Michael Haneke’s *Das weiße Band* commonly has been received as a parable for National Socialism’s origins. The critically-acclaimed film – with literally dozens of nominations and awards, including the 2009 Palme d’Or at Cannes, the 2009 New York Film Critics Circle Award for cinematography, and, in 2010, an astounding eight German Film Awards in Gold – is a historical thriller centered on a series of unexplained crimes that take place in the months preceding the First World War. Haneke sets the film in the fictional northern German town of Eichwald, melding, as reviewers have noted, the infamous names of Eichmann and Buchenwald (not to mention Waldheim, probably just as resonant for the Austrian director), evoking at once the perpetrators and spaces of the most terrible crimes in the country’s subsequent history. From the opening moments of the film, the narrator (performed by Ernst Jacobi) further fuels speculation that *Das weiße Band* concerns itself with the Nazi past, as the voice-over narrative channels the perspective of the aged schoolteacher who witnessed firsthand the events to be relayed and who now reflects on their significance from the vantage of his dotage:

> Ich weiß nicht, ob die Geschichte, die ich Ihnen erzählen will, in allen Details der Wahrheit entspricht. Vieles darin weiß ich nur vom Hörensagen und manches weiß ich auch heute, nach so vielen Jahren, nicht zu enträtseln, und auf unzählige Fragen gibt es keine Antwort. Aber dennoch glaube ich, dass ich die seltsamen Ereignisse, die sich in unserem Dorf zugetragen haben, erzählen muss, weil sie möglicherweise auf manche Vorgänge in diesem Land ein erhellendes Licht werfen können.

The monologue is accompanied by the first light in the film – enacting, as Fatima Naqvi notes, the very godlike power of the narrator, even as he undercuts this authorial control with protestations regarding how much of the story remains obscure and his uncertainty regarding his own accuracy (135). Although the narrator’s language remains vague – he introduces «die Geschichte,» suggesting a particular story but no specific historical period, and he admits to having more unresolved questions than answers –, the reference to the tale’s meaning for «manche Vorgänge in diesem Land» invites the audience to consider the relationship between the happenings in this small
village and the larger course of national history. Emphasizing this line in particular, critic Stuart Klawans argues that «despite Mr. Haneke’s avowed determination to leave viewers free to interpret, associations between the crimes committed in the movie on the cusp of World War I and the far greater crimes of 1933 to 1945 seem inescapable» from the outset of the film. (Indeed, as Klawans comments, the «biggest off-screen presence in The White Ribbon is the impending Nazi era» [n. pag.].)

Klawans is concerned with the reception of Haneke’s film at the New York Film Festival, and it could be argued that the reception of the film there (as well as in its copious US reviews) is colored by an American tendency to reduce contemporary German history to the Nazi period. But German critics also were quick to link Haneke’s depiction of Eichwald to the National Socialist era. Writing for Der Spiegel, Christian Buß characterizes the small town as a monstrous «breeding ground» for subsequent atrocities, its youthful main characters «fascist prototypes,» «soldierly» in their tendency to fuel sadism with sublimation (n. pag.). Die Zeit critic Peter Kümmel reaches similar conclusions, viewing the film as a portentous tale of family legacies gone horribly wrong, with the coming war framed as a «collective failure and derailment, a process by which the children complete the course first laid out by their parents» (n. pag.). Seen in this light, the film becomes a meditation on Nazism as the final culmination of generations of violence. That the film ends without real closure – although Haneke’s narrator becomes convinced that the town’s adolescents are the most likely perpetrators, the film offers no definitive answer – only encourages viewers to think beyond the diegetic frame and consider the future of the particular past depicted in Das weiße Band, and specifically the fates of the film’s hauntingly disaffected young adults.

Moreover, we could connect the narrator’s compulsion to tell (his words are: «erzählen muss») with multiple generations of writing, filmmaking, and scholarship driven by the imperative not only to come to terms with the past, but also to come to terms with the larger already existing German intellectual tradition of coming of terms with the past. In evoking the conventions of both oral history and the psychoanalytic talking cure, Haneke’s film suggestively puts us – and the diegetic world in Das weiße Band – on the couch in ways that inevitably echo larger cultural discourses around Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Given this array of «clues» (however indirect), it thus comes as little surprise that audiences and numerous critics have been quick to seize upon Das weiße Band as a film about Nazism, and little else. In a negative – but in this respect nevertheless typical – review for the New York Times, A. O. Scott dismisses the film as a «guilt trip down memory lane,» and accuses it of
«mystifying the historical phenomenon it purports to investigate. Forget about Weimar inflation and the Treaty of Versailles and whatever else you may have learned in school: Nazism was caused by child abuse» (n. pag.). Garrett Stewart (favorably, in this case) characterizes Das weiße Band as a «heritage film with a vengeance,» in which «social pathology marks the path to National Socialism» (40).

The question of the film’s historical referentiality forms a central strand of existing criticism and scholarship on the film. While most interpreters (à la Scott) hold that the film comments upon the rise of National Socialism in Germany, other writers offer an alternate view that argues for understanding the film as a more general exploration of the preconditions facilitating extremist behaviors. Assertions about the historical period and scope of the film beg the question: to what extent does it matter, in fact, whether the film represents a meditation on National Socialism, another moment in German history altogether, or – as is most plausibly the case, an amalgam of these? As Klawans reflects:

It might be fair, then, to ask how faithfully The White Ribbon prefigures Nazism. Does Mr. Haneke shed much light on the events that happened later? Or does the film’s allusion to those events serve mostly to give force and meaning to the filmmaker’s imagined world? Such questions often arise when a movie deals with history – but they may be especially urgent when a film as expertly made as The White Ribbon touches on a matter of such gravity. Where might one locate the reasonable limit of an artist’s freedom to select, to shape, to generalize, to invent, and the beginnings of his responsibility toward the subject he raises? (n. pag.)

Indeed, the film itself, in obliquely alluding to but never directly addressing the rise of German fascism or the Holocaust, and instead placing its emphasis on patterns of authoritarian behavior commonly associated with that rise, seems to pose the question, in the spirit of Sinclair Lewis’s 1935 novel It Can’t Happen Here, whether totalitarian regimes and actions might indeed flourish in other historical and cultural contexts. Thus, as Klawans suggests, Haneke’s film may be interested in fascism less for its historical details than for its enormous evocative power – as a metaphor for something more general in the human capacity for cruelty and violence. In a broader sense, the film might be viewed as a speculative answer to the question of what makes a perpetrator.

Haneke himself has professed a wish for such a reception, remaining coy on the subject of whether Das weiße Band should be read in light of National Socialism’s emergence. On the one hand, he readily admits a desire to direct his audiences to contemplate the genesis of German fascism. When asked by Klawans in an interview «whether viewers of The White Ribbon would find thoughts of fascism unavoidable,» Haneke «broke into laughter» and replied...
«I hope so!» (n. pag.) On the other hand, Haneke insists that his film tackles more than National Socialism alone: in numerous interviews, he stresses that his film takes up the violent ideological rigidity that can emerge in all radical groups, often citing the examples of the Baader-Meinhof group and Islamic fundamentalism as potential parallels. In the same conversation with Klawans, he declared, «the film doesn’t refer specifically to German fascism. It’s only because of the setting of the film, the place and the time that it occurs, that the spectator has these associations» (n. pag.). In a characteristic exchange with a British interviewer, Haneke elaborated:

It’s not a coincidence that I chose this period of time in which to present the story. This is the Nazi generation, but I didn’t want the film to be reduced to this example, to this specific model. I could do a film about modern-day Iran and ask the same question: how does fanaticism start? That’s the core of the film. In places where people are suffering, they become very receptive to ideology because they’re looking for something to clutch hold of, a straw that will take them out of that misery. (Day n. pag.)

His handling of the film’s subtitle is indicative: in the version for international distribution, the line that follows the title, Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte, intentionally has been left untranslated. According to the director, this decision was made in order to prevent audiences from mistaking the narrative for a matter merely of German relevance, presumably by encouraging them simply to look past or overlook altogether the kind of national and historical specificity that readers of the original language are prompted to recognize (Andrew 16). At the same time, Haneke’s stated ambition to invoke universal patterns of zealotry helps us to place Das weiße Band – whose historical subject and look at first glance seem like a departure from the director’s contemporary-themed films (e.g., Funny Games [1997, remade in a US version in 2007], Die Klavierspielerin [2001], and Caché [2005]) – into dialogue with his larger cinematic project to explore the human propensity to violence.

Several subsequent assessments of Das weiße Band have sided with Haneke on the issue of historical open-endedness – that is, that the film seeks to take on a time period and a set of issues much larger than German fascism alone. James S. Williams argues eloquently that the film offers a case study in formal opposition. After recounting the various ways in which the film «transports us back to Haneke’s Austrian context with its still far from exorcized Nazi past and ongoing process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung,» Williams asserts that «Haneke is also working at a more subtle and universal level than this by exploring the potential of cinematic form to convey the capacity for resistance in human and historical experience» (50). Williams highlights the problematic
quality of the voice-over narrative, the frequent contrast in information conveyed at the visual and acoustic planes, and several key abrupt editing choices. Collectively, in his reading, the film «can thus be read as a form of resistance to absolutism and the order represented by both the narrative and brutalizing morality» (55). For Williams, the film’s form, marked by ruptures and breaks rather than seamlessness, effectively countermands teleological accounts of history. Roy Grundmann has written more generally about the open structure of signification that characterizes the director’s larger project: in his words, «leaving things out is a standard modus operandi in Haneke’s work – there are gaps and then there is a spine» (8–9). Fatima Naqvi has argued in equally compelling but very different ways for the multiple histories of Das weiße Band – making the case that the film masks itself as an «adaptation-fake» which upon closer examination yields what she terms a «stereoscopic effect,» (129–30) achieved through a strategy of overlain disparate temporal moments, which she likens to what Michael Rothberg has indentified as «multidirectional memory» (132). Naqvi undertakes a careful explication of the director’s citation of seventeenth- through nineteenth-century German pedagogical texts, first collected by Katharina Rutschky in the 1977 anthology Schwarze Pädagogik. According to Naqvi, «sein Film kreist also um das Thema autoritäre Erziehung in einem erweiterten historischen Kontext,» with roots extending deep into the history of German society and letters (136). She interprets the Baroness’s declaration to her husband, «Du begreifst überhaupt nichts,» as Haneke’s warning to his viewers: beware of any monocausal reading of the filmic narrative as leading inexorably to National Socialism (133).

Without ruling out the possibility that Das weiße Band can be read as a reflection on the makings of totalitarian societies beyond the case of Nazism, this article argues for the wisdom of reading this film with the grain rather than against it, and for maintaining a skeptical stance toward Haneke’s own claims about the openness of his work – first, because regardless of the director’s intentions, the film has led myriad viewers and critics to understand it precisely as a film about Nazism’s rise (and as such, this phenomenon constitutes one of the film’s legitimate cultural meanings), and second, because even if that rise is not the exclusive concern of the film, it clearly comprises an essential element of its project. In other words, it argues for the need to take seriously Haneke’s portrait of the conditions facilitating the rise of National Socialism in Das weiße Band. Whatever allegorical resonances the film may provide, it remains important to investigate the terms of its core narrative, and ask just how Haneke seeks to explain the origin story of a
generation that would later go on to play a key part in the nation’s genocidal plans.

In particular, I take up the question of formal and narrative openness in *Das weiße Band* as it relates to the film’s characterization of German history, asking to what extent it suggests that the emergence of National Socialism was inevitable. Focusing on Haneke’s depiction of the fictional Eichwald as a community quite literally bred to violence, I suggest that *Das weiße Band* betrays a troubling reliance upon the dual notions of environmental and inherited characteristics, deploying these as mutually reinforcing explanatory models for historical development. In focusing on this aspect of the film, which thus far has been overlooked by existing scholarship, I aim to elucidate the ways in which Haneke thereby undercuts his own stated project to invoke multiple sociohistorical scenarios, offering instead a disturbingly narrow and deterministic view of the growth of National Socialism.

For alongside the central topic of *Erziehung* – education or childrearing – Haneke’s film deploys a range of biological motifs that evokes questions of *Züchtung*, or cultivation. In the process, *Das weiße Band* plays with the possibility that fascism’s origins were not only man-made, but also organic. Presenting a community shaped by «breeding» in both senses of the term (nature and nurture), *Das weiße Band* hints that Eichwald harbors evil at the level of both schoolroom and soil. Looking closely at the film’s narrative structure, visual code and editing, I argue that the film’s discourse on pedagogy relies heavily on a body of problematic theory, first advanced in the 1960s but influential to this day, that sought to explain National Socialism as a function of physical and sexual repression. At the same time, the director’s extensive use of various biological metaphors threatens to naturalize the emergence of German fascism, construing the movement as a kind of dark biopolitical destiny particular to that nation. In emphasizing the logic of the biologic, Haneke’s film thereby echoes in alarming ways the rhetoric of National Socialism and at the same time seems to suggest that the seed of fascism might be traced to the level of genetic code – a biological potential, if not quite fate, that serves to flatten out historical complexity and cuts against any multidirectionality implied by the film’s general narrative openness or its skillful overlapping of references from diverse periods. In concentrating the emergence of German fascism in a small German village and at the same time playing upon the possibility of its biological roots, the film ultimately presents Nazism as a localized outbreak – or, phrased differently while remaining with the genetic metaphor, as an isolated mutation rather than a common feature of human DNA.

Eichwald is a rural community organized around the local baron’s *Gut*, ruled by the rhythm of the seasons, crop timetables, and calculations of timber...
yields. At numerous points in the film, the narrator’s voice-over overlays static long shots of the local landscape: fields of waving grain, a copse of trees standing bare and stark against a snow-covered expanse. These sequences underscore the town’s spatial isolation and lend the film a sense of temporal suspension as well, feeding the feeling that this story takes place in a time «before,» a pre-cataclysmic lull. At the same time, they reinforce the ways this community seems veritably locked into the cycles of the natural world. As Buß notes, while cinematographer Christian Berger frames the film’s interior spaces as claustrophobically enclosed, the move to exterior shots offers little relief: «[W]enn die Kamera dann doch mal in die Totale gehen darf, bewegt sich darin fast nichts. Sonderbar eingefroren wirkt diese Landschaft, selbst wenn das Korn in der warmen Sonne wogt» (n. pag.). The result is a feeling of complete stultification, of deadly circularity.

The film’s first narrative climax falls on the day of the local harvest festival, which serves as the occasion for two key crimes, one against property, another one against a person. A young farmer whose mother, a harvest worker, died after a fall in an unsafe barn, seeks revenge upon the baron: looking every bit the grim reaper, he takes his scythe to a field of neatly planted cabbages. His father has earlier forecast the boy’s impetuous act, dismissing his son’s rage and sarcastically declaring that the boy could behead the foreman with his scythe, but it would not bring his mother back to life. The scene of the farmhand attacking the cabbage with determined force is oddly brutal. The vengeful impetus behind his deed, coupled with the very word Kohlköpfe – their neat, round rows resembling so many human heads while also subtly evoking the uncanny physical similarities between the film’s numerous child characters – render the act a symbolic mass beheading. The reaction of the baroness upon the discovery of the crime heightens the sense of violence behind this destructive but otherwise relatively harmless action: she turns away from the scene in patent disgust, deeming it «widerlich,» and then withdraws to her bed for the remainder of the day. The ominous quality of the young farmer’s attack is further heightened by a far crueler deed perpetrated that same day: someone lures the baron’s slight, effete and clearly sheltered son, Siggi, into a nearby mill, strings him up by his ankles and brutally canes him, leaving him gravely injured and mute with trauma. Although the precise reason behind the attack against Siggi remains unclear, the play upon the natural and retaliatory harvest underlying both acts is unmistakable, a literalization of the Biblical pronouncement «for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.» Haneke overlays notions of the natural and spiritual, of reward and retribution. While the film, highly critical of a brutal morality enacted in the name of religion, does not endorse this punitive world view, in
linking the harvest to the growth of violence it does plant the seed, as it were, that there is something amiss at the very root level of this diegetic world – that the cruelty behind these actions springs from the very soil.

This same cycle of ritual violence will come to the fore in the film’s second violent act against a child. Here the victim is the young son of the local midwife: Karli, who suffers from Down syndrome, is abducted, severely beaten, and tied to a tree. Next to him a note reads: «Denn ich, der Herr, dein Gott, bin ein eifriger Gott, der da heimsucht der Väter Missetat an den Kindern bis in das dritte und vierte Glied,» a version of a line in the opening text of the Ten Commandments warning against the worship of false idols. The emphasis here is not on the sin of false idolatry, however, but rather the generational consequences of paternal misdeeds, invoking biblical notions of begetting as well as inheritance. While the crime committed against Karli does not invoke the concept of natural harvest per se, it aligns with the film’s larger constellation of violence and succession, appearing as the latest chapter in a cruel legacy passed on in linear progression through the generations.

The brutality of the parental generation is omnipresent in *Das weiße Band*, meted out by an array of ironfisted fathers paired with mothers who support their absolutist domestic regimes. Indeed, the film presents a perfect patriarchal trifecta in its three most dominant male authority figures, each known simply by his title: der Baron, der Arzt, and der Pastor. The motif of paternal physical abuse is most clearly embodied by the figure of the local pastor. He instructs the local children in preparation for their confirmation, thereby playing a critical role in their path to maturation in both the church and the larger community. And it is he who implements the most draconian measures to school his own children in proper conduct, caning them regularly for small infractions, sending them to bed without supper, and withholding even the smallest gesture of affection. He makes their shame public, forcing his two eldest to don white ribbons as a visual admonishment to live up to the virtues of purity and innocence. He, too, devises the plan to bind his son’s arms to his bed frame – an act meant to prevent his son from masturbating, but which reads as an act of bondage, even torture.

In its emphasis upon the exercising of a false and domineering morality by the parental generation upon its children, *Das weiße Band* marshals now familiar arguments that read fascism as the byproduct of sexual repression – a theory perhaps most famously associated now with the work of Klaus Theweleit, but which, as Dagmar Herzog has so fruitfully shown, proved generally characteristic of the 68er critique of the perpetrator generation and postwar society. As Herzog argues, the New Left and sixties liberals «shared [the conviction] […] that the Third Reich had been at its core sex-hostile and
that the Holocaust was the perverted product of sexual repression» despite the fact that, as she carefully explicates in her book, this interpretation of sexuality under Nazism denied the very ways in which the movement appealed to some populations precisely through a politics of sexual license (156). Part and parcel of the 1960s-era’s new sexual politics, which equated «liberated sex with progressive politics,» was the Kinderladen movement, a collectivist child-rearing concept designed in direct reaction to older models of parenting deemed authoritarian (155). In particular, the movement championed new attitudes toward childhood sexuality, with permissive views on sexual exploration and masturbation, and aggression, holding that children should learn to direct their anger at parental and other figures of authority.3 If sublimated as in the past, according to this view, children would inevitably direct their aggression «toward those more vulnerable […] hippies, Negroes, yesterday Jews and today Arabs» (171). The concept was clear: repression fed a culture of racism and genocide. Yet the Kinderladen model was troublingly inadequate to explain such sociopolitical phenomena as anti-Semitism. It is thus all the more striking how much Haneke’s film reads like a primer of 68er views on earlier pedagogical beliefs, playing further into the film’s suggestion that the world of Eichwald does, indeed, give rise to a subsequent culture of atrocities. As historian Jeffrey Herf remarks with skepticism regarding Haneke’s film and the repression hypothesis underlying it, «Klaus Theweleit made a persuasive case that fear of their own sexuality, of women and of Jews contributed toward the movement of some young men toward right-wing extremist politics after World War I. But there are people all over the globe who are sexually repressed. Why is it that this particular repression took the form of National Socialism?» (cited in Klawans n.pag.).

Indeed, even Haneke’s choice to cite extensively from Rutschky’s 1977 anthology Schwarze Pädagogik could be seen in the light of 1960s-era pedagogical critiques. Rutschky, and following her, Haneke, selects materials published from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, cut and juxtaposed to suit a 1970s argument about the authoritarian nature of older forms of parenting. Rutschky never directly expresses a concern with fascism, but her book begins with a quote from Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialektik der Aufklärung, and in the spirit of the Frankfurt School she undertakes a critique of Enlightenment-era pedagogy that serves the larger project of interrogating German culture’s progression from putatively progressive thinking to barbarism. The anthology’s organizational rubrics map well onto contemporary critiques of traditional parenting patterns as fostering the development of authoritarian subjects, with chapters on topics including: instilling fear in children; the denial of parental love; the pedagogue’s demand

Raising Cain? The Logic of Breeding

161
for absolute subjection, self-abnegation, and the suppression of sexual urges; and the total rationalization of the child’s body.

Regarding her own process, Rutschky declares she was compelled «rück-sichtslos gegen die expliziten Absichten der Autoren [zu] verfahren» «um die verdrängten und verleugneten Konflikte, die diese Geschichte mitbestimmen, der Wahrnehmung zugänglich zu machen. [...] Die Texte wurden ihrem ursprünglichen Zusammenhang entrissen, jeder Autor wird tendenziös zitiert» (xv, cited in Naqvi 137). As Naqvi notes, there is a violence to Rutschky’s method – one that Haneke duplicates when he excerpts her abstracts for the dialogue in his film (136–37). This is not to suggest that the pedagogical tracts Rutschky and Haneke cite are not authoritarian; rather, I would emphasize that the author’s and director’s shared mode of citation deploys these older texts to generate a particular image of traditional parentage that, in the context of 1960s and 1970s West German debates about childrearing, was specifically indicted as having produced a totalitarian society capable of committing genocide. Read in this light, what Naqvi interprets as a multidirectional gesture by Haneke attains a troubling degree of teleology. Like Rutschky, Haneke offers a deliberately strong reading of the historical record that, although it gestures toward the deep roots of National Socialism’s origins, nevertheless continues along an alarmingly familiar trajectory that begins in a culture of abusive pedagogy and ends in the Holocaust.

The sense that Eichwald harbors the seed of future genocide is only heightened by the film’s representation of the town’s adolescent population. In selecting his corps of young actors, Haneke reports having previewed images of literally thousands of candidates with an eye to projecting historical accuracy through their physical appearance: «People look different now and it took a lot of work finding people with the right sort of face. We looked at over 7,000 children; they not only had to look like they belonged to the era, they had to be able to act!» (Andrew 15) A primary inspiration for Haneke was the Weimar-era photography of August Sander, famous for his efforts to capture a wide range of German physiognomies in the years preceding the racial exclusionism of Nazism, as in the 1929 photo series published as Antlitz der Zeit, which included sixty portraits derived from his larger documentary project Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts. Sanders suffered severe limitations on his artistic and personal life during the Hitler years after the Nazi regime deemed his work inimical to its aims. While the reference to Sander is unmistakable in the framing and costuming of the film’s figures as well as the film’s general aesthetic (shot in color and then transferred to black and white, a first for the director), Haneke departs from the photographer’s project in two
notable ways. Haneke tends to privilege group depictions rather than the sorts of individual portraits Sander favored, thereby downplaying the typological qualities Sander emphasized and instead foregrounding the figures’ place within a social constellation. Additionally, where Sander sought to depict a wide range of social classes and positions, grouping his works into rubrics such as «Der Bauer,» «Die Frau,» «Die Künstler,» and «Die Großstadt,» Haneke and cameraman Christian Berger tend to linger on the strikingly blond and mercilessly scrubbed faces of the town’s youth, suggesting not so much interest in issues of class as in physiognomy – a kind of selective citation of Sander’s work that focuses less on a broad spectrum of German society than on a particular subset that, significantly, will go on to constitute the nation’s racially privileged population.

The importance of Haneke’s emphasis on these young adults derives not only from the film’s historical setting, which sets their maturation on pace with the emergence of National Socialism and hence positions them as potential future perpetrators, but also because the figure of the child played a foundational role in National Socialist ideology and propaganda. Indeed, even more strongly than Sanders’ portraiture, the children of Das weiße Band evoke a host of wartime-era cinematic representations of Nazi youth in both pro- and anti-fascist works, from films celebrating the youth contribution to fascism, like Hans Steinhoff’s Hitlerjunge Quex (1933) or Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph des Willens (1935), to lurid condemnations of child indoctrination of the sort found in such films as Edward Dmytryk’s Hitler’s Children (USA, 1943), the Walt Disney animated short Education for Death – The Making of the Nazi (USA, 1943), as well as more standard fare like Frank Capra’s US government-sponsored Why We Fight – Prelude to War (USA, 1942). Even more striking is their resemblance to the evil offspring in Wolf Rilla’s British sci-fi/horror classic Village of the Damned (1960), which melds images of National Socialist racial superiority with the specter of Communist contagion to explore the dangers posed by the «bad seeds» of totalitarianism. Regardless of whether these references are conscious on Haneke’s part, the very fashion in which the child figures in this film evoke these cinematic predecessors both encourages viewers to see Das weiße Band in a trajectory of representations of National Socialism and to reflect on the various real and figurative ways in which these children themselves harbor a menacing reproductive potential.

Whether striding through the streets of Eichwald or lurking just outside closed windows, the village’s band of children appear in carefully orchestrated groupings (Fig. 1). Invariably at their lead is the towheaded Klara, daughter of the local pastor. Klara is presented as a disturbingly clever child. Gifted in the
art of sycophancy when called upon to explain her actions to adults, she is the sole figure whom the film conclusively shows as capable of abhorrent cruelty toward the weak: after her father humiliates her before the communion class, she steals into his study and crucifies his pet song bird with a pair of scissors (an act that her father strikingly declines to punish). The formation patterns in which the children move suggest the seed of a mass, suggestively echoing the larger-scale constellations later choreographed under National Socialism, with Klara standing in as their charismatic instigator.

Fig. 1: From Das weiße Band (2009). Directed by Michael Haneke.
The duplicative quality of the child characters is further augmented by Christian Berger’s camerawork, which adopts a highly regulated framing regime that frequently suggests the interchangeability of the various figures in the film. Consider, for example, a series of squarely frontal shots depicting the pastor’s family around the dinner table (Fig. 2). While the shots recall the traditions of portraiture as well as the physiognomic study and even the flipbook, allowing us to study the features and expressions of the characters, their juxtaposition emphasizes issues of similarity and variation, further calling to mind the interplay of genotype (that is, inherited characteristics) and phenotype (or the variations in expressed character that result from the influence of both genetic and environmental factors). As the graphic matches align face after face, our inevitable search for commonalities prompts larger questions about which precise traits these progeny will share with their parents. Indeed, although it is unclear whether Haneke researched the question of inheritance, it is noteworthy nonetheless that the concepts of genotype and phenotype were first introduced in 1906 by Danish botanist Wilhelm Johannsen and made available to German readers in 1909 (i.e., roughly around the period the film is meant to take place) with *Elemente der exakten Erblichkeitslehre* – the book that coined the term «gene» and became a foundational text for the field of genetics.

![Fig. 2: From Das weiße Band (2009). Directed by Michael Haneke.](image)

Berger’s linking frames are not restricted moreover to the individual family, but conjure resemblances across generational and familial lines. The overall result is a kind of infinite multiplication – one that, on the one hand, hints at the
transposable fates of Haneke’s figures, particularly the women, and that, on
the other hand, conjures the paranoiac spectacle of the clone. The very
substitutability of the figures in this film renders even the small world of the
village a disturbing potential mass with unlimited capacity for multiplication –
fertile ground for a more widespread movement. Although Garrett Stewart
does not concentrate on the issue of biological discourses in Das weiße Band,
his wording is fortuitous when he describes the film as resembling «hacked
diagnostic fragments on a dissecting table, cross-sections of a systemic
malady» (40). Along similar lines, reviewer Joe Morgenstern concludes,
«the village’s disease […] is the German disease, and the human disease as
well» (n. pag.). Permeating Haneke’s film, as both writers note, is a sense that
fascism functions much like an illness, capable of spreading through a
community and infecting its members – a trope that, as I have argued
elsewhere, since the early postwar period has carried widespread resonance,
but that remains disturbingly reliant upon dichotomies of health and illness
that proved instrumental in Nazi rhetoric and genocidal policies (Kapczyn-
ski).

The peculiar similarity in the children’s appearance – which seems to hint at
an uncanny capacity for biological regeneration as well as ideological spread –
further invokes a cinematic tradition linking Nazi biopolitics with the science
of replication. Indeed, a common trope in anti-fascist propaganda was the
characterization of the indoctrinated as clones or hydros, bespeaking both a
critique of and deep-seated anxiety about the authoritarian quest to foster a
master race defined by genetic purity as well as political conformity. In the
postwar era, the frightening specter of the fascist replicant has informed a wide
range of «what-if» films – among them David Bradley’s They Saved Hitler’s
Brain (USA, 1966) and Franklin J. Schaffner’s The Boys From Brazil (UK/
USA 1978) – that explore the possibility that Hitler’s genetic material, if not
his body, has been kept alive through perverse scientific experimentation. At
stake in these and similar films is never simply the maintenance of the fascist
dictator’s biological traits, however, but rather an assumption of a link
between these traits and the political ideology for which he stood. To be sure,
the Nazis themselves blurred this line explicitly in their program to cultivate
the «Aryan race»; however, these later representations continue to collapse the
distinction between nature and nurture, suggesting that political views might
be embedded at the level of one’s genes (even when, as in The Boys from Brazil,
those genetic traits are brought to expression by reproducing specific
sociocultural conditions along with those genes). In echoing this longer
cinematic tradition, albeit absent the campiness that characterizes the postwar
films, Haneke’s Das weiße Band presents audiences with a child population
fearsome not only for its potential for base and wanton violence, but also for its capacity to produce literal copycat crimes – a sense underscored by the suggestion in the film that the child perpetrators act in concert but without any clear coordination, as if their transgressions are the consequence of spontaneous and contagious cruelty born out of a deep interconnection. The director’s play upon the replication of physical and character traits in his youthful characters once more suggests an intimate link between biology and behavior, hinting that their misdeeds may not simply be learned, but also constitute a form of genetic expression.

The subtext of the biological emerges again through the film’s implicit and explicit treatment of incest and the inevitable questions of inbreeding and heredity it raises. The subject twice enters the film. The first occasion arises out of a moment of suggestive editing. The scene unfolds in the claustrophobically cluttered bourgeois confines of the pastor’s study, as the cleric methodically tends to his canary and with increasing force interrogates his eldest son, Martin, about masturbation. Listing a litany of frightening symptoms supposedly caused by onanism that culminated in the death of a boy from a nearby town, the pastor compels his son to «confess» the true reason for his own apathy and exhaustion. The scene is striking for its cruelty – the pastor nurtures his pet while systematically dismantling his own child’s psyche – as well as for its foregrounding of sexual transgression as a highest order sin in the world of Eichwald. This is in marked contrast to the violence that underlies Klara’s cruel killing of the same bird in that very space just a short while later, which the pastor never acknowledges, much as he refuses to countenance the schoolteacher’s suggestion that the town’s youth might be to blame for the series of mysterious crimes. Once more echoing the core tenets of 68er critiques of fascism, the film suggests a link between the cultures of repression and aggression.

At the same time, this scene is crucial for the film’s larger exploration of violence as the byproduct of both learned behaviors and inherited characteristics. Specifically, the scene hints at connections between sexual repression and sexual abuse. Throughout the scene, Berger makes frequent use of over-the-shoulder medium shots that position either father or son with much of their backs to the camera. While this is a standard convention in continuity editing, serving to connect the two figures and the space they inhabit, the strategy plays a key role in what follows. Immediately after the boy’s weakly uttered «ja» seals his forced admission of guilt, a hard cut to the next scene, set in a similarly overcrowded interior, reveals a medium shot of a man’s hunched back. His movements and guttural utterances make clear that he is having sex, but his large frame crucially obscures the identity of his
partner. Within seconds, that partner will be revealed as the local midwife, and the back as belonging to the doctor. But for a brief moment, because the hard cut might as easily indicate a temporal as a spatial shift (or possibly both), we are led to believe that we are viewing the delayed conclusion of the pastor’s interrogation: as “punishment” for the confession of masturbation, the pastor subjects his son to rape. The move certainly unsettles audience expectations in a fashion typical for Haneke, and may also signal the director’s intention to counter a long tradition of queering fascism (since after all, this turns out to be a consensual, if unpleasant, heterosexual encounter and not a case of gay pedophilia). At the same time, the juxtaposition of these shots suggestively links the community’s draconian morality to sexual cruelty and a general claustraphobic “inwardness” in the direction of its energies.

The disclosure that the back belongs to the physician, moreover, does little to undo the implications generated by the appositive images of the pastor’s relentless inquiry and the copulating pair. First, the doctor’s relationship with the midwife is characterized by his callous and at times craven meanness, and the sex that the viewer witnesses, if not rape, is nevertheless so devoid of caring and basic respect that it reads as another symptom of the town’s culture of misogyny and brutality. More important still, however, is the brief scene that immediately precedes the pastor’s interrogation, in which the doctor returns home after a lengthy absence. Standing at the spot of the accident that inaugurated the town’s crime wave and cost him a badly broken collarbone, when a thin wire strung between trees near the approach to his house toppled both the physician and his horse, the doctor turns to gaze intently at his pubescent daughter, Anna. In a medium close-up we see the doctor’s eyes sweep up and down her maturing young body, asking “Wie alt bist du?” At her answer, fourteen, he turns away and mutters: “Seltsam, wie sehr du deiner Mutter ähnelst.” The exchange concludes there, but the suggestion is clear that the doctor’s absence has granted him a new appreciation of his child’s sexual development, as he sees in her the outline of her deceased mother, and in so doing, seems to contemplate her readiness as a surrogate spouse. Considering this and the later episode as bookends to the pastor’s domestic inquisition sheds new light on the larger constellation of sex, violence, and abuse in Das weiße Band, foregrounding the various ways in which Eichwald’s children are subjected to and rebel against an adult system that simultaneously punishes and exploits their emerging sexualities. Thus even as the film flouts our first impressions when it cuts abruptly from the pastor to the doctor, the deliberate confusion generated by the edit does not undo our impression that abuse provides the hidden link between the film’s various familial and narrative lines. Indeed, the cut, in connecting these two scenes and stories, holds the
power to impel viewers to imagine scenes not shown, encouraging a feeling that the pastor could have done the same, even if the film never offers concrete evidence of it. Although the confounding cut in this way expands the film’s chain of signification beyond the frame, it does not necessarily foster an aesthetics of resistance as Williams suggests. Rather, the gesture of the hard edit may be understood as yet another formal expression of the film’s motif of replication, suggestively multiplying the fates onscreen through the intimation of their interconnection.

Incest enters the narrative explicitly a short while later in the film, in a scene in which the doctor’s young son Rudi stumbles upon his father and sister in a compromising encounter that appears to confirm the earlier suggestion that the physician is molesting his daughter. Wandering through the pitch-black halls of the family home after he discovers Anna is not in bed, Rudi hears muffled cries behind the closed door of his father’s office. The film cuts to a point-of-view shot, the camera positioned just over the boy’s shoulder as he slowly opens the door to reveal his father’s back once more, this time only partly obscuring the object of his attention: Anna is seated upon the exam table with her nightdress hitched up around her thighs, her thin, bare legs dangling and slightly parted (Fig. 3). Cut to a static medium shot of the interior, as Anna reassures her little brother through suppressed tears that their father was only piercing her ears. Shyly tugging down her garment to cover her knees, her father comments «Die Schönheit hat zu leiden – so sagt man, ja oder?» As if in reply, the girl, her face shifting between an expression of abject misery and
embarrassment, explains the timing of her father’s intervention: having not worn earrings in a long while, her holes had closed up, but now she will be able to wear the pair that had once belonged to their mother – “die schönen, weißt du?” – in time for the approaching Whitsun holiday.

The suggestive quality of the two figures’ physical positioning and dress, the scene’s language of physical penetration, emphasis on suffering as the price of beauty, and invocation of the earrings all indicate that the doctor has compelled his daughter to serve as the sexual substitute for his dead wife. A subsequent argument between the doctor and the midwife cements our suspicions, when she acknowledges having stood by silently despite the knowledge that he was abusing his daughter. Once more, the film plays on the theme of replication, suggesting the interchangeability of its central characters as well as the particularly gendered fate awaiting the young women of Eichwald. At the same time, the confirmation of molestation, when considered alongside the earlier sequence of the interrogation, leads viewers to consider whether incest has resulted in the literal (in)breeding of violence in the community of Eichwald.

In the wake of that argument between the doctor and midwife and the vicious attack on Karli – who may or may not be the result of the midwife’s affair with the doctor – the physician and his family abruptly leave town without notice, and a short while later, the midwife and her own child disappear as well. We are not given any reason for their departure, but the narrator informs us that village gossips soon suspect that the doctor and midwife bear the blame for all of the local attacks. A far more plausible scenario, of course (since the two have no discernible motive), would suggest that the doctor leaves to avoid disclosure of another crime altogether: his sexual abuse of his own daughter, with its potential for producing yet another telltale pregnancy. This risk becomes doubly apparent when the villagers explain Karli’s disability as the result of a botched abortion meant to hide the doctor and midwife’s adultery. Contemporary audiences know this to be false, of course, but this bit of local wisdom compels the viewer to consider the genetic forces at play in any act of procreation and that take on a particular urgency in cases of incest and inbreeding, precisely because the parties’ close similarities in DNA increase the rate at which recessive traits – among them, disabilities – appear. If we follow this analogy and link it to the film’s discourse on brutality as a “natural” by-product in Eichwald, the film appears to suggest a kind of exacerbated biological predisposition to violence shaping the culture of the village. When considered alongside the film’s visual foregrounding of the physiological similarities between its youthful figures, which heightens the impression of their incestuous resemblance and uncanny capacity for
reproduction, and the film’s editorial strategies, which suggest deeper underlying connections between these figures and their fates, a picture emerges of a society both born and raised to violence.

It remains unclear whether Haneke’s film functions as a broader meditation on fanaticism and the conditions of its emergence, not to speak of the desirability of using the case of pre-Nazi Germany as the medium for such reflection. In the end, this probably must remain within the subjective purview of the viewer and his or her associative faculties. As this article has sought to demonstrate, however, Das weiße Band does provide multiple lines along which to read the history of early twentieth century German culture as the breeding ground for National Socialism. As such, the film’s account of that history bears close examination. Scholars like Williams and Naqvi have argued compellingly for the openness of Das weiße Band, pointing toward its obvious narrative seams and its larger temporal frame of reference. However tempting, these analyses are ultimately unconvincing, particularly when brought to bear on Haneke’s treatment of youth violence in the film. In a fashion anything other than open, Das weiße Band suggests that the film’s young generation – that population that will come of age with National Socialism and hence play a seminal part in supporting and perhaps also participating in the crimes of the regime – commits egregious acts of cruelty against the weak out of a sadism cultivated through both learned behavior and inborn predisposition. One could make the case that Haneke hereby inverts the biopolitical logic behind the Nazis’ «master race» rhetoric, constructing a culture of brutal conformity shaped not by superior genetic selection, but rather incest and inbreeding, with their attendant associations of inwardness, backwardness, and deformity. This would be to miss the point, however, that such an argument in the end relies upon much the same theoretical structure as National Socialists themselves employed; rather than undoing the biopolitical logic of German fascism, it simply inverts the content of the categories of the normal and the pathological. Moreover, Haneke’s suggestion that nature as well as nurture created the conditions for Hitler’s rise to power effectively restricts his narrative to a narrow reading of history as the inevitable outcome of a very particular historical and sociopolitical constellation – one that does not lend itself easily to applications outside of an early twentieth-century German context. The director himself has expressed a certain amount of disinterest in the insights of current historical research on the preconditions that facilitated the Third Reich and Holocaust. In the interview with Klawans, informed «that some historians see only a weak link between the world of The White Ribbon and the development of Nazism, Mr. Haneke said there is «a vast spectrum of opinion on this question,» which he
would prefer not to address.» He elaborated: «When I offer explanations or commentary, I limit the possible views of the spectators» (Klawans n. pag.). Yet while Haneke here shows an admirable respect for his viewers’ interpretative inclinations and acumen, his statement belies the very manner in which his film, through a series of narrative and formal gestures, actively forecloses multiple readings and instead depicts the fictional community of Eichwald as a template for a nation’s biopolitical destiny, its future set on a locked course toward violence, fanaticism, and genocide.

Notes

1 See Buß and Kümmel. Kümmel is cited in Naqvi (130).
2 See for example Klawans.
3 On the Kinderladen movement see Herzog 162–74.
4 Both Scott and Andrew make this observation as well.

Works Cited


