

DIE WELLE

(Dennis Gansel, 2008)

Die Welle (The Wave) is a drama thriller based on a true story about a high school teacher that goes too far at an attempt to teach his students the dangers of Autocracy, it was directed by Dennis Gansel, the film became a hit in Germany and is still played in schools all around the world.

The film is based on a real story that happened at a Palo Alto high school in 1967, the events later became a 40 minutes television short called "The Wave", directed by Alexander Grasshoff in 1981 and there is also a documentary called "Lesson Plans" made in 2011 and directed by David Jeffery.

Synopsis

The story follows the life of a teacher named Rainer Wegner whom is assigned to teach his students the subject of Autocracy during the school's Project Week. After his first class he realizes that his students don't believe that the autocratic system could ever be reestablished in Germany, so he decides to give the students a practical example of it by simulating throughout the period of a week an Autocratic system within their class.

During the first days the class gets really united and they create a strong sense of companionship between those who are part of the study group, however they slowly start to reject others that don't participate in it.

By the end of the week the popularity of the group have spread all around the city and some students started to act violently against the ones whom oppose the philosophy behind the study group, that result in the teacher exposing to the students to the fact that they were living a system identical to the Nazi regime resulting in deadly outcomes from some students reactions.

The Director

Dennis Gansel was born in 1973 in the city of Hannover (Germany), he studied at Munich Film School at the age of 25 where he made his first feature film, "Das Phantom (The Phantom)". Die Welle was his 4th feature length film and in order to finance it he directed various television commercials. He has now directed 6 feature length films and is currently in post-production on his first action crime thriller "Mechanic Resurrection".

The Technique

Because of the political nature of the film it is very important that it tackles the subject in a very honest way preventing itself from becoming a confirmation bias work against the autocratic system. To do so, the director chooses to spend the first hour of the film exposing all the good aspects of the system really convincing the audience that what they are selling is a really good product, only when the director is sure that the audience is on board with the system he exposes the negative aspects of it and in a very brutal way.

This storytelling mechanism is a very effective way to force the viewer to rethink their opinions on any controversial subject and it has been used in many films such as "American History X", "12 Angry Man", "Requiem for a Dream" and even Hollywood blockbusters such as "Avatar".

Cultural Impact

The reason why this film has been so meaningful in Germany, other than the fact that the country has lived one of the strongest Dictatorships in history, is because of the current culture of discomfort Germans have in debating these subjects, 70 years after World War II the subject is still very sensible and avoided by a big number of Germans, which can be a dangerous way to uninform the reality of the problem to its younger generation and that sense of guilt is very well played with in the film, giving it a whole new meaning to the German audience.

Personal Resonance

I had a very hard time watching this film because of how it reminded me of a difficult year I had at a classical art school that was known for its strong discipline and sense of hierarchy that resulted in a pressure overload in the students and ultimately in the suicide of a close friend, the film reminded me of how easily we get carried away with the benefits of an over-disciplinary environment and end up doing things that do not necessarily benefit us individually.