

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 – GENRE

- Though the German setting establishes immediate parallels with the rise of the Third Reich in the 1930s, Wenger's experiment has more in common with Mussolini's National Fascist Party. Mussolini responded to the social and economic problems in post-WWI in Italy and - like *The Wave* - had goals that initially sound benevolent: votes for women, minimum wage, and improved public transport. *Fascio* means simply 'league' in Italian, and it was this sense of group pride that proved so popular. Mussolini used many of the same strategies as Wenger does to win support: a simple uniform (though brown instead of white shirts), a common enemy (organised crime and communism), symbols and salutes, and a drive to exclude (then persecute) those who expressed any criticism.
- The film is based on a novel by Morton Rhue, which is itself inspired by an experiment by teacher Ron James in California in 1967. Similar to Wenger, James wanted to show his students how easily fascism could take hold and expose the nature of crowd psychology, where people *enjoy* being told what to do.
- From a genre point of view, a comparison with other 'high school dramas' would be interesting. The students are quite typical teen movie stereotypes: the Jock, the Popular Girl, the Outsider, and the Drama Geeks. Wenger is a more interesting twist on the rebellious, 'inspirational teacher' whose unorthodox methods engage his students beyond the classroom - see *Dead Poets Society* (1989) or *Dangerous Minds* (1995). In *The Wave*, however, his role becomes more dangerous than heroic, and the scenes with his wife illustrate how his initial good intentions soon become a conflict between his ego and his conscience. Until the very end, Wenger is an ambiguous figure - has he bought into the ideology he was trying to expose? Is he enjoying the power his 'fuhrer' role is affording him? In the final shots he is led away by police - do you think he is responsible for *The Wave* and the death of Tim? Or are the tragic consequences an accident that he could not have predicted?