

Christian

creates modern black-and-white for **Das Weisse Band**

Berger

Christian Berger's fifth collaboration with director Michael Haneke, *Das Weisse Band* (*The White Ribbon*), was awarded the Palme d'Or at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. The film takes the viewer to rural northern Germany circa 1913. The story is presented in black-and-white, because everything we know about that time, we see without color, according to Berger.

"Also, black-and-white offers the power of abstraction, which appeals to me," he says. Still, he cautions, the visual grammar strictly avoided imitating the style of films from that time or period films depicting it. He describes his approach as "modern black-and-white."

"Michael felt strongly that seeing this time and place in color would feel fake or disruptive," Berger explains. "To me, it was equally important not to fall into a kind of historical nostalgia, which is dangerously easy to do. The goal was to achieve the clearest and crispest black-and-white images possible. I didn't do anything else to make the images particularly modern. Rather, we made a point to avoid anything nostalgic or old-fashioned in the photography."

The Austrian duo's previous feature films together include *Benny's Video*, *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls* (*71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*), *Caché* (*Hidden*), and *La Pianiste*, which earned several prizes at Cannes in 2001, including best actress for Isabelle Huppert. "By now, I know Michael's handwriting exactly," says Berger. "We don't discuss framing and movement very much anymore. For the light and the atmosphere, he gives me a free hand. But the rest is very precisely prepared in the script or on the shot list."

Haneke and Berger looked at recent black-and-white films like *Good Night, and Good Luck*, photographed by Robert Elswit, ASC, and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, photographed by Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC.

Berger achieved the clean black-and-white he envisioned in part by using the latest color film stocks combined with a 4K digital intermediate during which the color was removed. He chose KODAK VISION3 500T 5219, VISION2 250D 5205 and VISION2 100T 5212. Berger says he never considered less than 4K resolution for the scan.

Transfer the richness

"Black-and-white negative has not advanced as far as color negative, where there has been tremendous progress," remarks Berger. "In testing, I found that with a 4K scan I could transfer the richness, high-contrast range, and exposure tolerance of the color negative very well into a crisp black-and-white. The rich color tones and incredibly fine color space translated well to a very fine gray scale."

In scenes requiring more than a candle or an oil lamp, Berger used the B&B Cine Reflect Lighting System (CRLS). The system was developed by Berger to mimic nature. Like the sun, it uses a single powerful parallel beam light source, and employs a wide range of reflectors and scrims to alter the character of the light and to light entire scenes, including key, fill and ambience. The result is an efficient, unobtrusive lighting rig that uses very little electricity. Since Berger initially used the CRLS to light *La Pianiste*, it has been adopted by other cinematographers, including Martin Gschlacht, who used the system on Götz Spielmann's 2008

feature film *Revanche*. The system is now being manufactured by PANI Projection and Lighting.

One situation where Berger used the Cine Reflect system to good effect was a small, spare Protestant church where a key scene takes place in which a young boy talks to God. The system allowed him to light very specifically without any light fixtures inside the church.

Another key scene depicts the boy and his sister in a kitchen having a conversation about death. The kitchen was part of a house that the production built in the actual village where most of the film was shot.

"It was kind of half-studio, half-location," says Berger. "The kitchen had no roof, which helped us. This was an evening, twilight scene. The meaning of twilight can be very difficult in black-and-white. The scene, and the girl's face, was lit with light that came through the windows. We redirected some of that light to give back something for the boy's face and the eyes, using two or three tiny reflectors from the camera side. I think the scene is very good and intense, and for me it's a kind of masterpiece within the film."



Berger says that the combination of film acquisition and digital post technologies gives him the best of both worlds. "The advantages of shooting film include a good viewfinder in low light conditions, the reliability of the camera, and what I call the international model - meaning that all the discussion about formats, transfers, compressions codes, whatever, is not a subject at all," he says. "I made *Caché* with high-def digital cameras, and the cameras broke down constantly. Any cost savings were eaten up by delays in the first two weeks of shooting."

Flexibility

"The advantages of digital post-production include rich possibilities to save time, firstly during the shoot, on the set," he continues. "Often on this project I needed to supplement an oil lamp, and when you have two sources, it's very difficult to avoid two shadows. That is very easy to repair in post though. That's a dangerous line - fix it in post - but I feel that with concrete repairs of things that are otherwise impossible, it's an advantage. It's easy to change the light distribution

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on a wall or a window frame, or to pick up the last bit of light in underexposed scenes. It allows you to move more quickly during shooting. And the 4K scan meant we had plenty of flexibility to make alterations without picking up any grain or noise, while holding the full black, all the way through to the prints, both analog and digital."

Post-production was handled at Listo, a full service post-production house in Vienna. The scanning was done on a Northlight scanner and the DI color correction was done in a Baselight Eight grading suite. "Light matching and balancing were a big part of the DI," adds Berger. "I learned a lot. Each step was something special because of the black-and-white. We could do very complex and smooth light modulation, sometimes creating atmosphere with very minimal image information or choosing and altering only certain luminance values. The possibilities are enormous."

While Berger enjoyed the creative freedom that film origination and digital post offered, he cautions that technology can be overemphasized. "The technical is a way to get where we want to go, but what's most interesting is how each individual uses it," he says. "When I'm teaching at the Vienna Film Academy, I see in my students how difficult it can be to reject that reflex that we all have - if you have a problem, buy a new box, and the box will solve your problems. I am convinced that a director of photography today only finds the best result if he or she finds the most modest and efficient tool for

the situation. Having the latest tool is very seductive, but we can get lost in the manuals."

"To me the artistic aspect of our work is more important. We can't ignore technique. We have to be able to judge. Every day something new comes out, and often it's no answer or an old answer in a new dress. The technical is always changing, but the artistic is a more archaic perspective. Only the artist can see and realize what the director wants. We should never work under the dictate of technique. It's easy to say but difficult to do."

Key Data at a glance

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|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Director | Michael Haneke |
| DP | Christian Berger AAC |
| Post-production | Listo in Vienna, Austria |
| Film stock | KODAK VISION2 100T 5212 KODAK VISION3 500T 5219 KODAK VISION2 250D 5205 |

1 (L-R) Christian Friedel plays The School Teacher and Leonie Benesch is Eva in *The White Ribbon*. (Photo ©Copyright Films du Losange, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics)