

Nazi Movement in Campus: An Analysis of the Rise of Centralized Power Based on the German Film “Die Welle”

Kexin Huang*

Wenzhou Semir United International School, Wenzhou, Zhejiang, 325041, China.

*Corresponding author. Email: huangkexinjzy@outlook.com

Abstract. “Die Welle,” which won the German Film Prize in 2008, is a masterfully staged simulation of a fascist ideological control in a schoolyard. The design of the whole campus experiment reflects the results of Germany’s reflection on the anti-Nazi movement, warning the world that we are only five days away from the Nazis. It is a thought-provoking film that deepens the understanding of the Nazi nature of thought control in Germany and provides a dimension of reflection on extreme forms of dictatorship. Using “Die Welle” as a case study text, this paper takes the psychological basis of the rise of totalitarianism as an entry point and thus analyzes how the ideological apparatus uses this psychology to connect with individuals and explores how collectivism develops into authoritarian totalitarianism. This leads to the conclusion that the real root cause of the Nazi movement’s herd mentality is the misfortune of individual society and the loss of individual rationality. The so-called unity and solidarity reinforced by the Nazi organization are intended to anesthetize the rationality of its members and to conceal its real purpose of manipulating them, which aims to maintain the growth of the organization by controlling the energy gained by them. The main reason for individual members to follow the Nazis blindly is to indulge their own desires and give up rational thinking, allowing Nazi control to be exploited.

Keywords: Film “Die Welle”, Ideological Criticism, Individuality and Organization Totalitarianism, Fascism.

1. Introduction

The German film “Die Welle”, a 2008 film by German director Dennis Gansel, is based on a real-life event that took place in an American high school classroom in April 1976: Ron Jones, a history teacher at a California high school, was unable to explain to his students why German war criminals were innocent of the massacre of Jews in World War II. The teacher led his students in an experiment to simulate a fascist dictatorship called “The Third Wave,” a metaphor for the history of the Third Reich.

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The film “Die Welle” brings the experiment to a German campus, telling the story of a history teacher named Wenger who engages in a creative experiment with his students. The experiment during a five-day thematic week at a German high school aimed to make the students appreciate and understand the mechanisms by which dictatorships and totalitarian rule occur. He spent a week in class emphasizing and instilling in his students’ such things as collectivism, discipline, solidarity, and collective strength. The class Wenger taught was so effective that many students clamored to join what quickly became a “wave” that swept through the school. The group of high school students, guided by Wenger, evolved into the Nazi dictatorship within six days.

The German film continues the spirit of the post-World War II German theme of “reflecting on the Nazi spirit and avoiding a repetition of the mistakes of the past,” with the director’s ingenuity in recreating the complete transformation of a regular group into a Nazi system in the name of an experiment. The process of “The Wave” becomes a microcosm of the Nazi community. It is rich in symbolic meaning, so each step of the film’s plot has its specific background and meaning. It is well

designed and interlocked until the climax, allowing the audience to unconsciously feel a “katharsis” of the fascist spirit.

The film ends abruptly with a gunshot by Tim, a radical, bringing people back to reality and leading them to reflect on the problems of fascism and authoritarian dictatorship. This reversal of the dramatic effect brings the audience to a profoundly spiritual point of view, where they realize that we are only five days away from the Nazis and that the film’s plot is told from the point of view of the Wave’s magical ability to attract many members to its fascination and madness, reminding the audience once again to consider how collectivism can be transformed into authoritarianism. It also reminds the audience to consider how collectivism can transform into authoritarian totalitarianism.

In this paper, the film “Die Welle” is taken as a case to study the psychological basis for the rise of totalitarianism and thus analyze how the ideological apparatus uses social psychology to connect with individuals and explore several possibilities for collectivism to develop into authoritarian totalitarianism.

2. The abuse of totalitarianism: the psychological basis for the rise of the Nazis

The French social psychologist Le Bon has made a convincing explanation of the so-called herd mentality. He believed a group is always governed by the uniform law in which it is located; in his words: “The feelings and thoughts of the group all turn in the same direction, their conscious individuality disappears, and a collective psychology is formed.” [1] As shown in the film, each member of the Wave is constantly united in eliminating individual differences and gaining the group’s approval through absolute obedience to the collective. The frenzied members of the “wave” act irrationally and even violate basic norms of behavior, which demonstrates the difference between individual behavior and that of the collective. Individuals can easily give up their ability to think independently when in a particular group, and thus their independent spirit is replaced by the group’s will. This loss of conscious individuality leads to a tendency for human thoughts and feelings to shift in a common direction by implication and mutual contagion and to translate such implicit ideas into action.

Throughout history, the psychosocial background that supported the rise of the Nazi movement was precisely the unfortunate fate of the individual and the complete loss of reason. The Fascist government was founded on a regime under economic distress, and its propaganda catered to the needs of the majority of the lower and middle classes. Weak and incompetent individuals were reinforced by the Nazi organization, which anesthetized their rationality by promoting the idea of unity and solidarity. In turn, it gained the power to grow wildly through total control of its members. Individuals are fascinated by such totalitarian organizations because they can rely on the power of the organization to abandon rational thought and indulge their desires. The collective also protects them.

In the film, Tim, whom classmates bullied, develops a sense of dependence on the power of the group after being helped by the members of The Wave. Tim has a pistol with him, and to stand up for the other group members, the usually obsequious softy flashes it like a hero to scare off the gangster. The deliberate arrangement of this episode may also indicate that individual members when they feel the advantage of the group, will develop a sense of lawlessness and thus lose their sense of responsibility and do what they previously wanted to do but could not. This sharing of responsibility by the group essentially expands the individual’s rights and is one of the significant psychological reasons why people in totalitarian organizations tend to fall into insanity and obsession. Hoffer argues in his *Fanatics*: “What attracts and sustains followers of an emerging mass movement is not doctrine and commitment, but the ability to provide a refuge from anxiety, emptiness, and meaninglessness.” [2]

The Austrian psychoanalyst Reich made a similar point from a physiological, psychological perspective. He believes that the masses are prone to blind obedience and superstition to authority and that anyone with a fascist complex is susceptible to the demagoguery of the group. It stems from

the fact that human beings have been under a civilization of authority for a long time, that their instinctive impulses and irrational personalities have been suppressed, and that the oppression of authority in a patriarchal society has created a pathological personality structure within the masses. The unbelievable growth of the Wave is an indication of the fact that it has been able to meet the psychological needs of the majority of people. Moreover, according to Maslow's famous theory of the hierarchy of human needs, this psychological mechanism also fits the social and emotional needs of human beings, who, once lacking in the emotional aspect, will seek to supplement it, and totalitarianism fills this emotional lack within the individual. The collective sense of belonging created by totalitarianism allows the individual to feel spiritually fulfilled and to fall into the collective unconscious, acting more fanatically than usual. Looking back at the rise of the Nazi Reich in Germany, it is easy to see the hidden psychosocial factors. After World War I, Germany suffered from economic, political, and military trauma, and many people felt helpless and lost, unappreciated, and lacked care from others and society. This helplessness and impatience was a breeding ground for irrationality, as in the case of the students shown in the film. The emergence of "The Wave" gives them a direction of attention and guidance, and this sense of belonging and meaning has a solid appeal to those young people who lack faith and spiritual solace.

3. The Specter of Tyranny: Ideology and the Individual

In the book "The German Ideology", Marx and Engels explained social relations: "Certain individuals who carry out production activities in a certain way have certain social and political relations [3]. To satisfy the needs for survival and development, human beings must produce and interact with social groups and form certain ties with society. As an important element of the relationship between human beings and society, political relations are a basic form of human social existence. In essence, political relations are a relationship between a human society as a community, in which the status and identity of the members and groups living in it, as well as their ideological and cultural affiliations, are determined according to the distribution and ownership of power resources. Social order is established that corresponds to such reciprocal affiliations. This bottom-up structure of interrelationships between people and society, especially political relationships, forms an ideology that overrides society. It forces the oppressed class to submit to the ruling class to survive. This submission gradually evolves into the psychology of subordination through the combined effect of the reproduction of productive forces and production relations. This is what puts the ideology itself under the ruling class's control. Thus, ideology often becomes a tool to manipulate the people and make them willingly accept the rule. The Nazi regime in those years destroyed the subjective consciousness of the people through the propaganda machine, indoctrinating them on an ideological level, just as the first members of the "wave" did, and its almost militant movement exploded in them with a surprising power of brainwashing.

The famous French philosopher Althusser argued that ideology is, in fact, only an imaginary image, behind which there is, in essence, only a fictional relationship between the individual and their actual condition of existence, and that this relationship arises from a desire for the good in the face of the great contrast between the various material ideological machines [6]. This non-violent nature of ideology gives it considerable appeal, providing the individual with an imaginary world in which to find and accept their place in the group, constituting the concrete individual as a subject, and making the social individual identify with themselves, i.e., from the call of the dominant ideology to the individual's acceptance and submission to it, to imagine themselves as the object they identify with, and acting by this imaginary object. Object, and to operate by this imaginary object. Through this function of invoking the individual as a subject, the ideology makes them a free issue and a person who freely submits to the subject's commands. It uses this hidden power to conceal the natural material relations and manipulate people's consciousness to make them change their behavior. Ideology is often transmitted through the emotions generated by group psychology. This transmission penetrates the psychological level of the individual, causing them to lose the ability to criticize and act irrationally.

In “Die Welle”, this unique relationship between ideology and individuality is demonstrated through the characterization of Tim. As an underprivileged and underprivileged teenager, he lacks love and recognition in his life, and the emergence of “The Wave” drives him into a frenzy to follow it. For the sake of The Wave, he climbs a tall building to spray-paint the organization’s logo and pulls out his gun to stand up for its members. The film ends with his suicide. “Unlike isolated individuals, groups of people are susceptible to suggestion, as if they were hypnotized by each other. Under the influence of a suggestion, an individual may have an irresistible impulse to think or act in a certain way” [4]. He was so caught up in the ideology of “The Wave” that he fell into a state of near-madness and chose to kill himself rather than come to his senses, preferring to indulge in this imaginary group relationship rather than escape from the false image constructed by the organizational machine.

Tim goes to such an extreme because only in this ideological myth constructed by his imagination can he get the minimum respect and sense of belonging, can he have a sense of existence and can realize his self-worth. When a person does not or cannot discover his hidden values and strengths, he will instinctively gravitate to the recognition of a highly cohesive group [7, 8]. The group creates a sense of attachment, even if this sense of belonging is only an assumption of the individual. In this way, ideology invokes the individual as a subject, and the process of invocation is not simply one of stimulation and acceptance but indoctrination and suggestion. It is through the individual’s recognition and acceptance that the self-image is confirmed, thus forming an imaginative connection that links the individual to the group as a whole.

4. A sober reflection on totalitarianism and dictatorship

Through the narrative process of “The Wave”, the director always leads us to face and ponder a question: How far is an authoritarian dictatorship from us? Man is a social being, and as a herd animal, he needs to be attached to the collective, but what is the limit of collectivism? How to prevent collectivism from turning into a totalitarian dictatorship? With such questions, it is necessary to clarify the possibility of collectivism turning into totalitarianism, which is also the meaning of exploring the value behind artistic creation.

Marx and Engels divided the collection into two forms: the real and the unreal. The actual collective itself has two main characteristics: first, it emphasizes the social properties of individual existence, believing that only in this collective can the individual give full play to his or her personality and talents. That is, in this group, can there be individual freedom? The individual exerts himself or herself in and through this association; second, it emphasizes the individual characteristics of the individual. In this collective, the individual participates as an individual, it is the union of individuals, and this union can control the conditions for the free development of the individual. The individual is the collective, and the collective is also the individual, and it is a union for the individual to play, and this real collective is a free association. The scientific rationality of the actual collective is here, not in the collective itself, but in the relationship of the individual to it, is whether it is an organism constituted by the interests of the individual, not by subordinating the individual to itself, it is composed by the participation of the individual.

A so-called “illusory collective” is a collective formed by individuals of the same situation and class because they are opposed to the social relations formed by another class for the common good that constrains their development. In the illusory collective, individuals are just ordinary individuals subordinated to the collective, not because of the need to develop as individuals but because they are still in the situation and conditions of their class [9]. It is easy to understand that “The Wave” is essentially an illusory collective, like the character of Tim. His role in the collective is quickly transformed once he is free from the confusion of his situation. The more we get to the film’s end, the more we feel that Tim is no longer the weak and bullying person he was at the beginning but more like a strong leader of “the Wave.”

Another point that is particularly worth considering is the fragmentation of the collective. In other words, the original organization was formed by individual members of their own volition. It was

indeed a real collective, but because of the large number of members, it was inevitable that the members would have to manage the organization through their representatives. They would form a relatively independent group to pursue the common good. This is very similar to several key members of “The Wave,” such as Marco, Tim, and Sinan, who are the core members of “The Wave”. On the one hand, they were the representatives of the common interests of the entire organization and maintained the management of “The Wave”, but on the other hand, they enjoyed certain special rights, such as developing “The Wave’s gestures and symbols, discussing the rules, and even using the rules. They even use the power of the Wave to confront the gangsters. When they use the collective name to manage the “wave,” they are in fact above the organization.” [5]

Another way totalitarianism is formed through the disguise of the principle of the minority over the majority, disregarding the interests of the minority, and even through the violence of the majority to suppress and marginalize heretical forces. Carlo’s brother and his companions prevented the entry of partners who did not make The Wave’s gestures and demanded that individual members voluntarily or unconditionally identify with the system by the will of the collective, a coercive means that could easily lead to the obscuring of individual values, freedoms, and rights.

Human beings have developed the virtue of collectivism over a long period of productive activity and social interaction [10]. This collective strength helps people pool their resources and work together to overcome difficulties. This is demonstrated at the beginning of the film, when the actors in the theater company work in isolation, making it impossible for the program to be choreographed. Only by working together can it proceed smoothly. However, this need for centralized power provides the possibility of totalitarianism.

Especially when collectivism completely loses its principles, the notion that the minority is subordinate to the majority and the commonality overrides the individuality that it preaches and emphasizes will make the individuals in it completely abandon rational thinking, no longer independent and free but subordinate to the ideology approved by the collective, tearing the shackles of reason and falling into the ecstasy of human desire, just like the pistol raised by Tim in the film. This ideology is accompanied by ignorance and bloodshed. As Le Bon pointed out in his *Studies in Mass Psychology* when irrational emotions and emotional perceptions are in the absolute leadership or dominant understanding of a collective, coupled with the immense power of the collective unconscious, individual emotions, including thoughts, are unconsciously influenced by this subtle influence on each other and are collectively shifted in the same direction as the organization [1]. Collectivism is like a double-edged sword that can degenerate into collective or totalitarian terror when it exceeds the necessary limits.

5. Conclusion

“Die Welle” ends with Wenger’s meditation. With this long close-up, the viewer enters the grain of the film, contemplates the experiences of Tim, Kevin, Marco, and Carlo in the film, and looks at himself. It exploited the weaknesses of human nature, anesthetized reason, and provoked blind obedience and fanaticism in control to maintain self-existence. Its purpose is to exchange the individual’s demise for the organization’s growth. So both the leaders and the members ultimately have no control over their development in the organization and are reduced to instruments of administrative control. In a movement like the Nazis, no one was the absolute leader, and no one could control the organization. It was a collective orgy of the masses’ sick, selfish desires under the Nazi ideology, and the masses who had lost their humanity became the tools of the Nazi organization to destroy the dissidents. This is why the Nazi movement became a catastrophe in human history.

It is easy to see the director’s deep thinking and sober awareness, using the charm and expression of film art itself to stimulate the audience’s thinking and alert us to the fact that there may be a totalitarian element in any ideology, which is related to various rational and irrational factors in society at large. Everyone is not far from the Nazis, but irrational fanaticism and blind obedience are the root cause of the tragedy of the self.

This paper only presents a brief analysis of the formation of totalitarianism based on the content of the film “Die Welle”. The gradual development of various ideologies in society is very complex and needs to be studied in more depth. Some of the ideas presented in this paper may be abrupt and premature. The content analysis of “Die Welle” uses psychological foundations as an entry point. If it is considered the formation of fascism and the history of the Nazis, some processes are complex and need to be reflected. In addition, humans are supposed to be social animals and be noticed and recognized while being affected by society. Humans cannot stop the environment from influencing themselves, so it is of great significance to look at the environment and be aware of its influence. Besides, factors of the formation of totalitarianism and the way to raise people’s awareness are also essential to avoid the recurrence of historical tragedies.

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