

The Wave

(Die Welle)

(2008, Dennis Gansel)

Component 2: Global Film: Narrative, Representation and Film style

Focus Area Genre

PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

Sequence 1 - Tuesday (27:14 - 31:28)

Sequence 2 - Rampage (47:20 - 50:31)

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

- In one particular scene Rainer Wenger is in foreground centre, though his back is to the camera. This indicates his importance and power. However, the fact we cannot see his face suggests Wenger's actual identity is irrelevant - what his 'followers' need is an authority figure to focus their attention on. In LS background are his students/followers, all wearing the white-shirt uniform of The Wave, standing to attention and all doing the prescribed salute. When we look closely, we can see there is diversity but the initial impression is of one, unified group, where their individuality has been erased.
- Sequence 1: The shots during this sequence are mostly long shots of the entire class. This allows us to see the initial diversity of the group (expressed through costume and hair) before they begin Wenger's 'callisthenics'. The LS alternate between Wenger's POV (establishing him as a point of identification, and as the leader of the

group) and those of students from the back of the classroom, making us feel as if we are a member of the group, too. These are intercut with MS of individual students, so we can see their reactions: from Tim's enthusiasm to Mona's reluctance.

- Sequence 2: The camerawork in this sequence is mostly handheld and placed amongst the teenage characters, making us feel like we are part of The Wave, too. As the scene continues, the cinematography becomes far jerkier reflecting the excitement and restless energy of the characters, whilst creating a sense of immersion - we are swept up in the kinetic rampage as much as the characters (even 'good students' like Tim and Marco).

Mise-en-scène

- Sequence 1: The students at this point are still wearing their own individual choice of clothes. This diversity contrasts with the unity they show when doing the marching exercise. Wenger indicates his rebellious attitude by wearing a punk rock t-shirt - this contrasts with Wieland's more typical 'boring' shirt and tie.
- Props: the classroom furniture, posters, blackboard and science models remind us of the high school location and that, despite the raucous enjoyment of the students, they are still in a lesson.
- Sequence 2: The Wave logo itself is a graphic with elemental power, recalling tsunami imagery or surfer's tattoos; these connotations suggest both youthful rebellion and a force that will wash away the 'old order'.
- It is both simple and ornate, and - by turning it into stencils and stickers - the group can assert their new collective identity by slapping it or

spray-painting it across the town. Often they place the symbol over existing symbols: whether it be the 'enemy' anarchists, credit card idents, a crucifixion statue, or even on a police car.

- The costume and props of the group are those usually associated with youth delinquency: hoodies and face scarves, BMX bikes and skateboards. This could be a reference to the way dictators throughout history (from Mussolini and Hitler in the 1930s, to Pol Pot in Cambodia in the 1970s) have harnessed adolescent rebellion to further their cause.

Editing

- Sequence 1: 'Day of the Week' captions are used to keep track of time and often surprise us at how quickly things are escalating. Some critics of the film said the speed at which events progress was unrealistic, but the real-life 'Palo Alto Experiment' on which the film is based also took place over one week.
- Cross-cutting is used to show the responses of the class below ("the enemy") and to contrast the marching, joyous students in Wenger's class with the passive, bored-looking students in Wieland's group.
- Sequence 2: The speed of the cutting increases to an almost frantic pace as the scene progresses, combining with the handheld cameras to express the energy and excitement of the group. Once the rampage begins, there is a montage of jump-cuts of the stickers being slapped onto buildings or the symbol being spray-painted. During this we don't see any of the characters' faces, showing how the symbol has eclipsed their own individual identities.

Sound

- Sequence 1: Wenger's dialogue is used to show the more positive and optimistic of 'autocratism': "A rhythm like this can cause bridges to collapse" exhorts the power of united action, and the booming of the group's marching (especially as it gathers pace) creates a sense of excitement. His declaring Wieland's class as "the enemy" reflects the way other dictatorships unite disparate groups by creating a common enemy (Bolsheviks in Fascist Italy, Jews in Nazi Germany etc.). Wenger's explanation of his seating plan, pairing up "good and poor students" meets resistance at first. (Some students may be surprised that this and the adoption of uniforms is considered controversial

by the characters, as in the UK these are considered 'good teaching practices'!)

- Sequence 2: Dialogue: "Anyone can join who believes in the cause," shows how *The Wave* is erasing social distinctions. Interestingly, they don't have any political aim or objective, beyond their unity. This again is a typical feature of fascism: exploiting people's need to 'belong' and revolt against the establishment, with political ideology being secondary. Fast, percussive rock music is used to soundtrack the scene and adds to the excitement.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Representation of Germany: the real-life experiment (and novel based on it) was set in California, but the story has extra relevance when relocated to Germany. The country is represented as being scarred by its Nazi past, and almost afraid to let any authority control individuals again. The parents and teachers, for example, are extremely liberal and wary of any action that could be deemed fascistic. The youth, by contrast, seem bored by the lessons of history ("The Nazis were bad... Okay, we get it") and embrace Wenger's authority, finding the discipline reassuring. This is the opposite of the representation of teenagers and adults we usually see, especially in American high school movies.

Historical

- Dennis Gansel's previous film *Before The Fall* (2004) also dealt with teenagers, but more explicitly explored Germany's past by setting the story during World War II, at a National Political Academy where young people are trained to join the Nazi elite. Gansel's grandfather was himself an officer in the Third Reich, and the director is interested in understanding why young people are enticed by fascism rather than simply condemning them or portraying them as 'evil'. Another, more recent film, that explores a young person's perspective on fascism, is *Lore* (Cate Shortland, 2012) where the daughter of a high-ranking Nazi officer becomes conscious of her family's role in the Holocaust.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus – REPRESENTATION

- In German culture, the topics of autocracy and fascism are obviously sensitive, and many people still struggle with the country's Nazi past. This is represented by the adults in the film who are mainly liberal progressives, wary of authority. Still, there remains a powerful right-wing element in German society (particularly, in recent years, the anti-immigration AfD Party). The film's overall representation of German culture is one where the temptations of fascism need to be acknowledged and dealt with, rather than dismissed out of historical guilt.
- In terms of ethnicity, the characters are mostly White European which reflects the authentic racial mix in Germany. The exception is Kinan; the ethnicity of this student is not mentioned but he may be part of Germany's extensive Turkish community. Many Turkish immigrants moved to Germany after World War II to work in construction industries. Turkish – and other Islamic – communities have often been the target of right-wing groups in Germany. Interestingly, Kinan in *The Wave* embraces the movement, perhaps because it accepts all students in the class regardless of their religion, ethnicity or social class.
- *The Wave* features some very interesting representations of adults and teenagers/young adults, some of which are quite stereotypical, and others add complexity or subvert our expectations of these age groups.
- Most of the adults in the film act appropriately and responsibly, Wenger being the obvious exception. Consider the way the character is introduced in the title sequence: driving with his sunroof down, blasting rock music; his costume is a Ramones t-shirt, leather jacket and baseball cap. All these we would typically associate with rebellious teenagers, so it is a shock when we discover that Wenger is the teacher.
- Wenger's approach to authority is similarly unconventional – he is prepared to take risks in order to engage the students, even if this has terrible consequences.
- The representation of young people is also complex. In some ways, the student characters follow many of the stereotypes that are familiar from other 'high school' movies: the jocks, the popular girl, the bullied outsider. However, in the initial classroom discussions, they reveal themselves to also be thoughtful and impassioned. The ease at which they are manipulated into a neo-Fascist group can be seen as showing teenagers as innocent and gullible – but it could also reflect how young people need a cohesive social identity.
- During the 'rampage' (Sequence 2), the music, camera and editing capture the excitement the characters feel at these transgressions. Consider how these fit with teenage stereotypes of 'youth gone wild', for example skateboarding, defacing public buildings and police cars, climbing scaffolding.
- However, consider how the targets of their vandalism reflect a rebellious political sensibility. When they deface a police car, a credit card advert, a Catholic statue, these could be interpreted as acts of political resistance against the state, capitalism and organised religion.
- In terms of gender, it seems that only the female characters sense the danger in the experiment and try to challenge Wenger. The first are Kara and Mona, the only students in the class to resist. The second is Wenger's wife, Anke, who voices early concerns and eventually leaves her husband because of what the project has done to him. This seems to reinforce stereotypes of women being more sensitive than men; and also male desires for power, control and authority.