

Cruel Attachments, Tender Counterpoints: Configuring the Collective in Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*

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Introduction

In line with prominent topoi of Michael Haneke scholarship, most reviewers of *The White Ribbon* (2009), original title *Das weiße Band*, agreed that the film presents its twenty-first-century audiences with a starkly filmed, more or less Brechtian—and thereby belatedly modernist or even anachronistic—study on the emergence of fascism in an authoritarian German village cosmos on the eve of World War I.¹ With its temporally removed voice-over narrator and its black-and-white aesthetics, the film evidently undertakes a critical analysis of collective violence that keeps its audiences at a distance.² My own initial response was quite in line with that traditional reading. At best, *The White Ribbon*'s critical tale seemed to offer me a tangential alignment with the awkward teacher, whose attempts to solve the mystery of the portrayed violent incidents and whose second identity as the much older narrator keep him at a distance from the cruel village world. When I first taught the film

in an interdisciplinary graduate seminar, however, several students shocked me by declaring their emotional alignment with the village pastor, whose methods of constituting his religiously based family collective through discipline, both with the cane and the stigmata, gave the film its title—*The White Ribbon*—as a marker of temporary exclusion for presumed impurity. Clearly, this class discussion was a reminder of the crucial importance of audience positionality in mediating responses to any film. In tracing these different reactions in the classroom, however, I also revised my assessment of the film's composition, namely of how it encourages or discourages specific forms of (affective as well as cognitive) audience engagement.³ Without entirely accepting my students' take, I began to develop a more complex reading of *The White Ribbon*. Through this reading, I challenge dominant takes on Haneke's oeuvre and, by extension, a number of entrenched categorical oppositions in cinema studies, including those of affect versus distancing and (as I will explain) realism versus montage.

To be sure, this reassessment can draw in part on more recent work on Haneke. Scholars have begun to explore how his films rupture audience distance with offers of spectatorial identification (prominently with Juliette Binoche's characters in the French features), with framings that create distance only by depriving the spectator of it (or making her "unsafe at any distance"), and generally through the ways in which "[a]ffect perforates the formalist surface of Haneke's films."⁴ In exploring these complications, however, recent Haneke scholarship still largely remains focused on the intersection of violence and displeasure, which does not address my students' more "positive" affective responses to *The White Ribbon*.⁵ Against the background of established oppositions between affect and distancing as well as the association of Haneke's auteurist signature with (distancing) modernism, this recent scholarship has furthermore been haunted by tropes of contradiction and paradox, ambivalence and ambiguity.⁶ In this piece, I therefore make a suggestion for a more full-fledged reassessment. The alternative framework I propose is not necessarily suited for rereading Haneke's entire oeuvre, which has perhaps been analyzed too exclusively through an auteurist lens anyway. Beyond its explicit focus on *The White Ribbon*, however, I hope that my reading can inspire a rethinking of a broader range of (more or less) independent films made in the last decade or so, perhaps as a "no longer modernist" cultural moment including but not limited to Haneke's own *Amour* (2012).

This proposal draws on the work of Bruno Latour, who became known not least for his provocation that "we have never

been modern.”⁷ Specifically, my reading of *The White Ribbon* aims to reframe the terms of spectatorship analysis by way of a dialogue between the film’s invitations to relate to its historical village collective and Latour’s suggestions for “reassembling the social” or, as he words more emphatically, “*the collective*.”⁸ Latour’s respective plea can be situated as a part of a broader trend toward reconsidering collectivity in scholarship as well as society and the arts. Not surprisingly, such reconsiderations seem to have assumed new urgency in the face of twenty-first-century crises, from the September 11, 2001, attacks to the instabilities produced by neoliberal governance. While violent political manifestations of the urgency to create collective identifications based on nation, ethnicity, or religion have dominated the news from too many parts of the world, scholars from a range of disciplines have developed reflective, heterogeneous theoretical perspectives on the topic. These perspectives range from reconceptualizations of universalism, cosmopolitanism, and conviviality to growing interest in Jean-Luc Nancy’s “inoperative community” and Stanley Cavell’s plea for rediscovering “the existence of community” at the movies.⁹ However, they share gestures of reorientation vis-à-vis the primarily deconstructive positions associated with postmodernism, if not vis-à-vis fundamental tenets of (“modernist”) twentieth-century scholarship. Paradigmatically, Latour has argued for displacing both modernist insistences on “absence” and postmodern gestures of “deconstruction” with emphases on “presence” and “affirmation.”¹⁰ More concretely, Latour asks us to shift the twentieth-century ethos of distanced critique into a practice of patiently “assembling a common world” through “the actors’ own world-making abilities.”¹¹ Thus, he hopes to overcome contemporary uncertainties “about what ‘we’ means” through a “*tracing of associations*” between concepts, objects, and people—that is, by “deploying controversies about the social world” and following them to the point where they may eventually be stabilized.¹²

In detailing this plea for “following the actors,” Latour also asks us to take seriously people’s explanations as to “how and why they are deeply *attached, moved, affected*” by specific artworks rather than demanding the distanced responses that much twentieth-century film criticism associates with artistically and politically serious cinema.¹³ In this way, his science studies approach indirectly touches on questions of spectatorship. Among the various proposals for rethinking collectivity in the contemporary moment, Latour’s is particularly promising for my endeavor by virtue of how it connects to a related ensemble of twenty-first-century trends (and enables a specific intervention into these, as outlined below),

namely to scholarly (re)turns to the pleasures of the aesthetic, the transactions of empathy, or the force of affect in film and cultural studies.¹⁴ Although no less divergent in their conceptual and political affiliations than the cited proposals for rethinking collectivity, these turns to aesthetics and affect share common ground—both with the work on collectivity and with each other—by virtue of their respective calls for displacing twentieth-century emphases on negativity, distance, or “paranoid reading” with epistemologies of affirmation and reparation.¹⁵ More specifically, scholars have insisted on “good” feelings, or feeling for and with others, and the recognition of the individual’s affective ties to her world.¹⁶

In other words, influential contemporary (perhaps no longer exactly) critical paradigms seem to encourage my students’ inclination to feel for, or even with, the pastor at the center of Haneke’s historical collective rather than, at best, aligning with the voice-over’s more distanced perspective.¹⁷ And as I argue in this essay, the composition of *The White Ribbon* may in fact do so as well. A closer look, I demonstrate, shows the film’s post-Brechtian techniques of distancing to be intertwined with Latourian gestures of “following the actors themselves” in the assembly of their collective world—with attentiveness and varying degrees of cognitive and emotional understanding, respect, and empathy. My close reading pursues in detail how *The White Ribbon* invites its audiences to trace the attachments of the pastor as well as a range of other actors in its complex world by initiating a conversation between the narrative form of Haneke’s film, Latour’s scholarly—but also narrative—methodology, and contemporary film scholarship. In a nutshell, this conversation enables me to resituate the film within twenty-first-century discussions about reconstructing collectives instead of insisting on its belated modernism or the paradoxes of auteurial sadism and ethical reflexivity highlighted in existing Haneke scholarship. In the terms that Latour uses in his most recent book, I explore how *The White Ribbon* replaces iconoclastic critique with “diplomacy” by way of returning to the “experience” of the actors involved.¹⁸

Importantly, this revised reading does not translate into a claim about the film’s straightforwardly affirmative stance on the collective it traces. As I will also detail, “following the actors” in *The White Ribbon* does not actually come at the expense of critique in every sense; the film still insistently investigates the production of violence in the authoritarian collective enforced in its historical village. In affect studies, Lauren Berlant has vetoed the displacement of critique from the center of scholarly analysis. Her question “How does one go about defetishizing negation while remaining

critical?"¹⁹ succinctly points to the challenges inscribed in the contemporary paradigms of affirmation. Short of lapsing back into "old" recipes for "paranoid reading" and full-fledged distanciation, how can we still attend, for example, to the ways in which affective attachments sustain the violence of the collective?

An Aesthetics of Complex World-making

An answer to this question, I argue, is presented by *The White Ribbon's* complex narrative form and the audience address it develops. In reconstructing this form with inspiration from Latour, I balance some of his (dominant) anticritique rhetoric with his (occasional) hints at the possibility of conceptualizing the recommended methodological shift from "debunking" to "assembly" as a "new" mode of critique.²⁰ For as long as we hold on to an opposition between assembly and critical intervention, Latour's method of "following the actors" makes itself vulnerable to the concern that it backgrounds questions of power and implicitly asks us to accept *hegemonic* narratives in the envisioned process of developing "a shared definition of a common world."²¹ But the promise of Latour's intervention is precisely in challenging this opposition. Latour's science studies argument is based on a forceful displacement of the traditional dichotomy between realism and construction. Thus, he embraces the process of construction, but not the deconstructive bent of (postmodern) social constructivism, in recommending a (nonpositivist) "realism dealing with . . . *matters of concern*, not *matters of fact*."²² "While highly uncertain and loudly disputed," matters of concern are nonetheless "real" and "objective" but are taken as "*gatherings*" rather than "objects" by a "more talkative, active, pluralistic, and more mediated" empiricism.²³

My suggestion here is to translate Latour's epistemological and methodological interventions into the realm of aesthetics, to the effect of imbricating filmic realism with the forms of intervention traditionally opposed to it. *The White Ribbon's* narrative form can be described as performing precisely such imbrication. Praised for its "richness," the film intricately combines elements of what critics have described as realism, with its conventional opposite, a striking regime of montage (in the inclusive sense of both shot composition and editing).²⁴ With Latour, this complex form can, in a nutshell, be positively described as a narrative practice of assembly by way of "following the actors," or an attentively active world-making operating through careful associations between actors, attachments, gestures, sights, sounds, and words.²⁵

But let me back up for a moment: How can I just transplant Latour's contribution to the epistemological debates around scientific realism into the realm of film theory? Although quite conscious of differences between disciplines and media, Latour himself intriguingly performs such a move by explicitly aligning his methodology with narrative theory and comparing his advocated "world-building enterprise" to the "construction sites" of film production.²⁶ Taking these comparisons seriously allows me to describe Latour's epistemological (or ontological)²⁷ realism as itself anchored in aesthetics, specifically narrative procedure. In Latour's *Reassembling the Social*, this aesthetic, or narrative, grounding of ontological realism comes about as a gradual methodological shift away from a concept that had played a more central role in his earlier work and a crucial role in film theory: the concept of indexicality.²⁸ In film studies, Latour's earlier work on indexicality specifically inspired Joshua Malitsky's reconceptualization of realism for the context of postrevolutionary Russian and Cuban documentary cinema.²⁹ Connecting Latour's notion of indexical stability to film theoretical conceptualizations of indexicality from André Bazin to Mary Ann Doane, Malitsky amends the dominant historical narrative of how Soviet montage theorists retracted their avant-garde affiliations under Stalinist pressure by underlining the differently modernist connections of Esfir Shub's new realism with its rich, "descriptive" aesthetics of "accumulation" that de-emphasized "narrational authority."³⁰

Latour's more recent work, however, precisely anchors realism in narrative. Drawing on that proposal, my own rethinking of realism shares with Malitsky's insistence on an abundance of detail and a principle of accumulation but is based less on the "indexical force" sustaining the "complexity" of the photographic "image" than on the complexity of narration.³¹ The authority of such narration, to be sure, is anchored in intersubjectivity—and, if you will, "interobjectivity"—rather than sovereignty of any kind. In *Reassembling the Social*, a "good" narrative account is an account that orients itself at a goal of "objectivity, or rather *objectfulness*," through the ways it "*traces a network*" by giving agency to a range of nonsovereign participants and multiplying the associations between them, including events, objects, and more.³² In recording, deploying (or as Latour also words, "perform[ing]") these connections, the narrative process "*can put aside neither the complete artificiality of the enterprise nor its claim to accuracy and truthfulness.*"³³ In other words, the narrative process is not constrained by any claim to immediacy or direct access to any (historical or contemporary) perspective or even necessarily the notion of material trace that most proponents

of indexical realism also in film studies have held on to.³⁴ While thus principally enabled to sustain even bold critical interventions, Latour's narrative realism is controlled through an ethics of care and caution in "following" diverging viewpoints.³⁵ Depending on its context of articulation and genre (say, science or documentary versus film fiction), relevant standards of "discipline" and "domestication" also apply.³⁶

From my angle, this enables a productive reenvisioning of filmic realism for the contemporary moment. While dispensing with thorny questions of media specificity after the end of the photographic era, Latour's proposal does not entirely retreat into a discussion of (mere) narrative verisimilitude or realist effect.³⁷ Rather, Latour's imbrications of mediacy and the real, or words and worlds, find their place among contemporary "post-epistemological" ontologies, as recently described by Thomas Elsaesser with respect to Gilles Deleuze along with Cavell and Nancy.³⁸ I find Latour's proposal the most convincing among these, however, for its emphasis on the specifics of narrative form. Rather than displacing controversies about "truth and falsehood" with affirmations of "belief and trust," Latour engages the complexities of producing plural *truths*, through different kinds of "evidence," in the fraught assembly of matters of concern.³⁹ Whereas Deleuzian approaches have remained more or less antinarrative in their focus on "asocial," asubjective, and nonsemantic affect, Latour's narrative ontology programmatically bridges all of these divides.⁴⁰ But while clearly moving beyond the postmodernist critique of narrative as a tool of ideological closure, Latour's approach also diverges from cognitive approaches, where the contemporary reappraisal of narrative as a basic mode of human orientation has found its most clear-cut film theoretical development.⁴¹ In contrast to these cognitive takes, Latour's concept of realism does not return us to more or less "classical" narrative form but instead encourages nonclassical explorations of narrative complexity.⁴²

As I detail in the following sections of this essay, *The White Ribbon's* narratively striking assembly of heterogeneous images, sounds, and words is characterized by such a Latourian commitment to developing complexity through careful attention to parallel and often diverging elements and layers of a situation as well as actor perspectives. Before delving into this reading, however, a few more words on my concept of narrative complexity may be in order. As I use the term, it diverges from its dominant uses in recent scholarship. For instance, Warren Buckland has underlined the contemporary proliferation of "puzzle plots" as a form

of storytelling that exceeds classical (Aristotelian) models of plot complexity in breaking “the boundaries of the classical, unified mimetic plot.”⁴³ While I appreciate this intervention vis-à-vis the prominence of Aristotelian models in cognitive cinema poetics, my own concept targets less Buckland’s postmodernist antimimetics—or the resonant “mind games” of Haneke scholarship⁴⁴—than the multifaceted processes of world deployment in contemporary films such as *The White Ribbon*.⁴⁵ In other words, the fact that *The White Ribbon* world does not defy any basic assumptions about causality or significantly play with reality levels, virtuality, and temporality does not make it any less complex.⁴⁶

Rather than merely classical plot recipes, my own notion of complex narration displaces the centrality of plot as such, which, I suspect, has been in part responsible for the continued reservations of many noncognitive film scholars vis-à-vis questions of narrative. Drawing on postclassical narrative theory, I instead work with a much more encompassing notion of narrative world-making.⁴⁷ In connecting the cognitive focus on film poetics to affect scholars’ emphasis on flow and discontinuity, narrative can be defined as a (performative) process of configuration through a world-making “assemblage” of attachments, affects, associations, framings, gestures, images, sounds, and words—a process unfolding both on the composition side of film and (further) in its reception. As *The White Ribbon* thus assembles its historical collective in no longer quite modernist ways, we⁴⁸ are invited to engage with its diegetic actors’ attachments to their collective in a variety of modes, certainly including shock, discomfort, and possibly outrage but also understanding and respect, sympathy and empathy—or various degrees of (mostly acentral) alignment.⁴⁹ In carefully unfolding and forcefully connecting a range of developed scenarios, the film enables us to trace its diegetic actors’ orientations in the violent world of their village collective without compromising our ability to experience the brutality of their actions. Creating powerfully disturbing but not exclusively negative affective viewing experiences, the film thus analyzes the cruelty of attachments to violent collectives while simultaneously inviting us to connect with moments of hope, tenderness, and love in its diegetic world-making struggles. In its twenty-first-century production and reception context, the film thereby initiates a layered process of deploying controversies about the collective. Tracing those within its early twentieth-century cosmos, it simultaneously engages the question of our relationship to this historical configuration—and, if only indirectly, that of our relationship to contemporary collectives.

Complex Shots: The Interplay of Bodily and Verbal Performances

How could the diverging readings of *The White Ribbon* in my graduate classroom be accounted for? Although cognitive criticism especially has offered a wealth of considerations about the multiple techniques of audience guidance and the intricacies of our spatial, emotional, and evaluative alignment with characters, traditional assumptions about the particular significance of camera perspective often continue to serve as a default starting point for respective investigations: How much closeness, and from which angle, does the framing of shots afford in which particular moment of the film? With respect to *The White Ribbon*, however, attending to these questions proved to be of rather limited diagnostic value. At moments, the immobile camera well known to experienced Haneke audiences is installed at an observer's distance, where it presents a social tableau—sometimes through a door or a similar framing device and arguably to a more or less Brechtian effect.⁵⁰ Toward the end of the first scene in the pastor's house, for example, which introduces him to the film audience, the camera is positioned diagonally behind him in a long take on the family assembled for dinner (Figure 1). The two oldest children about to be punished for coming home late are standing far away in the background, and the silent mother sits almost as removed at the other end of the table. The framing dramatizes the hierarchical configuration of this family along with the situational exclusion of the two oldest children, whom the pastor will shortly prohibit from offering the ritual good-night hand kiss, and the shot does not seem to invite (emotional through spatial) audience alignment. Overall, however, a fair amount of close-ups and even conventional shot-countershot framings—unusual for Haneke's cinema⁵¹—balance these distancing gestures. In fact, the very first shot on the pastor was a closeup, in a series thereof that foregrounds the faces of the individual family members while he begins his disciplinary speech. Later scenes variously present the pastor as well as his family members in unobtrusive, near-classical close and medium shots, making it difficult to trace any implied camera commentary or allegiance at all. Thus, it might be more promising to turn elsewhere for determining audience guidance.

More important clues for understanding the different readings in my classroom turned out to be in the complex interplay between different elements of audiovisual shot composition, specifically bodily and verbal performance, including both voice-over narration and character speech.⁵² Thus, a closer look at the village pastor's rhetoric during his disciplinary monologues foregrounds



Figure 1. Michael Haneke's *Das weiße Band/The White Ribbon* (2009).

a contrast between his overall inexpressive body language (and mostly calm, disengaged voice) and the fact that his words almost constantly reference his own emotional engagement. In the initial family scene, for example, he not only talks about the mother having cried but also dramatically declares that they will both have a bad night because “the strokes” to which he just sentenced his two oldest children “will hurt us more than they hurt you.” Like me, some of my students decoded these words—not accompanied by a corresponding affective bodily habitus—as techniques of emotional manipulation from the repertoire of authoritarian education, and this take seems to be backed by the director’s acknowledged extensive use of literature on these educational practices.⁵³ The absence of the same decoding impulse in some of my younger students, however, alerted me to the fact that it *is* a critical imposition, mediated by the antiauthoritarian discourses with which I grew up in post-1968 Germany. Instead, these students were willing to “follow” the pastor’s rhetoric of affect, “deploy[ing] the actors’ own world-making abilities.” Perhaps naturalizing his unemotional body language as the normatively restrained habitus of bourgeois masculinity in modern Europe, they halfway legitimated him as a well-meaning, if failing, educator. And in fact, Haneke himself has cautioned that this pastor is a “tyrant” only from our perspective today.⁵⁴ Thus emphasizing historical distance as a key generator of critical distance, he simultaneously suggests the possibility of bracketing this critique in a more cautious approach. Still in historical terms, and through decidedly acentral alignment, we might understand the pastor as a representative of his era “who loves

his children and is one hundred percent convinced that his way of raising them is right.”⁵⁵ To be sure, Haneke indirectly ties that characterization back to the film’s analytical project in underlining that German fascism was characterized precisely by such “absolute belief in the ‘right thing.’”⁵⁶ Furthermore, we may have little inclination to follow the director’s own interpretation when the pastor, still in the initial family scene, also cruelly claims that “I don’t know what’s sadder, your absence or your coming back.”⁵⁷

A closer look thus indicates how critical positioning and gestures of following the actors may not merely coexist in this film but are intricately intertwined in its composition. The complex interplay of bodily affect and language in individual shots is a crucial component of this practice of narrative world-making. In a later scene in the pastor’s house, one of the younger boys asks for the father’s permission to foster an injured yard bird. As if intending to deny this permission, the pastor, once more, references affect in a performative of threat: sternly, he warns that his son will “be attached” to the bird by the time it is well again and ready to be released. When the kid counters by reminding the pastor of his own pet bird we have seen in its cage next to his desk throughout the scene, the pastor argues that the pet bird, unlike the bird from the yard, is used to captivity. Then for the first time, however, the pastor softens in tone and facial muscle as he asks the child whether he was really prepared for the “heavy responsibility” of standing in as “father and mother” for the bird (Figure 2). In response, the little boy’s face lights up in joy (Figure 3). Forcefully, this happiness at the (affectively padded) prospect of a situational role shift in the hierarchical family configuration seems to exemplify what Berlant calls “cruel optimism.” Berlant’s concept weaves a gesture of critical analytics into the project of following the actors: it designates the subject’s attachment to “compromised conditions of possibility” and the promises of a “good life” in the system while aiming not at “a map of pathology” but instead at “an orientation toward the pleasure that is bound up in the activity of worldmaking.”⁵⁸

In tracing these attachments, *The White Ribbon* invites us to understand (both affectively and critically) how “ordinary subjects” exercise thoroughly nonsovereign agency by pursuing “promise[s] of intimacy” in their circumscribed world.⁵⁹ Toward the end of the film, when the pastor’s oldest daughter crucifies his pet bird in revenge for his public shaming of her, the younger son offers the fostered bird as a replacement gift to the “Herr Vater.”⁶⁰ Once more, the nonharmonious interplay of dialogue and performance is key to the scene. While the boy’s self-sacrificial act of love is accompanied by the sadness we see on his face in a medium close-up,



Figure 2. Michael Haneke's *Das weiße Band/The White Ribbon* (2009).



Figure 3. Michael Haneke's *Das weiße Band/The White Ribbon* (2009).

he motivates the gift with the *father's* sadness. Does this gesture of verbal connection allow the film viewer to see the former child also in the pastor? The pastor's (perfunctory or anxiously controlled) "thank you" sounds rather cold, but as my students underlined, his face seems to betray genuine emotion here for once. In contrast to the distancing function of incongruity in Brechtian *Gestus* performance,⁶¹ the interplay of body and language creates emotional complexity here—without untwisting the film's knot of love and brutality. As the formerly free bird enters captivity for good, the pastor's situational performance of affect fails to connect with the

child. Apparently disappointed by the relative lack of response, the son turns to leave the room, painfully underlining that the pastor can show his love for his son as love for a pet only.

Finally, the film's antithetical deployment of language and physical performance as a core element of its complex world-making is explicitly foregrounded in a scene from one of *The White Ribbon's* other plot threads. In his younger onscreen persona as the village teacher, the narrator asks for the hand of Eva, the girl he has been shyly flirting with during her employment as a nanny for the baron's children. In a tableau shot of the dark family living room in the midst of winter, Eva's father openly articulates his skepticism about the financially unpromising applicant. Following an inappropriate joke about the significant age difference between them, he asks Eva directly, "Do you want him?" As Eva fails to answer, her mother demands that he stop pressuring her—unlike the pastor's wife, the mother does speak up against her husband. Underlining the gendered dimension of the film's disconnects between language and bodily performance, Eva's mother insists that "Of course she wants him. Don't you have any feeling?" When he snaps back with "How can I tell if she clams up?," Eva flees the room. The mother follows her, provoking him to add a condescending "Women!" ("Weiber!"). But the film does not simply resolve this situation by asserting the authenticity of nonverbal communication, which would have the effect of critically denouncing the patriarchal organization of its world while allowing us to unhesitatingly feel with the couple. Painful to watch, the scene instead suggests that Eva's full consent may in fact be impossible in the hierarchical constellation at stake: her father has a point about the age difference between her and the teacher. When these two are finally alone for a moment after Eva's father has declared a mandatory waiting period, the teacher once more asks Eva for her consent ("Is that all right with you?"). Before providing gestural affirmation by taking his hand, she returns the question to him, notably using the formal mode of address that he has repeatedly asked her to abandon with him: "Ist es Ihnen recht?" ("Is it with you, Sir?").

The audience unease invited here counteracts the emotional alignment with the teacher stipulated by my own spontaneous reading of the film. Initially, the emerging awkward flirtation between him and Eva had in fact offered the audience a break from the dominance of cruelty and sadness in the film's world. Their first encounter on the street not only established the fact that both of them are not originally from the village but was also set apart from the surrounding (dark interior) scenes through the use of full

sunlight and the dominance of close shot-countershot framings.⁶² The progression of the narrative, however, makes it increasingly clear that their relationship does not escape the overwhelming realities of hierarchy and affective disconnect in the film's world either. At moments paternally condescending, the teacher, like the pastor, talks about his love for Eva but fails to "appropriately" demonstrate it through facial gesture or voice in many scenes.

Voice-Over Narration: A Latourian Actor with the (Limited) Privilege of Hindsight

In his narrator function, the teacher characteristically includes himself in the village collective by using the first-person plural. When the pastor restores his family community by freeing the children of their ribbon stigmata for New Year's, for example, the narrator accompanies the images of this family scene with words that articulate doubt at best indirectly: "we thought of ourselves as united in the belief that life in our community was God's will, and worth living." Rather than a full-fledged outside perspective, he presents an account that is removed from the world he traces only by the grammatical marker of the past tense. In this sense, the character narrator is a Latourian actor with the (limited) privilege of hindsight whose historical distance does not equal full-fledged critical distance. Even the voice-over, as the film's arguably strongest distancing device,⁶³ thus follows Latour's methodological recipe of tracing the actors' attachments to their shared world. Another narrator commentary reports that the baron's speech in the church after the mistreatment of his son "frightened the locals": the baron threatened that the "peace of our community" would be lost if the perpetrator was not found. The narrator then offers an interpretation for the expressions—in part attentive, in part withdrawn—on the villagers' faces that we have just seen in a series of medium close-ups (Figure 4). As he explains, the baron "wasn't popular, but as a social authority and employer of nearly the entire village he was respected."

This alignment of the narrator's reports with the perspective of the village does not mean that he loses all narrative authority. While he is marked as nonsovereign by his own introductory references to the limits of his memory as well as his tentative rhetoric, critical habit perhaps too quickly equates such nonsovereignty with (the narratologically much more developed concept of) "unreliability."⁶⁴ But the narrator's introductory self-positioning also serves to authorize his account as an honest sense-making attempt:



Figure 4. Michael Haneke's *Das weiße Band/The White Ribbon* (2009).

I don't know if the story I want to tell you is true in all details. Some of it I only know by hearsay. After so many years, a lot of it is still obscure, and many questions remain unanswered. But I think I must tell of the strange events that occurred in our village. They could perhaps clarify some things that happened in this country.⁶⁵

While the film subsequently presents intimate details about village family life that the narrator could hardly have had access to, he could have certainly imagined these scenes based on the hearsay he references. More generally, such transgressions against the “natural” limits of (human) narrator knowledge have been made natural to audiences through the history of modern narrative techniques, prominently including the voices of so-called omniscient narrators. In Haneke's film, the narrator's gender and the age we hear in his voice are conventional authority generators. Along with his structural privilege as a voice-over and his significant presence, they make it likely that we *will* believe him as long as the other film tracks do not clearly signal otherwise.⁶⁶ And overall, they do not. While there are momentary tonal discrepancies (for example, when peaceful landscape shots accompany the first news of war), and while the narrator withholds full evaluation, *The White Ribbon* does not work through a large-scale “opposition” between “the film and its narrator” (as Williams claims) but instead largely presents voice-image congruity in the unfolding of its tale.⁶⁷

In this sense, the narrator's nonsovereign account can in fact be seen as embodying Latour's nonsovereign world-making practice of careful and cautious assembly. Eventually, the process does

stabilize some results: the audience is certainly invited to assume that most of the “strange events” in the village find their explanation in the children. And if the subjects of the pastor’s regime of torture have thus turned into torturers themselves, the narrator’s reconstruction of this process also provides the film audience—at our additional historical distance—with evidence for critically elaborating this story. Thus, we may conclude that the pastor has interpellated his children into a regime of community violence, presumably backed by divine law, with his techniques of enforcing consent: “You surely agree with me that I can’t leave your offense unpunished.” (A letter found with the tortured son of the midwife quotes a Bible passage about God “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children.”) But apart from the narrator’s initial hint at the genealogy of fascism, the mode of this assembly does not conceptually explicate and historically label such critical points and thereby does not (as Garrett Stewart claims) silence “mystery” through “history” or, as we could reword his charge, local investigation through historical allegory.⁶⁸ Rather than didactically demonstrating “[s]ocial pathology,”⁶⁹ the film draws its audience close to its cruel collective. Challenging us to engage with the actors’ own world-making processes, the narrator’s account (in Latour’s words) enables us to tangentially “share the experience” of their values while nonetheless “modify[ing] the account.”⁷⁰

Deploying Controversies: Camera Associations

The film’s techniques for thus drawing the audience in, and variously aligning us more or less tangentially with its actors, include classical empathy generators, especially the close-ups on the younger children’s faces. More striking, however, is the film’s editing practice, which I want to describe as a thoroughly “local” recording along the lines of Latour’s methodological prescriptions for tracing different viewpoints.⁷¹ Again and again, a cut takes us from one family scenario to the next in the midst of dramatic scenes, mostly without establishing shots or other means of narrative preparation.⁷² Haneke’s earlier work, specifically *Code inconnu* (*Code Unknown*, 2000), is known for emphasizing the autonomy of the shot by separating (narratively similarly incomplete) sequence shots with black screens. In contrast, the scenario-to-scenario cuts in *The White Ribbon* intertwine rupture with association, establishing linkages between heterogeneous situations, or perhaps, with Latour, “a discontinuous series of elements” in which, nonetheless, something “circulates in a continuous fashion.”⁷³ Although this local

recording technique at first glance operates in stark contrast with the voice-over (in its distancing and generalizing function), the editing thereby collaborates with the narrator in tracing associations. With the implied comparisons or analogies, the often disorienting surprise cuts contribute to assembling the village collective.⁷⁴

In some respects, the surprise cuts can thus even be seen in analogy to the actual community shots with which the film also presents us at moments, mostly in the church. In narrative mode and effect, however, these techniques of assembly are simultaneously quite different. Usually aligned with the pastor's frontal view, the church shots of the assembled collective function like the narrator's most generalizing comments: they produce seemingly complete visual accounts of the hierarchical community. In contrast, the "local" editing associations between individual scenarios establish "contact," not "congregat[ion],"⁷⁵ exploring the multiple links constituting partial assemblages. This editing technique can thus be compared to the narrator's less generalizing comments on specific connections. Especially akin to his suggestive but "under-evaluating" verbal gestures, it generates questions and possibilities rather than seemingly ready accounts. With *Latour*, it thus deploys "matters of concern" rather than "matters of fact" in a decidedly nonsovereign albeit critically engaged manner.⁷⁶

In the terms of cinematic montage theory, the resulting complexity is won by way of intertwined, layered effects of similarity, analogy, juxtaposition, and counterpoint. Often, the film's editing facilitates several of these association effects simultaneously in presenting the film's both unsettled and unsettling world of intricate connections. For example, a cut takes us from the scene in the pastor's study discussed above, in which the boy brings the injured yard bird, to a dinner scenario in the house of a small farmer whose wife was killed in a work accident on the day after the initial dinner in the pastor's house. Already the film's exposition insistently connected both family stories in its initial presentation of the village as an intertwined cosmos: the scene in which the farmer's oldest son inspected the location of the accident and asked questions about the baron's potential responsibility was embedded between two encounters that the narrator marked as immediately following one another. Namely, the teacher had found the pastor's oldest son, Martin, dangerously balancing on a bridge, giving God, as he explained, a chance to kill him—probably, the audience can guess, in response to the pastor's disciplinary speech. On his way back home, the teacher had first met Eva. From the representation of that encounter, a cut then took us into the doctor's house, where his children talked about the accident of the farmer's wife, and yet another cut took us back

to the pastor's, in medias res into the mother's preparations for the spanking ritual. At this later point of the film now, the farmer questions his son about the baron's cabbage, which has been cut during the harvest festival. In contrast to both the pastor's little boy, who rejoices at the prospect of redoubling existing family structures as a parent to the yard bird, and the film's "mysterious" acts of violence, for which we merely assume the (older) children's responsibility, the farmer's son rebels in explicit defiance of authority. Asserting that he is "proud" of his deed, he challenges both the baron and his own father, whom he had earlier blamed for his passive acceptance of the mother's death. In response, his father slaps him in front of the entire family assembled for dinner.

The range of (contrastive as well as connective) links with the scenario of discipline in the pastor's house established here arguably encourages diverging audience responses. On the one hand, we may be eager to align ourselves with the son's—in the film's world, lone—act of antiauthoritarian resistance. On the other hand, his father's (spontaneous, affective) act of corporeal punishment and his allegiance to the system may seem understandable when he now demands that his son think about the consequences of his rebellion: the family will not be able to survive without the support of the baron. Furthermore, he insists, it is impossible to establish whether the baron is actually responsible for the accident. In fact, it remains unclear also to us whether negligence was involved. Or should the children have had their hands in this mystery as well? While noticeably constructed in its often abrupt, discontinuous mode, the film's narrative generation of complexity certainly proceeds along the lines of Latour's plea for approximating ("objectfull") truthfulness through a cautious tracing of diverging perspectives. If anything, the film proceeds *more* cautiously in that it refrains from settling many controversies, indirectly suggesting critical questions about one of the weaker points of Latour's argument: his optimistic evocation of an eventual "unification of the collective into a common world acceptable to those who will be unified" arguably makes itself vulnerable to charges of Habermasian consensus "alchemy."⁷⁷ In contrast, the film constructively assembles controversies but holds on to the lack of a clear resolution not only in the conflict between the farmer and his son.

No Closure: Violated Affects, Ongoing Engagements

In line with the film's more general intertwining of critique with respect for the attachments it traces, the invitation to consider

the farmer's perspective along with that of his son does not undo *The White Ribbon's* critique of authority.⁷⁸ While the film asks us to experientially acknowledge the complexity inherent in authority's intricate, layered workings from the perspective of different actors, this local recording does not produce any conciliatory effect. Highlighting the cruelty of attachment, it still critically dramatizes the configuration of attachments it pursues. In this sense, the film's complex narration presents less a radical departure from Haneke's earlier work or the violent signature of his oeuvre than perhaps a shift in degree in how cruelty is embedded into multifaceted audience engagement. But as indicated in the introduction, reframing these audience transactions through Latour's methodology allows me to move beyond the impasses created by persistent dichotomies between un/pleasure and rational critique in much film studies scholarship and work on Haneke's oeuvre in particular, where un/pleasure and critique are then presumed to be paradoxically intertwined.

Another abrupt cut between scenarios connects the pastor's rhetoric of affect to the midwife's relationship with the doctor who abuses her. While telling horrifying stories about the presumably degenerative effects of masturbation, the pastor insists that his respective disciplinary intervention against Martin is motivated solely by love (Figure 5). Immediately after the scared adolescent eventually confesses to touching himself, we join an apparently rather unpleasurable dining room sex act between the doctor and the midwife in midaction (Figure 6). In their subsequent conversation, the midwife indirectly expresses her emotional longing by declaring its absence on the doctor's side: "You didn't miss me." (The doctor just returned from a stay at the hospital following his "mysterious" accident at the film's outset.) Cynically, he comments, "Nothing like a good dose of healthy self-hate!" but then halfway retracts the statement in response to the midwife's shocked "What?" and, after a moment of hesitation, almost gently, if patriarchally, places his hand on her head that she had rested on the table in a gesture of physically offering herself to him (Figure 7). Of course, matters only get worse from here. A subsequent intertwined sequence takes us from the house of the farmer, who has hanged himself in the barn, to another sex act between the doctor and the midwife that fails to produce orgasm and instead unleashes a round of verbal discharge. Mostly calm in tone, the doctor brutally articulates what he claims has been his long-standing disgust for the midwife. In response, she now openly charges him with sexually abusing his daughter and calls herself "ridiculous" for "loving" him, before comparing him to her disabled son.



Figure 5. Michael Haneke's *Das weiße Band*/*The White Ribbon* (2009).



Figure 6. Michael Haneke's *Das weiße Band*/*The White Ribbon* (2009).

More so than the “mysterious” acts of violence, it is the close confrontation with these “disabled”—in the sense of incapacitated—affects that produces the cruelty of Haneke’s film. The counterpoint effect of the editing in the described sequences may invite us to get some relief by focusing blame on the doctor. Doing so, those of my students eager to defend the pastor affectively approximated the resolution move of the diegetic collective on which the narrator reports at the end of the film: after the disappearance of the doctor and the midwife, the “village gossips” accused them of all sorts of things, including the unsolved crimes. In this instance,



Figure 7. Michael Haneke's *Das weiße Band/The White Ribbon* (2009).

however, the narrator's distanced rhetoric clearly de-authorizes the simple act of scapegoating and indirectly reorients the film audience toward the complex circulations of muted, mutilated, and violated affect and attachment that the film traced for us. Like in other Haneke films, we may worry also about our own complicity with the protagonists' violent performances.⁷⁹ Does our own interpellation into dominant beauty scripts perhaps make (some of) us share unwillingly in the doctor's expressed disgust for the midwife? At the same time, the notion of complicity is less suited to describing other layers of our emotional engagement with these diegetic situations, including our potential empathy for the midwife's cruel optimism in hanging on to a twisted promise of intimacy.

In another play of complex association, the new object of the doctor's sexual affection, his adolescent daughter Anni, is positioned in posture and overall appearance as an eerily similar double of the older midwife.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, the portrayal of Anni's gentleness contrasts not only with the harsher demeanor of the midwife but also with that of the pastor's oldest daughter, her age companion. While Anni's largely tender interactions with her younger brother provide us with momentary relief and may invite our allegiance with her (against her father), the resemblance with the midwife does not merely foreshadow Anni's future; it also, once more, curbs easy side taking in favor of more intricate engagements with the film's world of violent and violated affect. In the above-mentioned dialogue between Anni and her little brother after the death of the farmer's wife, the film traces their own participation in the seemingly inescapable entanglements of tenderness with violence

in the village world. Following an initial framing through the door as an almost motionless tableau, the major part of the scene is rendered in a close shot-countershot mode. But while drawing us in, the visual closeness also dramatizes the verbal distancing gestures through which Anni tries to console her brother and presumably herself. Having confirmed that “everyone” dies, she answers his insistent, wide-eyed follow-up questions (“Me, too?”) with temporal reassurances (“But not for a very long time”). When he now understands that their own mom “didn’t go on a trip,” Anni’s initially warm tone shifts into a stance of defense: “Yes, she is dead, too. But that was a long time ago.” In response to this harsher attempt at rendering death less present, her brother defiantly pushes his plate off the table, and a cut takes us to the pastor’s wife, who wipes off a tear while preparing for her children’s punishment.

Thus tracing the seeds of violence in mutilated tenderness, Haneke’s film invites thorough disturbance as part of an audience experience of complex affective engagement. It does so not in the mode of a “paradoxical affirmation that the meaninglessness of things . . . may actually be our best hope”⁸¹ but instead by way of a careful sorting through of variously meaningful layers of painful experience. Respectfully tracing the actors’ perspectives without forfeiting a critical analysis of community violence, the film’s composition discourages uncomplicated resolutions, be it through sustained distance or unmixed feeling with any members of its collective. Instead, it facilitates an unstable experience of partial and shifting alignments with the film’s ensemble of tenderly cruel actors. To be sure, actual viewers may strive to reduce such complexity. They may alternatively cling to the film’s gestures of contrasting doctor and pastor, to the effect of constructing the latter as a loving instance of authority, or to its indications of similarity, which compromise also the pastor’s performances of affect. But as I have demonstrated in this essay, a closer engagement with the complexity of the film’s narrative world-making allows developing both connection and contrast here as we delve into the multiple, specific, and layered associations evoked by its rich narration.

With its intricate layering of similarity and conflict, analogy and counterpoint, *The White Ribbon* offers this complexity through its careful tracing of controversies in Latour’s sense, a narrative methodology that I have suggested to conceptualize as a different kind of realism. Attaining its “objectfullness” not by virtue of a traditional opposition with the interventionist regimes of montage but instead through the richness of layered linkage, this notion of realism opens up new perspectives for engaging with contemporary cinema as well as potentially twenty-first-century culture at

large. Moving beyond the established fault lines of modernist and postmodernist paradigms without entirely forfeiting their critical potential, Haneke's narrative world-making responds to the challenge posed by the affective turn and adjacent twenty-first-century scholarly pleas for more affirmative engagements with the world: How do we overcome old twentieth-century recipes of distanciation without losing sight, for example, of the violence sustained by attachments to authoritarian forms of collectivity?

Through its close engagement with fraught historical configurations of collective attachment, *The White Ribbon* implicitly also challenges us to translate our disturbance into com/passionate questions about the affective ties structuring our own fraught world(s). But while Haneke himself repeatedly underlined that the film's story resonates beyond its specific historical context in investigating the genealogies of "radicalism" and "fundamentalism,"⁸² we might want to be careful not to settle on any definite allegorical translation. As I have demonstrated, the film's "localized" techniques of narration invite audiences to closely engage in the specific stories told. Rather than offering the gratifications of abstract analytical closure, the radical viewing discomfort produced in "following the actors" on *The White Ribbon's* trail thus asks us to explore also the links between its historical affects and our twenty-first-century tenderly cruel attachments as matters of *concern* rather than fact. It is only in this complexifying sense that the film indirectly contributes to larger twenty-first-century conversations about the ways in which we are, and would want to be, bound to the collective. As suggested above, these larger revitalized political as well as scholarly conversations at the time of the film's making and reception may perhaps be contextualized with the pressures of globalization and neoliberal governance, which have displaced not only the historical forms of authoritarianism operative in Haneke's village but also the forceful postmodernist critique of barons and pastors. In this moment of reorientation, *The White Ribbon's* narration presents an alternative to twentieth-century paradigms with their iconoclastic disregard for the complicated orientations of nonsovereign actors. But simultaneously, the film's insistence on the cruelty of its actors' attachments to their collective reminds us that imaginative returns to (more or less religiously based forms of) authority do not provide an answer to contemporary challenges. The film's powerful methodology for tracing controversies comes without easy recipes for settling them.

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Notes

1. Daniel Kothenschulte calls the film a “Lehrstück” (“didactic play”). “Die Logik des Traums,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, May 23, 2009; see also his “Die schrecklichen Kinder,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.fr-online.de/kultur/goldene-palme-cannes-die-schrecklichen-kinder,1472786,3188608.html>. See also on Haneke’s “cinema as moral institution” Fritz Göttler, “Im Dorf der Verdammten,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/im-kinodas-weisse-band-im-dorf-der-verdamnten-1.28208>, and on Haneke’s “impressively icy” gaze and the film’s “exacting scientific study,” see Karin Luisa Badt, “Festivals: Cannes 2009; Andrea Arnold’s Fish Tank Makes the Most Waves,” *Film Criticism* 33, no. 3 (2009): 68. Wheatley, to be sure, objects to the “cold and detached” diagnosis in “The Revenge of Children,” *Sight and Sound* 19, no. 2 (2009): 14. The notion of anachronism is Roy Grundmann’s; on *The White Ribbon*, see his “Introduction: Haneke’s Anachronism,” in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, edited by Roy Grundmann (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1. More generally, on Haneke’s modernist and/or Brechtian reputation, see *ibid.*, 6, and, e.g., in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, Thomas Elsaesser, “Performative Self-Contradictions: Michael Haneke’s Mind Games,” 63; Brigitte Peucker, “Games Haneke Plays: Reality and Performance,” 130; Jörg Metelmann, “Fighting the Melodramatic Condition: Haneke’s Polemics,” 168.

2. See the director’s own comments to that effect in “Unsentimental Education: An Interview with Michael Haneke (conducted by Roy Grundmann),” in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, 599–600.

3. My interest in film composition unfolds as a syncretistic approach intertwining (divergent) cognitive and affective approaches, without discarding the concerns of more traditional ideology-critical takes. A partly resonant inquiry into cinematic poetics is Tarja Laine’s *Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies* (New York: Continuum, 2011). Instead of Laine’s notion of a film’s “emotional core” (5), however, I work with a concept of (multifaceted) narrative configuration (unpacked below), which equips me to return to questions of empathy as one element of a complex interactional constellation. The respective notion of alignment I use in the introductory anecdote is inflected by Murray Smith, “Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema,” *Cinema Journal* 33, no. 4 (1994): 34–56. My continued interest in spectatorship also indicates where my approach diverges from Eugenie Brinkema’s *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), whose return to form I appreciate.

4. See Grundmann, “Introduction,” 34–35; Elsaesser, “Performative Self-Contradictions,” 62; Peucker, “Games Haneke Plays,” 139. In her discussion of light and grief in *Funny Games*, Brinkema suggests “how formalism [itself] might be read as working toward affective commitment”; see Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 99 (emphasis in original). Robert Sinnerbrink mentions (but does not discuss in detail) *The White Ribbon* as eschewing “the explicitly modernist techniques of distancing

evident” in most of Haneke’s films; see Sinnerbrink, “A Post-Humanist Moralism,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 16, no. 4 (2011): 115–29.

5. For the continued focus on violence, see, e.g., Brinkema, “How to Do Things with Violences,” in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, 354–70, and Laine, “Haneke’s ‘Funny Games’ with the Audience (Revisited),” in *On Michael Haneke*, edited by Brian Price and John David Rhodes, 51–60 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010). On *The White Ribbon* specifically (with a focus on audience complicity), see Martin Blumenthal-Barby, “The Surveillant Gaze: Michael Haneke’s *The White Ribbon*,” *October*, no. 147 (Winter 2014): 95–116. Elsaesser gets closer to the rereading suggested here by attending to the “glimpses and moments” where Haneke’s films attempt to “engage with the world” in a nonsadistic way (Elsaesser, “Performative Self-Contradictions,” 70–71).

6. In addition, e.g., to Elsaesser and Peucker (as quoted above), see particularly Catherine Wheatley’s *Michael Haneke’s Cinema: The Ethic of the Image* (New York: Berghahn, 2009), which ultimately identifies the moral imperative of Haneke’s cinema (with Kant and Cavell) as a call to “rational, . . . moral deliberation” (180). While focused on audience complicity with onscreen violence, Laine does problematize these binaries in describing the film’s “ethical pursuit” as one of “thinking through affect” (Laine, “Haneke’s ‘Funny Games,’” 58).

7. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

8. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14 (emphasis in original).

9. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, edited and translated by Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 94. For reconceptualizations of universalism, cosmopolitanism, and conviviality, see, e.g., Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2007).

10. Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 21.

11. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 260, 161 (see first 29). See also Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 279.

12. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 6, 5 (emphasis in original), 227.

13. *Ibid.*, 236 (emphasis in original). On the legacy of Brechtian distanciation in film studies, see, e.g., Murray Smith, “The Logic and Legacy of Brechtianism,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, 130–48 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996). To be sure, a closer look allows complexifying these accounts, insisting, for example, on the role of emotion even in Brecht or the crucial importance of presence in other strands of (e.g., Bazinian) modernism.

14. The high-profile workshop “Surface Tension” at the 2013 Chicago Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference indicated emerging cinema and media studies interest in the (initially literature-focused) returns to poetics and aesthetics, here via Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,”

Representations 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21. In literary studies, Rita Felski's work forms another important reference point for my argument, not least because of her interest in Latour. See her "Context Stinks!," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 573–91. In film studies, empathy has been foregrounded in cognitive criticism. See, e.g., Smith, "Altered States." Affect scholarship has been inspired by Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) and *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2010), Laura Marks's *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), and Vivian Sobchak's *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

15. For the motifs of affirmation and reparation (vs. "paranoid reading") in foundational affect studies texts, see, e.g., Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

16. For a differentiated perspective on the turn to "good feelings" and the epistemologies of affirmation, see Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 29–51 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For the emphasis on the individual's affective orientation processes, see Laurent Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

17. With Richard Wollheim, Smith ("Altered States," 36) distinguishes (acentral) "feeling for" from "feeling with."

18. Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 46, 189 (emphasis in original).

19. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 123.

20. See Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 245–46.

21. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 247. Latour himself answers the concerns regarding power and inequality with a Foucauldian insistence on process and multifacetedness (63–64) but, unlike Foucault, affirmatively foregrounds processes of collective stabilization (see, e.g., 138) and explicitly foregrounds the role of the "master narratives with which we are disciplined" as reservoirs of "metaphors for what 'binds us together,'" which "offer a preview of the collective" (189).

22. Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 231 (emphasis in original). See also Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 114, 161, 255.

23. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 114–15 (emphasis in original). Latour quotes Heidegger's notion of "gathering" here.

24. Rob White, "Three Types of Nothing," *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2010): 6. On the film's "realism," see, e.g., Grundmann ("Unsentimental Education," 593), who highlights *The White Ribbon's* gestus of "observation" through "meticulous attention to detail." Haneke himself has talked also about the emphasis on "credible" lighting in an interview with Geoff Andrew, "The Revenge of Children," *Sight and Sound* (December 2009): 17. On montage in *The White Ribbon*, see James S. Williams, "Aberations of Beauty: Violence and Cinematic Resistance in Haneke's *The White Ribbon*," *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2010): 48–55.

25. In his lecture “Cinema and Socialism,” Raymond Williams developed an earlier plea for overcoming the opposition between montage and realism, respectively “naturalism.” Although he mostly remains within dominant twentieth-century conceptualizations, which associated realism with “mere reproduction” and grounded critique in a traditional Marxist narrative of unveiling objective contradictions, Williams’s early emphasis on “structures of feeling” gets him closer to Latour’s project. As opposed to “formed ideas and commitments,” structures of feeling indicate “those areas of shared reality where we are all uncertain, crossed by different truths.” See Raymond Williams, “Cinema and Socialism,” in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, edited by Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989), 116–17.

26. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 55, 103, 88–89.

27. As specified by the title of the 2013 book, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, Latour develops his approach as an ontological one, although he also warns against overstating the difference between epistemology and ontology (138). This is consistent with his intervention against the philosophical opposition of world versus word (144).

28. See Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*. Even in *Pandora’s Hope*, Latour circumscribes indexicality as the paradigm that serves to establish scientific reference, whereas his own scholarly writing establishes its links through “allusions and illustrations”—or, in Peirce’s semiotic terminology, symbols and icons rather than indexicality’s physical contact (Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 78). See James Hoopes, ed., *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 239–40. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour mostly abandons indexicality as an explicit concept but implicitly still holds onto it in the midst of elaborating his narrative theory. As he keeps insisting on continuity (i.e., probably the physical trace), he thus at moments comes to sound like an advocate of classical narrative realism (see, e.g., 190, 229). *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, however, more consistently backgrounds indexicality in systematically pursuing differences between institutionalized domains. Now Latour emphasizes the role of *discontinuity* also, including material discontinuity in the chains of scientific reference (92), along with the crucial role of figuration and/or “fiction,” associated with “narrative,” across domains (249–50). Importantly, fiction is not defined against reality here; instead, it attains its mode of existence by how it solicits our engagement (see 238–42).

29. Joshua Malitsky, “A Certain Explicitness: Objectivity, History, and the Documentary Self,” *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3 (2011): 26–44.

30. Joshua Malitsky, “Ideologies in Fact: Still and Moving-Image Documentary in the Soviet Union, 1927–1932,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2010): 358.

31. *Ibid.*, 366.

32. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 128, 133 (emphasis in original). On the aspect of nonhuman agency (which I do not foreground here), see also Ilana Gershon and Joshua Malitsky, “Actor-Network-Theory and Documentary Studies,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 4, no. 1 (2010): 65–78.

33. *Ibid.*, 133, 136, 139 (emphasis in original).

34. In reconsidering indexicality for the postphotographic era, Mary Ann Doane actually distances indexicality from realism by distinguishing between its functions as “trace” versus “deixis”—with only that of “trace” being “unfortunately” linked to realism. Mary Ann Doane, “Indexicality: Trace and Sign; Introduction” and “The

Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007): 1–6, 128–52.

35. See Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 288–92.

36. See Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 251–52.

37. For a detailed mapping of film theoretical imbrications of indexicality and narrative sense making (as characteristic also of dominant documentary aesthetics) against the background of later twentieth-century critiques of narrative form in historiography, see Philip Rosen "Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts," in *Theorizing Documentary*, edited by Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 58–89.

38. Elsaesser describes this trend in his rereading of Bazin, which resonates with my conceptualization in dissassociating Bazin himself from a narrowly understood indexicality, and questioning of the traditional opposition between realism and montage. Thomas Elsaesser, "A Bazinian Half-Century," in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, edited by Dudley Andrew with Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11. Deleuze himself already challenges the "pseudo-contradiction between creativity (montage) and integrity (the real)" with respect to Vertov's materialist montage. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 81.

39. The quotes are from Elsaesser's summary of postepistemological ontology and Cavell himself, where "acceptance" is opposed to "evidence." Elsaesser, "A Bazinian Half-Century," 11; Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 157. See also the critique by Latour (*An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 137) of analytical philosophy for its reliance on language alone on the one hand and on fictions of immediacy on the other hand. In contrast, Latour insists on "several types of truth, each dependent on very specific, experiential conditions"—and a process of telling these "truths" that proceeds "for real," that is, again, ontologically (*ibid.*, 18, 139, 19, emphasis in original).

40. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 30. Particularly Massumi's earlier essays remain explicitly antinarrative. See, e.g., Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 25, even as the Bergsonian themes of temporality, "continuity," and "change" (4, 51) open up virtual connections with postclassical narrative theory. Latour's posthumanist ethics of "following the actors" on their nonsovereign world-making trails insistently locates the contingent production of subjectivity as well as objectivity in the sociosymbolic flows of affective-cognitive exchange, as also theorized, for example, by Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics*, 7–8, 10, 12. On action beyond mastery, see Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 280–83, and on the intertwined processes of object and human agency, see Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 70–78. At the same time, Latour's ethics invite me to endow these contingent subjectivities with more experiential weight than suggested by the Deleuzian brand of posthumanism. See Massumi's distinction between affect's "unqualified" nature and "emotion" as its "sociolinguistic fixing" in *Parables for the Virtual*, 28. See also Shaviri, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, 4; Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, e.g., 98. Whereas Ahmed's insistence on history and signification leads her to foreground the term "emotion" (also preferred by the cognitivists), Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 79–81, appropriates the opposition between affect and emotion for the purpose of distinguishing between actual feelings and an—often unconscious—affective structure. My own use of the notion "affect" intends to gesture both at such unconscious layers and the productive possibilities of affective instability, without radically detaching either from character or audience subjectivities and the transactions between them.

41. For a fuller discussion of these returns to narrative, see Claudia Breger, *An Aesthetics of Narrative Performance: Transnational Theater, Literature, and Film in Contemporary Germany* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2012), and Claudia Breger, "Configuring Affect: Complex Worldmaking in Fatih Akin's *Auf der anderen Seite* (*The Edge of Heaven*)," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 65–87.

42. See, e.g., Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007). Critically on the normalizing effects of their neoclassical concepts and the implied assumptions about self-contained, rational cinematic agents, see Steven Shaviro, "The Cinematic Body Redux," *Parallax* 14, no. 1 (2008): 48–54.

43. Warren Buckland, "Puzzle Plots," in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, edited by Warren Buckland (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 5.

44. See Elsaesser, "Performative Self-Contradictions."

45. Short of constituting a full-fledged trend, similar forms of complexity can be found in very different transnational films from the 2000s, such as Fatih Akin's *Auf der anderen Seite*/*The Edge of Heaven* (2007) and Alejandro González Iñárritu's work, including his *Biutiful* (2010) that deploys controversies about collectivity in ways that are resonant with Haneke's film.

46. In some respects, my use of the notion thus has more common ground with Matthew Campora's recent foray into *Subjective Realist Cinema* as a principally naturalistic variant of puzzle plots. However, the emphasis is not on "ontological fragmentation" through unmarked shifts into actual character perspectives, their dream states, etc., but instead is on ontological assembly via *approximation* of different perspectives on layered matters of concern. Matthew Campora, *Subjective Realist Cinema: From Expressionism to Inception* (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 24, 30.

47. See, e.g., Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996); David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

48. This "we" designates the (analytically postulated) implicit viewer called upon by the invitations of film form, which is to be distinguished from actual audience responses coinduced by a range of contextual factors.

49. Unlike Smith ("Altered States," 36), I use not only the notion of sympathy but also that of empathy for acentral modes of alignment, with the goal of further distinguishing degrees of closeness: empathy's feeling "with" does not necessarily equal full-fledged identification, which I continue to describe with this psychoanalytic notion entirely dismissed by the cognitivists.

50. On the overall oeuvre, see Georg Seeßlen, "Structures of Glaciation: Gaze, Perspective, and Gestus in the Films of Michael Haneke," in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, 327, 329. Notably, even Seeßlen concludes with a hint at the surprising "tenderness . . . behind such seemingly cool observation" (336).

51. As underlined by Williams, "Aberrations of Beauty," 49.

52. For the earlier films, Seeßlen also comments on the disconnect between character language and bodily performance ("Structures of Glaciation," 330–31). But the complex—and shifting—relations between different elements of shot composition cannot easily be summarized in a diagnosis such as Williams's, according to

whom “the terror of *The White Ribbon* is [primarily] sonically expressed” (Williams, “Aberrations of Beauty,” 52).

53. For detail, see Fatima Naqvi, *Trügerische Vertrautheit: Filme von Michael Haneke* (Vienna: Synema, 2010), 136–43.

54. Haneke, qtd. in Grundmann, “Unsentimental Education,” 604.

55. Ibid. See also Alexander Horwath, “The Haneke Code: Talking Shop, Theory, and Practice with the Director of ‘The White Ribbon,’” *Film Comment* 45, no. 6 (2009): 29.

56. Grundmann, “Unsentimental Education,” 596.

57. I have adjusted the translation vis-à-vis the English subtitles of my DVD edition where they fail to render significant connotations of the original German (in this case, the English wording is “worse” instead of “sadder”).

58. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 94, 97, 14.

59. Ibid., 98, 189.

60. The English subtitles simply translate “you,” obliterating the reminder of the hierarchical, distanced family configuration inscribed in the original German dialogue.

61. Again, see Seeblen, “Structures of Glaciation,” on Haneke’s earlier films.

62. Furthermore, we see this encounter in its full length up to Eva’s departure (on the otherwise dominant cutting in the midst of individual scenarios, see the section below titled “Deploying Controversies”).

63. See Haneke qtd. in Andrew, “The Revenge of Children,” 16.

64. For a sophisticated treatment of unreliability in narrative theory, see James Phelan, *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

65. See also Grundmann, “Unsentimental Education,” 594 and 599 (against Haneke’s own interpretation).

66. In cases of voice-image incongruity, Seymour Chatman insists, the cinematic “convention [is] that seeing is believing.” Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 136. On voice-over authority generators (potentially even overriding this convention), see Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), as well as, e.g., Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 51.

67. Williams, “Aberrations of Beauty,” 52, versus Grundmann, “Unsentimental Education,” 594. Seen against a standard of narration as a practice of autonomous critique, the narrator may thus be partially “unreliable” in that he *underevaluates* from his participant position, but we have little reason to charge him with *misreporting* (on these distinctions see Phelan, *Living to Tell about It*, 49–53). My alternative proposal thus is for the vocabulary of nonsovereignty.

68. Garrett Stewart, “Pre-War Trauma: Haneke’s *The White Ribbon*,” *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2010): 47. For another reading in terms of allegory, see Margarete Johanna Landwehr, “Voyeurism, Violence, and the Power of the Media: The Reader’s/Spectator’s Complicity in Jelinek’s *The Piano Teacher* and Haneke’s *Le Pianiste*, *Caché*, *The*

White Ribbon,” *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytical Studies* 8, no. 2 (2011): 117–32. For a (perhaps too clear-cut) counterposition, see Oliver C. Speck, *Funny Frames: The Filmic Concepts of Michael Haneke* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 101–2.

69. Stewart, “Pre-War Trauma,” 40.

70. Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 8 (emphasis in original).

71. On his “First” methodological “Move” of “Localizing the Global,” see Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 173.

72. Discussing the film’s themes of libidinal frustration, Stewart (“Pre-War Trauma,” 43) states that “There is no foreplay in Haneke’s editing, either.” The sexual analogy better indicates the affective impact of this editing regime than Williams’s claim that the “disjunctive process of montage” lifts “the film to a higher critical level” of “reflection on violence” (Williams, “Aberrations of Beauty,” 55, 54)

73. Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 33.

74. See also Stewart, “Pre-War Trauma,” 41.

75. See Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 61.

76. See, again, Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 255.

77. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 255; Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 251. Latour uses the notion of alchemy himself in talking about the demos representing itself reflexively to itself.

78. “In *The White Ribbon*, the problem is fatherhood, not its absence,” summarizes Stewart (“Pre-war Trauma,” 42).

79. See Blumenthal-Barby, “The Surveillant Gaze,” 104–5.

80. See Naqvi, *Trügerische Vertrautheit*, 145.

81. Elsaesser, “Performative Self-Contradictions,” 54.

82. Haneke qtd. in Andrew, “The Revenge of Children,” 16.

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