

Conclusion

Some people have told me that this subject is not the proper concern of an artist or of art. On the contrary I hold the position that there are times when an artist must examine and reveal such strange and secret brutality. – William Christenberry¹

The artist William Christenberry, perhaps best known for his photographs and paintings of the rural American South, also obsessively depicted the Ku Klux Klan in his art. Ranging from frightening paintings of Klansmen to Klan-hood shaped buildings and action figures dressed in Klan robes, his work manages to disturb and unsettle the viewer. Christenberry was aware that many audience members found his obsession inappropriate but felt that the subject matter was too important to be swept under the rug. Decades later, the Italian writer Roberto Saviano outlined the long history of Italian objections to cinematic depictions of the Mafia, stating:

When these facts of mafia life are kept secret, if they remain within courtrooms and prison cells, reported only in the local press or crime columns, the bloodshed will have achieved its aim. But when the story is told, it's as if a short-circuit occurs; a story can overcome the rule of silence and help us understand the dynamics of the organisation and its members. All it takes is a book, a television programme, a film to shed light on just one aspect – this is all it takes to trigger a revolution.²

In a recent book on US political history in the 1990s, writer and historian John Ganz notes how Martin Scorsese's gritty gangster film *Goodfellas* dismayed conservative intellectuals who idolized *The Godfather* as “a governing American myth.”³ The gangsters in *Goodfellas* have no moral code; they are unscrupulous men who will do anything to get ahead. the non-fiction *Goodfellas* “ruined the fantasy” of an honorable Mafia.⁴ Although the above examples deal with historical criminality in different parts of the world, the dilemmas of depicting Nazis on screen are similar, even if the crimes they depict are on a vastly different scale. The television films portraying the Wannsee Conference were attempts to reveal

1 Benjamin Forgey, “Christenberry: Growing Up But Not Away,” *Style*, *Washington Post*, April 24, 1983, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1983/04/24/christenberry-growing-up-but-not-away/29dc80eb-7f51-4c6a-8e73-2d432f24da3d/>.

2 Roberto Saviano, “‘These stories are our defence against organised crime’: the mafia on film,” *Guardian*, August 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/aug/14/mafia-on-film-roberto-saviano>.

3 John Ganz, *When the Clock Broke: Con Men, Conspiracists, and How America Cracked Up in the Early 1990s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 343.

4 Ganz, *When the Clock Broke*, 344–345.

another form of “strange and secret brutality.” Through portraying the very language of perpetrators on the small screen, “the unspeakable is indeed spoken,” as Alex Kay puts it.⁵ Their metaphorical lifting of the veil is both an artistic and inherently educational act. As Saviano argues about Mafia films, these films about Wannsee were also attempts to “understand the dynamics” of another inherently criminal organization. By shedding light on the inner workings of the Nazi government and the machinery of destruction, how people like Heydrich and Eichmann, who “worked mainly behind the scenes, largely shunning publicity” operated in secret, *The Wannsee Conference*, *Conspiracy*, and *The Conference* are all attempts at making this history known, at raising awareness of how a modern, bureaucratic state committed genocide.⁶ This argument is not meant to equate the Nazi Party with the Neapolitan Mafia, but rather compare the artistic responses to mass violence and secret criminality, which all deal with similar ethical quandaries – the line between honesty and glorification, between fascination and analysis.

This inherently educational impulse – namely, to raise awareness of mass criminality and its legacy – is also a key aspect of the public history movement, which is a democratically oriented approach which also grapples with difficult histories and their material legacies today. Contrary to Adorno’s disciples, who wag their fingers about the dangers of mass culture as an instrument of “mass deception,” and, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, describe a world where “intellectual products drawn ready-made from art and science are infected with untruth,” this study has shown that these dramas used television, one of the most derided forms of mass culture, to raise awareness and disseminate historical arguments about Wannsee in a responsible manner.⁷ If the three docudramas about Wannsee do not fit the standards of those who deny film and television’s ability to tell stories about the past, then there are few productions which could ever fulfill their criteria.

Most of the television productions addressing Wannsee were the result of the efforts of Jewish writers, historians, and producers convinced that the Wannsee Conference was an incredibly important subject worth portraying on screen. These productions are not merely examples of German or US television history but are also key examples of Jewish artistic responses to the Holocaust. In varying degrees of success, they all contributed to a diffuse body of work I call “antifascist

⁵ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 195.

⁶ Evans, *Hitler’s People*, 235.

⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94–136, 114.

television,” leaning on the concept of “antifascist film” outlined by film historian Jennifer Barker.⁸ While not as devoted to surrealism and visual innovation as the antifascist films Barker discusses, antifascist television takes advantage of television’s lower budgets and tolerance for dialogue-heavy productions, exposing the words and deeds of fascists to audiences for whom avant-garde productions like Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* may be out of reach. Of course, antifascist television is not limited to the productions dealing with the Wannsee Conference and the Holocaust. Recent series like *The Plot Against America* or *M: Son of the Century* are other clear examples of this genre.⁹

Throughout the course of this project, I often had the same irritating conversation with a German counterpart. Regardless of the person involved, almost every German historian, archivist, or museum employee I spoke with about this project expressed unsolicited disdain for *Conspiracy*, a supposedly inferior, overblown, and overdramatized film compared with the two allegedly more sober German films about Wannsee. While cinematic taste is a subjective matter, they often implied that Loring Mandel and HBO conducted no research of their own, that *Conspiracy* was simply a remake of the 1984 film, and that the actors exaggerated the Nazis’ evil too much. Sober German productions versus wild, inaccurate Hollywood. A comforting yet simplistic, old-hat narrative smacking of what Michael Kater has dubbed “artistic nationalism.”¹⁰ This characterization also made little sense to me, as the Nazis from the 1984 film behave even more like stereotypes than Ian McNeice’s portrayal of Klopfer in *Conspiracy*. This book’s chapters on *Conspiracy* show how these assertions are mistaken. Mandel and HBO conducted enormous amounts of research, were very careful about avoiding demonization, and went out of their way to avoid remaking *The Wannsee Conference*. Additionally, Germans claiming a production written by a Jewish American is somehow of less substance than their own smacks of old, highly problematic ideas about German substance versus foreign or Jewish spectacle.¹¹

But then I read a version of Paul Mommertz’s stage adaptation of *The Wannsee Conference* contained in his collection at Wannsee. At first glance, the stage script, referred to as a “working copy (*Arbeitskopie*)” on the first page, seems

⁸ See Barker, *The Aesthetics of Antifascist Film*.

⁹ *The Plot Against America* is an adaptation of Philip Roth’s novel of the same name, which is an alternate history of the United States where Charles Lindbergh becomes president. *M: Son of the Century* is an Italian miniseries about Mussolini’s seizure of power.

¹⁰ Kater, *After the Nazis*, 380.

¹¹ Blackbourn, *Germany in the World*, 358–362.

identical to Mommertz's published version of his stage version of *The Wannsee Conference*.¹² But after a few pages, the typewritten material from Mommertz's original stage adaptation suddenly gives way to new material written with a word processing program.¹³ These pages are inserted at various moments in the script. Their authorship is unclear and cannot be definitively determined, but the words themselves come from Loring Mandel's *Conspiracy*. When asked about this stage script, Mommertz emphatically denied that they were his words and felt that they did not represent his intent, instead blaming the play's director, Isolde Wabra, for the changes.¹⁴ The new script pages are verbatim transcriptions of key scenes in *Conspiracy*, specifically from its German-language dub, which go much further than an homage. They include: the scene where Lange discusses the meaning of the term "evacuation," the scene where Eichmann discusses the Wannsee villa's previous ownership, the scene where the participants introduce themselves, Kritzinger's vacillation, Stuckart and Klopfer arguing, Eichmann discussing extermination facilities at Belżec, Treblinka, Sobibór, and Auschwitz, Heydrich's final speech, and the scene at the fireplace where Kritzinger's story – I Mandel's personal life – is retold. In some instances, this "adaptation" simply assigns the cribbed lines of dialogue to different characters, but in most cases, these script pages are identical to the German dub of *Conspiracy*.¹⁵ At no point does this manuscript mention Mandel or *Conspiracy*.

The stage adaptation with these additional scenes was performed in Vienna and in Schloss Hartheim in 2003 and in Neustrelitz in 2015. A complete video of the 2003 production is available in the Joseph Wulf Mediothek. This video confirms that the play was performed with the lines stolen from Mandel's script, except for the end scene at the fireplace.¹⁶ A promotional video for the Neustrelitz run also contains unintentional references to Mandel's script, specifically when the actor playing Eichmann quotes the exact same number of Jews murdered

12 See Paul Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz: Bühnenstück in zwei Akten (Prolog und Epilog)*, (Berlin: Theaterverlag Desch, 2014). The first stage adaptation dates to 1988, and this published version is likely identical to the 1988 edition.

13 Paul Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz: Bühnenstück in zwei Akten, Arbeitskopie*, undated, presumably between 2001 and 2002, in Ordner 1, "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 050 "Bühnenstück in zwei Akten" Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

14 Mommertz, email message to author, April 11, 2019.

15 See the German DVD version of *Conspiracy, Die Wannseekonferenz* (Schröder Media HandelsmbH, 2015).

16 Isolde Wabra, "Die Wannsee-Konferenz: ein Schauspiel von Paul Mommertz," Inszenierung im Rahmen der Landesausstellung "Wert des Lebens" im Schloss Hartheim, 2003, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Berlin.

per hour which Eichmann references in *Conspiracy*.¹⁷ In this same video, the director, Isolde Wabra, and the actors talk about what an important, sober-minded, “documentary” production it was. Wabra states that the play was important in 2015 because Germany needed to address its Nazi past during the resurgence of the far right.¹⁸ At no point do they mention Loring Mandel and *Conspiracy*. It is deeply disappointing and frankly inexcusable that a production could not only transcribe lines from another without attribution, but that Germans and Austrians would copy dialogue about gas chambers and mass shootings from a Jewish writer who lost family in the Holocaust and then portray themselves as enlightened, sober-minded people who have learned from their history. To be clear: the dialogue is not uncopyrighted historical information. On the contrary, it includes some of the most famous dramatic lines in *Conspiracy*. Any person who had watched *Conspiracy* and understood German would easily recognize these lines for what they were. They are from the exact exchanges which German critics who dismiss *Conspiracy* reference when claiming that the film is exaggerated, overdramatic, and “too Hollywood.” Yet in 2003 and 2015, no one noticed that the supposedly sober, documentary-like stage adaptation of *The Wannsee Conference* used the exact same material.¹⁹ What does it mean when those who cast themselves as rational and soberminded lift dialogue from the very people they claim embody none of those attributes?²⁰ And what about when “experts” dismiss the film along the same lines?

Nothing of the abovementioned affair casts a shadow over the German television productions about Wannsee. They were valuable, necessary interventions in cultures of remembrance which had become complacent. *Conspiracy* has become a veritable cult classic in the English-speaking world – but as this study has shown, its unproduced sequel, *Complicity*, could have provided much needed self-reflection during a period in which the United States has moved further along its rightward path. Film and television productions are messy, complicated affairs which take years to reach fruition – and most of them never see the light of day. From 1960 until 2022, screenwriters, directors, producers, historians, and count-

17 See Theater Orchester Neubrandenburg Neustrelitz, “Die Wannseekonferenz,” uploaded February 9, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5zkUotxOzs>.

18 Theater Orchester Neubrandenburg Neustrelitz, “Die Wannseekonferenz.”

19 One review claimed that the play “moralized”: Hartmut Krug, “Die Wannseekonferenz – In Neustrelitz wird das Dokumentartheaterstück von Paul Mommertz authentisch ausstaffiert,” February 14, 2015, https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10570&layout=*Itemid=100190.

20 See Michel Foucault, “Orders of Discourse,” *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (April 1971): 7–30; Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, 121.

less others have worked to raise awareness about what happened at Wannsee – or what the historiography in their respective lifetimes believed had happened there. Some of the productions, most notably *The Wannsee Conference*, were televisual historiographic interventions. Each of these productions, even the more problematic ones, illustrates the evolution of perpetrator research since 1960. They also represent key aspects of television history in their respective countries: *Engineer of Death* as part of early television history, with its reliance on advertising and teleplay, *Holocaust* as a family drama, *Manager of Terror* as psychohistory, *The Wannsee Conference* with its pedagogical emphasis on Nazi jargon and intervention in historiography, *War and Remembrance* as a bloated, big-budget miniseries, *Conspiracy* as an example of “quality TV’s” historical filmmaking, and *The Conference* as a synthesis of its two predecessors for German public television in 2022. As key examples of television as a public history “type,” these productions all exemplify different methods of communicating history via mass media.²¹

The history of transnational television’s engagement with the Wannsee Conference shows that the methods of the New Film History can be applied to both television history and studies of dramatic Holocaust film and television.²² The latter field has long been dominated by scholars focused on questions of the ethics of representation who are bogged down in debates about the appropriateness of depicting the Holocaust in fiction. Few works on dramatic Holocaust films and TV investigate production histories. Additionally, the wave of so-called “quality TV” or “peak TV,” beginning with cable drama series from the 1990s, is in dire need of further historical analysis.

In an interview, Norbert Kampe, the former director of the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Education Center, recounted a story about *Conspiracy* filming on location:

and then there’s this thing with the snow, with the artificial snow, [*Conspiracy*’s production team] said, “it’ll be gone the next time it rains, but it didn’t go away. So, we got the volunteer fire department from nearby and they were here for days . . . the paths were almost completely sodden. So, it was a real problem. This starch does not disappear so quickly.”²³

21 See Thorsten Logge, “‘History Types’ and Public History,” *Public History Weekly*, June 28, 2018, <https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/6–2018–24/history-types-and-public-history/>.

22 See Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, *The New Film History*.

23 Interview with Norbert Kampe, July 25, 2018, Berlin, 01:00–03:28.

Regardless of the ecological implications of this quote, Kampe's anecdote provides a fitting epilogue to this study. Events leave traces, which historians, artists, and filmmakers then try to assemble into a coherent narrative. But their attempts at assembling those traces into narratives also leave traces themselves. Like the artificial snow that wouldn't melt, these films and their production material also left stubborn traces at a lakeside villa in Berlin.