THE WANNSEE CONFERENCE: A FASCINATING EXPERIMENT OF HISTORY INTO FILM:

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SUMMARY

Using film effectively: why short clips are best. In history, I have found that a judicious selection of video clips is superior to screening a whole film or video. I employ transparencies of original documents and weave in pedagogical commentary, creating a triangular mode of presentation that ensures student retention. To demonstrate this methodology in two different exercises in my course on World War II, I shall discuss effective use of clips from Triumph of the Will and the Wannsee Conference.

The Wannsee Conference, a 1985 German docudrama, is an excellent teaching tool. First, it demonstrates a basic fidelity to the January 20, 1942 event itself and second, it invites a textual analysis of the original minutes. Historians and students of the Holocaust are aware that there does not exist a single written order that initiated the genocide. Perhaps it is because of this absence that there has been a continuing fascination with the Wannsee Conference, a definitive moment in the Holocaust. Our interest is to show how the bland language which recorded the event failed to masquerade the genocidal intentions of the perpetrators.

In this presentation I shall discuss a pedagogy for teaching select clips from the docudrama The Wannsee Conference in college or university. Such clips are meant to elaborate upon the historical event and to show both the strengths and weaknesses of the medium. Classroom time constraints demand that the selection of video clips be judicious and to a specific point. The only written evidence for the meeting itself was in the form of a protocol, drafted and vetted by Nazi officials Adolf Eichmann, Reinhardt Heydrich and Heinrich Müller. German and English copies of the Protocol are circulated in class during the lecture. The students thus handle a facsimile of the single surviving copy of only thirty originals. Textual analysis is one of two pedagogical hooks on which to hang this lesson. The second is to explain how racial fanaticism was the ideology fuelling the ongoing war of conquest in the East. These introductory remarks place the docudrama The Wannsee Conference into context. From the Protocol, filmmaker Heinz Schirk and writer Paul Mommertz constructed a real-time imaginary equivalent, to recreate the ambience of this historical turning point. At Wannsee, the bureaucratic machine of death began to operate and entered a realm that Raul Hilberg has called absolutely new in history.

According to the text of the *Protocol*, the oblique objective of the meeting was "for the purpose of clarifying fundamental questions."¹ Students are informed that the fuzziness of this statement was part of the general ambiguity of language that the Nazis used to record this meeting. The blandness of the stated policy change from *emi*gration to evacuation hides a murderous intent.

Heydrich's goal was to establish his own authority and to set into motion the machinery that would coordinate the Final Solution, *Endlösung*, without regard to geographic borders. A policy of covertness and secrecy dictated that there be no articulation of the methods of killing, so as to make it look as though the deaths to follow occurred through natural attrition. The Conference, like the film, lasted ninety minutes, and for the viewer, the "real time"element heightens the sense that everything in the film actually occurred as it unfolds, although they only see some minutes of the film in video format. The "realtime" element allowed filmmakers to invent a dialogue that was true to the time and circumstances in order to round out the factual context. They used Adolf Eichmann's prison testimonies to this end.

In the original *Protocol*, Heydrich builds to a deadly climax as he refers cryptically to the end of the emigration programme and the deportation of 537,000 Jews.² The enforced accelerated emigration policy would henceforth

¹«...um Klarheit in grundätzlichen Fragen zu schaffen.» See Mendelsohn, John, ed. The Holocaust v.11. «The Wannsee Protocol» New York: Garland, 1982. v.2. (hereafter Protocol)

²«Trotz dieser Schwierigkeiten wurden seit der Macht bernahme bis zum Stichtag 31.10.1941 insgesamt rund 537.000 Juden zur Auswanderung gebracht.» Heydrich stated that their transport had been financed by Jewish organizations which had raised 9.5 million dollars to this end. Protocol, 5.

be prohibited, "for reasons of an emigration during wartime and consideration of the possibilities in the East."³ The new policy, which he said was awaiting the Fuhrer's sanction, was evacuation to the East as a further "solution possibility," *Lösungsmöglichkeit*. The key word "evacuations," *Evakuierungaktionen*, tries to assume neutral meaning, but the mask soon falls, revealing a deadly intent.

The film's language goes much further than the objective language of the Protocol.⁴ Schirk used creative artistic freedom to enlighten the uninformed, but in reading the transparency, students must be helped to interpret the Protocol's bland language, where there is neither mention of Einsatzgruppen nor of the permanent gassing facilities then being completed. Close examination of the text reveals the answer in the most brutal of Darwinian terms; survival of the fittest. There is no mention of killing other than an enigmatic reference to "provisional actions," [unnamed Einsatzgruppen in the occupied Russian territory] where "practical experience is already being collected which is of greatest importance in relation to the future final solution of the Jewish problem." The text states that the intention was to allocate Jews for labour to the East, where "able-bodied Jews would be taken in large labor columns to these districts for work on roads, separated by sex, in the course of which action a great part will undoubtedly be eliminated by natural causes."5

As much as the Nazis tried to disguise the Final Solution, there is no doubt what this means. As Eichmann told his Israeli interrogators during his trial, the meaning of "natural causes" was "perfectly normal dying." The key reference to the final elimination of the survivors is put in coldblooded terms in the Protocol: "The possible final remnant will, as it must undoubtedly consist of the toughest, have to be treated accordingly, as it is the product of natural selection, and would, if liberated, act as a bud cell of a Jewish reconstruction.⁶ Eichmann confirmed this terrible Darwinian logic to the Court, that "treated accordingly" was a typical Himmler phrase that rang of "natural selection." which itself meant "killed, killed undoubtedly." The Nazis used the metaphor of disease attached to man, the sick animal, to describe the Jews/Bolsheviks as bacilli, ulcers, and toxic poisons. Europe itself was thought to be a tubercular or cancerous patient. Rational Social Darwinism was the license that Himmler used to state blandly that the law of existence prescribes uninterrupted killing so that the better may live.7 German fiction or not, the socalled roadworking assignments were meant to kill off the Jews.⁸ While the Protocol contains many euphemisms, the students are informed that according to the trial testimony of Adolf Eichmann, there was much more frank language around the table where terms like extermination and liquidation were used,⁹ language that was omitted from the formal minutes.

The meeting then turned to defining what was meant by persons of mixed blood or *Mischlinge*. In this diabolical web of horrific regulation, based upon the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, one fact stood out: a Nazi fear that the Jewish blood would assert itself and overwhelm the German blood. This reveals an element in Nazi race policy that is rarely highlighted: a pathological fear that by mixing races the children of these unions "will racially reveal the ad-mixture of Jewish blood more strongly than persons of mixed blood of the second degree." Genetically, the 'Master Race' saw itself in peril.

The video sequences place the viewers privy to the inner workings of what Michael Burleigh called the "barbarous utopia" of Nazi racial hygiene.¹⁰ The film tries to deal with this core issue by creating a sharpened sense of conflict that has the Nazi officials arguing whether German blood, when mixed with Jewish blood, would create a new super race that might become the nemesis of Germany.

¹⁰ Burleigh, Michael. <u>The Racial State</u>, See also Robert Proctor, Racial Hygiene. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988.

³«[I]m Hinblick auf die Gefahren einer Auswanderung im Kriege und im Hinblick auf die Möglichkeiten des Ostens ist die Auswanderung von Juden verboten.» Protocol, 5.

⁴The Protocol states, <u>«Anstelle der Auswanderung ist nunmehr als</u> weitere Lösungsmöglichkeit nach entsprechender vorheriger Genehmigung durch den Führer die Evakuierung der Juden nach dem Osten getreten.» <u>Protocol</u>, 5. The film has Heydrich use sweeping gestures across the map, followed by an indifferent sounding Eichmann describing roundups, ghettoization, concentration camps and finally «direct action.»

^s «In grossen Arbeitskolonnen, unter Trennung der Geschlechter werden die arbeitsfähigen Juden strassenbauend in diese Gebiete geführt, wobei zweifellos ein Grossteil durch natürliche Verminderung ausfallen wird.» Protocol, 7.

⁶«Der allfällig endlich verbleibende Restbestand wird. da es sich bei diesem zweifellos um den widerstandsfähigsten Teil handelt, entsprechend behandelt werden müssen, da dieser, eine natürliche Auslese darstellend, bei Freilassung als Keimzelle eines neuen jüdischen Aufbaues anzusprechen ist. » Protocol, 8.

⁷Kaplan, Harold. Conscience and Memory: Meditations in a Museum of the Holocaust. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 63-64.

⁸«...wobei zweifellos ein Grossteil durch natürliche Verminderung ausfallen wird.» Protocol, 7.

⁹ Yahil, Leni. The Holocaust, The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1935. New York: Oxford, 1990. 312.

The *Protocol* made one final point as the Conference wound to a close: while undertaking the preparatory measures for the Final Solution, they must avoid alarming the population. The Conference adjourned, with Heydrich requesting from the persons and agencies present, assistance in carrying out the tasks involved.

The film ends differently, with a self-satisfied Heydrich giving an irrevocable order to Müller and Eichmann "to be as clear as possible but vague as necessary" in carrying out the Final Solution. Such words encapsulate perfectly the manner in which the genocide would unfold henceforth. At Wannsee the perpetrators once again used *Gleichschaltung* or coordination to start the colossal death machinery that consumed so many of Europe's Jews. These bureaucrats would neither solve the *Mischlinge* problem then nor at two subsequent meetings over the next three months. Heydrich's assassination by Czech partisans in May, 1942 would change nothing. Dealing death to millions of Jews was in train; the Nazi behemoth of industrial death largely let the mixed bloods slip through its maw.

There is usually an audible gasp at the end of this lesson when the students are informed that of the fourteen men who gathered for the Conference, eight held doctorates and were graduates of the best universities of Central Europe. That learned men who had achieved the highest rank that a society could bestow on its members, could murder, calls into focus the importance of humanistic values in education.¹¹ The lesson ends with a warning, that no human society is free of this scourge; it can recur if we are not vigilant.

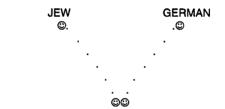
Hilberg claims that the makers of The Wannsee Conference did not cling to the structure and chronology of the historical record. But at the end, he was not opposed to the film, which he described as a hybrid. He concluded that the filmmakers had approached the subject seriously and left "a fascinating experiment." Another critic believes many Holocaust films hover between the "typically ambiguous division between morbid enthralment and instruction."¹² Elements of *The Wannsee Conference* may hover like that too, but using the above pedagogy, they are mitigated by a blending of the actual document (the printed word) with the imagined act (the screenplay). If the film experience creates a visceral reaction, the document provokes an intellectual response. Since students have no time to digest the import of this exercise immediately, it is necessary to follow up this class with a request for a short written reaction and critique. Two questions are posed: What did you learn from this lesson? and What was not clear in the presentation? Experience confirms that the overwhelming majority of students state that they were deeply affected by this class and that they have learned valuable new details.

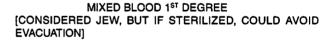
This pedagogy allows students, like the historian, to sift evidence for truth in its numerous manifestations. By shifting from document to video and back, a dynamic learning environment has been created. The father of the documentary film movement, John Grierson, had prescribed fidelity to truth as being the starting point for documentary film. Yet he also insisted that documentary had to be the creative treatment of actuality. So long as truth remains the goal of the historian's/educatorís quest, the marriage of document and visual image is not unnatural, but an amalgam that cements another brick to the foundation that we call memory.

ATTACHMENT: GENETIC CHART

Students are shown the following genetic chart that details the variations and gradations of Mischlinge under the Nuremburg Laws. The information is from the Protocol.

Race example #1

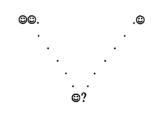




GERMAN BLOOD



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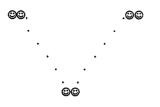


¹¹This point is the central thesis of David Patterson's When Learned Men Murder. Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1996.

¹²Kaplan, Harold. Conscience and Memory, x.

Race example #3

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Race example #4

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(ALWAYS CONSIDERED JEW BECAUSE JEWISH CHARAC-TERISTICS DOMINATE)