

## **Fascism and *Die Welle*: Transcript**

Adam: *Die Welle* was inspired by an actual social experiment conducted by a high school teacher in the 1960s. What does the film gain – or possibly lose – from being placed in the context of a modern German classroom?

Rachel: Firstly, I think it is very important that it does place the concept of fascism outside of the German context because people might be fed up of seeing German films about the Holocaust or the Stasi and this is almost transcending the Germanness of fascism so people can look at fascism in a way which is not just related to those German incidences. In doing so, it appeals to a wider audience and gains legitimacy by showing fascism can spread out of a German-speaking environment and how it can affect anybody who is watching this because this film was popular among non-German audiences. So, I think it does gain something by using this experiment from California.

Elizabeth: I think the danger the film faces is that you only know that it is based on an American example if you read the interviews the director and the filmmakers gave and if you were just to watch the film on its own you would think it is a German classroom with a German problem and it might have been braver of the director – especially as a German director – to have kept the American setting and, as a German filmmaker, make a film about fascism in an American context which is the base story. It's a bit of a problem, as we were saying, that he does try to lift it out of this German context by using a non-German example, but do we actually know that when we are watching the film? So, maybe something is lost in translation.

Adam: In the film, the primary opposition to The Wave movement primarily comes from female characters, primarily Mona, Karo, and Wenger's wife. Is this merely coincidental, or is the film attempting to make a larger statement about masculinity or femininity within a fascist mentality? Or, rather, is it saying something about these roles within contemporary German culture?

Elizabeth: One thing which certainly struck me was that in the Third Reich women had a very clear role. They were mothers, they were wives, they were there to produce children, stay in the kitchen and be the good *Hausfrau*. The idea of strong female characters certainly works against that. We see this throughout the film. The classroom is made up of Germans, but also Germans from a Turkish background and that is something you would never have seen in a National Socialist context. There seem to be little clues in the film that the director is challenging notions of what the female represented in the Third Reich but also what a 'German' was and we see this throughout the film.

Rachel: I think it fails in this as well, though. The director does portray these strong female figures, but at the end of the day they don't actually hold any power within their voices. They do act as an opposition to this movement, to The Wave, but they have no power to stop it. The only thing that stops it at the end is the male teacher. So, although the director is perhaps trying to portray these strong female characters I think he fails by not giving them any power. He gives them power at the start but then takes it away at the end.

Adam: Some critics argue that the film is too didactic, while others have said it is merely demonstrative of how quickly a group mentality can catch on. Which is it? And if it is didactic, what exactly is it trying to persuade people of?

Elizabeth: So, the idea of a didactic film is one that tells you what to think, what to believe. I think if you watch the film within the first ten or fifteen minutes, you do get a good idea about what is going to happen in this film. When the teacher introduces the idea of autocracy and tries to teach an ambivalent group of teenagers about it and everyone is saying, 'it's not relevant for us anymore' and 'this could never happen in Germany', it does set up what is going to happen in the film and it does go overboard somewhat in its extremes. For example, the shoot out at the end never actually happened. It does seem a bit over the top in trying to hammer home a point it really set up in the first ten minutes.

Rachel: I think as well, although it does attempt to demonstrate how the fascist movement spread, it doesn't give enough attention to the finer details. It sets up different events and circumstances to portray what the director wants you to think. Although it is attempting to demonstrate something, it is quite didactic at the same time.

Adam: In relation to the previous question, whether it's didactic *or* demonstrative, is the film realistic in its depiction of the quickness with which such group mentalities can spread? How so?

Rachel: It is probably very unrealistic given that it is only set during Project Week and although the focus of the film is Project Week and how quickly things can change, I think it would have been better if he had studied it over a longer period of time. Also, from what I am aware, the experiment in California was achieved through a wider period and I think that such a narrow time frame is too unrealistic.

Elizabeth: As we said, it is so extreme in such a short period, it is quite hard to draw wider conclusions. That said, however, the first time I watched it I thought this would never happen in one week, it is so extreme. However, in 2011 we did see the London riots and although you can't compare the London riots with what happened during fascism, or fascism more broadly, the way that it spread so quickly, especially among young people, and how quickly it became disconnected from the original idea within the space of a few days and the reaction of the British state, the British government, does have interesting – if not parallels – then at least relationships with what we saw on screen. If we think about it within a broader and less extreme context we can draw wider lessons from it.

Adam: While the film attempts a grand social critique, it still incorporates many more mundane cinematic elements, such as teenage romance, self esteem issues (primarily through the character of Tim), bullying, etc. Do these elements serve to make the film more realistic, as it deals primarily with teenagers? Do they serve more for marketing purposes, making them more appealing to a teenage audience? Or do they simply represent elements perhaps deemed necessary for the 'telling of a good story'?

Rachel: The director's target audience is generally teenagers. So, if you look at what German teenagers are watching, although it sounds like a generalisation, it's probably Hollywood movies and conventional cinematic techniques (romance, drug use). You could argue that he is attempting to draw in this kind of audience by appealing to a teenage audience through these techniques so he can get his message across to that target audience.

Elizabeth: The things you mentioned – telling a good story, having genre conventions – aren't necessarily unconnected. You can have a realistic story which is easier to market, or

you can have elements that are identifiable that are easier to market. Again, going back to the film, *Die Welle* wants to show fascism in an everyday context and to do this it draws on things which, even if they aren't realistic, they are things people can relate to. The romance is exaggerated, the consequences of bullying are exaggerated, which is what Hollywood and mainstream films do, but it's also things people can relate to. And this isn't a documentary. If he had wanted to make a documentary about how the youth became indoctrinated during the Third Reich he could have done that. He is setting it in a modern-day context and that brings its own baggage with it.

Rachel: Just to add to that, I think that is exemplary of why it is so popular today, not just nationally, but internationally in a school-age context. People are studying it all over the country for A-Level, so it is appealing to these people as well as trying to teach them something as well.