatened with denunciation and prison, having taken the risk of speaking the truth to authority, he is silent. Of course, there are good reasons that he does not pursue the matter: he has a fiancée, World War I is imminent, and soon after the events depicted in the film he leaves the town never to see these people again. Except that he will see them again in a new guise in the rise of Nazism, for the whole film, according to his voice-over recollection, is designed to determine “what happened in [his] country.” Perhaps in telling the story of Eichwald, this would-be parrhesiast is making his own confession: opportunities to speak up, and identify or even halt extremist atrocities are rare and ephemeral, but they can become salvific, if only we can seize them in time.

¹ The slippery nature of Foucault's representation of religion has been amply noted in works such as Carrette, Jeremy R., ed. *Religion and Culture*. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1999 and Mark D. Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 2015).

² Foucault used this phrase in a 1962 essay, "Religious deviations and medical knowledge." In *Religion and Culture*, 50.

³ *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality, Volume 4*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 2021). "The Laborious Baptism." Kobo.

⁴ *Funny Frames: The Filmic Concepts of Michael Haneke* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 100. Also see Martin Blumenthal-Barby, "The Surveillant Gaze: Michael Haneke's *White Ribbon*," *October* 147 (January 2014): 95-116.

⁵ See Elena del Rio, *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 34-42.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007), 109 fl.

⁷ The pastorate "gave rise to an art of conducting, directing, leading, guiding, taking in hand, and manipulating men, an art of monitoring them and urging them on step by step, an art with the function of taking charge of men collectively and individually throughout their life and at every moment of their existence." *Security, Territory, Population*, 165.

⁸ *Security, Territory, Population*, 175.

⁹ *Security, Territory, Population*, 178.

¹⁰ *Security, Territory, Population*, 183.

¹¹ *Security, Territory, Population*, 173.

¹² *Security, Territory, Population*, 169-170.

¹³ *Security, Territory, Population*, 173.

¹⁴ See del Rio, *The Grace of Destruction*, 44-46.

¹⁵ *Security, Territory, Population*, 181.

¹⁶ *Security, Territory, Population*, 184.

¹⁷ *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 20.

¹⁸ See *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003), 59-60, 186-189, 234-254.

¹⁹ *Security, Territory, Population*, 183.

²⁰ For analysis and critique of the moral content and reception of the film, see Gerwin van der Pol, "Punishment and Crime: The Reverse Order of Causality in *The White Ribbon*," *Journal of Religion, Film, and Media* 4, no. 1 (2018), 47-61.

²¹ "Omnes et Singulatim: Toward a Critique of Political Reason," in *The Essential Foucault*, eds. Paul and Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), 200.

²² "The Subject and Power," in *The Essential Foucault*, 137.

²³ "The Subject and Power," 138-139.

²⁴ See "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *The Essential Foucault*, 27. Also see 34-35.

²⁵ "The Subject and Power," 142-143.

²⁶ "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 27.

²⁷ "The Subject and Power," 143.

²⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, Stanford UP, 2003), 71.

²⁹ For an excellent reading of the visual and aural indicators of this shift, see James S. Williams, "Aberrations of Beauty: Violence and Cinematic Resistance in Haneke's *The White Ribbon*," *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (Summer 2010), 54-55.

³⁰ "Pre-War Trauma: Haneke's *The White Ribbon*," *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 42.

³¹ *Security, Territory, Population*, 128-129.

³² *Security, Territory, Population*, 169.

³³ *Security, Territory, Population*, 178.

³⁴ For a Nietzschean/Deleuzian elaboration of this point, see del Rio, *The Grace of Destruction*, 37-39.

³⁵ *Security, Territory, Population*, 172.

³⁶ *Security, Territory, Population*, 173.

³⁷ For a reading of the pastor's "denial," see Blumenthal-Barby, "The Surveillant Gaze," 108-110.

³⁸ *Security, Territory, Population*, 231.

³⁹ *The Grace of Destruction*, 39.

⁴⁰ See also del Rio, *The Grace of Destruction*, 41.

⁴¹ Quoted in Kevin L. Stoehr, "Haneke's Secession: Perspectivism and Anti-Nihilism in *Code Unknown* and *Caché*," in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, 479.

⁴² Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 10-11.

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