

***Die Welle*: Transcript**

Today I will be providing an analysis of Dennis Gansel's 2008 film *Die Welle*. During this analysis I am going to consider the following questions: In what ways does this film relate to German history and National Socialism? And, how does the film draw on German history within a contemporary, modern-day German setting?

Firstly, it is of interest to note that *Die Welle* is not Gansel's first film to deal with German history and the Holocaust. His 2004 film, *Napola (Before the Fall)*, follows a group of young boys who are members of the National Political Academy, which is an institution that acts as a stepping stone to becoming one of the Nazi elite. The film sensitively, and rather problematically, presents a group of young Nazis who, far from constituting the Nazi monsters German history would have you believe are, however, simply a group of young, naïve German boys who wish to secure a better future for themselves and their family. Gansel's fascination with the Holocaust, and the use of it as a major theme in his films, can be seen in direct relation to his grandfather's participation in one of these National Socialist elite academies. Thus, in order to come to terms with his own familial connection to National Socialist Germany, Gansel's films, *Napola* and *Die Welle* seek to discover the roots of German fascism, and how so many German children, including his own grandfather, can get sucked into the fascist ideology.

Although, unlike *Napola*, *Die Welle* is set in modern day Germany and does not deal directly with the events of the Holocaust and the Third Reich, it does deal with the Holocaust indirectly. *Die Welle* is based on a real-life experiment often referred to as the 'Palo Alto Experiment' that took place in an American high school in 1967. The purpose of this experiment was to showcase how a contemporary free society can become brainwashed into

forming a movement that aims to eliminate democracy and accept a dictatorship. Gansel adapts the events of the 'Palo Alto Experiment' and applies them to a contemporary German setting in his film.

The Plot

I will now briefly describe the plot of Gansel's film. During project week in a German high school, teacher, Rainer Wenger is forced to teach an autocracy class. He goes about teaching his students, who do not believe that another dictatorship could be established in modern day Germany, how easily a group of people can become manipulated and brainwashed into accepting a totalitarian movement. The teacher, Mr Wenger begins by demanding that the students must address him as 'Herr Wenger', and he imposes strict methods of discipline on them. The students must stand up when he enters a room, only speak when spoken to, and must sit next to people who they would not normally sit next to in order to unite the group and abolish any distance between any of them.

Within days the activities of the group get more and more elaborate. The class is taught to march in unison with each other, they have established a uniform in order to further unite the group, and they acquire their own group name, symbol and their own salute. The class, who are now referred to as the movement 'Die Welle', or 'The Wave', suddenly gets out of hand. They cause chaos around the town, graffitiing their symbol on public buildings and, any student that does not wish to partake in the activities of the group, soon becomes excluded and the victim of bullying by some of the group members. As the group gets more and more out of hand, with one student, Tim, brandishing a pistol around and offering all night security to his teacher, the teacher is asked to address the group and stop its activities. He calls a meeting in the school's lecture theatre, which every member of his class must attend. After

demonstrating to the class how easy it is to get sucked into an ideology and to adhere to a dictatorship, he calls an end to 'The Wave.' However, Tim, the student who became overly involved with the group cannot accept that it has come to an end and thus shoots a member of the group before shooting and killing himself.

The Relationship between *Die Welle* and German History

Now that you have all seen the film, I would like you to consider this question: In what ways does this film relate to German history and National Socialism? So, how can we link the events, the characters, and the behaviour of the characters as shown in the film, to German history?

Firstly, the film highlights how easy it is for a group of unsuspecting and easily influenced people to become controlled and entirely influenced by a leader, very much drawing on German history and Hitler's remarkable rise to power. We observe throughout film the progression from a group of students who believe that Germany has learnt from its mistakes and thus could never again be run by a totalitarian government, to a group of students who have subconsciously embraced a strict regime and actively fight for its survival. Instead of merely teaching his students about autocracy, the teacher, Mr Wenger, decides to form a mini dictatorship within his classroom as a sort of experiment. Nominating himself as a leader, despite his clear aversion to dictatorship and his position in the film as an anarchist, he begins to impose strict methods of discipline on his group. The success of his experiment lies in his position as a figure of respect in his school.

Mr Wenger is already a well-respected member of staff. Other teachers are threatened by his unorthodox teaching skills, while the pupils at the school seek to be taught by him in his

classes as he is seen as younger and cooler than the other teachers. Mr Wenger has thus already established an authoritative relationship with his pupils and before he has even begun this experiment and Mr Wenger has already gained the respect of his student group and thus has acquired a following.

Mr Wenger's position as a totalitarian dictator works in a number of ways within the film. Having already established a following, he soon begins his experiment by imposing strict methods of discipline on his group. When he enters the room, all students must stand up, the students must only speak when spoken to and they must all address him as 'Herr Wenger'. They must answer 'Ja, Herr Wenger' or 'Nein, Herr Wenger' to his questions. By addressing him in this way and being made to refer to him by a formal title when the students are used to addressing him by his first name, Rainer, the students immediately assume an inferior position to him. He has transformed from being a relaxed, friendly and approachable teacher, into a strict, terrifying leader. A number of the students are at first sceptical of this new approach to teaching as they were hoping project week would be an excuse for them to take a step back from their studies and have some fun. Some of them become so overwhelmed by the clear change that they see in their teacher that they opt to leave his class. However, as the experiment continues throughout the week the students and teacher alike begin to embrace this regime in an interesting yet terrifying way.

The group, in a similar way to the Nazis of the Holocaust, begin to acquire their own brand and thus become a recognisable single unit. The teacher, Mr Wenger, demands that the students taking part in the experiment must adopt a new uniform consisting of blue jeans and a white shirt in order to unite the group and to absolve any aesthetic differences that may stand between them.

In addition to this uniform, the group acquire a group name, 'Die Welle', a group symbol, which consists of a kind of menacing looking wave, and a group salute that is a sweeping hand movement across the chest which they must perform every time the group members come into contact with each other or their teacher. By acquiring a name, a symbol, a uniform and a salute, the teacher has sown the seeds for the success of the totalitarian experiment. The group already look like a fascist movement and soon they start behaving like one.

The students soon respond to the unifying effects of the group branding. Those who are considered 'outsiders' in the group, which is most evident in the character of Tim, who, before the establishment of 'The Wave' was seen as a bit of a loner and was bullied by other students in the school, soon relishes the sense of group unity that 'The Wave' offers him. Now that the other students have something in common with Tim, the outsider, they protect him from the bullies. Through 'The Wave', Tim has acquired new friends and a sense of purpose and thus begins to take his role in the experiment too far. We observe as Tim burns his old clothes, offers around the clock security to his leader and acquires a gun for group protection. The ease with which Tim becomes brainwashed by the group in the film reflects directly on the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany. The director, Dennis Gansel argues that the rise of fascism is not down to politics or location but based on psychology. Tim does not start the film with any political allegiances or rivalry with other social groups, however, in a group he begins to acquire them.

The film most directly reflects on German history in the film's penultimate scene, where we observe Mr Wenger's attempts to put a stop to 'The Wave' as the activities of the group are getting more and more out of hand. As the group begin graffitiing their symbol on the buildings of the town, and exclude any of those students who wish not to partake in the group's activities, the head teacher demands that Mr Wenger puts an end to 'The Wave'. Mr Wenger, however, like any fascist leader, has become accustomed to being idolised by his

followers and is reluctant to put an end the fascist movement that he has started. In the school auditorium Mr Wenger delivers a speech to the group. It is in this scene that parallels between Mr Wenger and Hitler can be made. As he enters the room, his idolisers rise, he performs the groups salute, and they perform it back to him in unison. Immediately a resonant chord of Hitler and the Nazis is struck. The camera is situated behind Mr Wenger. We see him stand in front of his group as an eerie stand-alone figure, as the group look up to him in awe and with admiration. When he delivers his speech, his charisma and oral delivery are eerily similar to that of the Führer.

The Position of *Die Welle* in an International Setting

Now I am going to discuss how the film draws on German history within a contemporary German setting. Firstly the film is set in an in descript German high school. Despite the German language being spoken this school could be set in any town in Europe or the United States. Thus, although the film draws on German History within a contemporary German setting, it universalises the concept of German fascism and takes it out of a German setting. Equally, the symbol, uniform, salute and group name possess no German connotations and are thus representative of a fascist movement that can occur within any group, anywhere in the world.

During Mr Wenger's speech in the penultimate scene of the film, and in a way similar to Hitler's speeches, Mr Wenger rouses his followers by describing the current problems within modern day German society. However, the problems he addresses within his speech respond to the perceived problems within contemporary *Western* society. For instance, Mr Wenger draws upon themes of social alienation, globalisation, capitalism and materialism. Once again,

by addressing universal Western issues, Dennis Gansel deterritorialises German fascism, taking it out of a specifically German context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Gansel's film presents us with an example of how fascism can re-emerge in a democratic, free society. Drawing on stereotypical images and themes that can be linked explicitly to German history, Gansel takes them out of a German historical setting and places them in a contemporary Western scenario.

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