

Nicholas K. Johnson
Scripting Genocide

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Nicholas K. Johnson

Scripting Genocide



The Wannsee Conference on Television, 1960–2022

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In Memory of Dr. Daniel Charles Nutzel, 1962–2013.

Or, as we knew him,

Dr. Daniel Christian Nützel, ???–2013.

Thanks for everything, Nuetzel.

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Glossary

Aktion 1005 Top Secret Program begun in 1942 to cover up mass graves in the East.

Einsatzgruppe ‘operational group’ of SD and police behind the lines.

Einsatzkommando Subunit of *Einsatzgruppe*.

Four-Year Plan Hermann Göring’s armament program begun in 1936 and extended for the war’s duration.

Gauleiter Governor of a province in Nazi Germany and head of Nazi Party activity in the province.

General Government Official title of Nazi colonial puppet state in occupied Poland.

Gruppenführer SS rank equivalent to a major general.¹

Mischling Literally “mongrel,” this racist term denoted a person who had mixed Jewish and “Aryan” blood.

Obergruppenführer SS rank equivalent to a lieutenant general.

Referat Office within a Ministry, for example Eichmann led the *Referat* devoted to Jews.

Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA) - Reich Security Main Office. This organization, led by Heydrich, encompassed all policing.

Sicherheitsdienst (SD) Security Service. This was the intelligence wing of the SS/RSHA.

Sicherheitspolizei (SiPo) Security Police.

Staatsektretär State Secretary, roughly equivalent to a U.S. Undersecretary of State.

Oberführer SS rank equivalent to between colonel and brigadier general.

Obersturmbannführer SS rank equivalent to a lieutenant colonel.

Sturmbannführer SS rank equivalent to a major.

Waffen-SS Armed wing of the SS, deployed at the front.

¹ Ranks are adapted from the glossary in Alex J. Kay, *The Making of an SS Killer: The Life of Colonel Alfred Filbert, 1905–1990*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), xvi–xvii.

People on Tuesday: An Introduction

“The abyss is bordered by tall mansions.” – Eric Vuillard, *The Order of the Day*

On Tuesday, January 20, 1942, representatives of the German government attended a meeting chaired by Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) and the man in charge of radical anti-Jewish policy, to discuss and coordinate what he called “the Final Solution.” The meeting took place in an ornate villa on the shores of Wannsee, a lake in Berlin’s western suburbs. This top-secret meeting would later gain infamy after U.S. Army investigators discovered a typewritten protocol outlining what took place there. Later dubbed the Wannsee Conference, the meeting quickly stood for “the most emblematic and programmatic statement of the Nazi way of genocide.”¹ Adolf Eichmann drafted the meeting minutes, usually referred to as the Wannsee Protocol. In bureaucratic language that is shocking in its brutality, Eichmann rendered the men’s words palatable. As the historian Mark Roseman recounts in his study of the conference:

The Wannsee Protocol is emblematic of the Holocaust not just in its methodical blueprint for murder. On the one hand, the protocol exists, its authenticity undeniable, its leaden matter-of-factness as unanswerable as it is unfathomable. It reminds us that the Holocaust is the best-documented mass murder in history.²

This type of meeting – attended by *Staatssekretäre* (state secretaries, roughly equivalent to a U.S. undersecretary of state), their subordinates, and members of the SS, including representatives of the Reich Security Main Office – was not unique, but according to Roseman, followed the form of a routine type of meeting which, for the Nazi regime, was “in effect a substitute for cabinet government.”³ Wannsee later became shorthand for genocide conducted by modern bureaucratic states, though it was not subject to detailed historical studies until the 1990s. One historian has noted that Wannsee marks the transition from local mass killings to genocide, arguing that it “had cleared the way for the mass mur-

¹ Mark Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration* (London: Folio Society, 2012), 3.

² Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 5.

³ Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 61. See also Darren O’Byrne, “Nazi Constitutional Designs: The State Secretaries’ Meetings and the Annexation of East Central Europe,” *European History Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (April 2024): 337–357.

der of Jews in the different German-occupied territories to be placed on a centralised, pan-European footing.”⁴

Historians have long debated the significance of the Wannsee Conference. Was it where the Nazis made “the decision” to commit genocide? The current consensus is that that decision was not made at Wannsee, but this impression remains in the popular imagination.⁵ Mark Roseman identifies the Wannsee Conference as a “signpost indicating that genocide had become official policy” and repeatedly refers to the conference protocol as a type of “keyhole” through which we can observe a transitional period in the history of the Holocaust.⁶ Roseman disagrees with historians like Eberhard Jäckel, who contend that the conference was “relatively unimportant.”⁷ The on-screen depictions necessarily agree with historians like Roseman: no one would make a film about something they considered “unimportant.” Historians still debate Wannsee’s significance. In *Wannsee: The Road to the Final Solution*, Peter Longerich integrates the Wannsee Conference into the wider context of the war and occupation policies, but not as central to the Holocaust’s unfolding as other scholars have emphasized. For him, the conference was a key turning point in the integration of the “Final Solution” into the war effort.⁸

4 Alex J. Kay, *Empire of Destruction: A History of Nazi Mass Killing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 91.

5 The most important monographs on the Wannsee Conference are Mark Roseman’s *The Villa, The Lake, the Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* (London: Allen Lane, 2002) and Peter Longerich’s *Wannsee: The Road to the Final Solution*, trans. Lesley Sharpe and Jeremy Noakes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). Both works (and historians of the Holocaust in general) owe a great deal to sources in former Warsaw Pact countries that only became accessible to Western scholars after 1990. Longerich’s study is particularly valuable because it includes a page-by-page commentary on the protocol. Note that Roseman’s book was published in the US with the title *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*. A 2012 edition published by the Folio Society (with a new foreword) uses the American title.

6 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 110.

7 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 66–67.

8 Longerich, *Wannsee*, 106. Curiously, he ignores Roseman’s book, but instead cites a historiographical essay Roseman wrote for an edited volume. This is likely explained by Longerich’s positive review of Roseman’s book that nevertheless noted that Roseman offers no “really new interpretation.” See Longerich, “Buch im Gespräch: Mark Roseman ‘Die Wannsee-Konferenz,’” *Die Zeit*, January 17, 2002. https://www.zeit.de/2002/04/200204_p-wannsee.xml. A glance at both works’ bibliographies does reveal that Longerich used more archival sources than Roseman, who relied more on secondary works and re-printed sources – but still wrote the standard English-language work on Wannsee.

In a 2022 article for the *New York Review of Books*, the historian Christopher Browning discussed the debate on Wannsee's significance, noting that although it was not where "the" decision was made, it "clearly was an important step along the way."⁹ Browning's argument here largely conforms to the historiographical consensus about Wannsee. It was important more for what it illustrates about the inner workings of the Nazi government, not because the protocol serves as a kind of "smoking gun" for a master plan. In contrast to Longerich, Richard J. Evans has argued that "Heydrich made it abundantly clear to the participants in the conference that the end result would be the extermination of the entire Jewish population across the continent."¹⁰

The Wannsee Conference has also repeatedly attracted the attention of artists, writers, and filmmakers seeking to explore and explain what happened at the villa on the path to genocide.¹¹ It is a shadow presence in television history – it has been present in television depictions of the Nazi regime in every decade since the 1960s, but these productions have not received the same critical and scholarly attention devoted to either big-budget theatrical films or European art cinema about the Holocaust. This book investigates dramatic, fictionalized depictions of the Wannsee Conference, centering on the acclaimed docudramas *The Wannsee Conference* (1984), *Conspiracy* (2001), and *The Conference* (2022).¹² Contrary to stereotypes or even prevailing dramatic conventions, these three docudramas depict the Wannsee Conference and Nazi perpetrators in a minimalistic and "almost analytical perspective on internal hierarchies and political agencies," as film scholar Axel Bangert has noted.¹³

9 Christopher R. Browning, "When Did They Decide?," *The New York Review of Books*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/03/24/wannsee-the-road-to-the-final-solution-peter-longerich/>.

10 Richard J. Evans, *Hitler's People: The Faces of the Third Reich* (London: Allen Lane, 2024), 314.

11 I conducted a preliminary investigation into this topic in my master's thesis, Nicholas K. Johnson, "HBO and the Holocaust: *Conspiracy*, the Historical Film, and Public History at Wannsee" (MA Thesis, 2016).

12 Documentaries, other visual art, poetry, and novels are beyond this study's scope. For example, the photographer Werner Zellien published an exhibition catalog consisting of his 1988 photographs of the then-abandoned Wannsee villa. See Werner Zellien, *Villa Wannsee - Melancholy Grandeur*, (Oslo: Werner Zellien, 2008). Claude Lanzmann also discusses Wannsee in his 1985 documentary *Shoah* and includes footage of the villa in his outtakes, but many other television documentaries have covered the conference.

13 Axel Bangert, *The Nazi Past in Contemporary German Film: Viewing Experiences of Intimacy and Immersion* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 58. Bangert refers here to the 1984 docudrama *The Wannsee Conference*, but I argue that this judgment applies to all three docudramas.

All productions explore the juxtaposition, or incongruity, between the conference's elegant, refined setting and its criminality. While some productions reenacted the Wannsee Conference in real time (as in the case of the three above-mentioned docudramas), other filmmakers only referenced it obliquely – for instance, by discussing the meeting's minutes or attendees. Almost all are sparse, minimalist, dialogue-driven productions, apart from the two miniseries *Holocaust* and *War and Remembrance*. The minimalism of these television productions echoes a predominantly minimalist aesthetic in Holocaust literature.¹⁴ They all, to various degrees, engage with an idea expressed by the novelist Eric Vuillard: “The abyss is bordered by tall mansions.”¹⁵ This study seeks to determine why and how filmmakers have portrayed Wannsee in dramatic form since the 1960s – and, of course, whether they responsibly depicted that history.

1 The New Film History and Production Histories

In keeping with the tenets of the New Film History,¹⁶ this study is a cultural history of Wannsee on television. It relies heavily on production documents, screenplays, oral history interviews, and research material assembled by screenwriters and historical advisors. The sites from which these source materials were gathered range from large archives, like the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, to small, private collections. Working through these production histories, this book charts a dialogue between the filmmaker and the historian, a dialogue that, I argue, ultimately enhances our understanding of the processual nature of filmmaking as historiographic intervention. In this, my study deviates from a range of film studies approaches, and, to some degree, this approach is independent of the films' eventual plurivocal “meanings.” I take for granted that the productions themselves may unwittingly counteract, revise, or at times deviate in unforeseen ways from the collective, authorial input of their production. This project, rather, considers production history as intimately entangled with the question of how filmmakers depict the past.

In doing so, however, the mediality of film and of television features significantly in this book. Following Rebecca Weeks, I am concerned with history *on screen* and draw from scholarship on historical film *and* television. As Weeks notes, “[m]any of the arguments made and conclusions drawn in studying the le-

¹⁴ Daniel R. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 37.

¹⁵ Eric Vuillard, *The Order of the Day*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (London: Picador, 2019), 129.

¹⁶ See J. Chapman, M. Glancy, and S. Harper, eds., *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

gitimacy and possibility of putting history into film apply to television.”¹⁷ A strict distinction between these two media forms is arguably untenable in this age of streaming and home media, but is doubly problematic when one considers that my three main objects of study are television films.¹⁸ However, when necessary, I discuss the network- and production-related historical contexts specific to the television medium, particularly when it comes to issues of public versus private television or the wave of independent filmmakers moving to HBO during the 1990s as a result of Hollywood’s shift towards blockbusters. Additionally, while I take questions of authorial intent and historical context seriously, I do not claim that these productions are the work of single authors. They are collaborative, industrial products and even the screenplays are informed by both screenwriter biographies and larger, structural forces such as network policies, historical and national contexts, and the input from producers, directors, and historical consultants. In addition to my cultural history perspective, I consider these productions as examples of public history. As part of the *Public History in European Perspectives* series from De Gruyter and the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH), this book argues that the filmmakers, screenwriters, actors, historical consultants, and producers consulted here all “did history” in a way largely in keeping with the values and goals of the public history movement.¹⁹

Following screenwriter and film historian Bruno Ramirez’s approach, this study argues that screenwriting is the crucial step in historical filmmaking that permits us to see a particular production’s historiographical argument, message (or, in some instances, educational impulse), and where compromises – such as fictionalization – were made. For Ramirez, screenwriting “constitutes a sort of bridge between research-generated historical knowledge and the visual language through which a film will speak to viewers.”²⁰ Some film scholars investigate screenwriting “as a research artefact,” that is scriptwriting as a form of academic research, though these scholars primarily investigate screenwriting practices

17 Rebecca Weeks, *History by HBO: Televising the American Past* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2022), 17. Although she focuses on television, Weeks also draws on Robert Rosenstone’s, Bruno Ramirez’s, and Robert Toplin’s work on historical film.

18 The only theatrical films discussed in detail here are *The Man with the Iron Heart* and *The Zone of Interest*.

19 Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 168–171. Although my most prominent case study, *Conspiracy*, is a product of the US television network HBO, that does not mean that it solely offered an American perspective on Wannsee. Its production team included both British and Austrian-American producers, and initially began as a collaboration with the German studio UFA.

20 Bruno Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 37.

within the academy, not as research artifacts from non-academic contexts, such as commercial scripts written by professional screenwriters.²¹ This study considers television screenplays important research artifacts and, in the case of historical films like the ones analyzed here, are collaborative historiographical interventions. Furthermore, this collaborative aspect of film production also parallels the public history movement, which historian Denise Meringolo strongly associates with collaborative work and negotiations between a wide variety of experts and stakeholders.²² In their landmark 1998 survey of American attitudes towards history, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen identified film and television as the most common ways Americans “encountered” the past.²³ A recent German survey on public memory of the Nazi past exhibited similar findings.²⁴ This study does not view public history or Holocaust education as simply sitting down and watching a movie. This simplistic view of historical education and cinema is not represented by any proponent of using films in an educational setting or those advocating for historical film’s potential. The educator and film scholar Rich Brownstein discusses this dilemma at length, arguing for a nuanced assessment of Holocaust films and their role in education:

[T]eaching “The Holocaust” cannot be done with only one film. Using narrative Holocaust films as the primary source for Holocaust education would be educational malpractice, even if a single film could encompass all aspects of the Holocaust. Holocaust film is an educational supplement, which can be used to fill-in and give life to difficult sub-topics within Holocaust study.²⁵

Brownstein is by no means the only voice on Holocaust education and film, but his work deserves serious consideration when discussing how Holocaust films can be used in the classroom – though this study considers Holocaust education, public history, and historical education in a sense much broader than classroom implementation.

21 Craig Batty and Dallas J. Baker, “Screenwriting as a Mode of Research, and the Screenplay as a Research Artefact,” in *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry*, ed. Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 67–83.

22 Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), xxiv.

23 Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 31.

24 See “MEMO-Studie,” accessed October 31, 2022, <https://www.stiftung-evz.de/was-wir-foerdern/handlungsfelder-cluster/bilden-fuer-lebendiges-erinnern/memo-studie/>.

25 Rich Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete: A History and Analysis of 400 Films, with a Teaching Guide* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co Inc, 2021), 157.

In the Anglo-American and German historical communities, serious attention to historical films²⁶ and their uses and abuses follows several approaches. This study will combine both the more established cultural- or film studies-influenced approach, initiated by scholars like Robert Rosenstone and continued by Alison Landsberg, with the larger fields of public history and historical culture.²⁷ It is important to note that Holocaust films come with their own special set of challenges and controversies. Critiques of historical films are well known by now: they simplify, fictionalize, sensationalize, impart “dangerous” emotions, and do not meet the standards of written scholarship. One cannot dismiss these critiques out of hand, but they hold little value when analyzing historical films and their potential beyond the surface level. Historical films are here to stay. Audiences will still watch historical films even if historians completely dismiss them. Audiences will also continue to consume and absorb the messages of historical films and other depictions of history in mass culture, whether in museums, video games, or on YouTube. If historians want to understand how memory culture is developing in our current era, it is essential that they also devote our attention to these productions and their idiosyncratic modes of becoming, which complement (rather than compete with) comparable film and media studies – disciplines which have, for example, been fruitfully utilizing production histories for decades.²⁸

Filmmakers, as this study traces, rarely set out to “teach” history in a didactic, schoolmaster-like manner. Nevertheless, the medium has the power to affect viewers pedagogically – most of all in the sense of fostering historical empathy for people quite unlike themselves. The educationalist film scholar Elvira Neuendank stresses that every film contains “pedagogical structures” and “embedded pedagogy.”²⁹ This statement is more about education in the sense of the German word *Bildung*, which connotes cultivation and is not as top-down of a process as the English word “education” may imply. As Tim Zumhof notes, film and televi-

26 I use the term “historical film” much in the way Robert Toplin and Robert Rosenstone use it. I do not mean a film “from the past,” but a film that depicts the past in some way.

27 For a detailed discussion of the overlaps and differences between historical culture, public history, and popular history, see Tim Zumhof, “Historical Culture, Public History, and Education in Germany and the United States of America: A Comparative Introduction to Basic Concepts and Fields of Research” in *Show, Don’t Tell: Education and Historical Representations on Stage and Screen in Germany and the USA*, eds. Nicholas K. Johnson and Tim Zumhof (Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt, 2020), 15–30.

28 See Barbara Klinger, “Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies,” *Screen* 38, no. 2 (July 1997): 107–128.

29 Elvira Neuendank, *Film als pädagogisches Setting: ein Medium als Vermittlungs- und Vergewältigungsinstanz* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2022), 9–13.

sion “teaching audiences lessons from history” is “[a] misleading notion.”³⁰ Instead, films have the potential to impart historical information and raise awareness about a particular topic to a mass audience, rather than functioning as overtly didactic, paint-by-numbers enterprises – they are an example of public history; they are a “history type” worthy of historical investigation.³¹

In his article “Cinematic History: Where Do We Go From Here?” the historian Robert Toplin argues that most historians analyze individual films as texts; that is, they watch films and then write about them. Some historians go further and will touch on a film’s historical context and the background of its creators. Toplin divides historical film analysis into three levels: 1) A film as a primary source. For example, this approach could use D.W. Griffith’s racist love letter to the Ku Klux Klan, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to illustrate the early-twentieth-century “nadir of American race relations.” 2) Exploring a film’s historical context, background, and reception. In the case of *The Birth of a Nation*, this approach would examine the early years of Hollywood, the United States shortly before the outbreak of World War I, and the film’s initially positive critical reception. 3) A production history of the film in question, based on archival materials (such as scripts, memos, and correspondence) and interviews.³² For example, Thomas Cripps examined the “paper trail” of the 1918 film *The Birth of a Race*, a film meant to refute racist stereotypes propagated by *The Birth of a Nation*, to prove that the film’s originally intended message was “dampened by the wavering commitment of white liberals.”³³ This level is much rarer among historians³⁴ and guides my

30 Zumhof, “Historical Culture,” 27.

31 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/>.

32 Robert Brent Toplin, “Cinematic History: Where Do We Go From Here?,” *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (August 2003): 86–87.

33 John E. O’Connor, “History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1200–1209, 1205; Thomas Cripps, “Following the Paper Trail to *The Birth of a Race* and Its Times,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 18, no. 3 (1988): 50–62.

34 Recent studies that engage in historical film analysis at this level include Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, *Making Patton: A Classic War Film’s Epic Journey to the Silver Screen*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012); J. E. Smyth, *From Here to Eternity*, (London: Palgrave, 2015); Smyth, *Fred Zinnemann and the Cinema of Resistance*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014). Recent archive-based studies of historical films which deal with the Holocaust specifically include Sue Vice, *Claude Lanzmann’s ‘Shoah’ Outtakes: Holocaust Rescue and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Vice, *Shoah* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Jennifer Cazenave, *An Archive of the Catastrophe: The Unused Footage of Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah* (Albany, NY:

own research into the films that depict the Wannsee Conference. Toplin describes this “third level” in detail:

Only a few historians, though, are taking the analysis of film to a third and still deeper level. Investigations of this nature may examine the production histories behind the movies. They can extend the range of primary sources to include a wide assortment associated with the crafting of a motion picture. In this case historians can examine film treatments (story narratives and descriptions), inter-office memos from studios and production companies, letters between individuals involved in production, drafts of the script, and other materials. Analyses at this third level often include original interviews with principal artists and business managers involved in a production. The scholarship may feature evidence drawn from conversations with the cinematographer, writer, director, producer, or studio executive. This form of research also focuses on efforts to publicize a movie. It can include study of publicity blurbs, press kits, statements by the director to the press, and other documents.³⁵

As noted above, this study’s use of script archives, production documents, associated marginalia, and oral history interviews places it within this longer academic tradition described by Toplin. While such studies are rare among studies of *dramatic* on-screen depictions of the Holocaust, my three main examples (*The Wannsee Conference*, *Conspiracy*, and *The Conference*) are particularly suited to such an analysis. Each of these films portrays the same event in roughly the same running time, each exemplifies historiographical trends from their respective production periods, and each respectively stands out as an example of trends in television history in West Germany and the United States during the 1980s, late 1990s, and early 2020s. Additionally, each screenwriter (Paul Mommertz, Loring Mandel, and Magnus Vattrodt) either donated their research material and screenplay drafts to archives or made them available for this study.

2 Public History and History on Screen

Since the 1990s, historians have devoted more attention to historical film and television. In the Anglosphere, historians like Robert Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin spearheaded this new movement among historians to analyze historical films as sources in their own right, not just as artifacts of cultural production from their respective historical eras. The American Historical Association (AHA) and the National Council on Public History (NCPH) have dedicated film review

SUNY Press, 2019); and Simone Gigliotti, *Restless Archive: The Holocaust and the Cinema of the Displaced* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023).

³⁵ Toplin, “Cinematic History,” 86–87.

sections in their journals (*The American Historical Review* and *The Public Historian*) and have even devoted special issues to history and film, both of which will be explored below. Nevertheless, historians (and, obviously, film and media scholars) had been analyzing film long before Rosenstone and Toplin. The journal *Film & History*, for example, has published material since the 1970s. Historians have been engaging with film since the early days of the medium; Bruno Ramirez has pointed out that film and professional history emerged in roughly the same era and were always engaged in a dialogue that was often characterized by “rivalry.”³⁶

One key early publication on history and film is a 1988 special issue of *The American Historical Review* which included contributions by Rosenstone, Toplin, Hayden White, and others. Toplin notes that while films do not engage with historiographical debates at first glance, they nevertheless “take sides.” For Toplin, historical films are relevant to serious historical analysis because they

contribute to the controversies that animate historical writing. Indeed, many producers fashion their films as statements on these debates, for they draw their conclusions from the theses of influential monographs. The connection, then, between media and print-oriented interpretation is often significant, even though film reviews rarely take note of the relationship.³⁷

In his last sentence, Toplin makes a point similar to one made by Ramirez: the film and print worlds talk past each other even though they are intimately linked. As the later analysis of Wannsee films and their production materials will show, filmmakers utilized then-cutting-edge historiography when preparing their screenplays. They did not simply consult encyclopedias and create dramas with the Wannsee Conference as window dressing. The writers included bibliographies and footnotes with their scripts. One wrote a film about the Wannsee Conference long before historians had devoted monographs to it. For Toplin, screenwriters (and other filmmakers) “become historians” and that if they are acting as historians, “[w]e need to know, for instance, how the filmmaker operates within the context of historiography.” This is not merely an academic exercise: Toplin notes that if historians fail to devote attention to historical films, filmmakers can operate without serious historical scrutiny.³⁸ As medieval historian David Herlihy

³⁶ Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*, 24.

³⁷ Robert Brent Toplin, “The Filmmaker as Historian,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1210–1227, 1218.

³⁸ Toplin, “The Filmmaker as Historian,” 1226–1227.

notes, “[m]ovies own no immunities; like every other representation of the past, they must answer for their messages in the high court of historical criticism.”³⁹

Toplin’s characterization of filmmakers as historians echoes Rosenstone, the strongest advocate of visual history as a historical method, who argues for the need of “the historian to accept the mainstream historical film as a new kind of history . . .”⁴⁰ For Rosenstone, the historical film may be evidence of a “challenge to history” similar to “the challenge of written history to the oral tradition.”⁴¹ Rosenstone’s arguments are essential to this study, but can be moderated, especially with regard to the written word. Additionally, I consider screenwriters, producers, historical advisors, and other filmmakers as types of “quotidian intellectuals,” a term introduced by historian Tiffany Florvil to describe Black German activists working outside of mainstream German academic intellectual culture.⁴²

Historical films still largely rely on the written text for their sources, and their screenplays are still written documents. This study takes the “paper trails” of the films seriously. It is through these paper trails that we can prove intent and identify historiographical positions, identify tensions within productions, and determine how filmmakers justified instances of fictionalization.⁴³ Through the script archives, one can trace a film’s historiographical lineage and argument. It is important to note, as Thomas Cripps has pointed out, that film historians previously neglected archival sources because they simply were not available.⁴⁴ Film studios are very protective of their intellectual property, and archival material has only become available at a slow pace.

In 1976, William Hughes noted that “the historian’s professional training provides no guarantee of cinematic literacy.”⁴⁵ Although many contemporary graduate programs offer courses in visual history or media literacy, this is not always the case; moreover, many historians start with the premise that film is inherently dangerous (an understandable position considering twentieth-century experience

39 David Herlihy, “Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Films and History,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1186–1192, 1192.

40 Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 60.

41 Rosenstone, “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1173–1185, 1184.

42 Tiffany N. Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

43 See Cripps, “Following the Paper Trail.”

44 Cripps, “Following the Paper Trail,” 51.

45 William Hughes, “The Evolution of Film as Evidence,” in Paul Smith, ed., *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge, 1976), 51. Quoted in Toplin, “The Filmmaker as Historian,” 1212.

with mass manipulation via propaganda films). Such a hardline attitude would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater, as John E. O'Connor has noted. O'Connor argues for the importance of media literacy but advises caution: "It would be easy to teach students to be cynics (or to reinforce them in their cynicism), but this would be neither productive nor educational." For him, media literacy encourages students to become "thoughtful citizens" and that in a "free society," "the goal of history teaching . . . must go behind simply informing people . . . it should be a given therefore that we teach our students to use audiovisual sources as stimuli to thought."⁴⁶ Similar efforts by leading German theorists of history didactics echo this approach and emphasize a combination of historical awareness and civics education (*politische Bildung*) that examines encounters with history outside of the classroom.⁴⁷

It is important to note that historians concerned with the depiction of the past on screen, like Ramirez, Rosenstone, Weeks, and Toplin, or media scholars like Alison Landsberg, are not naïve about the potential flaws of film and television – none of them write unabashed praise of films; Toplin concedes that the majority of historical films do not meet the standards of professional historiography. Nevertheless, he points out that the "challenge" for historians is "to examine the record of film productions and discern achievements amid the general wreckage."⁴⁸ Examining those achievements amid the wreckage is one of the chief aims of this study.

Thomas Cauvin has referred to the problem of defining public history as a "difficult task," which is complicated at the international level by imprecise or ambiguous translations. Cauvin notes that early public historians "adopted a defensive, and anxious, tone" and saw themselves "in opposition to what they perceived as a traditional academic and isolated history that ignored the public."⁴⁹ Furthermore, Cauvin notes that demarcating public history as simply all history done outside of the classroom oversimplifies the situation. Although the public history movement began to unite historians working outside of the traditional academic sphere (government historians, park rangers, historical society employees, consultants, archivists, etc.), public history actually encompasses a wider

⁴⁶ O'Connor, "History in Images/Images in History," 1208–1209.

⁴⁷ See Karl-Ernst Jeismann, "Geschichtsbewußtsein als zentrale Kategorie der Didaktik des Geschichtsunterrichts," in *Geschichte und Bildung. Beiträge zur Geschichtsdidaktik und zur Historischen Bildungsforschung*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobmeyer and Bernd Schönemann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000), 46–72.

⁴⁸ Toplin, "The Filmmaker as Historian," 1211.

⁴⁹ Cauvin, *Public History*, 12.

range of practitioners.⁵⁰ Other definitions of public history focus on its communicative aspect. Philip V. Scarpino defines public history as “a way of understanding and practicing the craft of history” and argues that the “communication” of history to diverse audiences distinguishes public history from “traditional” history.⁵¹ For Cauvin, a strict division between “academic history” and public history is a relic of the American historical community’s struggles during the 1970s and no longer reflects the current state of the field.⁵²

Recent European scholarship has both complicated and enhanced our understanding of public history as a concept and methodological tool.⁵³ In an article discussing the difficulties of defining public history in the German context, Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann claim that public history is closely related to applied history (*angewandte Geschichte*) and that the fields function like “two sides of a hinge.” They propose this model due to the institutional division of historical scholarship in German universities, which maintain organizational divisions between research historians and history didacticians. For Nießer and Tomann, public history is concerned with “the *forms* of history” and applied history is concerned with “the *agents* of history.”⁵⁴ So, a film would count as a “form” of history whereas the individuals who made the film would be the “agents” of history. They therefore argue that:

the “public historian” functions as a translator, whereas the “applied historian” acts as a moderator and facilitator of historical dialogue. In this way the public historian interprets history in popular forms for nonexperts, whereas the applied historian facilitates nonexpert participation in the production of historical knowledge.⁵⁵

This division between the public and “applied” historians does not appear as neatly bifurcated when one considers that American public historians have been utilizing the concept of “shared authority” for the past few decades without demarcating themselves into another subfield (applied history).⁵⁶ Shared authority

⁵⁰ Cauvin, *Public History*, 19–20.

⁵¹ Philip V. Scarpino, “Some Thoughts on Defining, Evaluating, and Rewarding Public Scholarship,” *The Public Historian* 15, no. 2 (April 1993): 55–61, 56.

⁵² Cauvin, *Public History*, 20–22.

⁵³ See Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann, “Public and Applied History in Germany: Just Another Brick in the Wall of the Academic Ivory Tower?,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 11–27, and Marko Demantowsky, “What is Public History” in *Public History and School: International Perspectives*, ed. Marko Demantowsky, (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 1–38.

⁵⁴ Nießer and Tomann, “Public and Applied History in Germany,” 24.

⁵⁵ See Nießer and Tomann “Public and Applied History in Germany,” 24–25.

⁵⁶ See Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (SUNY Press, 1990) and Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, *Letting Go?: Shar-*

refers to historians collaborating with the public, as no one can “own” the past.⁵⁷ For example, an exhibit on public housing in an American city would include input from public housing authorities and residents during the creative process, turning it into a collaborative process instead of a top-down project where the expert historian teaches locals about their own community. The shared authority concept has become a buzzword in the American public history community; Cauvin rightly points out that in some instances, sharing authority does not mean an anything-goes style relativism, that “[t]here is a difference between sharing and giving up authority.”⁵⁸ In a response to Nießer and Tomann, Brazilian public historian Ricardo Santhiago acknowledges the difficulty of navigating “the collision between established, native practices and the prevalent US public history model,”⁵⁹ but questions the necessity of the article: “A public historian’s toolkit should not comprise a field thesaurus.”⁶⁰ Cord Arendes takes a similar tack when he argues that while Nießer and Tomann’s model is useful, its central argument illustrates that “integrated [historical] practice is still a long way off for public history in Germany.”⁶¹ This is important to keep in mind when discussing public history in the German context. Regardless of American public historians’ fears about “academic history,” public history at the university level remains an established discipline in the US, and history didactics do not exist as a field of study there as they do in the German context. Thus, this specific division between applied history (or history didactics) and public history is a specifically German debate that has little bearing on public history practice internationally. In a response article, Thomas Cauvin notes that the authors’ distinction between public and applied history is “quite uncommon on the international scene” and that countries outside of Germany do not apply this distinction in a “clear cut” manner.⁶²

Where do historical films fit into the public history landscape? Although earlier definitions of public history ignored film (or only focused on documentaries), film is acknowledged as an established “strand” of the public history framework.

ing *Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011).

⁵⁷ Cauvin, *Public History*, 47–50.

⁵⁸ Cauvin, *Public History*, 51.

⁵⁹ Ricardo Santhiago, “Public History as a Thesaurus?,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 46–50, 46.

⁶⁰ Santhiago, “Public History as a Thesaurus?,” 50.

⁶¹ Cord Arendes, “So, What Difference does it Make?” *The Public Historian*, 40, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 51–55, 55.

⁶² Thomas Cauvin, “What Public History Do We Want? Views from Germany,” *The Public Historian*, 40, no. 4 (November 1, 2018), 42–45, 44.

One of the ways in which European public historians distinguish themselves from their North American counterparts is a stronger emphasis on media.⁶³ For example, the International Federation for Public History (IFPH) includes a dedicated section on film and media in their annual conferences.⁶⁴ One way to gauge the acceptance of film in the international public history movement is that IFPH's 2022 conference hosted a keynote panel by the creators of the acclaimed German television drama *Babylon Berlin*, which depicts the end of the Weimar Republic.⁶⁵ In his *Public History: A Textbook of Practice*, Thomas Cauvin includes documentary and dramatic films in his chapter on "Radio and Audio-Visual Production." He discusses the tension between historians and filmmakers mentioned above, includes guidelines for historians wanting to help create films, and briefly sketches the role of the historical advisor.⁶⁶ The inclusion of film in Cauvin's textbook, plus the practical information he provides for historians wishing to participate in film projects, is further evidence that film has become an established part of the wider public history world.

One of the most fruitful examples of public historians' attention to film is a 2003 issue of *The Public Historian* devoted to film and history. *The Public Historian* is the most well-established public history journal in the world and is the official publication of the National Council on Public History (NCPH), the largest public history organization worldwide. Like the 1988 *American Historical Review* issue discussed above, the 2003 issue on film and history contains contributions from Robert Rosenstone and Robert Toplin. The issue's introduction, written by Shelley Bookspan, notes that the charge of "creative license" applied to filmmakers can also be applied to historians, who – although they work with established historical "facts" – nevertheless also engage in a sometimes arbitrary process when collecting sources and choosing which to emphasize and which to ignore. She calls for "the disciplines of history and film to cross-fertilize" and that students and public historians should be trained in media analysis.⁶⁷ Robert Rosenstone's piece is of particular importance to this study. He argues for film as a modern medium of expression (echoing early German filmmakers and media

⁶³ This is not to say that the North American public history field ignores media, only that it occupies a greater share of attention at the international level than in the US and Canada.

⁶⁴ See "6th World Conference of the International Federation for Public History," *6th World Conference of the International Federation for Public History* (blog), accessed November 4, 2022, <https://www.ifph2020.berlin/program/index.html>.

⁶⁵ See "6th World Conference of the International Federation for Public History."

⁶⁶ Cauvin, *Public History*, 170–171.

⁶⁷ Shelley Bookspan, "History, Historians, and Visual Entertainment Media: Toward a Rapprochement," *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 9–13. 10–13.

scholars like Fritz Lang and Walter Benjamin) and notes the connection between film and public history by stating:

. . . the historical film can do “history” – that is, recount, explain, interpret, and make meaning out of the people and events in the past. Like written history, it utilizes traces of that past, but its rules of engagement with them are structured by the possibilities of the medium and the practices it has evolved. So its claims on us will inevitably be far different from those of written history.⁶⁸

In this passage, Rosenstone articulates the potentials of historical films. For him, films also interpret the past, but in a different format. Rosenstone has made a career out of analyzing (and promoting) historical films. His radical stance advocates for film as the ideal medium for depicting history. He divides historical films into three categories: history as drama, history as document, and history as experiment (his favorite category).⁶⁹ Similar to Toplin, Rosenstone claims that films “cannot exist in a state of historical innocence” and necessarily operate within historiographical frameworks.⁷⁰

This issue of *The Public Historian* also includes the essay by Robert Toplin discussed above. In addition to his valuable illustration of the three levels of film analysis, Toplin’s article also defends historical films against the charge of “fictionalization” by admitting that fictionalization takes place as a necessary component of film as a medium:

Cinema needs to take audiences behind closed doors and expose viewers to the thoughts and actions of people living in the past. Yet evidence of those thoughts and actions is often not recorded in the archives. Invention helps to remedy this problem. The movie’s fictional scenes offer informed speculation, educated guesses about the way ideas and behavior could have found expression in those unrecorded settings. Thus, dramatic invention is a critically important component of the filmmaker’s craft. It is employed abundantly, even in the most sophisticated productions, including those designed with serious educational purposes.⁷¹

One of the most common complaints about historical films is that they fictionalize real people and events. None of the works surveyed here deny that fictionalization takes place, but rather that fictionalization is inevitable, and filmmakers must always grapple with the degree of fictionalization they are willing to permit. Toplin rightly points out that “gotcha”-style critiques in the press, which focus on

68 Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Reel Joan of Arc: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of the Historical Film,” *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 61–77, 70.

69 Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 50.

70 Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 71–72.

71 Toplin, “Cinematic History,” 89.

minutiae instead of the overall historical message conveyed by a film, “seem irrelevant.”⁷² It is unfortunately also common to see similar judgments pass as serious film criticism in the historical community. The production histories examined in this study will show that the issues of fictionalization, speculation, and just how much “entertainment” was permissible in films about the Wannsee Conference were ever-present during production and were not merely a marketing gimmick to provide cover so that networks could claim that the films were “based on a true story.” One important aspect of the above quote is Toplin’s use of the term “informed speculation.” Loring Mandel utilized this exact terminology to describe how he wrote dialogue for *Conspiracy* when he could not rely on direct quotes from the archive.⁷³ A deeper analysis of Mandel’s “informed speculation” methods will be discussed later.⁷⁴

Toplin’s book *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* argues in favor of the Hollywood blockbuster (as opposed to the avant-garde “art films” promoted by Rosenstone). He claims that large budgets prevent complex stories from being told, which, while undoubtedly the case for theatrical blockbusters, is less so for cable and streaming networks like HBO and Netflix.⁷⁵ For example, *Conspiracy* had already aired by the time of publication and HBO had already been offering more complex cable drama series and films for several years.⁷⁶ One of the key strengths of Toplin’s book is its discussion of the rift between film scholars and historians. He argues that film scholars often rely on jargon-laden “European”

⁷² Toplin, “Cinematic History,” 89–90.

⁷³ Simone Gigliotti, “Commissioning Mass Murder: *Conspiracy* and History at the Wannsee Conference,” in *Repicturing the Second World War: Representations in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Paris (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 119–133, 125.

⁷⁴ The question of “informed speculation” and its legitimacy is also why many dismissals of fictionalization out of hand prove unsatisfying. For example, one master’s thesis on the Wannsee film concludes its argument by saying *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy* are “audiovisual speculations,” which is the starting point of this study. See Christian Papesch, “Die Darstellung der Wannsee-Konferenz im Doku-Drama. Eine vergleichende Analyse der Filme DIE WANNSEE-KONFERENZ und CONSPIRACY.” MA Thesis, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 2012.

⁷⁵ Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 40–41.

⁷⁶ For HBO’s role in the changing television landscape, see Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, *The Essential HBO Reader*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), and Dean J. DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, (New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). For more on recent cable television and the (serial) historical drama, see Chapter 2 of Alison Landsberg’s *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

film theory at the expense of deeper historical analysis.⁷⁷ He also takes historians to task for their tendencies to view films in a vacuum; that is, without looking at the broader historical and production contexts of a particular film or engaging with film scholarship. Furthermore, he notes an obsession with “truth” which sometimes leads to a myopic focus on historical detail, thereby blinding historians to the broader historical ideas and themes present in films.⁷⁸

This book takes the challenge of public history seriously and shows that filmmakers, particularly screenwriters, can, in the words of Rebecca Weeks, “do history.” The creators of the three docudramas central to this study acted as historians. The film scholar and practicing screenwriter Barry Langford argued that screenplays should become objects of research within film studies and that they had been previously neglected.⁷⁹ He also noted that screenplays can be both acts of creativity and research, using his own screenplay, the Holocaust film *Torte Bluma*, as an example.⁸⁰ Bruno Ramirez, also a historian and screenwriter, argued along similar lines.⁸¹ Rebecca Weeks’ *History by HBO* investigates key aspects of historical TV drama such as set design, sound, and art departments. She holds up HBO series like *Deadwood*, *Band of Brothers*, *Boardwalk Empire*, and *Treme* are examples of responsible ways of “doing history” on film.⁸² Weeks argues that scholars have largely neglected historical television, with the exception of documentaries.⁸³ This claim is borne out when one looks at recent studies of Holocaust film and television which engage with production history. Most are concerned with Claude Lanzmann’s documentary *Shoah* and few engage with fictional, dramatic productions, though recent scholarship, particularly on projects which remain unproduced, has begun investigating dramas which deal with the Holocaust.⁸⁴ Weeks even contends that HBO’s *Treme*, a drama depicting post-

⁷⁷ Toplin, *Reel History*, 171.

⁷⁸ Toplin, *Reel History*, 160–161.

⁷⁹ Barry Langford, “Beyond McKee: Screenwriting in and out of the Academy,” in *Analysing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Nelmes (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 251–262, 253–256.

⁸⁰ Langford, “Beyond McKee,” 259–260.

⁸¹ See Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*.

⁸² Weeks, *History by HBO*, 13.

⁸³ Weeks, *History by HBO*, 17–18.

⁸⁴ For example, see: Vice, *Claude Lanzmann’s ‘Shoah’ Outtakes*; Simone Gigliotti, *Restless Archive*; See also recent work on unmade dramatic Holocaust films: Caitlin Elizabeth McDonald, “Examining the Legacy of Nazism in Emeric Pressburger’s Unmade Films,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 17, no. 3 (July 2024): 292–309; Vice, “Stanley Kubrick’s Quest for the Heroic: Turning Wartime Lies into Aryan Papers,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 17, no. 3 (July 2024): 328–345. For media history which discusses a more oblique grappling with the Holocaust on German tele-

Katrina New Orleans, largely fulfills the standards of academic history.⁸⁵ *Scripting Genocide* takes these claims seriously and uses the methods of the New Film History to prove that screenwriters can and do act as public historians.

3 The Holocaust and Film

The academic literature on Holocaust films is vast and is inextricably bound to the discourse on memory culture and memory studies. The sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider claim that by the 1990s, Holocaust memory transformed into a “cosmopolitan memory,” that is, a transnational historical memory “unbound” by national borders.⁸⁶ Studies of collective memory usually are demarcated by time and place: memories of World War I in France, the American Civil War in Louisiana, or imperialism in Japan. Levy and Sznaider argue that the Holocaust has transcended these boundaries and become a global, or “cosmopolitan,” memory shared by people whose societies were not directly involved with or affected by the Holocaust. The authors contend that the post–Cold War era in the West is characterized by a “compromise that is based on the mutual recognition of the history of the ‘Other,’”⁸⁷ a statement which also prefigures the German public historian Marko Demantowsky’s definition of public history, which refers to public history as “a complex past-related identity discourse” which “serves the mutual recognition of narratives.”⁸⁸ Levy and Sznaider’s concept is, however, a product of the post-1989 optimism bolstered by Francis Fukuyama and seems overly optimistic in our era. Contemporary historians have reassessed Levy and Sznaider’s thesis.⁸⁹

In her groundbreaking *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Alison Landsberg outlines her concept of “prosthetic memory,” which she defines as a “new form of public cultural memory” that “emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narra-

vision, see Haydée Mareike Haass, *Herbert Reinecker: NS-Propagandist und bundesdeutscher Erfolgsautor: Eine mediale Verwandlungsgeschichte* (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2024).

⁸⁵ Weeks, *History* by HBO, 182.

⁸⁶ See Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider. “Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory.” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5.1 (2002): 87–106.

⁸⁷ Levy and Sznaider, “Memory Unbound,” 103.

⁸⁸ Demantowsky, “What is Public History,” 26.

⁸⁹ See Thomas Pegelow Kaplan, “The Universalisation of the Holocaust as a Moral Standard,” in *Beyond “Ordinary Men,” Christopher R. Browning and Holocaust Historiography*, ed. Kaplan, Jürgen Matthäus, and Mark W. Homburg, (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2019), 159–175. 160.

tive about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum.”⁹⁰ She views prosthetic memories as a result of “commodified mass culture” which can “creat[e] the conditions for ethical thinking precisely by encouraging people to feel connected to . . . the ‘other.’”⁹¹ Landsberg’s prosthetic memory concept has intriguing implications for historical films viewed by audiences worldwide:

The person [filmgoer, museum visitor] does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics.⁹²

For Landsberg, prosthetic memory (acquired through engagement with mass culture) has the potential to foster “ethical thinking” and therefore transform – and educate – people. It can influence people to “rethink and reshape” themselves.⁹³ Echoing Levy and Sznajder, she argues that “[m]ass culture has had the unexpected effect of making group-specific cultural memories available to a diverse and varied populace.”⁹⁴ For Landsberg, film is the key driver of prosthetic memory formation alongside other “experiential” methods like museum exhibits. Drawing on Frankfurt School theorists like Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, she stresses mass culture’s educative and transformative potential and explicitly rejects Theodor Adorno’s critique of the culture industry as manipulating and hoodwinking mass audiences, writing that “commodities and commodified images are not capsules of meaning that spectators swallow wholesale but are the grounds on which social meanings are negotiated, contested, and sometimes constructed.”⁹⁵ Tim Zumhof echoes Landsberg when he asserts that “this kind of criticism [i. e., criticism following Adorno’s perspective] neglects and demotes the audience’s perspective and its critical abilities. Adorno’s one-sided view on popular culture reduces audiences to ‘victims’ of the culture industry.”⁹⁶ Critics often cite (and often misquote) Adorno’s well-known aphorism that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric.”⁹⁷ Landsberg is not naïve about the dangers of mass cul-

⁹⁰ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 2.

⁹¹ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 9.

⁹² Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 2.

⁹³ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 9.

⁹⁴ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 11.

⁹⁵ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 34.

⁹⁶ Zumhof, “Historical Culture,” 26.

⁹⁷ This misquotation stems from a longer sentence: “Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frisst auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward,

ture and its well-known negative examples; she acknowledges that her vision is “utopian.”⁹⁸ Nevertheless, she contends that “capitalist commodification and mass culture have created the potential for a progressive, even a radical, politics of memory.”⁹⁹

The Holocaust in American culture is one of Landsberg’s primary examples. She contends that *Schindler’s List* “stages – and acts as an instantiation of, – the possibility of a responsible mass cultural transmission of memory.”¹⁰⁰ She highlights the pedagogical potential of affect, empathy, and discomfort when viewing Holocaust films. For example, she discusses a scene in *Schindler’s List* where Amon Göth (Ralph Fiennes) executes a hinge-maker for ostensible inefficiency: “Our discomfort [during this scene] derives from the power of the image to move us and to make intelligible and visceral what we cannot comprehend in a purely cognitive way.”¹⁰¹ She notes that many historians have been critical of affect or “the experiential mode,” arguing that it is “anathema to most academic historians.” She points, however, to a counterexample found within the recent historiography of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust: Saul Friedländer’s integration of Jewish diaries and letters in his *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination*, the latter of the two volumes which comprise the current standard work of Holocaust history which focuses on both victims and perpetrators.¹⁰²

The televisual representations of the Wannsee Conference serve as examples of a *responsible* mass cultural transmission of memory. They are interventions into our historical memories; the Wannsee Conference occurred in secret and its protocol was supposed to have been destroyed. It is an event that was not supposed to have been remembered – and yet it is. As Landsberg notes, “visual representation is crucial to rendering an event thinkable.”¹⁰³ Drawing on Walter Benjamin, she argues that prosthetic memories of the Holocaust “may inspire action”:

Representing the Holocaust is about making the Holocaust concrete and thinkable. It is about finding ways to “burn in” memories so that they might become meaningful locally, so that they can become the grounds for political engagement in the present and the future.¹⁰⁴

heute Gedichte zu schreiben.” – Theodor W. Adorno. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 10.1: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I, Prismen. Ohne Leitbild, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977). 30.

⁹⁸ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 113.

⁹⁹ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 143.

¹⁰⁰ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 111.

¹⁰¹ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 125–126.

¹⁰² Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 8.

¹⁰³ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 126.

¹⁰⁴ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 138–139.

Landsberg's recent work, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge*, discusses "historically conscious television dramas" in detail, but also expands on her prosthetic memory concept.¹⁰⁵ For Landsberg, twenty-first-century television and online landscapes "pose some fundamental challenges for our sense of what constitutes history in the twenty-first century."¹⁰⁶ Landsberg does not seek to denigrate traditional academic historiography, but rather rejects the prevailing academic attitude which "treat[s] all popular engagements with the past as watered-down, oversimplified melodrama," which causes historians to "[miss] an opportunity to think productively about how ordinary people use the past and how contemporary technologies and modes of perception have the potential to provoke historical thinking."¹⁰⁷ One of her concepts she develops to explain the potential of historical films is "affective engagement", which she notes is "qualitatively different from identification in that it explains how a film draws the viewer into proximity to an event or person in the past, fostering a sense of intimacy or closeness but not straight-forwardly through the eyes of someone living at that time."¹⁰⁸ Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of "distraction," Landsberg further points out that affective engagement can also "disorient" the viewer – an important concept for the films depicting the Wannsee Conference, as they certainly do not try to get viewers to "identify" with the conference participants, but rather place viewers in the Wannsee villa with them: "the potential for the production of useful historical knowledge is at its greatest when the viewer does not identify with the characters on the screen."¹⁰⁹ This is not to say that the Wannsee films demonize the perpetrators (even if they sometimes play with or utilize some well-worn pop culture tropes about Nazis).¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, these films undoubtedly succeed at fostering "a recognition of a sense of difference between oneself and the person figured on the screen."¹¹¹

105 Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 61–62.

106 Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 10.

107 Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 24.

108 Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 27.

109 Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 33–34.

110 It is important to keep in mind that the term "Holocaust perpetrator" is imperfect. The historian David Cesarani has argued that it is inadequate to truly represent what it intends to signify, instead preferring the French term *génocidaire*, a term originally used for those guilty of the Rwandan genocide, because the French term "is rather more effective . . . since it identifies the actor with the crime." David Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (London: Vintage Books, 2005), 357.

111 Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 35.

It is obviously a generalization to state that Anglo-American views on a subject broadly fit into one category whereas German views fit into another. And, of course, there are views from countries beyond the German/US dichotomy.¹¹² Nevertheless, some trends are visible. German historians or media scholars tend to devote a great deal of attention to the debates surrounding depicting the Holocaust and some (like Wulf Kansteiner) go further than most Anglo-American scholars in their promotion of media as a valid object of historical inquiry and form of historical culture. Within the professional historical communities, the Anglo-American sphere seems overall friendlier to an analysis of films and television, owing much of its willingness to embrace the medium to Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer (see Rosenstone and Landsberg) whereas the German historical community often seems tied to the Adornian mode of suspicion towards the “culture industry.” One example of this phenomenon can be seen in the academic literature on *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy*: most publications on either film are in English. When one reads the various German publications on the Wannsee Conference, the conference’s place in memory culture is also barely present except for mentions of Joseph Wulf, the first historian and individual to campaign for a Wannsee Conference memorial and research center, or jabs against inaccuracies in the films. In the media and critical landscapes of both cultures, the lines are more blurred. One can find journalists and critics of all stripes, in either German or English, either defending depicting the Holocaust on film or considering it distasteful. Perhaps this particularity of the German historical community is due not to an innate conservatism among Germans in general (after all, if that were the case, German journalists and film critics would pan every single historical film produced), but rather due to the split within the historical discipline in Germany between “hard,” research-based history and the fields of history didactics and public history, which have been concerned with historical culture, including film, for decades.¹¹³ This split in attitudes seems attributable to the more entrenched institutional division of labor in the German university system when compared to American history departments and to different intellectual genealogies: Benjamin and Kracauer versus Adorno. Note, however, that within the

¹¹² Rich Brownstein has shown that most Holocaust films are produced in the United States or Germany, making these two countries of outsized importance when discussing depictions of the Holocaust on screen. Germany has produced just as many Holocaust films as the United States. See Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete*, 60–62.

¹¹³ See Christian Bunnenberg and Nils Steffen, eds., *Geschichte auf YouTube: Neue Herausforderungen für Geschichtsvermittlung und historische Bildung, Geschichte auf YouTube* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019) and Susanne Popp et al., eds., *Zeitgeschichte - Medien - Historische Bildung*, (Göttingen: V&R unipress GmbH, 2010).

field of public history, German public history MA programs are actually more open to media and film studies influences than their longer-established American counterparts.

The most important controversy surrounding Holocaust and film is the debate between mimesis and the prohibition on images or representation (*Bilder-verbot* and *Darstellungsverbot*).¹¹⁴ Scholars, critics, and filmmakers have debated for decades about whether it is appropriate to depict the Holocaust either in a fictionalized manner or on film at all.¹¹⁵ As mentioned earlier, this enduring debate pits one group, which roughly shares Theodor Adorno's suspicion of the "culture industry," against another, which argues for dramatic film's potential. This debate has been exhaustively documented and is a common feature of university courses on the Holocaust and film.¹¹⁶ On the critical side, the French documentarian Claude Lanzmann is usually held up as an avatar (alongside Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel) of those arguing that due to its status as a uniquely horrific and barbaric event, depicting the Holocaust is beyond the boundaries of acceptable taste.¹¹⁷ For example, one scholar has gone so far as to claim that the 2015 Hungarian Auschwitz drama *Son of Saul* (and Academy Award Winner for Best Foreign Language Film) is "soft porn for refined people."¹¹⁸ Usually, scholars involved in this debate contrast Lanzmann with Steven Spielberg, with *Schindler's List* representing the ultimate problematic contrast to Lanzmann's *Shoah*—, usually because, since it focuses on survivors rather than the dead, it utilizes a conventional filmic structure – or simply because it is a "Hollywood" film. However, as early as 1996,

114 Catrin Corell, *Der Holocaust als Herausforderung für den Film: Formen des filmischen Umgangs mit der Shoah seit 1945: Eine Wirkungstypologie*, (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), 14–15. Corell also notes the religious connotations of a prohibition on images.

115 One important recent intervention into this debate is Georges Didi-Huberman's, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Didi-Huberman argues that this debate overlooks the fact that Auschwitz prisoners risked and lost their lives taking photographs of mass killing.

116 See Barry Langford, "Mass Culture/Mass Media/Mass Death: Teaching Film, Television, and the Holocaust," in *Teaching Holocaust Literature and Film*, ed. Robert Eaglestone and Barry Langford, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 63–77.

117 Waltraud Wende, "Medienbilder und Geschichte – Zur Medialisierung des Holocaust," in *Geschichte im Film: Mediale Inszenierungen des Holocaust und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, ed. Waltraud Wende (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002), 12–13.

118 Pau Bosch Santos, "Soft Porn for Refined People: *Son of Saul* within the History of Holocaust Representation," *East European Film Bulletin*, Volume 69, November 2016, <https://eefb.org/perspectives/son-of-saul-within-the-history-of-holocaust-representation/>. Aside from its polemics, Santos' article provides an easy to understand introduction to the genre's history.

Miriam Hansen cautioned against setting up a “false dichotomy” between *Schindler’s List* and Lanzmann’s *Shoah*.¹¹⁹ She noted the key issue at hand:

A fundamental limitation of classical narrative in relation to history, and to the historical event of the Shoah in particular, is that it relies on neoclassicist principles of compositional unity, motivation, linearity, equilibrium, and closure – principles singularly inadequate in the face of an event that by its very nature defies our narrative urge to make sense of, to impose order on the discontinuity and otherness of historical experience.¹²⁰

Imposing order on discontinuity is common to all genres of historical writing, whether for academic book projects, museum exhibits, or even films. In this sense, the long discussion surrounding Holocaust representation could also be helpful for those depicting other historical atrocities or events, as Susan Neiman has recently attempted in her comparison of German memory culture with that of the American South.¹²¹ Perhaps the “limit case” nature of the Holocaust is what makes this discussion so alluring to critics and scholars, some of whom have borrowed language and arguments from this debate when discussing other historical films like *12 Years a Slave*.¹²² It is important to note that in the years before his death, Lanzmann had a kind of rapprochement with Spielberg; the two collaborated on the latter’s oral history project and Lanzmann praised *Son of Saul*, a fictional story set during the October 1944 uprising of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando.¹²³ Rich Brownstein has also argued that Elie Wiesel’s initial “condescension” towards Holocaust films had more to do with the old animosity between so-called high and low culture, arguing that Wiesel’s views epitomized elite, literary taste.¹²⁴ As early as 1996, the Holocaust historian Omer Bartov suggested that scholars “might as well try to influence the media by constructive criticism or involvement, rather than dismiss

119 Miriam Bratu Hansen, “‘Schindler’s List’ Is Not ‘Shoah’: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 292–312.

120 Hansen, “‘Schindler’s List’ Is Not ‘Shoah,’” 298.

121 See Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

122 See Richard Brody, “Should a Film Try to Depict Slavery?,” *The New Yorker*, October 21, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/should-a-film-try-to-depict-slavery> and Isaac Chotiner, “Why Can’t Critics Deal With Films About Slavery?,” *The New Republic*, October 23, 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/115304/12-years-slave-reviews-highbrow-critics-are-wrong>.

123 Jordan Cronk. “‘Shoah’ Filmmaker Claude Lanzmann Talks Spielberg, ‘Son of Saul,’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/shoah-filmmaker-claude-lanzmann-talks-869931> Accessed April 1, 2020.

124 Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete*, 81–83.

anything that does not meet our expectations.”¹²⁵ Bartov has remained consistent. In 2023, he published *The Butterfly and the Axe*, a touching, searing novel about the Holocaust and memory set in Israel and Ukraine based on his own family history.¹²⁶

Much writing on Holocaust representation refers to “representing the unrepresentable,” that is, how to make sense out of a senseless event – though Holocaust historians would likely argue that we can make sense out of this event and can explain how and why it happened – claiming otherwise would be admitting defeat. Analyzing this Sisyphean task is common to much writing about this topic, but perhaps the best depiction of it from a creator’s point of view is Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, which deeply explores the author’s ethical and creative dilemma when depicting his father’s story in comic form.¹²⁷ This dilemma is ever-present: historian Alex J. Kay titled his recent article on *Conspiracy* “Speaking the Unspeakable.”¹²⁸ Catrin Corell has noted that the “central difficulty” of representing the “unrepresentable” Holocaust on film is what she calls *Erfahrbarmachung*, which roughly translates to “making (something) experienceable.”¹²⁹ The interplay between history, memory culture, and media is not a one-way street: Sometimes, the historiography of a particular topic has to reach a critical mass before it begins to become an attractive subject for media representation. In other cases, artists and filmmakers are the first to explore a particular topic, to which historians then later devote increased attention.

In an article on film and history, the film scholar and Germanist Anton Kaes used a quote from Siegfried Kracauer’s 1960 *Theory of Film* to illustrate how society can deal with the horrors of the twentieth century via film:

The mirror reflections of horror are an end in themselves. As such they beckon the spectator to take them in and thus incorporate into his memory the real face of things too dreadful to be beheld in reality. In experiencing the rows of calves’ heads or the litter of tortured human bodies in the films made of the Nazi concentration camps, we redeem horror from its invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination. And this experience is liberating in as much as it removes a most powerful taboo. Perhaps Perseus’ greatest achievement was

125 Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 174.

126 Bartov, *The Butterfly and the Axe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Publishers, 2023).

127 See Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin, 2003) and Spiegelman, *Meta-Maus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus* (New York: Viking, 2018).

128 Alex J. Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable: The Portrayal of the Wannsee Conference in the Film *Conspiracy*,” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of History and Culture* 27, no. 2 (August 2021): 187–200.

129 Corell, *Der Holocaust als Herausforderung für den Film*, 17.

not to cut off Medusa's head but to overcome his fears and look at its reflection in the shield. And was it not precisely this feat which permitted him to behead the monster?¹³⁰

It is time to reapply Kracauer's quote to this era: As Kaes notes, Perseus' shield is no longer a cinematic canvas. It is a television (or tablet, or laptop, or even smart-phone) screen.¹³¹ The most responsible examples of Holocaust film and television seek to make the invisible visible, to make the unspeakable speakable. At their best, Holocaust film and television seek to make a hitherto ignorant public aware of just how the crime unfolded to prevent it from happening again. In the case of the Wannsee films, they also seek to make the "unfilmable" filmable. This task is what lay before the German, American, and British filmmakers who sought to tell the story of the secret meeting that took place in a charming lakeside villa in January 1942.

There are surprisingly few examples of academic writing on the films and television programs that have depicted the Wannsee Conference. The notable exception is NBC's 1978 miniseries *Holocaust*, which has been the subject of numerous academic studies, especially due to the series' popularity in West Germany. The two films by Heinz Schirk and Paul Mommertz (*Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror* and *The Wannsee Conference*) have, in contrast, received scant scholarly attention.¹³² *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror* is almost entirely absent from the literature – one could call it a forgotten film, which is unsurprising considering it is only watchable in an archival setting (to this date there has been no DVD or online release). *The Wannsee Conference* has received more attention, but usually in passing – for example, in lists of Holocaust films considered worth including in a school curriculum or as a subsection of wider studies on German memory culture or Holocaust film. *Conspiracy* has received greater attention from historians, but only in recent years. There are five academic articles that analyze *Conspiracy* in depth and one scholarly review of the film by Alan Steinweis.¹³³ In the

¹³⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). 306.

¹³¹ Anton Kaes, "History and Film: Public Memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination." *History and Memory* 2, no. 1 (1990): 117.

¹³² See Bangert, *The Nazi Past in Contemporary German Film*, 58; Nicholas Johnson, "I Am a Historian as Well." - The West German Reception of *Die Wannseekonferenz* (1984) and Portraying Holocaust Perpetrators in Public Television Drama," *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 11, no. 21 (August 3, 2022): 19–35.

¹³³ See Gigliotti, "Commissioning Mass Murder," 119–133; Stefanie Rauch, "Understanding the Holocaust through Film: Audience Reception between Preconceptions and Media Effects," *History & Memory* 30, no. 1 (March 2018): 151–188; Kay, "Speaking the Unspeakable"; Steffen Hantke, "Horror and the Holocaust: 'Prestige Horror' and Frank Pierson's *Conspiracy* (2001)," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 69, no. 4 (December 2021): 413–429; and Nicholas K. Johnson, "A

recent crop of German publications on the Wannsee Conference, the films sometimes appear, but either as one-off notes or as the propagators of errors that historians need to correct. In short, the films have received some scholarly attention, but nothing that goes beyond a reading of the films as such – the available archival sources have hitherto been neglected (outside of master's theses).¹³⁴ In other words, they remain footnotes.

This study complements an existing body of academic literature. Only one of the studies cited above (Gigliotti's) engages with any of the films on Toplin's third level of analysis; the rest stick to a traditional reading of the films as texts without looking into their production histories or consulting statements made by the filmmakers themselves. Furthermore, German-language academic literature on these productions is clearly lacking – only *Holocaust* has received major attention and the docudramas *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy* only appear as curiosities or as examples of "bad history" that the authors need to correct. This study sees critiques and characterizations of the television docudramas as "speculation" as a mere starting point. The truly valuable aspects of these films are how they provide snapshots of German and American remembrance cultures within specific historical and television contexts. These films are historiographical interventions themselves and deserve far more than passing mention. The production histories explored here will bring a much-needed empirical and historical grounding to studies of dramatic Holocaust film, particularly from a public history angle, as film scholars and film historians have long used production histories fruitfully.¹³⁵ Finally, I argue that television is not inferior to cinema when it comes to depicting history – in fact, as Alison Landsberg has noted, television is where we can see the latest and most intellectually rewarding developments in the historical film genre. Besides studies discussing NBC's *Holocaust* miniseries, the academic literature on Holocaust film tends to ignore television – an oversight not unique to Holocaust studies, but also common in film histories and literature on depicting the past on screen, which tend to privilege either blockbuster films or art cinema to the neglect of television history.

Classroom History Lesson Is Not Going to Work': HBO's *Conspiracy* and Depicting Holocaust Perpetrators on Film," in *Show, Don't Tell*, 172–196. I also conducted a preliminary investigation into this topic in my master's thesis: Nicholas K. Johnson, "HBO and the Holocaust: *Conspiracy*, the Historical Film, and Public History at Wannsee" (MA Thesis, 2016). Lastly, see Nicholas K. Johnson, "Shadow Quality TV: HBO's *Complicity* and the Failure to Portray Allied Indifference to the Holocaust, 1995–2003," *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 17, no. 3 (July 2024): 269–291.

¹³⁴ See Papesch, "Die Darstellung der Wannsee-Konferenz."

¹³⁵ See Chapman et al, *The New Film History*; Smyth, *Fred Zinnemann and the Cinema of Resistance and From Here to Eternity*. See also Vice, *Claude Lanzmann's 'Shoah' Outtakes*, and Klinger, "Film History Terminable and Interminable."

This study investigates the production histories of film and televisual depictions of the Wannsee Conference in chronological order, beginning with 1960. Echoing film scholar Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, historical television episodes and films which depict both the Wannsee Conference villa and protocol as icons also comprise this study's filmography, but its main focus lies on direct depictions of the conference.¹³⁶ The first chapter covers four American television productions which portray Wannsee, beginning with "Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story," an episode of the docudrama anthology series *Armstrong Circle Theatre*, which was the first depiction of Wannsee on screen. The chapter then moves to the 1978 NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, which, through the character Erik Dorf, depicts Holocaust perpetrators in surprisingly rigorous, if sometimes stereotyped, detail. HBO's 1994 film *Fatherland*, an alternate history and crime drama about the murder of Wannsee Conference attendees in a victorious Nazi Germany, and ABC's sprawling 1998 miniseries *War and Remembrance*, which uses the Wannsee Conference protocol to interrogate Allied indifference to the Holocaust, round out this chapter. Chapter 2 analyzes the 1979 West German television film *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror*, an important predecessor to the first docudrama about Wannsee. *Manager of Terror* is notable as both the first German-language television depiction of Wannsee and as an experiment in explaining Nazi crimes via psychology. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the production history and reception of *The Wannsee Conference*, a pioneering West German television docudrama reenacting the conference in real time. These chapters argue that *The Wannsee Conference* was an important intervention in West German remembrance culture and historiography because it drew wide attention to the Wannsee Conference when no historians had yet published studies about Wannsee. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 discuss the production history, reception, and lasting influence of *Conspiracy*, a 2001 HBO/BBC coproduction about Wannsee which has become a cult classic. *Conspiracy* was the most prominent docudrama depicting Wannsee, had the highest budget, and most recognizable star power. These chapters also explore this film's unmade sequel, *Complicity*, which would have depicted the 1943 Bermuda Conference and Allied antisemitism. An adaptation of David S. Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews*, *Complicity* was a damning indictment of the American and British governments which never saw the light of day.¹³⁷ Sections covering *Complicity*

¹³⁶ Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Symbolort und Ikone – Das kulturelle Nachleben der Wannsee-Konferenz," unpublished manuscript, 2021. The author would like to thank Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann for providing this draft. Hartmann also discusses the Wannsee villa as a visual reference in contemporary Israeli cinema.

¹³⁷ See David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941–1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

also contribute to a growing body of film histories focusing on the unmade.¹³⁸ The final chapter focuses on depictions of the Wannsee Conference after the global resurgence of the far right. It centers around *The Conference*, a third docu-drama about Wannsee released on German public television in early 2022, but also covers other, more oblique artistic references to Wannsee in response to a changed political climate.

4 People on Tuesday

Most studies of Berlin's film history gloss over filmic depictions of the city's "Nazi blights on collective and prosthetic memory," which, for one film historian, end up as just one of the "many versions of Berlin available" for the city's boosters.¹³⁹ But Berlin, which one public historian recently termed "the Rome of contemporary history," does not let you escape that blighted past for long.¹⁴⁰ Even one of its most influential contributions to film history leaves us with unintentional foreshadowing; other filmmakers and writers have noticed this connection. *People on Sunday*, a 1930 silent classic created by later Hollywood icons and film noir greats Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer, Billy Wilder, and Fred Zinnemann, is a slice-of-life film about a group of young Berliners on a typical Sunday. The friends meet up and go swimming in the Wannsee lake; it is a film about "undramatic normality."¹⁴¹ *People on Sunday* is notable because it is "a portrait of a city through intimate, anecdotal looks at some representative inhabitants."¹⁴² Billy Wilder biographer Joseph McBride notes that "the Wannsee Conference . . . would take place in the same location, retrospectively throwing the shadow of historical catastrophe over the initially heedless but gradually downbeat proceedings onscreen."¹⁴³

McBride is not the only person to have played with this contrast between *People on Sunday* and Wannsee's darker legacy. In its sixth episode, the German Weimar-era crime and political drama *Babylon Berlin* features a scene where its female protagonist, Charlotte Ritter (Liv Lisa Fries) goes on a weekend outing to

138 James Fenwick, Kieran Foster, and David Eldridge, eds., *Shadow Cinema: The Historical and Production Contexts of Unmade Films* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

139 Brigitta B. Wagner, *Berlin Replayed: Cinema and Urban Nostalgia in the Postwall Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 195.

140 Hanno Hochmuth, *Berlin. Das Rom der Zeitgeschichte*, (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2024).

141 Jens Bisky, *Berlin: Biographie einer großen Stadt*, 1st Expanded Edition (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2023), 510.

142 Joseph McBride, *Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 87.

143 McBride, *Billy Wilder*, 88.

Wannsee. The scene, filmed on location at the *Strandbad Wannsee*, plays like an homage to *People on Sunday*, whether via the 1920s bathing costumes, jazz, or just the carefree young people enjoying an ordinary Sunday. During the scene, two characters the show has previously led us to believe are communist activists have a conversation – about Hitler. The two are actually Nazis. By locating this scene at Wannsee, in the middle of an homage to *People on Sunday*, the creators of *Babylon Berlin* also play with the contrasts of German history, all centered at the same lake in the nation's capital.

The Wannsee Conference has been a shadow presence in transnational television history for decades, even if contemporary German intellectuals ignore it.¹⁴⁴ A 2023 issue of the intellectual history magazine *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* is devoted to the place of Wannsee within the history of ideas. None of the films discussed in this book were deemed worthy of serious consideration in the texts featured here, with one exception. In one contribution, a conversation with Deborah Hartmann, current director of the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial, her interviewers allege that “our image space [*Bildraum*] is infiltrated by films about the Wannsee Conference,” followed by clearly dismissive comments on “actors in Nazi makeup.”¹⁴⁵ The word choice here, namely “infiltrated,” is characteristic for German high-cultural suspicion of film and television as intellectual pursuits. In her response, Hartmann does not address the comments about the television movies, but instead discusses the difficulties faced in communicating this history at the historic site and museum without artifacts: “for us, it’s less about the suggestion of authenticity than about historical significance.” At no other point are the television productions *Scripting Genocide* investigates mentioned in the issue. In contrast, the British historian Dan Stone, in his recent survey *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History* convincingly argues for the cultural significance of Wannsee:

Wannsee is not just important as one of the key moments in the unfolding of the Nazis’ genocidal mindset, however. When one pictures the fifteen leading Nazis sitting around the table in the sumptuous villa that Heydrich planned to claim for himself after the war – which we can easily do, as the site is now a museum and the setting of the film *Conspiracy*,

¹⁴⁴ See Jochen Arntz and Holger Schmale, *Wannsee: An den Ufern deutscher Geschichte*, (Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 2024), which only mentions *People on Sunday*, but leaves the television explorations of Wannsee’s darker history unmentioned. Arntz and Schmale do discuss the Wannsee Conference, but the cultural exploration of it, which is arguably more prominent and certainly longer than other filmic depictions of the lake, remains ignored.

¹⁴⁵ Deborah Hartmann, “20. Januar 1942, Tagesordnungspunkt Völkermord. Ein Gespräch mit Deborah Hartmann,” ed. Martin Hollender, Hedwig Richter, and Michael Matthiesen, *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* Heft XVII/2 Sommer 2023: Wannsee XVII, no. 2 (May 12, 2023): 23–32, 31–32.

one of the few largely convincing historical reconstructions of the Nazi period – it becomes clear that the optics and aesthetics of the meeting were equally significant. The meeting looks, in retrospect, like an exemplary scene in the Nazis' staging of their own myth as the master race. These smug, self-satisfied men, sure of their own superiority, discussed, while being fed fine food and wine, the intricacies of mass murder and the legal problems that arose from them. They laughed and joked, argued and fell into line – and the massive disjunction between their self-performance and the reality of what it all meant is devastating.¹⁴⁶

The Berlin historian Jens Bisky has noted that Wannsee is a location where high and low culture have historically clashed. His example is that of proletarian bathers, depicted so lovingly by Heinrich Zille, and the neighborhood's bourgeois property owners, exemplified by the painter Max Liebermann. This book investigates another meeting between high and low culture, between historiography and that medium often derided as synonymous with low culture: television.¹⁴⁷ The television depictions investigated here also focus on a seemingly undramatic normality at Wannsee: a meeting of Nazi officials on an otherwise ordinary Tuesday in January 1942.

¹⁴⁶ Dan Stone, *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History*, (London: Pelican, 2023), 139.

¹⁴⁷ Bisky, *Berlin*, 427–428.

Chapter 1

Early Portrayals of the Wannsee Conference on American Television, 1960–1994

This chapter analyzes four television programs that depicted the Wannsee Conference on American television before *Conspiracy: Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story* (1960), an episode of CBS' *Armstrong Circle Theatre*; the NBC miniseries *Holocaust* (1978); the ABC miniseries *War and Remembrance* (1988–1989); and the HBO film *Fatherland* (1994). *Holocaust* has been subject to major academic and media attention since its release and is the most well-known of the four television programs; however, previous analyses rarely discuss the series' brief portrayal of the Wannsee Conference. *Engineer of Death* and *Holocaust* directly depict the conference on screen, with *Engineer of Death* the first dramatic depiction of the conference in television history. *War and Remembrance* and *Fatherland* take a different approach and refrain from directly depicting the conference on screen, but instead use the Wannsee Protocol as a plot device or as an icon, much in the vein of Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann's argument. The last two productions in this chapter center on the Wannsee Protocol as evidence of a crime.¹

Although Wannsee is a minor aspect of all four productions, it is important to note that each includes it as either a pivotal plot device or focuses on the protocol as the symbol of ultimate, bureaucratic, modern evil. These productions show how the Wannsee Conference was understood in American popular culture from the 1960s until the early 1990s, as well as how television rapidly responded to world events, with one example going into pre-production as soon as Eichmann's capture became public. The two miniseries discussed here were not obscure; they had massive budgets and publicity; it is only through our retrospective lens that *War and Remembrance* seems a footnote in television history. Lastly, it is important to recognize that most of these productions also represent a specific Jewish-American artistic response to the Holocaust and an increasing public desire to examine the motivations of Nazi perpetrators. The Wannsee Conference was a key aspect of this artistic response and, although not occupying as central a role in

¹ Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Symbolort und Ikone," See also a published section of this piece, Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Das Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz – vom Wasser aus gesehen," in *Einblendungen: Elemente einer jüdischen Filmgeschichte der Bundesrepublik*, ed. Johannes Praetorius-Rhein and Lea Wohl von Haselberg, *Jüdische Kulturgeschichte in der Moderne Band 27* (Berlin: Neofelis, 2022), 132–136.

Holocaust television as Auschwitz, it nevertheless was ever-present and became shorthand for modern, industrial-scale genocide.

1 Eichmann as Ultimate Evil: *Armstrong Circle Theatres'* “Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story,” 1960

On the evening of May 11, 1960, Israeli agents captured Adolf Eichmann as he walked home from a bus stop on a lonely road in Buenos Aires.² The highest-ranking Nazi tried after the war, Eichmann’s televised trial became a global media sensation. Most scholarship has focused on Eichmann’s capture and trial or Hannah Arendt’s depiction of it in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. But philosophers, journalists, and historians were not the only ones interested in Eichmann. Film-makers rapidly reacted as well, and screenwriter Dale Wasserman—most famous for *Man of La Mancha*, a 1966 musical adaptation of *Don Quixote*—signed a contract that August with the Madison Avenue-based Andrew Television Inc. for a television episode about Eichmann’s life.³ The episode, titled *Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story*, aired on October 12, 1960 and was the first dramatic depiction of the Wannsee Conference on television or film. *Engineer of Death* was an episode of the CBS drama anthology series *Armstrong Circle Theatre*, which had previously aired on NBC in the 1950s and specialized in docudramas. Sponsored by the Armstrong World Industries Corporation, which specialized in manufacturing components for ceilings and walls, the series ran from 1950 until 1963.⁴ *Armstrong Circle Theatre* was a prominent anthology series during the early days of television, though it has not enjoyed the longevity of other 1950s and 1960s anthology series like *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*. Many important figures in early American television history worked on *Armstrong Circle Theatre* episodes, including *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling. Loring Mandel, for example, wrote the 1958 episode “Kidnap Story: Hold for Release” and future stars like Telly Savalas and Carroll O’Connor played roles in *Engineer of Death*. However, *Engineer of Death* is unavailable outside of television archives and has never been released on home media.⁵

² Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 228–230.

³ Signed Contract for “Engineer of Death,” August 25, 1960, Box 3, Dale Wasserman Papers, 1946–1983, U.S. Mss 67AN, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

⁴ *Armstrong Circle Theatre*, Drama (CBS Television Network, CBS, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), 1950), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0042074/>.

⁵ Because of rights restrictions, this section will not contain screenshots from *Engineer of Death*. The episode is available to watch in-person at the Paley Center for Media in New York and at the

The episode aired in October 1960, several months before the Eichmann trial began. It is an example of the quick response to Eichmann's capture by television producers and writers and prefigures academic work on Eichmann – therefore, it is not an exercise in translation or distillation of academic findings for a lay audience.

Wasserman's research material for *Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story* primarily consisted of journalistic accounts and was unable to rely on information later revealed during Eichmann's trial. Wasserman's sources included newspaper articles, magazines, wire services, and dossiers on Eichmann from various publications. One item he consulted was a June 1960 article from the Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America that described Eichmann as the Holocaust's architect and cites Gerald Reitlinger's *The SS, Alibi of a Nation, 1922–1945* for information on Eichmann's role in the Holocaust. This article argued that if found guilty, Israel would not execute Eichmann but would instead extradite him to West Germany.⁶ Wasserman's preliminary notes for the script, then titled *The Eichmann Case*, mentioned "The secret Wannsee Conference," which Wasserman referred to as "[t]he secret decision upon 'The final solution to the Jewish Question.' It means that 11 million Jews will be exterminated. Eichmann is put in charge."⁷ The notes also mentioned the need to thematize "Eichmann's failure as a person and growing idolatry of Hitler. His character, weaknesses, psychology."⁸ As Jeffrey Shandler has noted, Wasserman's episode "exemplifies [the] desire to probe the inner workings of the criminal mind."⁹ The episode depicts Eichmann (Frederick Rolf) as a loser; resentful at being "mistaken for Jewish" and then seeking revenge on the Jews as a result of his ill treatment at the hands of his fellow Nazis.¹⁰ Indeed, a scene where several SA members beat up Eichmann in an Aus-

UCLA Film & Television Archive. See <https://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=head&p=46&item=T86:0077>; *Armstrong Circle Theatre. Engineer of Death: the Eichmann Story* / Talent Associates Productions ; Producer, Robert Costello ; Director, Paul Bogart ; Writer, Dale Wasserman. 1961. [Rebroadcast of program originally aired October 12, 1960], https://search.library.ucla.edu/permalink/01UCS_LAL/1hnia1h/alma9944933506533/

⁶ Bernard Abrams and Joseph F. Barr, Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America, Headquarters Letter, Vol. 2. No. 4, June 1960, Box 3, Dale Wasserman Papers, 1946–1983, U.S. Mss 67AN, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin, 1–3.

⁷ Dale Wasserman, Preliminary Outline, 1960, Box 3, Dale Wasserman Papers, 1946–1983, U.S. Mss 67AN, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

⁸ Wasserman, Preliminary Outline, 1.

⁹ Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 122.

¹⁰ Wasserman, Preliminary Outline, 1.

trian barroom occurs shortly after he joins the Nazi Party and serves as a traumatic explanation for Eichmann's antisemitism. The scene is almost comical from today's perspective, with the SA men speaking with accents out of a 1930s Chicago gangster film. The episode intercuts its dramatic footage with newsreels showing the rise of the Nazis and the Second World War, emphasizing its "factual" basis.

Engineer of Death begins with a shot of Eichmann imprisoned in a basement as an off-screen narrator argues that Eichmann's capture "electrified the world" and that "[i]t was as though Hitler himself had been found alive." It overemphasizes the coincidence of Hitler and Eichmann attending the same Linz school, though at different times. It refers to Eichmann as "the other Adolf" and as a "surrogate figure," i.e., a stand-in for Hitler.¹¹ When introducing Eichmann, Wasserman's script contains a cut section which wildly exaggerates Eichmann's role. Initially, the narration almost prefigures Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, stating that "[h]e killed, neither in passion nor combat, but with the cold efficiency of a file-clerk."¹² But then, in the same passage from a section cut before filming, the narration strays off course, depicting Eichmann as the main driving force behind the Holocaust:

Some of his victims he starved to death. Some he beat to death. Others he burnt alive. He shot more than one million of them, first making them dig their own graves. He tortured them with ghastly medical experiments. And still they did not die fast enough to please him, so he built a murder-machine with a production output of 20,000 human beings a day. Nine hundred an hour. Fifteen lives a minute, every minute of the day for five years.¹³

Later, Eichmann appears as the individual giving Rudolf Höss, the Auschwitz commandant, orders to shift to using poison gas. Wasserman greatly exaggerates Eichmann's authority in the aired production as well. *Engineer of Death* also recounts Eichmann's childhood, claiming that he was a misfit whose only friends were Jewish, and that he was a weakling and coward. In a scene set at the Nuremberg Trials, Eichmann's protégé, Dieter Wisliceny (Telly Savalas) describes him as "personally a cowardly man, but . . . also a fanatic. The rest of us were soldiers who did our duty . . . but with Eichmann, it was some sort of crusade."¹⁴ Savalas' performance stands out, and during his interrogation, he asks his interrogator the following question about Eichmann which contradicts the above depictions of

¹¹ Shandler, *While America Watches*, 124.

¹² Dale Wasserman, Final Draft of "Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story," October 6, 1960, Box 4, Dale Wasserman Papers, 1946–1983, U.S. Mss 67AN, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin, Act 1 Page 1, Act 1 Page 2.

¹³ Wasserman, Final Draft of "Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story," Act 1 Page 2.

¹⁴ Wasserman, Final Draft of "Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story," Act 1 Page 19.

Eichmann as a fanatic: “Would you describe a gun as immoral? Eichmann was a gun. Someone aimed him. Someone pulled the trigger.”¹⁵

The Eichmann of *Engineer of Death* fits popular 1960s beliefs about Holocaust perpetrators. He is a disturbed, possibly psychotic individual maladjusted to normal society but able to thrive in the criminal Nazi regime.¹⁶ Shandler describes *Engineer of Death* as a “morality play” about Eichmann and includes it in a discussion of “responses to the Eichmann trial” which offered psychological explanations for Eichmann and a sense of resolution that the trial did not.¹⁷ Shandler is correct when he notes that the episode “portray[s] [Eichmann] as an extravagantly sadistic villain.”¹⁸ In this sense, *Engineer of Death* sticks to intentionalist ideas about the Holocaust’s inner workings and offers psychological rather than systemic explanations for Eichmann’s crimes. Heydrich (Alvin Epstein) haughtily refers to a “plan” he is ready to implement as soon as war breaks out and describes measures to encourage Jewish emigration and confiscate Jewish assets. Heydrich treats Eichmann like his golden boy, emphasizing his future role in carrying out the “plan.” Once the “plan” is mentioned, the episode cuts to a scene depicting the Wannsee Conference, which completes the episode’s first act. The narrator mentions the date and Wannsee Conference by name, stating that “ministers of State [met] together with the executives of Department 4A-4B which deals with the so-called mongrel races.”¹⁹ The small conference room (here, only about half a dozen people are attending) contains a massive Nazi banner and photo of Hitler overlooking the table, which is surrounded with extremely high-backed chairs reminiscent of a gothic horror film. Contrary to the historical record, Wisliceny is present. After Heydrich orders all participants to maintain the meeting’s secrecy, Eichmann discusses Göring’s letter authorizing Heydrich’s control over the “Final Solution” and discusses measures encouraging Jewish emigration up to that point. He then states that all European Jews are to be killed. In a cut passage, Eichmann also states that “the same procedures shall apply to England and the United States as soon as conditions shall make it feasible.”²⁰ The episode’s portrayal of Wannsee is very much that of a secret cabal meeting to discuss devious plans, with Eichmann even telling the participants that they “will now

15 Wasserman, Final Draft of “Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story,” Act 1 Page 20. This line comparing Eichmann to a gun prefigures a scene in *Conspiracy*, where Rudolf Lange (Barnaby Kay) positively compares a gun with the euphemistic, deceptive language of lawyers.

16 Evans, *Hitler’s People*, 319–321.

17 Shandler, *While America Watches*, 121.

18 Shandler, *While America Watches*, 122.

19 Wasserman, Final Draft of “Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story,” Act 1, Pages 26–27.

20 Wasserman, Final Draft of “Engineer of Death: The Eichmann Story,” Act 1, pp. 29–29.

proceed to the final solution of the Jewish Question.” As soon as the scene ends, the program cuts to an advertisement for Armstrong ceiling tiles.

Dale Wasserman was not unaware of the tension between overt corporate sponsorship and depicting the Holocaust on network television. Shandler has noted that audiences actually welcomed the commercial breaks during *Engineer of Death* as an opportunity for relief, in contrast with later outrage over commercial breaks during NBC’s *Holocaust* miniseries.²¹ But Wasserman mentioned his disappointment with the production and how the requirements of 1960s American corporate broadcast television affected *Engineer of Death*. In an interview with *The New York Post*, Wasserman stated that he “was not happy” and accused CBS of censorship:

I’ve never seen so many departments censoring a TV show . . . I personally, without hypocrisy, say I’m rather gratified that so much did survive in view of the number of restrictions and the multiple agencies of restriction, which included several legal departments, the continuity acceptance (censor) department of the network, the news and public affairs department of the network, the sponsors and the sponsor’s agency, as well as the outside countries, organizations, individuals and companies . . . The fact that any show is done for profit, under such restrictions, challenges factuality and reality²²

Wasserman’s statement shows that television screenwriters were not naïve about the restrictions of American broadcast television and chafed at what they saw as censorship of artistic freedom. When scholars scoff at the inclusion of advertisements in older television depictions of history, they should keep in mind examples like this one, which show that screenwriters were often fully aware of the problems television standards and practices, corporate sponsors, and legal departments posed for their artistic freedom.²³

Engineer of Death is the earliest known depiction of Adolf Eichmann in film and television, but few scholars besides Jeffrey Shandler have noticed it – likely due to its inaccessibility.²⁴ *Engineer of Death* was publicly shown at Purdue University during the Eichmann Trial’s broadcast and accompanied by an academic

21 Jeffrey Shandler, *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 107.

22 Bob Williams, “On the Air,” *The New York Post*, October 16, 1960, Box 3, Dale Wasserman Papers, 1946–1983, U.S. Mss 67AN, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin, 14.

23 For a discussion of artistic freedom and pay cable networks like HBO as a response to this situation, see Chapter 5.

24 For example, Cesarani’s Eichmann biography contains an extensive filmography, but *Engineer of Death* is not listed. Instead, the first film mentioned is Erwin Leiser’s 1961 documentary *Eichmann und das 3. Reich*. See Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 441–442.

debate on the Holocaust's singularity. Shandler identifies this event as an example of mass media becoming part of what he terms the "popular, rather than official, civil religion of Holocaust remembrance."²⁵ CBS also re-aired *Engineer of Death* during the Eichmann Trial alongside documentaries and other reports on Eichmann broadcasted throughout the nation. Shandler notes that "American broadcasters offered more extensive television coverage of the Eichmann trial than did any other nation," arguing that this media event was central to the establishment of television as "a vehicle for world news coverage."²⁶ Although *Engineer of Death* has largely been forgotten, it also was part of the Eichmann Trial as a larger media event, even if it aired several months beforehand. In January 1961 in *The New York Times*, Dale Wasserman stated that he would edit "about 40 per cent [sic]" of the script for reshoots so that the episode could include new revelations about Eichmann in the leadup to the trial.²⁷ The rebroadcast episode, which aired on April 12, 1961, does not differ substantially from that originally aired in October 1960.²⁸ Furthermore, the Dale Wasserman papers do not contain any edited scripts dating after October 1960. What Wasserman wanted to change between the two scripts is something historians can only speculate about. His research files contain an interview with Eichmann printed in *Life* magazine dating from 1961.²⁹ Nevertheless, no corresponding revision materialized.

²⁵ Shandler, *Jews, God, and Videotape*, 107–108.

²⁶ Shandler, *While America Watches*, 95, 97.

²⁷ "Eichmann Story Revised," *The New York Times*, January 25, 1961, Box 3, Dale Wasserman Papers, 1946–1983, U.S. Mss 67AN, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin. See also <https://www.nytimes.com/1961/01/25/archives/tv-show-feb-19-lists-stevenson-un-envoy-to-start-season-of-great.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

²⁸ *Armstrong Circle Theatre. Engineer of Death: the Eichmann Story* / Talent Associates Productions ; Producer, Robert Costello ; Director, Paul Bogart ; Writer, Dale Wasserman. 1961. [Rebroadcast of program originally aired October 12, 1960].

https://search.library.ucla.edu/permalink/01UCS_LAL/1hnia1h/alma9944933506533/

²⁹ *Life*, "Eichmann Tells his own Damning Story," vol. 19. No. 22, November 28, 1960, Box 3, Dale Wasserman Papers, 1946–1983, U.S. Mss 67AN, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin; Adolf Eichmann, "Them . . . to the Butcher," in *Life*, vol. 19. No. 22, November 28, 1960, Box 3, Dale Wasserman Papers, 1946–1983, U.S. Mss 67AN, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, Wisconsin.

2 From “Flash in the Pan” to International Bombshell: NBC’s *Holocaust* (1978)

Since the end of World War II, American cinema and television have portrayed, explored, and raised awareness of the Holocaust to American – and global – audiences. Television, however, was usually on the forefront of artistic depictions of the Holocaust, with major film studios only touching the subject in detail long after television paved the way. Although earlier films like *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959) and *The Pawnbroker* (1964), along with one-off episodes from 1960s television series including *Armstrong Circle Theatre*, *Combat!*, or *The Twilight Zone* dealt explicitly with the Holocaust, NBC’s 1978 miniseries *Holocaust: the Story of the Family Weiss* “constitutes the most significant event in the presentation of the Holocaust on American television.”³⁰ Most historiography and other academic literature about the American response to the Holocaust, particularly that concerned with film and television, includes *Holocaust* and considers it a watershed moment in this genre of historical film. Historian Judith E. Doneson states that *Holocaust* constitutes a paradigm shift in the purpose of Holocaust film, namely towards “teaching” a universal message:

Holocaust has taught a contemporary moral lesson. At least in the evolution of American film of the Holocaust, the event is no longer a universal symbol or part of a shared history or even compared history but, rather, a universal metaphor. The destruction of European Jewry is the frame of reference for contemporary suffering; its lesson, a lesson for today.³¹

In addition to moral lessons, the series offers a (for the most part) correct narrative history about the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the series attracted widespread criticism for its narrative structure – telling the story of the Holocaust through the eyes of one Jewish family, which some critics denounced as depicting the Holocaust with the same methods and style of American soap operas. In other words, they saw the series as trivializing and profaning a sacred historical event. Most notably, Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel lambasted the series in a review for the *New York Times*. In his review, Wiesel denounced the series as “an insult to those who perished and to those who survived” and claimed that the Holocaust stood outside history, and constituting “the ultimate event, the ultimate

³⁰ Shandler, *While America Watches*, 155.

³¹ Judith E. Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*. 2nd edition. (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 190.

mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted.”³² Wiesel’s criticism is often mentioned in any discussion of the merits or problems of the series; it is still referenced today in non-specialist publications, with one recent *Jacobin* author framing his takedown of Wiesel as a response to the latter’s negative review of *Holocaust*, which he sees as key to Wiesel’s self-branding as moral arbiter.³³ Wiesel’s review is connected with larger academic and cultural debates about the Holocaust’s uniqueness and the ethics of depicting it in fiction. Although this debate has cooled in recent years, it nevertheless forms a large part of academic and journalistic discussions of Holocaust film and literature.³⁴

Most discussions of *Holocaust* focus on its portrayal of Jewish victims or on its reception in the United States and West Germany. In West Germany, *Holocaust* unleashed a wave of public debate about the Holocaust and Holocaust education vastly overshadowing the comparatively brief discussion in US media. This discourse consists of a vast number of pieces of varying quality; many articles simply repeat old arguments and summaries. A smaller set of literature examines how the series depicts perpetrators. The best recent account of the series’ history and its reception is the final chapter in historian Frank Bösch’s *Zeitenwende 1979: Als die Welt von heute begann*, a work covering global historical change during 1979. This chapter goes beyond the usual recounting of the series’ West German reception, and instead also devotes attention to its international reception. Bösch also utilizes WDR (*Westdeutscher Rundfunk*) archives to illustrate the struggle television networks went through to get the series aired in West Germany, which breaks with older accounts that avoid archival material. The series contains one of the earliest depictions of the Wannsee Conference on film.³⁵ Although the scene depicting Wannsee only lasts around five minutes, it is a crucial scene because it marks the series’ turning point; after the conference, the main characters – several of whom are forced laborers in concentration camps or are trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto – are now in danger of being murdered on an industrial scale. Additionally, the series’ depiction of perpetrators, most notably Erik Dorf, is crucial to understanding its depiction of the Wannsee Conference. The conference

32 Elie Wiesel, “TV View,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1978.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1978/04/16/archives/tv-view-trivializing-the-holocaust-semifact-and-semifiction-tv-view.html>.

33 Corey Robin, “My Resistance to Elie Wiesel.” *Jacobin*, June 7, 2016.

<http://jacobinmag.com/2016/07/elie-wiesel-holocaust-primo-levi-imre-kertesz/>.

34 See Rich Brownstein’s extensive and fair-minded discussion of Wiesel and Holocaust film: Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete*, 79–83.

35 Paul Mommertz’s *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror* premiered in West Germany on ZDF in July 1977, one year prior to *Holocaust*.

scene is not isolated. The audience witnesses key developments prior to the conference (the Nuremberg Laws, Operation Barbarossa, the *Einsatzgruppen*) and the events that followed it (mass deportations from Western Europe, Auschwitz).

Holocaust, produced by Robert Berger and Herbert Brodtkin for NBC, was a direct response to the success of the 1977 ABC miniseries *Roots*, a multi-century epic about an enslaved family in the American South. *Roots* was directed by Marvin J. Chomsky, who later directed *Holocaust*.³⁶ *Holocaust* can be seen as a Jewish version of *Roots*, especially considering its similar focus on individual victims while telling the story of a much larger historical process. In this sense, *Holocaust* prefigures recent twenty-first century comparisons of chattel slavery and the Holocaust (or simply comparisons of the public memory of both crimes).³⁷ *Holocaust* was a massive success for NBC; over 120 million watched it in the US and it garnered roughly a third of the audience share of Western European adults (20 million in West Germany).³⁸ Out of all of the productions in this study, *Holocaust* reached the widest audience with the greatest international impact. Less known in the US today, the series is still a household name in Germany, where it often invoked as shorthand for a shift in collective memory. It is also widely credited for popularizing the word “Holocaust” in the German language.³⁹ Screenwriter Gerald Green adapted *Holocaust* into a tie-in novel published in 1978. The novel’s structure consists of the memoirs of Rudi Weiss; the sections featuring Dorf are composed of his diary, which is found by Rudi.

Holocaust centers on two Berlin families. The first and most important is the Weiss family; they are upper middle-class, assimilated Jews: Josef (Fritz Weaver), a doctor; Berta (Rosemary Harris), his wife; his sons Karl (James Woods), an artist; and Rudi (Joseph Bottoms), a soccer player and future resistance fighter. Karl’s Christian wife Inga (Meryl Streep in her breakout, Emmy-winning role) initially escapes persecution but eventually finds herself in Theresienstadt after her search for the incarcerated Karl. The Weiss family storyline encompasses an array of Jewish experiences: initial persecution in Germany, incarceration and deportation, resistance or collaboration, death or survival, and emigration to Palestine.

The series also follows another Berlin family, the Dorfs. The Dorfs are Christians, but friendly with the Weiss family during the Weimar era. Erik Dorf (Michael Moriarty, who also received an Emmy for his performance) is a down-and-out

³⁶ Frank Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979: Als die Welt von heute begann* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019), 369.

³⁷ See Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*.

³⁸ Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979*, 363.

³⁹ Jürgen Wilke, “Die Fernsehserie „Holocaust“ als Medienereignis,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 30, no. 4 (114) (2005): 16.

lawyer who curries favor with Reinhard Heydrich and eventually becomes his protégé. The series follows Dorf as he compromises his principles, culminating in his suicide when faced with Allied prosecution. A composite character based on several individuals, Dorf's biography most closely resembles Adolf Eichmann, even though Eichmann himself appears in several scenes. According to Lawrence Baron, the character of Dorf “epitomizes Arendt's concept of the ‘banality of evil’” and owes much to Raul Hilberg's pathbreaking *Destruction of the European Jews*.⁴⁰ During the course of his SS career, Dorf is present at every major turning point in the history of the Holocaust; in this way, like Maximilien Aue, the protagonist of Jonathan Littell's 2006 novel *The Kindly Ones*, Dorf is a Nazi version of Forrest Gump. Dorf is present when the order for the November Pogroms (more commonly known as *Kristallnacht*) is issued, when the *Einsatzgruppen* are established, at the Babi Yar massacre, at the Wannsee Conference, and at the initial gassings in Auschwitz. He has frequent contact with members of the Weiss family, especially after Karl is arrested and sent to Buchenwald. It is through Dorf's storyline that the audience witnesses the Wannsee Conference and the Holocaust through the eyes of the perpetrators.

Michael Moriarty portrays Dorf as a calculating, careerist man who does not really believe in Nazi ideology. On the contrary, at the beginning of the series, he exhibits no real ill will towards Jews and is a regular patient of Dr. Karl Weiss, whom he advises to flee Germany as soon as possible. The series depicts him as a man beaten down by Depression-era unemployment who would do anything to get ahead; this personality trait makes him an ideal candidate for the SS and is what places him on the path to mass murder. The series further emphasizes his chameleon-like nature by mentioning rumors that he is a former member of the German Communist Party (KPD). His wife Marta (Deborah Norton), in contrast, is a true believer in Nazi ideology and constantly exhorts him to further devote himself to the goals of the Party and of the “New Germany.” In this aspect, the series excels at showing the audience how the families of perpetrators also often fully believed in the regime's murderous policies. In one scene, Dorf breaks down in front of Marta and tells her about the mass executions he is responsible for and feels guilt over. She tells him to get over it because his work is important for their children's future. Although he occasionally expresses doubt about the course of the war or the morality of his actions, his wife remains untroubled and resolute until the end.

⁴⁰ Lawrence Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present: The Changing Focus of Contemporary Holocaust Cinema* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 52.

By 1938, Dorf rises through the ranks of the SS and becomes Heydrich's (David Warner) right-hand man. Throughout the series (until Heydrich's assassination in May 1942), Dorf regularly meets with Heydrich and discusses how their efforts to exterminate European Jewry are faring. In contrast with the production's often-unconvincing portrayals of executions, these meetings with Heydrich consist of Dorf showing actual archival photographs or films taken by the SS which document their crimes. It is in these scenes that *Holocaust* transcends television melodrama and forces viewers to encounter the unvarnished historical evidence of mass murder – this is not the same as showing archival footage of German tanks crossing the Maginot Line or Stukas divebombing Soviet positions; these images are criminal evidence of genocide. Doneson notes that critics who claim that “one cannot portray the unimaginable” are faced with a paradox by these scenes: “[T]he stark reality of the stills does just that: it visually authenticates what cannot be imagined.”⁴¹ Using archival footage is not uncontroversial; the documentarian Claude Lanzmann refused to utilize any archival photographs or footage for his film *Shoah*, arguing that this use of perpetrator-created material would constitute an attempt “to illustrate,” which he considered “out of the question.”⁴² Lanzmann went so far as to say that he “would have preferred to destroy” any footage of gas chambers in operation if he had found it.⁴³ It is in this respect that *Holocaust* rejects what film scholar Catrin Corell has dubbed a *Darstellungs-verbot* (prohibition on images or representation) in Holocaust media.⁴⁴

These conversations between Dorf and Heydrich also reinforce a stereotype about the upper echelon of Holocaust perpetrators being careerists who do not really believe in National Socialism or even antisemitism; Heydrich refers to Christian – not racial, which is curiously absent from the series – antisemitism as a tool, a useful lie to control the population: For him, it is the “cement that binds us together.” Dorf gives off an air of cold rationality; he embodies the “banality of evil” trope and it is in this sense that one gets the impression that he serves as a fictionalized stand-in for Eichmann. He speaks in a monotone voice and rarely shows emotion; when he does, he only expresses emotions like anger, fear, guilt, or sadness when alone with his wife or when confronted with the reality of the

⁴¹ Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, 177.

⁴² Claude Lanzmann, Ruth Larson, and David Rodowick, “Seminar with Claude Lanzmann April 11, 1990,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 79 (1991): 82–99, 97. For more on the ethics of archival footage of the Holocaust, see Fabian Schmidt and Alexander Oliver Zöller, “Atrocity Film,” *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures of Central and Eastern Europe*, no. 12 (March 10, 2021), 1–80.

⁴³ Lanzmann et al, “Seminar with Claude Lanzmann, April 11,” 99.

⁴⁴ Corell, *Der Holocaust als Herausforderung für den Film*, 15.

murderous decisions made at his desk. The latter is exemplified by a pivotal yet puzzling scene when *Einsatzkommando* officer Paul Blobel (T.P. McKenna) forces Dorf to shoot a wounded man lying in an execution pit; Dorf is quite reluctant to do so but overcomes his inhibitions. The scene is implausible because Dorf is supposed to supervise all *Einsatzgruppen* operations on the Russian Front, yet Blobel, one of his subordinates, is giving *him* orders and essentially forcing him to commit murder at gunpoint. In subsequent scenes, Dorf complains about the “chaos” of mass executions and implores Heydrich to find a more orderly, rational alternative. With that in mind, *Holocaust* finally reaches its portrayal of the Wannsee Conference.

The series’ depiction of the Wannsee Conference consists of one brief but pivotal scene in Episode 2, “The Road to Babi Yar.” As in other filmic versions of the conference, Heydrich leads the proceedings and has the difficult job of managing rival individuals and factions present at the table. Since Erik Dorf is the star of the show and a composite character partially based on Eichmann, Eichmann himself has less to do at the meeting, as Dorf has established himself as Heydrich’s heir apparent. The series manages to depict Wannsee in a fashion that succeeds at the broad strokes but falls flat upon closer examination. This faltering has more to do with the series’ handling of the Dorf character than with the way it portrays the conference.

The Wannsee scene begins in an imposing government building in central Berlin – probably meant to resemble something like the Gestapo offices on Wilhelmstrasse – instead of the leafy suburbs of Wannsee. This change of setting immediately makes the conference seem more visually imposing than it was in reality – it was conducted outside of the governmental district and in an area of Berlin largely controlled by the SS. Various conference attendees arrive by car in quick succession and head upstairs past a large portrait of Hitler – he is literally “above” the attendees as they make their way into the conference room. Large swastika banners are clearly visible throughout this sequence, lending a campy atmosphere to the scene. Dorf and Heydrich ignore a greeting from Hans Frank (John Bailey), boss of occupied Poland (General Government), underscoring the fact that the SS is the agency dominating the proceedings and setting the meeting’s tone. Frank did not attend the Wannsee Conference, so perhaps he is a stand-in for other civilian authorities present at the meeting who were active in the General Government, like Josef Bühler, who served as Frank’s deputy and attended the Wannsee Conference as his representative.⁴⁵ More likely, the film-

45 See the GHWK’s biographies of Meyer and Bühler: “Teilnehmer,” Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, accessed November 10, 2022, <https://www.ghwk.de/de/konferenz/teilnehmer>

makers did not want to introduce extra characters, as apart from Frank, Heydrich, Eichmann, and the fictional Dorf are the only named characters present in the scene. Everyone else is an unnamed extra. The novelization is more extensive and names other attendees like Alfred Meyer and Martin Luther, but they do not appear by name in the episode. Frank also calls Heydrich a “part-Jew,” which was a rumor later debunked by historians.⁴⁶ The episode illustrates the different factions present at the conference with costume design; it is clear to the viewer who belongs to the SS, the Nazi Party, or civilian ministries – even though the SS are dressed up in historically inaccurate black uniforms and swastika armbands, heightening the scene’s overall feeling of campy exploitation. The meeting takes place in an opulent hall full of chandeliers and dominated by Nazi symbols such as eagles and swastikas (Figure 1.1). In contrast to later, more subtle screen depictions of the Wannsee Conference, *Holocaust* uses Nazi iconography in a maximalist, stereotypical fashion.



Figure 1.1: The Wannsee Conference in *Holocaust*. *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss*. Titus Productions, NBC, 1978.

or the excellent recent biographical collection *The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference*, edited by Hans-Christian Jasch and Christoph Kreutzmüller, (Oxford, New York: Berghahn, 2017).

⁴⁶ Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 15. *stere*

Heydrich opens the meeting by outlining the total world population of Jews (11 million) and stating that “the Final Solution will deal with all of them.” The filmmakers were clearly well-aware of the SS’ policy of inventing euphemisms for killing, as evidenced by several scenes throughout the series where Dorf invents several such euphemisms (“special treatment”) on the fly, but Heydrich dispenses with this convention and immediately encounters a comment from Hans Frank:

HEYDRICH: The Fuehrer has ordered the physical extermination of the Jews.

FRANK: Language, Heydrich, language!

Heydrich then explains how “natural attrition” will eliminate most Jews sent to labor camps in the East (quoting practically verbatim from the Wannsee Protocol). He then quickly abandons all pretense and discusses the use of poison gas as an extermination method to supplement the *Einsatzgruppen*, which arouses protest from State Secretary Martin Luther (not named in the series, but named in the novelization).⁴⁷ Luther stresses that the use of poison gas in the T4 Program, in which the German medical community murdered thousands of mentally ill and disabled persons, aroused protest from the German Catholic Church and that a return to such methods would only invite further protest and interference from Germany’s Catholic community. This brief aside mentioning the Catholic Church is unique for films and television programs that depict the Wannsee Conference. No other portrayal of the conference mentions the Church and its possible objections. Both *Conspiracy* and *The Wannsee Conference* discuss the T4 Program at length, but not the German Catholic Church’s protest. In fact, when the Catholic Church is depicted in Holocaust films, it is usually in the context of Pope Pius XII’s indifference to the fate of the Jews or the Vatican’s support for the postwar “ratline” for Nazi war criminals escaping Europe.⁴⁸ *Holocaust* includes an earlier scene in which a priest, Father Lichtenberg (Llewellyn Rees), chastises members of his congregation and denounces Nazi atrocities. Dorf later confronts the offending priest and attempts to correct him; this comment about T4 is most likely a reference to this earlier scene, as the Wannsee Protocol does not mention the Catholic Church at any point.

⁴⁷ Due to the lack of available archival source material from the production’s history, this section also consults screenwriter Gerald Green’s 1978 novelization of the series. Any quotations from the novel are from Dorf’s first-person perspective. Gerald Green, *Holocaust* (London: Corgi Books, 1978), 217.

⁴⁸ The 2002 Costa-Gavras film *Amen.*, based on Rolf Hochmuth’s play *Der Stellvertreter*, is the most prominent example (outside of the numerous 1970s and 1980s films that depict former Nazis hiding out in South America).

In short, *Holocaust* portrays the Wannsee Conference in a straightforward fashion while making room for Dorf, its antagonist, to contribute to it. The series manages to distill the infighting among the various factions of the German government and Nazi Party without much distortion given the brief time allotted for the scene (ca. 5 minutes). No one morally objects to Heydrich's plans. Instead, any objection consists of worries about arousing protest or crossing legal boundaries. Dorf brushes aside such concerns about the "legality" of the "final solution" by quoting Hitler: "Here I stand with my bayonets. There you stand with your law. We'll see which prevails."

The series makes clear that mass killings began before Wannsee and argues that Wannsee represents a decision made sometime between the invasion of the Soviet Union and the end of 1941; it coordinates earlier disparate killing programs under SS leadership. This is the standard, widely accepted interpretation of the conference today, though some aspects remain a mystery.⁴⁹ For a series made in the late 1970s, *Holocaust*, for all its flaws, manages to clearly illustrate the "functionalist" position of Holocaust historiography by emphasizing the initiative of mid-level SS functionaries. In *Holocaust*, these mid-level players play key roles in the evolution of the "Final Solution," even though Hitler always hangs over the proceedings like a shadow. In the first episode, Heydrich and Dorf describe pre-Wannsee mass murder as having "no aim, no pattern," and Dorf constantly complains about the circus-like atmosphere of mass executions with civilian spectators, photography, drunkenness, and general behavior that he characterizes as unprofessional, echoing Himmler's infamous October 1943 Posen speeches, which called for SS men to remain "decent" (*anständig*) while killing.⁵⁰ Bösch also emphasizes this point and provocatively claims that the series' shift between multiple perspectives, between victim, perpetrator, and bystander, (and individuals within those three categories) as well placing individual voices within a larger narrative, prefigures Saul Friedländer's narrative decisions in *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, a book noted for its "integrated history" approach combining the voices of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.⁵¹ This statement has some merit; after all, the relationship between historiography and historical culture (as expressed in novels, films, etc.) is not simply a one-way street in which artists and museum

49 See David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933–1949* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 453–459 and Kay, "Speaking the Unspeakable."

50 See Harvard Law School Nuremberg Trials Project, Item No. 3791, "Speeches concerning the SS and the conduct of the war [six speeches] Rede des Reichsfuehrer-SS Heinrich Himmler in Charkow. April 1943," <http://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/documents/3791-speeches-concerning-the-ss>. Accessed January 28, 2018.

51 Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979*, 372.

professionals simply translate the work of professional historians for mass audiences. Rather, the border is porous; sometimes cultural productions influence historians; it is not a clear top-down relationship where the historian delivers his or her knowledge to the artist, who then disseminates it to the uncritical masses.

Nevertheless, the series also has its flaws, particularly in the portrayal of Dorf as a sort of Forrest Gump figure who is present at every major step taken during the Holocaust while simultaneously not really believing in Nazi ideology. *Holocaust* takes Arendt's thesis about the banality of evil and runs with it. The only fanatical Nazis present are nameless SS and SA men carrying out the violence rather than signing orders behind a desk. In *Holocaust*, there are no true believers among the upper echelon – or even middle management – of the SS (except for Himmler, played here by Ian Holm), just careerists and opportunists concerned with increasing their own power and sating their financial, material, and sexual appetites. While it is not incorrect to say that the SS was full of such people, it blinds audiences to the fact that the architects of Nazi ideology tended to be so committed to it because they believed it, not just because they were opportunistic people who saw the regime as a means for career advancement. Dorf's character perfectly illustrates this problem. He is unemployed until Heydrich offers him a job and his wife constantly pushes him to do more, which is also brought up in the scene immediately following the portrayal of the conference. To be sure, careerists with no real ideological convictions existed, but it is a mistake to characterize the leadership of the SS and RSHA as such. Ideology was central to policy and did not merely serve as window dressing.⁵²

After the conference, Dorf, Eichmann, and Heydrich retire to an adjacent room to discuss the day's events. This is based on Eichmann's testimony at his trial in Jerusalem, wherein he discussed a fireside chat over cognac that he had had with Heydrich and Gestapo head Heinrich Müller directly after the conference.⁵³ *Holocaust* uses this scene to further illustrate Dorf's careerism and underlying motivations. Heydrich sleeps in a chair while Eichmann and Dorf talk about the day's events. Eichmann and Dorf briefly talk about how they are just cogs in a machine following orders and that Hitler's word is supreme law. Eichmann then changes the subject and Dorf describes his family as the primary motivation for his work: "Our families, Eichmann, the women and children of Germany, they

52 See Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office*, trans. Tom Lampert, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

53 "106. Sitzung des Gerichts am 21. Juli 1961: Vernehmung Adolf Eichmanns durch den beisitzenden Richter Yitzhak Raveh" in Norbert Kampe and Peter Klein, eds., *Die Wannsee-Konferenz am 20. Januar 1942: Dokumente, Forschungsstand, Kontroversen*, (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013), 104–107, 105–106.

give us courage, determination . . . we owe them a better world . . . like the decisions we made today . . . I look at my children and I know that I'm doing the right thing." When one compares this scene with the version of Eichmann and Heydrich's fireside drink in *Conspiracy*, in which they discuss their personal motivations, it is possible that the scene in *Conspiracy* is a direct response to this one in *Holocaust*. The conversation in *Conspiracy* is about the death of a man's abusive, hated father, a parable used to show that men like Heydrich and Eichmann need more than pure antisemitic hatred to have purpose in life after they have completed their murderous task. In *Conspiracy*, the scene is no longer about familial love, but about hate.

In its depiction of the Wannsee Conference, *Holocaust* also differs from later films. In contrast with other filmic depictions, the audience is presented with a gaudy room filled with Nazi iconography, such as *Reichsadler*-adorned chairs, table runners, a massive swastika above the entrance, and the previously mentioned Hitler portrait. Other productions' use of Hitler busts in the corner (*The Wannsee Conference*) or kitschy swastika-adorned candle holders (*Conspiracy*) seem subtle in comparison. *Holocaust's* restaging of the Wannsee Conference in the center of Berlin, in a Nazi building straight out of an exploitation film, robs the viewer of one of the more troubling aspects of the Wannsee Conference: that such an infamous meeting took place at a picturesque lakeside location, in a charming villa designed by the architect responsible for the artist Max Liebermann's nearby residence.⁵⁴ Instead, the audience is presented with imposing marble entrances and stairwells plus a seemingly endless supply of swastikas and eagles. In short, the set chosen for the Wannsee Conference manages to distort Heydrich's intent for the meeting, which Mark Roseman describes in detail: "In selecting the villa as the venue for the meeting, Heydrich had thus eschewed more intimidating or business-like locations. Instead he had gone for expansiveness and informality."⁵⁵ Curiously, the series does not even mention that this scene is *the* Wannsee Conference – indeed, the name "Wannsee" is also absent. However, the scene obviously depicts the conference (same objectives, same discussion topics, same meeting between Heydrich and Eichmann by the fireside afterwards). Gerald Green's tie-in novel, however, makes it clear that the scene does in fact portray the Wannsee Conference, which he erroneously refers to as "The Gross-Wannsee Conference."⁵⁶ In this aspect, *Holocaust* does not treat Wannsee any differently than it does other aspects of the Holocaust. One of the

54 Johannes Tuchel, *Am Grossen Wannsee 56–58: Von der Villa Minoux zum Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1992), 9.

55 Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting*, 65.

56 Green, *Holocaust*, 213.

main – but often hackneyed – criticisms of the series is that it relies on melodrama like that of a soap opera, which it often does. The set designers also underscore the melodrama through the above-discussed reliance on Nazi kitsch elements in this, and other, scenes involving Dorf and Heydrich. Dorf’s scenes set at the front or at home are mostly devoid of these elements, but his scenes with higher-level Nazis usually include these visual cues which unfortunately lend these scenes a cartoonish aesthetic that the series avoids on other occasions. Nevertheless, *Holocaust*’s depiction of the Wannsee Conference is an overlooked but important aspect of this series and its legacy as a flawed yet pioneering moment in television history.

Another flaw of *Holocaust* is that, to contemporary viewers, the series appears dated. While *Holocaust* had a large budget and is a worthy successor to *Roots*, it sometimes strays into a soap opera-like aesthetic that most “prestige TV” of today seeks to avoid. Even if family series like *The Sopranos* borrow the soap opera format, they do not adhere to the genre’s storytelling and visual conventions or melodramatic tone, which *Holocaust* does on occasion – just not as overtly as its worst critics have claimed. The most notable examples include a wide discrepancy in acting quality: James Woods (Karl), Meryl Streep (Inga), and Michael Moriarty (Erik Dorf) all perform their roles well. But Joseph Bottoms (Rudi Weiss), who is the series’ hero figure, falls flat and is unconvincing – he is an all-American football star transplanted into 1940s Europe. Furthermore, his storyline, which eventually sees him become a committed Zionist and emigrant to Palestine, veers into Israeli nationalism.

The series mostly gets the history right, however; only two members of the Weiss family, Rudi and Inga, survive the war, a surprising outcome for a 1970s American broadcast network television series. As Judith E. Doneson notes, it is disingenuous to accuse *Holocaust* of having an “American” happy ending when only Rudi and Inga survive the series.⁵⁷ In fact, the series avoids many of the stereotypically “American” (and implicitly negative, when the term is used by European critics) aspects of historical film. There is no happy ending; most of the protagonists die, and not heroically. There are no scenes of GIs swooping in to save the day; the only American featured in a scene is a military prosecutor. The underdogs in the Resistance do not succeed in the end, unless success counts as the survival of the few that remain in 1945. The most “American” aspect of the series is that all of the actors speak English but have no consistent accents. American, British, German, and Eastern European accents are all thrown together, a common problem with American productions set in Europe. Because the series

⁵⁷ Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, 159.

mostly focuses on assimilated German Jews, it shows the Holocaust as neighbors killing neighbors, not an event imposed on the victims by a foreign power (which it was for the vast majority of victims). When one looks at more recent television productions about the Second World War and the Holocaust, including European ones, it is hard to argue that *Holocaust's* flaws, such as soap opera-style storytelling, are exclusively American qualities or have gone by the wayside. On the contrary, several contemporary European productions about World War II, such as the ZDF miniseries *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter* (2013), the Sky Entertainment remake of *Das Boot* (2018–present), and the BBC epic *World on Fire* (2019–2023) all suffer from soap-operatic flaws such as contrived romances, repeat “chance encounters,” maudlin music, melodramatic death scenes of “good” characters, and one-dimensional villains. These features may, indeed, be inherent to historical television productions created for either American broadcast network television or Western European public television – that is, program formats which are designed to reach the widest audiences possible. Still, Lawrence Baron is correct when he states that:

[t]he concern expressed by scholars (towards *Holocaust*) . . . that docudramas blur the distinction between documentaries and feature films strikes me as overly alarmist. Only an extremely unsophisticated viewer could ignore the commercial interruptions, the professional quality of the acting, and the contrivances that link all of the characters together.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, *Holocaust* does suffer as both a work of art and as a teaching tool because it appears dated and melodramatic. Television audiences today, at least in the English-speaking world, are accustomed to productions that rival the cinema in writing and production quality, and when given a choice between *Holocaust* and newer films about Wannsee, both audiences and educators would likely choose the more recent productions if they would like to learn more about the Wannsee Conference and the origins of the Holocaust.⁵⁹

But what does *Holocaust* have to say about the Wannsee Conference? It shows that, although the SS was the leading governmental agency and was responsible for the planning, coordination, and killing, civilian authorities not only acquiesced, but also collaborated enthusiastically. It points to an unspecified, possibly verbal order from Hitler to exterminate all European Jews, which suggests

⁵⁸ Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*, 53.

⁵⁹ See publications about the so-called “Golden Age of Television” beginning in the late 1990s, including Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers, and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013); Kyle Paoletta, “Party Monsters: Punch-Drunk Critics in the Era of Peak TV,” *The Baffler*, November 4, 2018, <https://thebaffler.com/outbursts/party-monsters-paoletta>.

the that the SS sought to keep its operations secret. At another point in the series, Dorf argues that this secrecy is dangerous, because it would make people think that the SS was ashamed of its crimes; he thinks that the camps should stand as monuments to what the Nazis had “achieved” for their people. The series correctly portrays the conference’s purpose as informing civilian ministries about a decision that higher-ups (Hitler, Heydrich, Goering, and Himmler) had already made; the SS was essentially telling the representatives of the other agencies present what the plan was, who was in charge, and how they were to cooperate. The time for questions was over; Heydrich would now only give orders. The series gets the broad strokes correct, but several aspects of its depiction of the Wannsee Conference, as noted above, are both problematic and, in some cases, flat-out incorrect.

The series distorts the history of the conference in several ways, the most important of which are its setting, the presence of the fictional Erik Dorf and of non-attendee Hans Frank, and its characterization of Eichmann. The setting and especially the gaudy set design reinforce tropes about the Nazi regime and approach caricature. The issue with Hans Frank has been discussed above, it is an odd choice to have him present at the conference when other attendees (Bühler) performed his role as representatives of the General Government. The problematic aspect of Erik Dorf’s presence at the conference also apply to his role in general. By making Dorf a composite character who is present at every stage of the Holocaust, the series inadvertently absolves real-world figures of guilt. For example, Dorf is shown as Heydrich’s right-hand man at the conference and serves as both organizer and expert witness; he holds some measure of authority over the other attendees. This results in Eichmann being relegated to the background, which is exactly how Eichmann portrayed himself in his defense: as an unimportant figure tasked with organizing the meeting. During the conference, he has nothing to do except glare menacingly or have a chat with Dorf by the fireside afterwards. Because the series focuses so much on the fictional Dorf, Eichmann comes across as a bit player who was relatively unimportant to the Wannsee Conference. This distortion inadvertently takes Eichmann’s testimony in Jerusalem at face value but goes even further. Eichmann was Heydrich’s right-hand man and organized the conference; Dorf ends up fulfilling the real-life function of Eichmann and Eichmann is relegated to the background. These criticisms aside, it is important to note that as the scene is so short, the production team likely lacked both the time and resources to get everything right; their choice of using the composite character Dorf for their antagonist also hamstrung them into placing him in most scenes containing perpetrators.

The series was especially popular in West Germany and is remembered in German-speaking countries much more so than in the Anglosphere. However, it

initially faced strong skeptical voices from the West German media. *Der Spiegel* devoted its January 29, 1979 cover story to the series before it aired in West Germany. In this report, *Spiegel* recounted the series' use combined with teaching material in schools, but mistakenly concluded that the series was a "flash in the pan" (*Strohfeuer*).⁶⁰ The West German foreign office even got involved; concerned about West Germany's international reputation, they supplied consulates with materials for debates about German guilt.⁶¹ Members of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) opposed the series' airing, which caused the series to be aired on the so-called "third program," that is, on regional affiliates instead of the two national channels ARD and ZDF.⁶² In fact, WDR argued internally that the series' positive reception in Israel contradicted the conservative argument that the series could offend Jewish viewers or spark a wave of anti-German sentiment.⁶³ In contrast, the German Democratic Republic (East Germany, or GDR) did not even bother showing the series, with officials arguing that doing so would be unnecessary because "GDR citizens had long been educated about the crimes of fascism in schools and through films."⁶⁴

Holocaust unleashed a firestorm of reactions in Europe, particularly in West Germany and Austria, and was a watershed moment in memory culture and media history. Historians and journalists commented on the series in all major newspapers and magazines; academics and teachers drew up lesson plans and discussed the series' educational potential.⁶⁵ The individual *Bundesländer* produced educational material, and documentaries which contained interviews with Holocaust survivors.⁶⁶ For historian Frank Bösch, *Holocaust* represents a turning point in memory culture. To him, it "played a key role" in a 1970s shift towards greater prominence of the Holocaust in public memory.⁶⁷ Bösch correctly points out that academic historians reacted "helplessly" to the fact that a "Hollywood se-

60 "‘Holocaust’: Die Vergangenheit kommt zurück," *Der Spiegel*, January 29, 1979, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-40350860.html>.

61 Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979*, 376–377. See also Jacob S. Eder, *Holocaust Angst: The Federal Republic of Germany and American Holocaust Memory since the 1970s* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

62 Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979*, 364.

63 Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979*, 374–375.

64 Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979*, 375.

65 See Yizhak Ahren, *Das Lehrstück „Holocaust“: Zur Wirkungspsychologie eines Medienerignisses* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1982).

66 Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979*, 380–381.

67 Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979*, 363. For a contemporary summary of West German debates, see Jeffrey Herf, "The 'Holocaust' Reception in West Germany: Right, Center and Left," *New German Critique*, no. 19 (1980): 30–52.

ries" provoked so much discussion of the topic and notes that the overwhelmingly negative German press coverage (before the series even aired) is "disconcerting" from today's perspective.⁶⁸ This coverage tended to accuse the series of "commercialization" and "trivialization" of victims' suffering, a charge still commonly leveled at historical film and television.⁶⁹ Audiences tended to react much more favorably than intellectuals, who, as Omer Bartov notes, "strongly resented" the series.⁷⁰ A sizable minority reacted unfavorably, some of whom protested the series as American and Jewish propaganda. Some neo-Nazi activists attacked transmission towers; SS veterans and other Nazis sent angry letters to WDR.⁷¹

The media and communications historian Jürgen Wilke has rightly pointed out that *Holocaust* was a unique "media event" in West Germany and deserves its reputation as a pathbreaker. However, he also points out that the Holocaust and Nazi Germany had been ever-present in German media since the end of the war. For him, these earlier productions paved the way for West Germany's embrace of the series.⁷² In present-day Germany, one gets the impression that *Holocaust* was the first series in which Germans had seen a depiction of the Holocaust on television. It certainly was the case for many in the audience, but this has become a shopworn myth in the German press and, to a lesser extent, in the German historical community.⁷³ Whether plays like Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* (1965), films like the Rudolf Höss biopic *Death is My Trade* (1977) or Heinz Schirk and Paul Mommertz's *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror* (1977), Nazi crimes were present in German mass media before *Holocaust* but did not receive the same level of attention or reaction. In the case of the television productions analyzed in this study, the angry reaction and charges of demonization leveled at *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror* in *Die Zeit* serve as an example.⁷⁴ Frank Bösch also discusses the medial genealogy of *Holocaust* at length. He correctly points out that the 1968 generation (that is, the generation of student demonstrators) was not the

68 Bösch, *Zeitenwende* 1979, 364.

69 Bösch, *Zeitenwende* 1979, 370.

70 Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, 151.

71 Bösch, *Zeitenwende* 1979, 381–384.

72 Wilke, "Die Fernsehserie „Holocaust“ als Medienereignis," 16.

73 Wilke, "Die Fernsehserie „Holocaust“ als Medienereignis," 9. See also Siegfried Zielinski and Gloria Custance, "History as Entertainment and Provocation: The TV Series 'Holocaust' in West Germany," *New German Critique*, no. 19 (1980): 81–96, which argues that German television and film professionals' reluctance to address the Holocaust was, in part, due to "the older generation of film directors" having pasts in the Nazi film industry. See the discussion on page 85.

74 See Walter Jens, "Der Große Dämon Reinhard H.," review of *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror*, dir. Heinz Schirk, *Die Zeit*, July 29, 1977, <http://www.zeit.de/1977/32/der-grosse-daemon-reinhard-h>.

first to represent the Holocaust in mass media. However, he argues that *Holocaust* is unique because it is the first time the stories of victims and perpetrators were combined in a single production. Bösch also notes that earlier West German television productions tended to focus on the National Socialist elite.⁷⁵ In 1980, in a special issue of *New German Critique* devoted to debates about the series, Andreas Huyssen convincingly argued that German aesthetic debates about *Holocaust* unwittingly revealed the German left's inability to handle emotions:

To me, the key problem with critical appraisals of 'Holocaust' in Germany lies in their common assumption that a cognitive rational understanding of German anti-Semitism under National Socialism is per se incompatible with an emotional melodramatic representation of history as the story of a family. Left German critiques of 'Holocaust' betray a fear of emotions and subjectivity which itself has to be understood historically as in part a legacy of the Third Reich.⁷⁶

Huyssen's observation would continue to hold true for later German reactions to depictions of the Holocaust on film. This underlying fear of emotions is a characteristic of more left-wing strains of German memory culture. In his "emotional history" of West Germany, Frank Biess has claimed that *Holocaust* helped break the emotional blockade and led to a shift in how West Germans grappled with the Nazi past.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, even today, it is common for German intellectual and journalistic critiques of the genre to focus on the supposed dangers of emotion.

While other, more recent Holocaust films are better suited for today's audiences, it is undeniable that *Holocaust* was a milestone in television history and introduced millions to this most difficult of histories. The series reached an audience of 120 million Americans and "initiated extensive discussion of Holocaust television and Holocaust remembrance. The responses to the American broadcast premiere, by and large, deemed Holocaust television to be an inherently problematic genre."⁷⁸ The West German reception, on the other hand, helps illustrate that international releases of historical films can provoke wildly different reactions. Although an American production, *Holocaust* proved to be more important to West German society than it did to the United States, where it arguably stands in the shadow of its predecessor *Roots*, which depicts a past much more immediate for most Americans. Holocaust film and television productions, because they de-

⁷⁵ Bösch, *Zeitenwende* 1979, 368.

⁷⁶ Andreas Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification: 'Holocaust' and West German Drama," *New German Critique* 19, no. 1 (1980): 117–136, 118.

⁷⁷ Frank Biess, *Republik der Angst: Eine andere Geschichte der Bundesrepublik*, 2. edition (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Buchverlag, 2019), 332–342.

⁷⁸ Shandler, *While America Watches*, 155.

pict a fundamentally transnational event, are ripe for transnational reception and are bound to be of greater interest to international audiences than media depictions of a historical event whose impact is only really known within the country in which it took place. Contrary to contemporary criticism, *Holocaust* is much more engaging and less historically flawed than the impression critics like Elie Wiesel have provided. It integrates personal stories of (fictional) victims into a larger narrative, manages to depict the evolution of genocidal policy in a relatively straightforward (albeit flawed) manner, and avoids painting Germans as one-dimensional monsters. Rather than grafting a typically American plotline with a happy ending onto the Holocaust setting, the series transcends the constraints of its network (such as the unavoidable commercial breaks) and ends with a sense of incalculable loss.

3 Warning the Allies: *War and Remembrance*

The ABC miniseries *War and Remembrance* (1988–1989) was the not only most expensive miniseries ever produced up to that point,⁷⁹ but also one of the last of the big-budget miniseries produced during the genre's heyday, which began in the 1970s with series like *Roots* and *Holocaust*.⁸⁰ Film and media studies professor John Caldwell sees miniseries like *War and Remembrance* are "loss leaders" or prestige projects, which, while they may not draw in large audiences, nevertheless earn critical acclaim and awards, thereby bolstering a network's reputation.⁸¹ According to media scholar Barbara Selznick, miniseries like *War and Remembrance* were characterized by "factors such as their lavish mise-en-scène, exotic locations, and unusual length," as well as by their tendency to place "style before story."⁸² These big-budget miniseries largely fell by the wayside in the 1990s in favor of more profitable fare. One *New York Times* article even credited *War and Remembrance* with "sinking" the miniseries genre.⁸³ Miniseries reemerged in the

79 See Morgan Gendel, "ABC at 'War' Again with Miniseries, Maxi-Sequel," *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 1986, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-09-06-ca-12868-story.html>.

80 Barbara J. Selznick, *Global Television: Co-Producing Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 44.

81 John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality (Communication, Media, and Culture)* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 160.

82 Selznick, *Global Television*, 45.

83 Andy Meisler, "Television/Radio; The Epic that Sank a Genre," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/03/books/television-radio-the-epic-that-sank-a-genre.html>.

late 1990s in order to appeal to international audiences as television continued to globalize.⁸⁴ The genre of the epic, big-budget miniseries also saw a revival on cable networks like HBO later in the decade, with productions like the NASA-themed *From the Earth to the Moon* (1998) and the World War II combat drama *Band of Brothers* (2001). These later miniseries, however, tended to be between 8 and 12 hours long. *War and Remembrance* clocks in at almost 23 hours.

War and Remembrance is the direct sequel to the miniseries *The Winds of War* (1983). Both are based on novels by Herman Wouk, a Jewish-American novelist and World War II navy veteran known for his seafaring novel *The Caine Mutiny* (1951), which was also adapted into an acclaimed film starring Humphrey Bogart in 1954. *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* are sweeping chronicles of two American families caught up in World War II, the Henrys and the Jastrows. Some critics interpret the novels as Wouk's attempt at writing an American version of *War and Peace*, and the length of the work as well as its impressive scope attest to that.⁸⁵ Critics usually consider Wouk a conformist voice promoting conservative values and Jewish assimilation into the American mainstream, though others have reassessed him in more recent publications, with one scholar even dubbing him a social historian.⁸⁶ Wouk consulted and befriended the pathbreaking Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg and credited his *Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) as the inspiration for depicting the Holocaust in his novels.⁸⁷ Wouk co-wrote the scripts for the *War and Remembrance* miniseries adaptation with director Dan Curtis and the writer Earl W. Wallace. Branko Lustig, an Auschwitz survivor (and later producer of *Schindler's List*), co-produced the series alongside Curtis and Barbara Steele.

War and Remembrance is a twelve-episode miniseries; its episodes are usually two and a half hours long but vary somewhat in length. It is nothing if not a comprehensive production. The series focuses on the family of US Navy captain "Pug" Henry (Robert Mitchum) and his experiences as a naval attaché in various

⁸⁴ Selznick, *Global Television*, 45–46.

⁸⁵ Zhang Yidong, "Two Panoramas About Great Wars," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 19, no. 1 (1985): 57–64, 57.

⁸⁶ See Edward S. Shapiro, "The Jew as Patriot: Herman Wouk and American Jewish Identity," *American Jewish History* 84, no. 4 (December 1996): 333–351; Susanne Klingenstein, "Sweet Natalie: Herman Wouk's Messenger to the Gentiles," in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1998), 103–122; Arnold Beichman, *Herman Wouk: The Novelist as Social Historian* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Routledge, 2004).

⁸⁷ See Herman Wouk, "'Inescapable, and the Best': Tribute to Raul Hilberg," in *Perspectives on The Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Raul Hilberg*, ed. James S. Pacy and Alan Wertheimer (London: Routledge, 2019).

posts around the globe. His daughter-in-law, Natalie Jastrow (Jane Seymour), and her uncle, Aaron Jastrow (John Gielgud), a professor, are American Jews living in Europe when the war begins. The series follows these characters and their families throughout the war and visits locations ranging from the South Pacific to Auschwitz itself. The miniseries is particularly notable for likely being the first non-documentary productions to film at the actual Auschwitz memorial site. Holocaust historians and film scholars have neglected the series in general; however, its status as the first production to film in Auschwitz, as well as the scenes shot there, represent important milestones in television history. Most shockingly, *War and Remembrance* is perhaps the only mainstream Holocaust film or television program that violates the taboo of depicting the full extermination process in the Auschwitz gas chambers.⁸⁸

The series does not directly depict the Wannsee Conference, but the Wannsee Protocol serves as a key fictional plot device in the second episode. Leslie Slote (David Dukes), Natalie Jastrow's former fiancé, is the first Undersecretary of the American legation in Bern, Switzerland. Slote gains possession of photostats of the protocol and tries to notify the US State Department, but encounters roadblocks at every turn.

The protocol is introduced into the plot when Jacob Ascher, a wealthy Jewish socialite in Bern, invites Slote to a cocktail party in order to put him in touch with a contact. Slote had previously drawn negative attention to himself by sending photographs of *Einsatzgruppen* mass shootings to the *New York Times* (which, in a nod to real-life downplaying of the Holocaust, ended up on the paper's back page), but this had attracted the interest of Bern's Jewish community. At the cocktail party, Slote flirts with Ascher's daughter Selma (Mijou Kovacs) and meets his contact, Father Martin (Aubrey Morris), a German priest. Father Martin walks with Slote through the streets of Bern and hints that he has conclusive evidence of "new, unbelievable atrocities" that could be of interest to the US government, but is skeptical of Martin's evidence. They arrange a later meeting at a cinema.

At a showing of Bing Crosby's musical *Road to Zanzibar* (1941), Father Martin leaves the theater, and an unidentified man takes his place next to Slote. This man hands Slote an envelope containing documents that turn out to be photostats of the Wannsee Protocol. Slote returns home and examines the documents: they are clearly facsimiles of the Wannsee Protocol (see Figure 1.2), but the viewer does not know this; only the ominous music, Slote's nervousness, and the sus-

⁸⁸ For a detailed explanation of this taboo, see Chapter 3 of Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films* (New York: Continuum, 2011).



Figure 1.2: Leslie Slote examining the photostats of the Wannsee Conference Protocol in *War and Remembrance*. *War and Remembrance*. Dan Curtis Productions, ABC Circle Films, Jadran Film, 1988.

penseful nature of his encounter in the theater indicate the nature of this evidence. Curiously, the production added a *Reichsadler* stamp on the top left of the protocol's first page, to make it abundantly clear that this is indeed an official, top secret Nazi document.⁸⁹ Slote skims through the pages quickly, but page 6 of the protocol, which contains a list of the Jewish populations of Europe, is clearly identifiable.⁹⁰ In a frustrating plot turn, Selma Ascher calls Slote during this scene and asks him out to dinner – immediately. He agrees to and locks the documents in his desk. During their dinner, he asks her if Father Martin is reliable, which she confirms. When she drops him off at home, the car radio broadcasts news of German setbacks on the Eastern Front and Slote begins to fall in love with Selma – all while the documentary evidence of genocide sits in his desk. Visual storytelling is key to television histories and production archives can also help bolster arguments about these aspects. One version of Episode 2's script contains detailed handwritten instructions for the cinematographer, describing, for example, how the camera should film the photostats (“hi [sic] angle over Slote to documents”) or

⁸⁹ Herman Wouk, Earl W. Wallace, Dan Curtis, *War and Remembrance*, Part II, Second Draft, April 23, 1985, in Dan Curtis Productions Records, Box 122, Folder 3, UCLA Library Performing Arts Special Collections, 29.

⁹⁰ See the scan of the Wannsee Protocol on the GHWK's website, pages 1 and 6: “Protokoll und Dokumente,” Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, accessed November 10, 2022, <https://www.ghwk.de/de/konferenz/protokoll-und-dokumente>.

when to use a close-up shot.⁹¹ This piece of evidence helps illustrate the value of screenplay archives for writers of film and television histories wanting to focus on investigating the visual aspects of film production.

After they part ways, Slote returns to the apartment, lights a fire and his pipe, and reads through the documents until morning. Throughout this scene, his shocked and horrified expressions indicate his realization about just what the evidence is. He even exclaims “Oh my God!” while reading the protocol. The screenplay describes Slote’s expression as “utterly ravaged,” the diplomat is full of “profound, hopeless despair.” It also explicitly identifies the document as the Wannsee Protocol.⁹² That morning, Slote brings the photostats to his superior at the American legation and argues about their significance. He says that the protocol proves that Germans are committing “mass murder – perhaps genocide” and that the document is of “grave import.” He urges his boss William Tuttle (Howard Duff) to notify Assistant Secretary Breckinridge Long and to send the photostats via airmail. Slote’s colleague August van Winnaker (Lee Patterson) believes that the protocol is fraudulent and stems from an unreliable, biased (i.e., Jewish) source, because cabinet-level officials would never put such plans in writing. He also pokes fun of Slote and implies that he is a bleeding heart wasting their time. Slote angrily responds and says that “nothing is more German than reducing an inhuman plan to writing. Read *Mein Kampf*.” He says that the documents are proof that “the Germans are committing a crime that’s almost beyond human imagination” and that sending them overseas could help FDR “turn world opinion” against them. The scene ends with a discussion of the supposed logistical impossibility of requisitioning enough trains to transport Jews during wartime and Tuttle places the photostats in maximum security storage and warns Slote about contacting the *New York Times*. This section is intercut with the German diplomat Beck (Bill Wallis), who denies all German atrocities to the gullible (and ill-fated) Aaron Jastrow at his villa in Siena. The episode continues with the murder of Father Martin after he promises to provide Slote with corroborating evidence through the German Foreign Office, which could be a nod to the origins of the actual Wannsee Protocol (the only surviving copy stems from the archives of the German Foreign Office).⁹³ Oddly, this episode introduces Eichmann, though there

91 Herman Wouk, Earl W. Wallace, Dan Curtis, *War and Remembrance*, Part II, Annotated Script, undated, presumably late 1985, in Dan Curtis Productions Records, Box 124, Folder 2, UCLA Library Performing Arts Special Collections, 31.

92 Herman Wouk, Earl W. Wallace, Dan Curtis, *War and Remembrance*, Part II, Second Draft, April 23, 1985, in Dan Curtis Productions Records, Box 122, Folder 3, UCLA Library Performing Arts Special Collections, 35.

93 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 3.

is no mention of his connection with the Wannsee Conference. The script describes him as “a professional bureaucrat” with “pale soft hands” but also as a “fanatical Nazi,” which helps its depiction of Eichmann stand out from other filmic depictions of him as an unideological bureaucrat.⁹⁴ *War and Remembrance* also portrays Eichmann as a stereotypical Nazi – a creepy, possibly perverted individual who compares wooing Italy with seducing a virgin.⁹⁵

Curiously, the word “Wannsee” or names of the conference participants are not mentioned at all during this episode (though they are in the script), but a scene in Episode 4 explicitly refers to the documents as the “Wannsee Conference photostats.” In this episode, Tuttle reveals that he had sent the documents to the State Department’s European division; however, they ignored it. His motivation was the release of a report by the Polish government in exile (most likely the Kar-ski Report). Tuttle sends Slote back to Washington as a courier. In Episode 6, Slote delivers the documents to his colleagues in D.C. and expresses outrage at what he deems a “castrated” Allied joint statement on German atrocities. His colleague accuses him of being overly emotional. Slote is then called into a meeting with Breckinridge Long (Eddie Albert). In a menacing scene, Long attempts to convert Slote to his viewpoint and argues that the State Department is restricted by regulations preventing Jewish refugees from entering the country. Slote points out that visa requirements such as good conduct certificates from the German police can be waived. Long states that he is not an antisemite and that the press has libeled him as such. Long sidesteps Slote’s critique of the joint statement and says that his British counterpart, Anthony Eden, drafted the statement and that the Allies should help “the Jewish race within the law.” Immediately afterwards, Slote has dinner with “Pug” Henry and begs him to do anything within his power to get his daughter-in-law Natalie out of Europe before she is deported to a concentration camp. After this scene, the Wannsee Protocol disappears from the plotline and a disillusioned Slote quits the State Department and joins the OSS. He is later killed while on a mission in Normandy.

This alternative history of the Wannsee Protocol, in which US State Department investigators come into possession of copies and use it to try to warn their superiors about the true scale of the German mass murder program, is illustrative of the Wannsee Conference’s place in American popular culture during this pe-

94 Herman Wouk, Earl W. Wallace, Dan Curtis, *War and Remembrance*, Part II, Final Shooting Script September 1985, July 28, 1986 Revision, in Dan Curtis Productions Records, Box 98, Folder 3, UCLA Library Performing Arts Special Collections, 144.

95 Herman Wouk, Earl W. Wallace, Dan Curtis, *War and Remembrance*, Part II, Final Shooting Script September 1985, September 24, 1985, in Dan Curtis Productions Records, Box 98, Folder 3, UCLA Library Performing Arts Special Collections, 145.

riod. First, the protocol is handled as a “smoking gun” type document that clearly spells out a plan for genocide; this is how *The New York Times* portrayed the conference when Heydrich’s invitation letters to Otto Hofmann, chief of the SS Race and Settlement Office, were first discovered in 1945.⁹⁶ Because *War and Remembrance* was published in 1978, Wouk did not have access to later historiography that analyzed the conference in detail, but he undoubtedly relied on his friend Raul Hilberg’s analysis of it in *The Destruction of the European Jews*.

Second, the multiple references to *Mein Kampf* (and additionally, the many scenes of Hitler ranting and raving at his generals throughout the series) indicate an intentionalist position regarding the unfolding of the Holocaust; this section contrasts with Hilberg’s status as a pioneer of the functionalist school of Holocaust research. Most notably for its time, the series’ depiction of the US State Department and Breckinridge Long echoes David S. Wyman’s *The Abandonment of the Jews*, which portrays Long as an “extreme nativist” and possible antisemite who did everything in his power to limit Jewish immigration.⁹⁷ The rights agreement between Herman Wouk and the production company includes a clause stating that the miniseries adaptation of Wouk’s novel must include several aspects from the novel, including “[t]he acquiring by Leslie Slote of the Wannsee Protocol; his effort to convince American authorities of the Final Solution; his resignation from the Foreign Service after the Bermuda Conference, and the circumstances of his death as a Jewburgh.”⁹⁸ The Austrian exile Peter Zinner edited *War and Remembrance* alongside his daughter Katina. One sentence in Wouk’s novels reads like a pitch for the HBO’s later *Conspiracy/Complicity* project, in which Zinner had: “. . . history will say that the Jews of Europe were destroyed between the hammer of the Wannsee Conference and the anvil of the Bermuda Conference.”⁹⁹

War and Remembrance is an important forerunner to later high-budget, epic depictions of World War II in miniseries format such as *Band of Brothers* (2001), *The Pacific* (2010), and *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (2013) and also serves as an example of the trend of network television miniseries produced during a boom in the genre between the mid-1970s and early 1990s. Its existence is evidence that

⁹⁶ “Nazi Jewish Files Found: Berlin Papers Confirm Aim to Exterminate People in Europe,” *The New York Times*, August 21, 1945, in Norbert Kampe and Peter Klein, eds., *Die Wannsee-Konferenz am 20. Januar 1942: Dokumente Forschungsstand Kontroversen*, (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013), 61–62.

⁹⁷ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 190–191.

⁹⁸ Fragment of purchase agreement between Herman Wouk and Paramount Pictures, July 7, 1983, in Dan Curtis Productions Records, Box 117, Folder 2, UCLA Library Performing Arts Special Collections, 16.

⁹⁹ Wouk, *War and Remembrance* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1980), 752.

present-day marketing copy touting the high-budget, epic “originality” of depictions of the war on television are nothing more than hype. While hampered by its length and mammoth number of characters, the series does manage to depict Allied indifference towards the Holocaust in a relatively sober manner – even if the subplot about the Wannsee Protocol is complete fiction. However, it undeniably suffers from clichéd Reagan-era flag-waving patriotism and the many soap-operatic aspects of its plot and dialogue, much more so than the critiques leveled at *Holocaust* could claim. Nevertheless, the series’ engagement with the Holocaust is one of its strengths – but also potentially goes too far. *War and Remembrance*’s graphic depiction of the Holocaust makes it unique among television productions. It brazenly violates taboos of “Holocaust piety” by filming at the Auschwitz memorial and showing the full killing process in a gas chamber – something that is still taboo in filmmaking today.¹⁰⁰ As Aaron Kerner has noted, such scenes are rare in Holocaust film.¹⁰¹ Indeed, some critics labeled the 2015 Hungarian Auschwitz drama *Son of Saul* “pornography” because the film, which has no such scene inside a gas chamber, shows the gas chamber doors and confronts the audience with the off-screen victims’ screaming and pounding on the doors.¹⁰² Out of all of the big-budget productions analyzed in this study, *War and Remembrance* is the most violent and arguably least remembered.

The historical miniseries format has returned; the BBC series *World on Fire* (2019–2023) is somewhat of a spiritual successor to *War and Remembrance*, albeit with a more international (British, American, French, Polish, and German) cast of characters. *World on Fire*, like *War and Remembrance*, suffers because it has an impossible task: balancing a large list of characters located all across the globe. These series simply have too many characters and cannot fulfill their goals of depicting the war in a comprehensive manner. In *War and Remembrance*, events on the Eastern Front and in Japan, for example, are neglected while the series spends what seems like an inordinate amount of time on the US Navy. *World on Fire* limits itself to the European theater in order to mitigate the problem. Unlike *Band of Brothers*, a miniseries which limits itself to the story of a single American rifle

100 For a definition and discussion of “Holocaust piety” in film, see Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43–48.

101 Aaron Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 36.

102 See Susan Vahabzadeh, “Kinofilm ‘Son of Saul’ - Pornografie des Schmerzes,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/kinofilm-son-of-saul-pornografie-des-schmerzes-1.2897645> and Pau Bosch Santos, “Soft Porn for Refined People: *Son of Saul* within the History of Holocaust Representation,” *East European Film Bulletin* (blog), January 6, 2018, <https://eefb.org/perspectives/son-of-saul-within-the-history-of-holocaust-representation/>.

company, the vast scope of this style of historical miniseries leads to shifts between locations and characters at a rate that can almost cause whiplash. *Holocaust* and *War and Remembrance* try to solve this problem through the conceit of focusing on two fictional families who happen to be at the center of historical events, much in the vein of epic historical novels like *War and Peace*. These two sprawling, epic miniseries are the polar opposites of the three chamber plays – *The Wannsee Conference*, *Conspiracy*, and *The Conference* – discussed in detail below, which restrict themselves to depicting the Wannsee Conference itself in its entirety. In this respect, these productions are unable to get at what makes the three Wannsee movies so compelling – by hyper-focusing on fictional individuals, they neglect the real people, ideas, structures, and organizations that made that history happen.

4 The Wannsee Conference as Detective Story: *Fatherland*

Fatherland, a 1994 HBO film based on Robert Harris' 1992 novel of the same name, uses the Wannsee Protocol as evidence in a murder investigation. *Fatherland* takes place in an alternative history, in 1960s Berlin. Nazi Germany has won the Second World War and presides over a united Europe. The protagonist, Xavier March (Rutger Hauer) is a *Kriminalpolizei* detective and member of the SS. During the course of a murder investigation, March discovers that the Gestapo is behind the murders of seemingly unrelated victims. These victims turn out to be officials who had attended the Wannsee Conference. In this story, the Holocaust has been kept secret from most Germans and Heydrich (who has survived the war in this story) is now eliminating those officials who had knowledge of its existence. The film adaptation of *Fatherland* has drawn considerably less critical and academic attention than Robert Harris' novel, probably because HBO's adaptation was a critical failure. Despite its cinematic failure, *Fatherland* is important to this study because of the way it uses the Wannsee Protocol: much like it did for Allied prosecutors, the protocol here serves as evidence of a crime. Only in this story, it functions as evidence on two levels: for the detective plotline, it serves as evidence that the murder victims are connected. On the larger, alternate history track, the protocol serves as documentary evidence of a massive crime that the Nazi regime has covered up and will kill to maintain its secrecy. Much like it does in *War and Remembrance*, the protocol functions as a documentary "smoking gun" for the Holocaust and the characters seek to reveal its forbidden knowledge to the proper authorities. Only in *Fatherland*, the authorities are the ones keeping the document secret. The novel and film retain a classic hardboiled tone; much as

in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, over the course of his investigation, the detective March discovers that he too is "part of the nastiness now."¹⁰³

In *Fatherland*, detective March initially discovers the body of Josef Bühler floating in the River Havel. As the story progresses, he learns that former *Staatssekretär* Dr. Wilhelm Stuckart has "committed suicide," and that former Foreign Office official Martin Luther is on the run. He later uncovers a list of Wannsee participants. All besides Martin Luther and Heydrich have died, most in recent years. After meeting American journalist Charlie Maguire (Miranda Richardson), March's investigation uncovers the fact that Bühler, Stuckart, and Luther sought to inform the new American president, Joseph Kennedy (in this alternate history, it is John F. Kennedy's anti-Semitic father who has won the 1960 presidential election), about the true fate of Europe's Jews. President Kennedy is scheduled to visit Berlin, which would signify normalized relations between the United States and Nazi Germany. Heydrich and his minions, including Odilo Globočnik, are racing against time to prevent the group from getting the word out and sabotaging the regime's diplomatic coup. Through various plot intrigues which involve visits to Swiss banks and the *Reichsarchiv*, the characters learn about the Holocaust and the existence of death camps like Auschwitz and Belżec. The archivist Arlene Schmuland argues that authors like Harris "equate research into archives with the opening of gravesites" and that "archival records represent not only dead files, but ones that are deliberately buried."¹⁰⁴ Arlene Schmuland notes that *Fatherland* engages in a common literary device of discovered archival material "play[ing] an important role in political events."¹⁰⁵

The film ends when March is killed in a shootout with the Gestapo as Charlie escapes. In the novel's climactic sequence, March travels to the site of Auschwitz II (Birkenau) and finds nothing except traces of destroyed buildings as Gestapo agents close in. Meanwhile, Charlie manages to inform the Kennedy administration, leading to the cancelation of his impending meeting. This contrasts with the novel, where she escapes to Switzerland with a briefcase full of documents, including the protocol, but whether she succeeds in informing the American government remains unclear.

Robert Harris distanced himself from the film adaptation of his novel: "My first novel, *Fatherland*, was made into a very bad film."¹⁰⁶ Michael Geisler includes the film in a subset of "de-historicized" Holocaust films, which employ ac-

¹⁰³ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2002), 230.

¹⁰⁴ Arlene Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography," *The American Archivist* 62, no. 1 (1999): 45.

¹⁰⁵ Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction," 48.

¹⁰⁶ Charlotte Philby, "Hollywood Ate My Novel," *The Independent*, February 18, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/hollywood-ate-my-novel-novelists-reveal-what-it-s-like-to-have-their-book-turned-into-a-movie-6940772.html>.

tual photographic evidence of the Holocaust or Nazi imagery (swastikas, SS uniforms) as devices for completely fictional plots that use Nazism to represent absolute evil instead of historical realities. For him, *Fatherland*'s instrumentalization of the Holocaust for an alternate history detective story is "trivialization," not a "historical" portrayal like *Holocaust* or *Schindler's List*.¹⁰⁷ He argues that in contrast with more historically-grounded productions, *Fatherland* is part of a subset of films whose fast-and-loose playing with the facts and morality (its protagonist is a member of the SS, after all) is dangerous, because "[f]rom here, it is a short leap of the imagination to question the historical accuracy of the Holocaust in the interest of an agenda of denial or relativization" and thus, the film engages in a "fictional reevaluation[s] of the SS."¹⁰⁸ For him, the danger here lies in how the imagery and figures of the Nazi past have been removed from their historical contexts and instead serve as "floating, nomadic signifiers of evil." He compares these de-historicized images of the SS with that of Erik Dorf and *Holocaust*, arguing that the latter is clearly preferable to the former.¹⁰⁹ Holocaust scholar Gavriel Rosenfeld is more open to *Fatherland*, noting that the film functions as a "critique of isolationism."¹¹⁰ It is in this vein that the Wannsee Protocol in *Fatherland* occupies a similar function to that in *War and Remembrance*: it serves as evidence to persuade the United States to end its isolationist stance and its indifference to the fate of European Jews. For Rosenfeld, HBO's *Fatherland* is part of a wider American debate between interventionism and isolationism that appeared in various alternate histories during the 1990s.¹¹¹

Ron Hutchinson's October 1993 *Fatherland* teleplay departs from the novel in many ways, but one key difference is the absence of the Wannsee Protocol. The script notes that the protocol existed but that Heydrich destroyed it. Only the invitations to the conference remain, as well as a fictional photograph of the Wannsee Conference participants standing in front of the villa.¹¹² Instead, March finds photos of corpses and receipts for Zyklon B.¹¹³ One aspect missing from most critiques of *Fatherland* evidenced by the screenplay drafts is the writer's attempt to draw parallels between the 1960s US and a fictional Nazi Germany in this fictional

107 Michael E. Geisler, "If the Shoe Fits . . . Germans as Nazis on U.S. Television," *German Politics & Society* 13, no. 3 (36) (1995): 173–189, 181.

108 Geisler, "If the Shoe Fits," 182.

109 Geisler, "If the Shoe Fits," 183.

110 Gavriel Rosenfeld, "Why Do We Ask 'What If?' Reflections on the Function of Alternate History," *History and Theory* 41, no. 4 (2002): 90–103, 98.

111 Rosenfeld, "Why Do We Ask 'What If?'," 97–98.

112 Ron Hutchinson, "Fatherland – Teleplay by Ron Hutchinson", October 25, 1993, in Dennis Bishop Papers, Box 209, Folder 2, UCLA Library Performing Arts Special Collections, 61–62.

113 Ron Hutchinson, "Fatherland – Teleplay by Ron Hutchinson," 95–96.

timeline. Hutchinson's screenplay repeatedly references the Vietnam War, segregation, and a United States under the leadership of Joseph Kennedy, the "appeaser of and apologist for the dictators."¹¹⁴ *Fatherland* was not simply a movie about clichéd Nazis, but originally intended to provoke self-reflection on the part of American audiences. An earlier draft of the screenplay credited to Stanley Weiser (both Weiser and Hutchinson received writing credits for the film) sticks closer to Harris' novel, with March discussing the protocol and driving to Auschwitz, which is absent from Hutchinson's version.¹¹⁵ The final cut of *Fatherland* includes more discussion of the Wannsee Conference than either script draft available in the University of California archives. In a later study of alternate histories and Nazism, Gavriel Rosenfeld notes that the HBO adaptation strayed from Harris' novel due to "the nakedly patriotic happy ending forced upon the film by the network executives."¹¹⁶ In the script drafts available in the UCLA archives, no direct evidence of network interference is present, but Ron Hutchinson's draft of the ending is more patriotic than Weiser's. Hutchinson's teleplay ends with March committing suicide and the American ambassador, acting on March's information, canceling Kennedy's meeting with Hitler.¹¹⁷ In contrast, Weiser's version ends with the *New York Times* editorial board vowing to reveal the information March died to reveal.¹¹⁸ Both screenplay versions and the final cut, even if they nod to 1930s American isolationism, ultimately insert faith in American institutions – whether governmental or the fourth estate – into a story where these institutions have no interest in the truth getting out.

Most critical and academic focus on *Fatherland* is concerned with Harris' novel. In her book on British portrayals of Nazi Germany, the Germanist and critic Petra Rau is more forgiving of *Fatherland* than Geisler, but not as much as is Rosenfeld. For her, documents such as the Wannsee Protocol function in the novel as a "material body of evidence," but because victims' voices are absent, this sole focus on Nazi documentation causes the readers to view "[the Shoah] with the perpetrators' eyes: 'such energy, such dedication.'"¹¹⁹ Rau also finds that

114 Ron Hutchinson, "Fatherland – Teleplay by Ron Hutchinson," 50. For a nuanced discussion of Ambassador Joseph Kennedy Sr. and his interwar appeasement, see Fredrik Logevall, *JFK: Volume 1: 1917–1956* (London: Viking, 2020).

115 Stanley Weiser, "Fatherland – Teleplay by Stanley Weiser," August 18, 1993, in Dennis Bishop Papers, Box 209, Folder 2, UCLA Library Performing Arts Special Collections, 110–111.

116 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 156.

117 Ron Hutchinson, "Fatherland – Teleplay by Ron Hutchinson," 118–121.

118 Stanley Weiser, "Fatherland – Teleplay by Stanley Weiser," 121–122.

119 Petra Rau, *Our Nazis: Representations of Fascism in Contemporary Literature and Film* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 73, 82.

Harris conflates contemporary Germany with its Nazi predecessor and implies that Nazism is just below the Berlin Republic's democratic façade. For her, such associations and comparisons are tied up with the Eurosceptic movement in Britain and that the book "renders traditional Germanophobia respectable for a middle-aged generation."¹²⁰ Echoing Geisler, Rau also notes that "continental neo-Nazis" have embraced the novel, arguing that "finding this book gripping in Germany betrays right-wing leanings; finding it gripping in the UK is supposedly a reassurance of one's democratic normality."¹²¹ Nevertheless, Rau does not explain how Harris could be responsible for how readers from other cultures interpret his novel; it is also an exaggeration to say that German readers of the novel are most likely in the far right-wing camp. In a positive review, the transatlanticist German publisher Josef Joffe instead saw *Fatherland* as an allegory of Western détente towards the Soviet Union and China.¹²² In contrast with both, Rosenfeld argues that while Harris analogized both the recently-collapsed Soviet Union and reunified Germany, he was mainly concerned with "the heightened sense of British decline . . . using the scenario of a Nazi wartime victory to engage in self-critique."¹²³ For Rosenfeld, Harris' novel is important for the attention it devotes to Allied collaboration and complicity, it is an example of "the pessimism required to de-heroize the British" – and, by extension, the Americans.¹²⁴

When it comes to the Wannsee Conference, Harris relies on the archival record to move the plot forward. Throughout the novel, Harris quotes from historical documents, whether the Wannsee Protocol or extracts from Himmler's 1943 Posen speech. Just as in *War and Remembrance*, the copy of the protocol stems from Martin Luther and the Foreign Office, which is historically correct. It is important to also keep in mind that protocols were marked top secret (*Geheime Reichssache*) and each copy was numbered. March initially locates Heydrich's invitation letter to the conference, which Harris reprints in full. It is in this chapter, where March draws the connections between the murders and notes that other participants have died under mysterious circumstances in the recent past.¹²⁵ In contrast with *Holocaust*, Harris notes the incongruity of the setting with the subject matter:

He looked back at the house. His mother, a firm believer in ghosts, used to tell him that brickwork and plaster soaked up history, stored what they had witnessed, like a sponge. Since then March had seen his share of places in which evil had been done and he did not

¹²⁰ Rau, *Our Nazis*, 84.

¹²¹ Rau, *Our Nazis*, 83.

¹²² Josef Joffe, "The Mother of All Fatherlands," *The National Interest*, no. 29 (1992): 86–87.

¹²³ Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made*, 80–81.

¹²⁴ Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made*, 81.

¹²⁵ Robert Harris, *Fatherland: 20th Anniversary Edition* (London: Arrow, 2012), 335–340.

believe it. There was nothing especially wicked about Am grossen Wannsee 56/58. It was just a large, businessman's mansion, now converted into a girls' school . . .¹²⁶

In his description of the setting, Harris nevertheless repeats a well-worn historical falsehood about the villa. He erroneously states that the villa “housed the German headquarters of Interpol” and that it was built in the nineteenth century.¹²⁷ At the novel's end, the history-soaked bricks of the Wannsee villa are contrasted with a brick March finds at Auschwitz. During an interrogation, Globočnik taunts March, saying “not even a brick” from the death camps remains and therefore his attempt to expose Nazi crimes is in vain.

The story is reaching its climax by the time March finds the protocol. Harris quotes from the protocol at length and invents a redacted page, a bit of historical invention which certainly leans credence toward Geisler's critique about alternate histories. This fictional page is attributed to Eichmann and is clearly a way to incorporate Eichmann's subsequent statements about participants speaking quite frankly about killing methods during the conference, something that is absent from the protocol.¹²⁸ The fictional page describes mass shootings, gas vans, and gas chambers at Auschwitz: “against this, in the margin, Heydrich had written ‘No!’.” This fictional page is then condensed into the phrase “there was a discussion of the various types of solution possibilities” and “[t]hus sanitised, the minutes were fit for the archives.”¹²⁹ In this way, *Fatherland* uses the Wannsee Protocol differently from *War and Remembrance*. In *War and Remembrance*, the document is direct evidence of genocide, a smoking gun that is obvious to all except those American officials who are willfully in denial. In *Fatherland*, the document's constructed, edited nature is made apparent – the protocol only functions as a smoking gun by virtue of its inclusion with other documents of genocide: train timetables, eyewitness reports, and diagrams of Auschwitz. Neither production repeats the myth that Wannsee was where “the” decision about the Holocaust was made; they instead use the protocol as proof of the diabolical, perverse nature of Nazi planning – as Leslie Slote observes about Germans putting evil plans on paper. In Wouk's novel, a German general disingenuously argues that all nations have something like the Wannsee Protocol, but “[o]nly Germany suffered the ignominy of having her records unveiled. Only Germany was stripped naked.”¹³⁰

126 Harris, *Fatherland*, 388.

127 Harris, *Fatherland*, 384.

128 Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting*, 99.

129 Harris, *Fatherland*, 421–424.

130 Wouk, *War and Remembrance*, 160.

As an alternate history, *Fatherland* uses the Wannsee Conference as a plot device for its detective story set in a 1960s Nazi Berlin. From a post-2016 perspective, the film also seems to prefigure later alternate history television series depicting either a different outcome of the Second World War, such as the Amazon series *The Man in the High Castle* (2015–2019) or the BBC series *SS-GB* (2017), or a homegrown American fascist movement, exemplified by HBO's *The Plot Against America* (2020). But as Rosenfeld has shown, it was part of a larger, international wave of alternate histories about Nazi victory.¹³¹ *Fatherland* exemplifies Anglo-American anxieties about a reunified Germany in the post–Cold War Era, just as these later series exemplify our own anxieties about a resurgent nationalist right.

Engineer of Death, *Holocaust*, *War and Remembrance*, and *Fatherland* each depict the Wannsee Conference as a key turning point in the history of the Holocaust. These four productions illustrate the presence of the Wannsee Conference in American popular culture and show it was not an obscure event by any means. *Engineer of Death* uses the Wannsee Conference to show audiences how Eichmann committed his crimes and why he was about to be put on trial in Israel. *Holocaust* integrates the conference into a functionalist narrative about SS functionaries trying to streamline the previously disjointed killing actions in the occupied Soviet Union. *War and Remembrance* uses an alternative history of the Wannsee Protocol to illustrate American indifference to the fate of European Jews and the futile efforts of those who tried to raise awareness of the Holocaust. Wouk's novel goes further and directly connects Wannsee with the 1943 Bermuda Conference and Allied "complicity," a topic that *War and Remembrance* editor Peter Zinner and others at HBO continued exploring during the 1990s and early 2000s, when they attempted to produce *Complicity* as either a sequel or companion film to *Conspiracy* or to combine both productions into a 3-hour consecutive epic telling the twin stories of these conferences. *Holocaust* and *War and Remembrance* also serve as examples of the big-budget, historical family miniseries genre that was popular during the 1970s and 1980s, only to fall by the wayside and return after the turn of the millennium. *Fatherland* is less directly relevant to later depictions of Wannsee, but nevertheless shows that HBO had previously thematized the Wannsee Conference, and it serves as a key early example of alternate television histories depicting a victorious Nazi Germany. Although these productions are of varying quality, they attracted large audiences and, in the case of *Holocaust*, influenced a global recalibration of Holocaust remembrance; they certainly were part of the shift to a global "cosmopolitan memory" noted by Daniel

¹³¹ Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made*.

Levy and Natan Sznaider.¹³² *War and Remembrance* also marks a turn towards even more graphically violent depictions of the Holocaust (as exemplified by *Schindler's List* and *The Pianist*); its production history, especially the section of the series shot in Auschwitz, certainly merits more attention. These productions are all aware of the significance of the Wannsee Conference for the history of the Holocaust, but none investigate it in depth. It was there as an icon, as part of what Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann has called Wannsee's "cultural afterlife," but these productions were more interested in the conference as either shorthand for bureaucratic murder or in its protocol as a smoking gun document proving that the genocide indeed happened.¹³³ Here, Wannsee is not used to investigate how the Nazi government and ideology functioned, but is instead merely used as a backdrop.

Some West German filmmakers, such as Edgar Reitz and Paul Mommertz, saw their work as a corrective to what they considered the trivializations or simplifications of *Holocaust*. This study now turns to the production histories of the West German television films *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror* (1977) and *The Wannsee Conference* (1984), which help illustrate a shift in West German television and memory culture during the 1970s and 1980s. These television productions were in some ways responses to "fictionalized" and more overtly dramatic productions like *Holocaust* and sought to portray Holocaust perpetrators in a more sober, rational light based on the latest historiography. More importantly, they sought to confront a society in which many perpetrators still lived normal, unassuming lives. These filmic Nazis would not be composite characters like Erik Dorf – they were your neighbors.

132 See Levy and Sznaider, "Memory Unbound."

133 Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Symbolort und Ikone," 202.

Chapter 2

Psychoanalyzing Nazi Perpetrators on Television – *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror* (1977)

In 1977, ZDF aired *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror* [*Reinhard Heydrich – Manager des Terrors*],¹ a biopic directed by Heinz Schirk and written by Paul Mommertz. Dietrich Mattausch and Friedrich G. Beckhaus, who play Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Müller, would go on to reprise their roles in Schirk and Mommertz's 1984 film *The Wannsee Conference*. Produced by Hans Günther Im-lau's production company Sator Film and filmed in Studio Hamburg, *Manager of Terror* depicts Heydrich's life through a series of vignettes that illustrate the different stages of his biography and aspects of his personality. These vignettes are intercut with narrated scenes psychoanalyzing Heydrich's behavior. In contrast with their later film on the Wannsee Conference, *Manager of Terror* frequently utilizes archival footage and photographs. The film is split into three sections that depict the stages of Heydrich's biography: The Origin (Der Ursprung), The Rise (Der Aufstieg) and The Conflict (Der Zwiespalt). *Manager of Terror* is an outlier in West German television history, but not because it is a film focusing on a Holocaust perpetrator. West German Holocaust dramas mostly focused on victims, rescue, and resistance. This television film is an outlier because it is explicitly an experiment in filmic psychohistory; a criminology professor comments on the films' events and milestones in Heydrich's biography throughout the film to create a "historical psychogram" of its protagonist. The film also represents an important stage on the path to Mommertz and Schirk's later film about the Wannsee Conference. To this day, ZDF has not released *Manager of Terror* in either physical or digital formats.²

Several scenes also prefigure key parts of NBC's *Holocaust*, as well as later depictions of Heydrich, such as *The Man with the Iron Heart* (2017). While only one brief scene portrays the Wannsee Conference, *Manager of Terror* is the earliest German-language depiction of the conference in dramatic film. Although not as groundbreaking or dramatically (and historically) convincing as *The Wannsee Conference*, *Manager of Terror* exemplifies West German television's struggle

¹ For the sake of brevity, I will refer to the film as *Manager of Terror* in the rest of this chapter.

² The author is grateful to the Joseph Wulf Mediothek at the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial and to Education Site for granting access to a copy of the film.

with depicting the Holocaust during the late 1970s. It is an example of a public television film going against the mainstream of West German historical television programming trends and, even more importantly, shows that, although such programming had not yet penetrated the West German consciousness, West German television networks had been engaging with the Holocaust even before the premiere of NBC's miniseries on ARD in January 1979.

Holocaust was a milestone in West German memory culture and made the term "Holocaust" part of the common lexicon. Nevertheless, *Holocaust* was not the first example of television programming in West Germany that explored Nazi crimes. West German public television stations had already been airing programming about the Nazi period before *Holocaust*'s 1978 premiere. During a thirty-year period (1954–1984), before the introduction of private television networks, West German public television channels and their executives held a monopoly and, in addition to news and entertainment, also "defined the population's educational needs, and, among many other items, this included the task of furthering Vergangenheitsbewältigung."³ Referencing the top-down nature of this programming, film and television historian Wulf Kansteiner defines this period as one of "patriarchal television" which included high-quality historical dramas which aired in primetime slots. This type of historical programming fell by the wayside by the late 1980s as a consequence of the rise of private television networks and decreased state funding.⁴ *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror* and *The Wannsee Conference* are part of this brief wave of "patriarchal television" which helped fulfill the networks' "educational mission" or *Bildungsauftrag*. Kansteiner notes an uptick in such programming on the public television network ZDF during the 1970s which predates *Holocaust*. Most of these programs focused on survivors and rescue.⁵ Kansteiner argues that "according to its television image in the Federal Republic, the Holocaust was a crime without perpetrators and bystanders."⁶ Perpetrator-focused productions like *The Wannsee Conference* or the Rudolf Höss biopic *Aus einem deutschen Leben* (1977) were outliers during this period. Kansteiner's argument is underscored by the muted reception perpetrator-focused productions like *Manager of Terror* and *The Wannsee Conference* received in West Germany. Later statements by Paul Mommertz about the lack of enthusiasm shown by ARD and Bayerischer Rundfunk for *The Wannsee Conference*, such as

3 Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics After Auschwitz* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), 110.

4 Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 110–111.

5 Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 115–116.

6 Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 122.

the lackluster nature both of the promotional campaign and the educational supplements made available, further bolstered Kansteiner's claim.⁷

Kansteiner has noted that in contrast to ARD, which broadcasted *Holocaust*, ZDF took a more conservative tack and rarely depicted Nazi perpetrators outside of a "handful" of productions which "probed deeper into the gray, undefined collective of perpetrators who appeared on screen." He states that ZDF often relegated these productions to time slots that received low audience numbers. In his most damning critique of West German television's attitude towards the Holocaust, Kansteiner notes that "[t]he conscious or unconscious decision of television producers to spare the feelings of audience members and political supervisors highlights the political limits of Vergangenheitsbewältigung and raises the question of the extent to which the medium of television can function as a vehicle of social and cultural reform."⁸ Thus, explicitly antifascist perpetrator-focused productions like *Manager of Terror* and *The Wannsee Conference* went against the more conservative trends of West German television by explicitly depicting Nazi perpetrators as human beings, thereby confronting audiences with their own pasts – and their possible complicity. It is therefore little wonder that both films suffered ambivalent or negative reception upon their release. These types of films were outliers during a period of historical programming characterized by evading critical engagement with questions around the actions of perpetrators and the complicity of bystanders; an era focused on piety towards the victims and an absence of self-critical reflection.

The Munich-based screenwriter Paul Mommertz focused on the Nazi period for his entire career. A native of Aachen, trained historian, and former writer for *Simplicissimus*, Mommertz began writing plays during the 1960s, beginning with his 1963 play *Aktion T4*, which explores a family swept up in the Nazi program of euthanizing mentally ill and disabled persons. This play was an early example of stage productions that explored the Holocaust and has been overshadowed by more prominent works such as Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (1963) and Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* (1965). Mommertz claims that a postwar mental illness in his family, as well as the death of a mentally ill classmate during the war, inspired his interest in the topic of the euthanasia program.⁹ After the premiere of *Aktion T4*, he began writing historical dramas for television, including productions such as *Walther Rathenau – Anatomie eines Attentats* (1965), the Trotsky-themed *Das Attentat – Tod im Exil* (1967), and *Der Pedell* (1970), which depicted

7 Interview with Paul Mommertz, October 19, 2019, 30:13–32:33

8 Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 125.

9 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 0:22–2:34.

Jakob Schmid and his denunciation of the Scholl siblings, leaders of the White Rose resistance cell. On his website, Mommertz mentions his lifelong engagement with the Second World War and the Holocaust: “My work was, of course, influenced by my experiences as a youth: by the, at the time, very strong environment of Catholicism in the Rhineland, the air war between 1942 and 1945, where I not only lost my father, but also classmates, and through National Socialism.”¹⁰ In an interview, Mommertz credits an Allied re-education newsreel with reshaping his worldview and influencing his career:

Then [at the end of the war], the cinemas were very quickly there again. Culture in general was there from the first day. Everything was destroyed, there was nothing except for culture. The libraries were there, the theaters were open and they now showed something completely different. Now came world theater and world literature and cinema. Instead of *Die Deutsche Wochenschau*, another [newsreel] ran. I went to the cinema to see some sort of tralala movie, some sort of comedy – and then I saw the new *Wochenschau* [newsreel]. And they took their time and showed images from the concentration camps, the famous thing. I saw it there for the first time. And I have to say that it blew me away, and that was my topic from there on out. I would like to say that I left the theater and wasn’t able to watch the main attraction. But I don’t think that was the case. Its scope must have become clear to me in the course of the day and week. Then of course you felt incredibly ashamed for your dear Fatherland [laughs].¹¹

Mommertz and the director Heinz Schirk belonged to a generation which historian Dirk Moses dubbed the “forty-fivers,” a play on the “sixty-eighter” term which refers to West German left-wing activists from the 1968 student movement. Forty-fivers are also sometimes dubbed the *Flakhelfer* or Hitler Youth generation.¹² According to Moses, the forty-fivers “were between fifteen and twenty-five years of age at the end of the war” and, in the 1960s, “commenced the task of subjecting the national intellectual traditions to a searching critique in light of their experience of the rupture of 1945.”¹³ Forty-fivers like Mommertz considered the German defeat and renewal of democracy “the turning point of their lives and the beginning of their own (and Germany’s) intellectual and emotional (*geistige*) reorientation.”¹⁴ For historian Michael Kater, forty-fivers in the West German cultural sphere like Martin Walser tended to produce docudramas for the stage

10 <http://www.paul-mommertz.de/lebenslauf.html>, Accessed August 20, 2020.

11 Interview with Paul Mommertz, October 19, 2019. 14:10–16:26.

12 A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 55.

13 Moses, *German Intellectuals*, 9.

14 Moses, *German Intellectuals*, 51.

which “reflected on the Nazis amid their crimes.”¹⁵ Kater also discusses postwar playwrights Hochhuth and Weiss, arguing that they tried to fill the silences created by West German historians, who they felt avoided discussing the Holocaust.¹⁶ With his television docudramas, Paul Mommertz would also try to close that gap and follow in the footsteps of Weiss and Hochhuth.

1 Historical Advisor Shlomo Aronson

Little production material for *Manager of Terror* has survived. Unlike his practices for his later film *The Wannsee Conference*, Paul Mommertz only saved three letters from the Israeli historian Shlomo Aronson regarding *Manager of Terror*. Other material, such as the script, production correspondence, memos, drafts, and bibliographies are absent from his archive. Mommertz used Aronson’s study *Reinhard Heydrich und die Frühgeschichte von Gestapo und SD* as one of his key sources for the film. One early scene, in which Heydrich’s parents express shock at their young son having climbed onto his school’s roof in order to prove his fearlessness, is taken almost verbatim from a passage in Aronson’s book.¹⁷ However, Aronson’s study of Heydrich, the SD, and Gestapo stops in 1935, so Mommertz could not have solely relied on his work. Mommertz corresponded with Aronson during preproduction of *Manager of Terror* and throughout the preproduction of *The Wannsee Conference*. Aronson is an uncredited historical advisor for *Manager of Terror* and the available correspondence confirms this status. The first Aronson letter, dated August 7, 1975, answers questions Mommertz had posed in a previous letter dated July 23, 1975. Mommertz’s original letter remains undiscovered.¹⁸ In this letter, Aronson wishes Mommertz luck in undertaking the

¹⁵ Michael H. Kater, *After the Nazis: The Story of Culture in West Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 176.

¹⁶ Kater, *After the Nazis*, 180–181. See also his discussion of Alexander Kluge, 186–187.

¹⁷ Shlomo Aronson, *Reinhard Heydrich und die Frühgeschichte von Gestapo und SD* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1971), 22–23.

¹⁸ Shlomo Aronson’s papers are currently housed at the Massuah Institute for Holocaust Studies in Tel Yitzhak, Israel, but are not yet available to researchers. The primary sources contained in the Paul Mommertz collection at the Joseph Wulf Mediothek are a mixture of original documents and photocopies; they are often unlabeled, so it is unclear what is an original and what is a photocopy. This is especially apparent with the correspondence contained within the collection. Due to the unavailability of Aronson’s papers, we often are presented with only one half of the correspondence and cannot be sure if some of Mommertz’s drafts were actually sent to Aronson. This becomes particularly important during my later discussion of *The Wannsee Conference*’s West German reception.

“very difficult project” of portraying Heydrich on film and recommends that Mommertz contact two historians: George Browder and Wolfgang Scheffler, both of whom specialized in Holocaust history, with Browder specifically specializing in the history of the SD and German police.¹⁹ There is no evidence that Mommertz contacted these historians, though Scheffler appears in the bibliography for his later film *The Wannsee Conference*.²⁰ Aronson also mentions the possibility of Mommertz visiting him in Jerusalem in order to access and photocopy primary sources housed at the Hebrew University, as well as a possible meeting between the two in West Berlin later that September.²¹ No record exists confirming when Mommertz traveled to Israel for research, but in an interview, he mentioned meeting Aronson in Israel and sending him drafts of his *Wannsee Conference* screenplay, which is confirmed by other letters contained in the Paul Mommertz collection.²²

The second letter from Aronson, dated March 24, 1976, is largely concerned with whether Heydrich suffered from long-term physical and mental problems due to a childhood case of encephalitis. Mommertz had written Aronson about this possibility on March 7, 1976, and, while Aronson was skeptical, he promised to contact the health authorities in Halle as well as potential family doctors or their archives in order to see if they possessed any of Heydrich’s medical records.²³ Aronson expressed understanding for Mommertz’s decision to consult the criminologist Armand Mergen in order to make “assessments of [Heydrich’s] temperament” and said that he had interest in a “medical investigation” of Heydrich, but that he was very cautious about making statements about Heydrich’s mental state in his book.²⁴

The final Aronson letter, dated May 24, 1976, is unusual because it is the only English-language correspondence found in Mommertz’s archive. This letter is a response to a screenplay draft sent on May 11, 1976 and consists of three major points. Aronson’s first comment is that the screenplay’s dialogue is too “modern”

19 Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Paul Mommertz, August 7, 1975, in Ordner 0, “Korrespondenz Paul Mommertz mit Shlomo Aronson,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

20 Paul Mommertz, “Literatur Drehbuch “Wannseekonferenz” in Ordner 2, Kapitel 1000 “Quellen (IMT, Literatur),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1983, 2.

21 Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Paul Mommertz, August 7, 1975, 2.

22 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 43:58–45:23.

23 Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Paul Mommertz, March 24, 1976, in Ordner 0, “Korrespondenz Paul Mommertz mit Shlomo Aronson,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

24 Aronson to Paul Mommertz, March 24, 1976, 1.

and “far from the traditional atmosphere both at Heydrichs’ [sic] home and especially in the navy.”²⁵ Because no script drafts are available, it is impossible to determine how much dialogue, if any, was changed in the final script. He also notes that the scene depicting Heydrich’s court-martial would have been judged by a “Full Court of Honor” instead of a single judge – this is the case in the final film, so Mommertz did, it seems, change this scene. Most notably, Aronson warns Mommertz about potential legal trouble if he kept the scene as in the script:

The chairman [of the court of honor] was probably Vice-Admiral Hansen, commander of the marine station North Sea who curiously enough may still be alive. Some other members of the court may also have survived. As I know these people very well, it is very easy to get involved with an angry reaction from them, which might end with judicial proceedings.²⁶

In his second point, Aronson continues this line of argument, but this time regarding Heydrich’s widow Lina: “. . . [T]he role you have created for her in the manuscript and many dialogues invented in this connection may also bring about a very tough reaction unless you first spoke to her.”²⁷ He also suggests that Mommertz consult Werner Best, Heydrich’s former SD deputy. No evidence suggests that Mommertz contacted the above-mentioned people. Mommertz has also denied contacting Lina Heydrich.²⁸ Aronson’s third and final comment is his most salient: “Many other dialogues . . . do not fit in with the historical style and seem to be overly simplistic. The atmosphere lacks the intense ideological bias on Himmler’s part, Heydrich’s seemingly clever brutality and the heavily traditional bureaucratic background.”²⁹ Compared with *The Wannsee Conference*, the dialogue in *Manager of Terror* seems less convincing. Aronson’s point about Himmler’s missing “intense ideological bias” is a key flaw of *Manager of Terror*; several scenes imply that Himmler had qualms about killing his opponents and that he let Heydrich bully him (his superior!) into submission. As far as the “traditional bureaucratic background,” the film’s reliance on inserts of psychological commentary handicaps the rest of the film, giving it a rushed, disjointed feel once Heydrich enters the SS – which was intentional. A promotional blurb in the *Süd-deutsche Zeitung* from July 22, 1977 describes the film as a “psychogram in scenes”

25 Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Paul Mommertz, May 24, 1976, in Ordner 0, “Korrespondenz Paul Mommertz mit Shlomo Aronson,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

26 Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Paul Mommertz, May 24, 1976, 1.

27 Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Paul Mommertz, May 24, 1976, 1.

28 Paul Mommertz, Email to Author, August 19, 2020.

29 Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Paul Mommertz, May 24, 1976, 2.

and quotes Mommertz saying that the film eschews a “continuous chronology.”³⁰ Curiously, the blurb claims that Heydrich would have been an unknown had it not been for his assassination. It describes the film as “supported by short inserts of commentary that intercut the scenes.”³¹ It also highlights that the first third of the film (The “Origin”) depicts the young Heydrich suffering from the fear of possible Jewish ancestry.

2 *Manager of Terror*

Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror opens with a shot of Lina Heydrich in mourning attire walking through a hallway flanked by SS guards. Some of them lead her into a room, where she watches footage of Heydrich’s state funeral after his assassination in Prague at the hands of Czechoslovak Special Operations Executive (SOE) agents Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík.³² This footage is from *Die deutsche Wochenschau* nr. 615, which aired on June 18, 1942.³³ The film shows the section of the newsreel depicting Heydrich’s funeral in full and does not interrupt the narrator’s (Harry Giese) shrill commentary. Heydrich’s funeral was “one of the most elaborate funeral ceremonies ever staged in the Third Reich” and was a key propaganda event. Hitler and Himmler eulogized him as a martyr and as an embodiment of the SS ideal.³⁴ The film then transitions to a shot of Heydrich’s death mask as a voiceover narration asks the audience: “Reinhard Heydrich. One of the most monstrous figures of the Hitler Regime, but little-known. Who was this man? Questions for historians. Questions for psychologists.” The narration intercuts the entire film and is its most unique feature when compared to other Holocaust films or historical films in general. It clearly has its roots in the subfield of psychohistory, which Wulf Kansteiner has identified as a key influence on 1970s ZDF programming about Nazi Germany and the Holocaust.³⁵ This narration, writ-

30 “Reinhard Hedyrich – Manager des Terrors,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Nr. 166, July 22, 1977, 30.

31 “Reinhard Hedyrich – Manager des Terrors,” 30.

32 Heydrich and his assassination have constantly been present in films, beginning with Fritz Lang and Bertolt Brecht’s *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943). Early drafts of the *Conspiracy/Complicity* double feature included Heydrich’s assassination as the turning point in the drama and recent films like *Anthropoid* (2016) and *The Man with the Iron Heart* (2017) center on Kubiš and Gabčík’s role in the assassination and its aftermath. The latter film is another example of a Heydrich biopic and will be discussed in this study’s final chapter.

33 See <https://archive.org/details/1942-06-18-Die-Deutsche-Wochenschau-615>

34 Gerwarth, *Hitler’s Hangman*, 278–279.

35 Wulf Kansteiner, “Visual *Wunderjahre*: German Television and the Disappearance of the Nazi Perpetrators” (Perpetrator Research in a Global Context / Täterforschung im globalen Kontext,

ten by University of Mainz professor Armand Mergen, focuses on Heydrich's inner life and motivations.³⁶ In an interview for this study, Heinz Schirk claimed that he narrated these passages himself.³⁷ Paul Mommertz states that the motivation for this technique stemmed from the complicated nature of Heydrich's personality: "Then I had the idea . . . I realized that this Heydrich is a complicated, most likely pathological character, and I would have to actually be able to speak with someone like a psychologist, psychotherapist, or depth psychologist."³⁸ This filmic experiment, which combines docudrama with academic commentary, is not present in Schirk and Mommertz's later collaboration on *The Wannsee Conference*. Heinz Schirk has stated that he wishes he had dispensed with the narration altogether.³⁹ While it certainly adds to the film's didactic aspirations, it veers the film into problematic territory. Its focus on Heydrich's "abnormal" personality characteristics dangerously perpetuates earlier historiographical and popular cultural trends, which depicted Holocaust perpetrators and the Nazi elite as "pathologically disturbed."⁴⁰ Heydrich's psychological background as a central theme – and the psychological makeup of Nazi leadership in general – were still common in historical and popular writing during the 1960s and 70s.⁴¹ One scholar of comparative fascism has noted that "[t]he use of psychoanalytic theories to explain 'aberrational' politics has been immensely tempting for scholars of European fascism as well as the American fringe, even among those who would otherwise abjure and even sneer at psycho-history as a branch of historical analysis."⁴² Ian Kershaw has noted that early biographies of Hitler and the 1970s psychohistorical trend represented the "apogée of 'Hitler-centrism,'" i.e. intentionalism, and that studies focusing on Hitler's personality fail to explain "how such a person could become ruler of Germany and how his ideological paranoia came to be implemented as government policy by non-paranoids and non-psychopaths in a sophis-

Berlin, 2009), https://www.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/9Z56AT%5B1%5D_kansteiner.pdf, Footnote 1.

³⁶ Interview with Paul Mommertz, March 14, 2019, 2:42–7:41.

³⁷ Interview with Heinz Schirk, April 5, 2019, 9:01–9:41.

³⁸ Interview with Paul Mommertz, March 14, 2019, 2:42–7:41.

³⁹ Interview with Heinz Schirk, April 5, 2019, 9:01–9:41.

⁴⁰ Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, xvi.

⁴¹ See Joachim E. Fest, *The Face of The Third Reich: Portraits of The Nazi Leadership* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), originally published in 1973, for one example.

⁴² Richard Steigmann-Gall, "Star-Spangled Fascism: American Interwar Political Extremism in Comparative Perspective," *Social History* 42, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 94–119, 110.

ticated, modern bureaucratic system.”⁴³ Such an argument can also be applied to the portrayal of Heydrich in *Manager of Terror*. Although biographical films by their very nature will inevitably focus on the personalities of their protagonists, the “psychogram” of Heydrich in *Manager of Terror* goes too far into explaining his rise as the man responsible for the Holocaust as the result of a disturbed personality.⁴⁴ One of the other ethical problems with this approach is that it can lead to the impression that Germany was simply under the yoke of madmen and the German people were either coerced or hoodwinked into supporting them. *Manager of Terror* does not go too far in its portrayal of Heydrich as psychologically disturbed; however, such an approach always still risks propagating old, comforting myths about Nazis as abnormal people. This does not preclude the possibility that some Nazi leaders were indeed sociopathic or mentally ill, but to reduce Heydrich’s motivation to mental illness pathologizes fascist tendencies and ignores ideology. As Richard J. Evans has put it, “[i]deological and historical context in the end was more important than individual psychology.”⁴⁵

The film then proceeds as a flashback, by beginning with Heydrich’s childhood in Halle an der Saale. This initial scene depicts Heydrich suffering anti-Semitic bullying from classmates at his father’s conservatory. The film correctly depicts Heydrich’s struggle with rumors of his potential Jewish ancestry throughout his life. For example, during his childhood, his classmates often called him names like “Isidor.”⁴⁶ Heydrich’s parents discuss the young Reinhard as a troubled and reckless youth; Armand Merger’s commentary seeks a medical explanation for this behavior and Heydrich’s subsequent development by claiming that a childhood case of encephalitis could have contributed to strong personality changes such as aggression and recklessness. This is a key example of psychohistory of the type discussed above; also note that recent academic literature such as Robert Gerwarth’s biography do not mention such a childhood illness, yet the press and popular histories often still repeat this rumor. For example, Mario Dederichs’ *Heydrich: The Face of Evil* mentions a case of encephalitis in Heydrich’s infancy and implies that it could have caused his later development into a mass murderer.⁴⁷ Recall that in his letter from March 24, 1976, Shlomo Aronson states

43 Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 89.

44 For more on psychological explanations for the Nazis as an outgrowth of the immediate post-war era, see Evans, *Hitler’s People*, 105–108.

45 Evans, *Hitler’s People*, 236.

46 Gerwarth, *Hitler’s Hangman*, 26.

47 Mario R. Dederichs, *Heydrich: The Face of Evil* (Annapolis, Newbury: Casemate, 2009), 23.

that he exercised caution about including speculation about possible illnesses in his book on Heydrich and that only a medical specialist could truly diagnose him. He also notes that the German Navy, which would have been able to be highly selective about its officer candidates during the Great Depression, would have likely prevented Heydrich from joining if such an illness had been present. He would not pass a physical examination if he had truly suffered from long-term effects of a childhood encephalitis or meningitis case.⁴⁸ The rest of the film is punctuated by Mergen's psychohistorical audio commentary, which always appears alongside historical photos of Heydrich in order to underscore the film's authenticity. Other psychohistorical inserts describe Heydrich as an "insecure" individual full of "neurotic self-love" who "fled into self-pity." Heydrich's "ambition," "need for battle," and "cold fanaticism" are "all symptoms of a paranoid-disturbed personality."⁴⁹ A key insert claims: "Heydrich, as a schizoid personality, sees people as material that one can use without hesitation or throw away. His robotlike organizational genius makes him an ideal manager of power." Other interludes explicitly denounce Heydrich as a sadist: "The linked gratification of his power and sex drives manifests itself in the perverted lust of the sadist." A final insert describes him as a "neurotic and psychopath" with an "abnormal personality." This section argues that the Nazi regime permitted such people to satisfy their urges in "great style." These inserts are not problematic because they depict abnormalities or negative features of Heydrich's personality, but rather because they ascribe sole explanatory power to them at the expense of ideology, social background, and internal power dynamics within the SS and SD. Although personality traits and psychological questions may be more interesting to television viewers than the above-mentioned factors, they open up films to charges of sensationalism and demonization. *Manager of Terror* suffers in this aspect because it makes explicit what other films keep implicit – it is one thing if a character *seems* disturbed, but quite another when the narrator *diagnoses* him as such.

In a key scene towards the end of the film, Heydrich fails to impress a barmaid with his high rank and societal status. The other bar patrons laugh at his self-importance and mock him. In response, Heydrich shouts at them and says he could have them all thrown in a concentration camp if he wanted to. He smashes a vase and leaves the bar. Upon returning home, he is surprised by his own reflection in a mirror, draws his pistol, and shoots at his own reflection. An insert

⁴⁸ Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Paul Mommertz, March 24, 1976, 1.

⁴⁹ All subsequent quotes from the psychohistorical inserts are transcriptions from *Manager of Terror*, no screenplay could be located.

immediately before this sequence states that Heydrich is “unloved, rejected, and lonely . . . he is an uncanny stranger to himself.”

Immediately after this incident, he calls himself “crazy” and tells his wife Lina that he thought a stranger had been waiting for him in the doorway. He then tells her that he has been named *Reichsprotector* of Bohemia and Moravia and that they must prepare for their move to Prague; that this promotion will bring them a lot of money and that his Weimar-era debts will no longer pose a problem. The film ends with a brief mention of his assassination. These psycho-historical inserts are the most problematic aspect of *Manager of Terror*. They break up the flow of the film (in contrast with *The Wannsee Conference*, which, by nature of its subject matter, is much more self-contained and restrained). These voiceover inserts discount Heydrich’s (and by extension, other Holocaust perpetrators’) own abilities, intellect, and ideological convictions, instead pushing Nazism into the realm of pathology. Paul Mommertz later distanced himself from these inserts and their implications (which remain absent from his later work):

The diagnosis, that the psychologist . . . the professor offers, has the strong tendency to characterize [Heydrich] as if he couldn’t do anything differently, that he was a pathological person. That always had a connotation of excusing him: “that’s a poor dog that couldn’t do anything differently,” to put it bluntly. And viewers possibly saw it that way. It was very dangerous. I would do it today [differently] . . . I didn’t have these reservations when I wrote [the screenplay], but afterwards I thought that there was a certain danger that the film exonerates Heydrich or can be understood that way.⁵⁰

When *Manager of Terror* avoids psychohistory, it does better, largely due to the strength of Mommertz’s writing and Dietrich Mattausch’s performance. The film quickly progresses through Heydrich’s life and depicts his dismissal from the Navy and engagement to Lina von Osten. In the scene where Heydrich first meets Lina (Isabell Stumpf), the band they are dancing to plays the Weimar-era jazz standard “Schöner Gigolo, armer Gigolo,” underscoring Heydrich’s reputation for womanizing and infidelity. Later in the scene, he shows her a photograph of his fiancée, which he subsequently sets on fire in order to signify that he is breaking off the engagement (the ensuing scandal and his flippant attitude later resulted in his dismissal from the Navy). Lina introduces him to the Nazi Party, which he is initially skeptical of, dismissing the “proletarian” SA and their “crap-brown uniforms.” Lina, a well-connected party member, arranges a job interview with Himmler (Franz Rudnick). During the interview, a sniffing Himmler (recovering from a cold) praises Heydrich for his “Nordic” appearance and asks him to draft an organizational scheme for an intelligence agency – what would become the

⁵⁰ Interview with Paul Mommertz, March 14, 2019, 19:53–21:51.

Sicherheitsdienst (SD). Heydrich says that the traditional spies are too expensive for the cash-strapped party and also incompatible with the tenets of National Socialism. He advocates a new, internal intelligence service staffed with committed Nazis and then proceeds to draw an organizational chart of the SD. In the next scene, Heydrich makes it clear to Lina that he was bluffing – he had no real intelligence experience and based his suggestions off of detective novels and his rudimentary knowledge of foreign intelligence agencies. This scene corresponds with Aronson's recounting of Heydrich's interview with Himmler.⁵¹

The interview, which took place on June 14, 1931, marked the beginning of Heydrich's close working relationship with Himmler, which Robert Gerwarth describes as mutually beneficial and close: "For the rest of Heydrich's life, Himmler was his central ideological and professional reference point . . . Himmler could rely on his unshakeable loyalty." For Gerwarth, Heydrich acted as Himmler's "deputy" and "transformed the Nazi worldview as expressed by Hitler and Himmler into concrete policies."⁵² This aspect of their working relationship illustrates Heydrich's importance to Nazi anti-Jewish measures and later campaigns of terror and mass murder on the road to Wannsee. It is here that the film's title becomes clear: Heydrich is depicted as the *manager* of policies stemming from Hitler and Himmler; the figure who translated ideology into praxis. One problematic aspect of the film centers around the relationship between Heydrich and Himmler. The film depicts Heydrich as more radical than Himmler and more willing to resort to extreme violence. For example, Himmler expresses shock during a scene where Heydrich suggests that they arrest and execute leading members of the SA and right-wing opposition such as Ernst Röhm in what would become known as the Night of the Long Knives. The scene suggests that in June 1934, Himmler had scruples about resorting to violence and that Heydrich had to convince him of its necessity. Such a characterization has no historical basis and is absent from Aronson's work.⁵³ This is not to say that Heydrich did not advocate extreme violence and radical action, but rather that when he did so, there is no evidence to suggest that his superior Himmler expressed reservations about approving it. In a subsequent, particularly powerful sequence, (the film notes that Ernst Röhm was the godfather of one of Heydrich's children), Heydrich slowly crosses out the type-written names of the purge victims as he makes his way down his list of them, underscoring how executions of political rivals take place in a modern, bureaucratic state.

⁵¹ Aronson, *Reinhard Heydrich*, 37–38.

⁵² Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 52.

⁵³ Aronson, *Reinhard Heydrich*, 191–195.

A later scene which takes place in early 1942 (after the Wannsee Conference and before Heydrich's death) is even more problematic. Heydrich and Himmler discuss exterminating the Jews of Europe – and Himmler expresses reservations. Here, the scene seems to imply that Heydrich was acting independently of Himmler and that a rivalry grew between the two of them, possibly in order to gain favor with Hitler. Gerwarth points out that Heydrich and Himmler always maintained a close working relationship and friendship and that there is no “hard evidence” of animosity or rivalry between them; rumors stem from unreliable post-war memoirs of SD men and Himmler's physical therapist Felix Kersten.⁵⁴ In a later passage, Gerwarth again emphasizes this lack of evidence: “there is no evidence that Heydrich's loyalty towards his mentor was ever in question.”⁵⁵ In his biography of Himmler, historian Peter Longerich identifies “two competing chains of command involving Jewish policy: Hitler–Himmler–Heydrich and Hitler–Göring–Heydrich” and notes that Himmler “was thereby in danger of being excluded from the decision-making process in the event of his proving insufficiently active on the anti-Semitic front.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Longerich points out that these two different policy axes “do not, however, appear to have led to serious rivalry between Himmler and Heydrich. On the contrary, Himmler considered that in the first instance and above all it was his own power that had been adversely affected by his colleague's murder.”⁵⁷ Thus, *Manager of Terror* invents either a rivalry between the two or at the very least a relationship dynamic in which a weak Himmler lets his subordinate and closest protégé berate him into signing off on genocide.

The film depicts Heydrich's attitudes towards his subordinates differently, where Heydrich is alternately charming and abusive towards his subordinates. In one scene, he threatens Heinrich Müller of the Bavarian Political Police (and later head of the Gestapo) with being sent to Dachau if he fails to meet his expectations. These scenes are underscored by Armand Mergen's commentary about Heydrich's psychological profile – for instance, the comment describing Heydrich's attitude towards people as “material that one can unhesitatingly use or throw away.” In one key scene depicting the creation of the *Einsatzgruppen* as the Wehrmacht prepares to invade the Soviet Union in June 1941, Heydrich discusses the need to eliminate political commissars and Jews as the Wehrmacht advances. During this briefing, Heydrich berates his SD subordinates, including Eichmann (whom he calls an “asshole”), and then assigns the commands of the four *Einsatz-*

⁵⁴ Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 95.

⁵⁵ Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 225.

⁵⁶ Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: A Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 217.

⁵⁷ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 570.

gruppen to individual officers whom he berates one by one. In one instance, Heydrich shouts at the career policeman Arthur Nebe for being hesitant to shoot innocent civilians before assigning him command of *Einsatzgruppe* B. Heydrich's threatening attitude towards his subordinates corresponds with historical accounts which describe his leadership style as "despotic"⁵⁸ and "creating a permanently 'tense atmosphere full of mistrust and friction.'"⁵⁹

The immediately following scene depicts Heydrich and his subordinates watching amateur footage of a mass shooting on a projector. The footage in question is an actual amateur film of a mass shooting in Liepāja, Latvia taken by a German sailor.⁶⁰ Heydrich says that the mass shooting seen in the footage is a "disgrace" (*Sauerei*) and that the SS needs to find a "decent" method. He mentions the T4 euthanasia program as a possible alternative. This segment is very similar to a scene in NBC's *Holocaust*, which would have been in the midst of production when *Manager of Terror* aired on television. In that scene, Heydrich and Erik Dorf watch the same archival footage of the Liepāja massacre and complain about the inefficiency of the *Einsatzgruppen* and shooting as a killing method. No sources exist proving that *Holocaust*'s production team watched *Manager of Terror*, but the scene in *Holocaust* seems to be a direct reference to this one.

The scene depicting the Wannsee Conference is the earliest known German-language depiction of Wannsee on film. Only lasting around one minute, the scene clearly echoes the above-mentioned *Einsatzgruppen* briefing scene, underscoring the Germans' increasing radicalization as the war progressed. The other attendees (besides Eichmann and Müller) remain nameless. The scene roughly follows the protocol: Heydrich opens by discussing his July 1941 letter from Göring, which tasked him with preparing an "overall solution of the Jewish Question in the German sphere of influence in Europe."⁶¹ He continues by mentioning the resettlement of Jews from the Reich and occupied territories, the concentration of them in ghettos, and forced labor divided by sex and subsequent "natural attrition." He then notes that any survivors will be subject to "special treatment" (*Sonderbehandlung*), a euphemism for execution.⁶² Heydrich calls for coordination be-

⁵⁸ Walter Wanek, quoted in Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 95.

⁵⁹ Werner Best, quoted in Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 95. See Gerwarth's discussion in endnote 89, which lists other accounts of Heydrich's frightening leadership style.

⁶⁰ This footage can be found in the digital collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; see <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/einsatzgruppen-mobile-killing-units> and <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1005052>.

⁶¹ Quoted in Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 40.

⁶² Cornelia Schmitz-Berning, *Vokabular des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 584–587.

tween the different governmental agencies and the SS, saying that organizational problems have obstructed policy up until now. During his presentation, massive portraits of Hitler and Himmler loom behind Heydrich (see Figure 2.2), underscoring the film's intentionalist interpretation of the Holocaust. Other scenes include Heydrich telling people to read *Mein Kampf* if they want to understand the direction Nazi policy is taking. The scene ends with Heydrich closing the meeting and sending the participants to a buffet. He then has a brief chat with Müller, says that the attendees are not shocked, but instead “ideal underlings [*Befehlsempfänger*].” He expresses satisfaction with the meeting and says that he will go enjoy a “decent cognac.”

Prefiguring later, more detailed depictions of the conference, *Manager of Terror* sticks to a “you are there” cinematographic approach: the camera largely remains at eye-level, at the table (Figure 2.1) and, in contrast with *Holocaust*, the set decoration is more restrained, with the exception of the Hitler portrait in Figure 2.2.



Figure 2.1: The Wannsee Conference in *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror*.

Reinhard Heydrich – Manager des Terrors. Infafilm, Zweites deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), 1977.

Although the Wannsee Conference only appears in one scene, it complements the larger portrait of Heydrich in *Manager of Terror*. The film is concerned with Heydrich's personality and obsession with power and control. This scene is about Heydrich using his alternately charming and abusive personality in order to accomplish his policy goals without resistance. The film ends shortly after the section when Heydrich shoots at his own reflection, noting that Heydrich was the “victim” of an assassination in Prague. Paul Mommertz has since distanced him-



Figure 2.2: Hitler looms in the background as Heinrich Müller (Friedrich G. Beckhaus) and Heydrich discuss the results of the Wannsee Conference. *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager des Terrors*. Infafilm, Zweites deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), 1977.

self from this language, noting that several critics had issues with it: “I can only remember a critique that I have to agree with: at the end of the film, there is a line [stating that] ‘Heydrich became victim of an assassination.’ And many reviews were bothered by the word ‘victim’ and asked [. . .] whether there wasn’t too much understanding for him or too much was excused.”⁶³

3 Reception

Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror aired on ZDF on Friday, July 22, 1977 at 8:15 pm and received muted reception in West Germany and little international reception, in stark contrast with *The Wannsee Conference*, which was well-received outside of West Germany. The writer and editor Walter Jens (under his pseudonym “Momos”) penned a negative review for *Die Zeit* entitled “The Great Demon Reinhard H.”⁶⁴ Jens takes the film to task for not depicting Heydrich’s victims and instead focusing on Heydrich as a fascinating villain. He claims that the film reproduces Nazi propaganda and its image of Heydrich while also transforming him into a “demon.” For him, Dietrich Mattausch’s Heydrich is Paul Mommertz’s

⁶³ Interview with Paul Mommertz, March 14, 2019, 19:53–21:51.

⁶⁴ Jens, “Der große Dämon Reinhard H.”

“fallen angel.” The last paragraph argues that the film diverts attention from the victims and focuses on the “Nazi Superman” Heydrich:

The millions remain silent so that he can savor his role: No gassed child, no skeleton, no ramp [at Auschwitz], not even the park bench which Jews were not allowed to sit on at that time in Germany came into the picture. The state of mind of the victims (perhaps one of them also had a funny father and a dutybound mother: someone among the countless whose death date, in contrast to Heydrich's hour of death, we will never know?), the state of mind of the victims, the nameless with their dreadful everyman's end, is not mentioned.⁶⁵

The historian Andreas Eichmüller agrees with Jens by arguing that *Manager of Terror* depicts Heydrich as an “evil genius,” but nevertheless points out that the film largely corresponds to biographical depictions of Heydrich at the time, such as the 1977 biography by Günther Deschner.⁶⁶ Jens' argument falls into the trap identified by Wulf Kansteiner: because German television at the time rarely depicted Nazis and Holocaust perpetrators in detail, *Manager of Terror* is one of a handful of productions. This is why Kansteiner characterizes ZDF historical programming in this era as depicting a “Genocide without Perpetrators.”⁶⁷ So Jens, citing the suffering of Holocaust victims in his review, contributes to a line of West German thinking that advocated ignoring the perpetrators, many of whom were still living and occupying prominent societal positions. In this mindset, attention devoted to Nazi perpetrators is tasteless. This line of argument is similar to the prohibition on images and representation (*Darstellungsverbot*, *Bilderverbot*) is discussed by Catrin Corell, only here the problem is that Jens seems to be advocating a *Darstellungsverbot* applied to the perpetrators in general, not a blanket prohibition of depicting atrocities on screen.⁶⁸ This type of thinking still persists in contexts ranging from German conservative circles, which advocate moving on from the Nazi past, to those with more well-meaning but still misguided misgivings. One example of the latter is the philosopher Susan Neiman's fear of perpetrator-focused historical sites like the House of the Wannsee Conference or

⁶⁵ Jens, “Der große Dämon Reinhard H.”

⁶⁶ Andreas Eichmüller, “‘Auf das Typische kommt es an.’ Bilder und Narrative der SS in Film und Fernsehen in den 1970er-Jahren,” in *Die SS nach 1945: Entschuldungsnarrative, populäre Mythen, europäische Erinnerungsdiskurse*, ed. Jan Erik Schulte and Michael Wildt (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 301. For Deschner, see Günther Deschner, *Reinhard Heydrich: Statthalter der totalen Macht*, (Esslingen am Neckar: Bechtle, 1977).

⁶⁷ Wulf Kansteiner, “Ein Völkermord ohne Täter: Die Darstellung der ‘Endlösung’ in den Sendungen des Zweiten Deutschen Fernsehens,” in *Medien-Politik-Geschichte. Tel Aviver Jahrbuch fuer Deutsche Geschichte* 31, ed. Moshe Zuckermann, (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003), 229–262.

⁶⁸ Corell, *Der Holocaust als Herausforderung für den Film*, 15.

Topography of Terror distracting the public from Holocaust victims and becoming either unintentional shrines to the SS or the focus of morbid “dark tourism.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, there is something to this critique. In a 2018 interview with the *Prager Zeitung*, Dietrich Mattausch described praise he received from Nazis for his role as Heydrich: “I got invitations to very specific ‘meetings.’ With the note that if [Mattausch] can play Heydrich so well, he can only be ‘one of us.’”⁷⁰ In an interview for this study, Heinz Schirk claimed that films have limited didactic potential and can only reach those already susceptible to their messages:⁷¹ so, for example, a film like *Manager of Terror* cannot convert a neo-Nazi, so it is little wonder that some of them would mistakenly view productions like it as praising their ideological heroes. Such charges are reminiscent of those some critics, such as Christopher Grau, have leveled at the film *American History X* (1998), a drama depicting an American neo-Nazi’s radicalization and eventual rejection of his ideology.⁷² Grau posits that by depicting Nazis on film, the nature of film as a medium inherently makes Nazis attractive to viewers and it is therefore little wonder that actual Nazis find the films appealing.

In a negative review for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Ernst-Otto Maetzke found the film’s psychological focus unconvincing and noted that the film failed to live up to its title. He correctly points out that the film’s portrayal of Himmler is so problematic that he could earn a “*Persilschein*,” a sarcastic postwar German term referring to a past ostensibly free of involvement with the Nazi regime. In his most original point, Maetzke argues that the film fails to depict Heydrich’s reign of terror in Czechoslovakia – the film briefly depicts it in only one scene. He also noted that the film’s “pathetic” epigraph, which calls Heydrich a “victim of an assassination in Prague” was not a good plot point and that the film wastes its time with “unimportant” scenes. Finally, Maetzke speculated that Momertz relied on Lina Heydrich’s memoirs as a source, which led to “unimportant” scenes in dance halls.⁷³ Maetzke’s critique, particularly that of the portrayal of

69 For the former opinion in a recent mainstream conservative publication, see Torsten Krauel, “Nazis nach 1945: Der SS-Lehrer, der keiner war,” *Die Welt*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article213603326/Nazis-nach-1945-Der-SS-Lehrer-der-keiner-war.html>. For Neiman, see Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*, 275–276.

70 Dietrich Mattausch, “Wir brauchen Zusammenhalt in Europa,” interview by Klaus Hanisch, *Prager Zeitung*, March 3, 2018, <https://pragerzeitung.cz:443/die-vertreibung-war-ein-grosser-schmerz/>.

71 Interview with Heinz Schirk, April 5, 2019, 46:45–51:01.

72 Christopher Grau, “*American History X*, Cinematic Manipulation, and Moral Conversion,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2010): 52–76, 52.

73 Ernst-Otto Maetzke, “Mit Heydrich im Tanzlokal,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 25, 1977, 16.

Himmler and the film seeming rushed, is more convincing than that of Walter Jens. Its arguments about the film failing to live up to its promise and how the psychological focus offers weak material for a film also hit home. In a review for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, film critic Birgit Weidinger praised *Manager of Terror* for going beyond the typical “costume drama” and that the film’s “educational work” (*Aufklärungsarbeit*) included interrogating stereotypical characterizations of like “Manager of Terror” or “Hangman.” As Munich’s leading cultural publication and paper of record, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had previously promoted the film and reviewed Mommertz’s plays and television dramas throughout his career. Weidinger, however, also argued that the filmmakers “mistrusted” their main idea and that the psychological inserts imbalanced the drama and were hard to understand, particularly because of their academic language. For her, they also sometimes seemed too loosely connected to the following dramatic scenes. For Weidinger, the film exemplified the difficulty of understanding Heydrich and also failed to clearly portray the wider context of the Nazi State.⁷⁴

The reception of *Manager of Terror* drew attention to the problems of psychoanalyzing Nazi perpetrators on screen. This method could open a film up to charges of demonization, simplification, or obfuscation. Unlike with other films, where attempts to explore Nazi psychology are less explicit, *Manager of Terror* openly utilizes Armand Mergen’s attempt at diagnosing Heydrich’s potential psychological disorders. This attempt, while an interesting experiment, falls flat and appears dated after decades of historiography and films that attempt to move beyond the stereotype of Nazis as psychopaths or other social misfits. These psychological inserts also insinuate that Heydrich’s lust for power and attitude towards subordinates stemmed from childhood insecurities, which historians can only speculate about. Apart from the problematic psychological inserts and the relationship between Heydrich and Himmler, the dramatic scenes do not stray far from historical depictions of Heydrich from the time and Dietrich Mattausch plays the role convincingly. The early parts of the film especially rely on Shlomo Aronson’s work and, although rushed, convincingly depict Heydrich’s career path during the Weimar era. Later scenes in the film, particularly those depicting Heydrich meeting with *Einsatzgruppen* leaders or at the Wannsee Conference, also largely conform to the latest historical research at the time. However, the depiction of Heydrich’s relationship with Himmler, where he berates his superior into agreeing with his plans for either the Night of the Long Knives or the Holocaust, are ahistorical and give the impression that Himmler was both less ideological and less prone to violence than Heydrich. Lastly, *Manager of Terror* glosses over

74 Birgit Weidinger, “Schüsse auf den Doppelgänger,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 25, 1977, 19.

Heydrich's activities in occupied Czechoslovakia and awkwardly ends with an epigraph describing him as the "victim" of an assassination.

In *The Wannsee Conference* (1984), the same filmmakers would learn from the lessons of *Manager of Terror* and produce a film that largely avoids its pitfalls. Dietrich Mattausch would reprise his role as Heydrich in the latter film. *The Wannsee Conference* is both a smaller yet more ambitious film than *Manager of Terror*. Although it only depicts a 90-minute event, writing and directing this re-enactment of the Wannsee Conference would prove to be a much longer and difficult process than *Manager of Terror*. However, *The Wannsee Conference* succeeds where *Manager of Terror* falters by largely avoiding speculation about the psychological motivations of the conference participants, and also benefits from Mommertz taking the unusual step of including his bibliography in the screenplay and later making it freely available on his website decades later. This study will now turn to the production history of *The Wannsee Conference* and the Paul Mommertz archive held by the Joseph Wulf Mediothek in Berlin. This archive consists of correspondence, the screenplay, photocopied sources with handwritten notes, and other production material. These sources demonstrate the challenges encountered during pre-production as well as the production team's historiographical positions and explicit historical and political argument. Although *The Wannsee Conference* refrains from direct historical or psychological commentary, its argument about the Wannsee Conference's place in the history of the Holocaust and how it illustrates the dangers of modern bureaucracy combined with far right-wing ideology lend it a powerfully educational character, and mark it as a noteworthy contribution to public history. By letting the characters speak in the language used by Nazi officials behind closed doors, the film gives audiences an unvarnished, unblinking view of one of history's most notorious meetings.

Chapter 3

A Production History of *The Wannsee Conference* (1984)

On December 19, 1984 at 8:15 pm, ARD aired *The Wannsee Conference*, a docudrama reenacting the Wannsee Conference in real time. Directed by Heinz Schirk and written by Paul Mommertz, *The Wannsee Conference* explores topics raised by the duo's earlier film *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror*. A pioneering film, *The Wannsee Conference* is an example of a responsible, sober depiction of Holocaust perpetrators which largely – but not entirely – refrains from stereotypes. Grounded in primary sources as well as the historiography of its time, *The Wannsee Conference* is not only an artistic interpretation of the conference but deserves consideration as a historical interpretation of Wannsee as well. Frank Bösch has correctly noted that *The Wannsee Conference* premiered almost a decade before any historical monographs on Wannsee, fitting with his argument that perpetrator films in this period “provoked the strongest questions about historical accuracy” among historians and prefigured later historiography.¹ Additionally, West German perpetrator films during this period tended to be characterized by “observational distance” as opposed to more “intimate” films from later periods which focused on private aspects of the Third Reich.² This chapter utilizes both archival sources and oral history interviews to demonstrate how Mommertz used primary and secondary sources (as well as the advice of Shlomo Aronson) to write his screenplay. It is through these documents and interviews that we can gain insight into how and why a small team of filmmakers in the early 1980s decided to create a film about the Wannsee Conference.³

1 Frank Bösch, “Film, NS-Vergangenheit und Geschichtswissenschaft. Von ‘Holocaust’ zu ‘Der Untergang’,” in *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 55, no. 1 (January 2007): 9.

2 Bangert, *The Nazi Past in Contemporary German Film*, 58.

3 The Paul Mommertz collection at the Joseph Wulf Mediothek contains a vast array of sources. There are many photocopies of primary and secondary sources with handwritten notes or type-written dialogue drafts on them. For this chapter, I have restricted myself to correspondence, the script, and some of his other more identifiable material instead of his marginalia written on photocopied sources.

1 Origins

During the production of *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror*, Paul Mommertz and Heinz Schirk had a conversation where they discussed potentially creating a film about the Wannsee Conference.⁴ The two left it at that, just a fleeting conversation. By the early 1980s, however, the film producer Manfred Korytowski (1936–1999), head of Infafilm GmbH in Munich, was brainstorming a film about the conference. Korytowski held both German and Israeli citizenships; he was born in Königsberg and lived with his parents in Brazilian exile before moving to Israel as a teenager in 1953. He moved on to West Berlin three years later and quickly began a career in the film industry, where his early production work included Karl May adaptations. In the mid-1970s, he founded his own production company, Infafilm; the company mainly worked with Bayerischer Rundfunk and ZDF. After seeing a copy of the Wannsee Protocol at Yad Vashem, Korytowski got an idea to produce a film about the conference.⁵ Korytowski is most famous for the Bavarian children's show *Pumuckl*, which, according to Mommertz, gave him leeway for producing other, more personal projects including *The Wannsee Conference*, which the network was unenthusiastic about:

Korytowski had this idea for awhile and he was always talking about it with the [BR] producers. He always said 'ceterum censeo, we have to make *The Wannsee Conference*.' They laughed at him because he had said that for so long. Then he somehow had a good relationship with Bayerischer Rundfunk, because he had made the successful, but different, series *Pumuckl*. He twisted their arms into agreeing to it, but they really didn't want to [produce it]. They did it as purely a matter of duty and assigned a network coordinator [*Redakteur*] to it who also didn't want to be there, and I had to work with him, who also complained about the script yet wasn't confident enough to really push through changes.⁶

The network coordinator in question is Norbert Bittmann, a man whom Mommertz later collaborated with on other projects. Bittmann appeared in a short behind-the-scenes documentary on the film and discussed its development and striving for historical accuracy.⁷

⁴ Interview with Heinz Schirk, April 5, 2019, 42:53–44:01.

⁵ Paul Mommertz, "Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen," in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1200 "Eichmann (Robert Kempner, Prozess Jerusalem)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

⁶ Interview with Paul Mommertz, Munich, October 19, 2019, 30:13–32:33.

⁷ *Die Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen zum gleichnamigen Fernsehfilm des Bayerischen Rundfunks*, directed by Heinz Steike, 1984. Paul Mommertz wrote the script which Bittmann read from during his interview. See Paul Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 1.

Infafilm's website mentions that Korytowski was seriously injured in Tel Aviv after the hijacking of Sabena Flight 571 by the Palestinian Black September Organization on May 9, 1972.⁸ An article in the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* from May 11, 1972 contains the following account:

55-year-old Wilfred Kordovsk, a German-Jewish film producer, was reported to be recovering satisfactorily from the four bullet wounds he sustained. Kordovsk was fired on by Israeli soldiers who mistook him for one of the terrorists as they stormed into the aircraft to liberate it. He said the mistake was understandable since at the moment he was running after one of the armed women terrorists, Rima Eisa, in an attempt to subdue her.⁹

Given the spelling differences resulting from transliteration and the spelling differences of names like Korytowksi between Hebrew, English, and German, it is plausible that the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* misspelled his name – though this does not explain the erroneous age as Korytowksi would have been 36 in 1972, not 55. An earlier *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* piece names this passenger “Vilfred Kordovski.”¹⁰ The *JTA* also got the name “Rima Eisa” wrong – this hijacker was actually named Rima Tannous.¹¹ The similarities in name and occupation, as well as general shoddy fact-checking from press agencies at the time, corroborate Infafilm's statement. Mommertz recalls Korytowski as “a phenomenon. A person with enormous temper and work mania and quick decision-making, in good spirits, and also a great team worker who treated people from the bank exactly the same as his driver – he always addressed them as “Du!” He said ‘I don’t understand anything about art, I make film!’”¹² Mommertz praises his long working relationship with Korytowski after *The Wannsee Conference* but nevertheless still (admittedly) resorts to crude antisemitic stereotypes, describing Korytowski as an easy-going business partner who cared little for German social norms – Korytowski's offices were in an apartment building near the Munich Central Station instead of

8 “Infafilm GmbH Manfred Korytowski – Manfred Korytowski,” accessed October 2, 2020, <https://www.infafilm.de/manfred-korytowski/>. Archival material shows that during the interviews, Bittman read from a script written by Mommertz.

9 “Mrs. Holtzberg Remains on Critical List; Only Miracle Can Save Her, Says Nurse,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, May 15, 1972, <https://www.jta.org/1972/05/15/archive/mrs-holtzberg-remains-on-critical-list-only-miracle-can-save-her-says-nurse>.

10 “Two Passengers on Hijacked Plane Seriously Wounded; Terrorists Separate Jews from Non-Jews on Plane,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, May 11, 1972, <https://www.jta.org/1972/05/11/archive/two-passengers-on-hijacked-plane-seriously-wounded-terrorists-separate-jews-from-non-jews-on-plane>.

11 Stuart Jeffries, “Four Hijackers and Three Israeli PMs: The Incredible Story of Sabena Flight 571,” *Guardian*, November 11, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/11/sabena-flight-571-hijack-plane-black-september-film>.

12 Interview with Paul Mommertz, Munich, October 19, 2019, 20:21–24:35.

in a more bourgeois neighborhood – while still giving off the airs of a “very elegant metropolitan guy” instead of an “ominous *Ostjude* from the *shtetl*.”¹³

Korytowski brought Schirk on board after the writer Rolf Defrank (1926–2012) had turned in a script draft that Korytowksi was unsatisfied with.¹⁴ Defrank had written and directed the 1979 documentary *Erscheinungsform Mensch: Adolf Eichmann* as well as *Walter Hasenclever*, a biopic on the exiled Expressionist writer. DeFrank would later write a radio play about Wannsee, titled *Ihr Name Steht im Protokoll*, which premiered on WDR in 1984.¹⁵ Schirk recalled a script draft and transcripts of the Eichmann trial, along with other documents, on Korytowski’s desk.¹⁶ Schirk claimed that after mentioning working with Mommertz on *Manager of Terror*, Korytowski immediately telephoned Mommertz, who showed up in his office within two hours.¹⁷ Mommertz recalls the meeting similarly, claiming that Korytowksi had cancelled the Wannsee film project because of Defrank’s disappointing script. No copy of this script can be found in the Paul Mommertz Archive at the GHWK memorial library. Mommertz described DeFrank’s script as something completely different than what Korytowski was looking for:

I immediately noticed that the script contained too much fiction and way too many subplots. The writer didn’t really get to Wannsee, but rather . . . a third of the film took place in Poland with the General Government boss [Hans Frank] and in the military, in SS offices, so in groups of lower-level people and that was supposed to show how dreadful it had already been handled there, how the – not only the Jews, but also the Poles – were treated. And that led everything too far into the weeds. That was also most likely the reason why they didn’t want [the script]. They probably wanted more of a focus on this conference.¹⁸

Mommertz immediately began reading about the conference, which proved to be difficult as no monograph existed at the time. Mommertz began conducting research at the Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ) in Munich. In an interview, he described his research process at length:

13 Interview with Paul Mommertz, October 19, 2019, 20:21–24:35.

14 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 8:00–10:53.

15 Rolf Defrank, “Ihr Name steht im Protokoll - Die Planung des Holocaust,” Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Köln: WDR Mediathek, Nov 23, 2020. <https://www1.wdr.de/mediathek/audio/wdr3/wdr3-hoerspiel/audio-ihr-name-steht-im-protokoll—die-planung-des-holocaust-100.html>.

16 Reconstructing these initial meetings is difficult as neither Mommertz nor Schirk recall which year they took place. As Mommertz conducted most of his scriptwriting in 1982 and 1983 and speaks of 14 months of research, it is likely that this meeting took place sometime between 1980 and early 1982. The project was also put on ice for a period, making an earlier date more likely.

17 Interview with Heinz Schirk, April 5, 2019, 12:42–14:44.

18 Interview with Paul Mommertz, Munich, October 19, 2019, 1:04–10:48.

I sat down and noticed, that I – so immediately I decided to only show the conference. I had read the protocol and then thought ‘you have to get to the bottom of this like a historian. What’s behind this? Who, what, and why? And I have to figure it out.’ And that meant that I had to go to the Institute for Contemporary History, where I had everything side by side – almost everything – and could begin to work historically there and then I noticed that it was an insane amount [of sources]. There were documents – on film, which they still had back then. And they had the complete volumes from the Nuremberg Trials, which I knew that I couldn’t avoid. And then you had to – you need a week in order to even get an overview. What’s this even about? Well, then it became very arduous, but I was very interested and, I have to say, worked with a passion for it, because suddenly I realized that I wanted to hit people over the head with what was going on, that people bureaucratically discussed something like that at a conference. Then I was on fire, I sat every minute, day by day in this institute and scooped up every fact I could get. And then by the way, there was a small bar across the street [from the IfZ] and sometimes I went there and had the facts that I’d gathered, my notes, and then I sat there and suddenly the meeting room was in my head and the people and the dialogue began. And I knew that I had to make sure that one generally informs, but that [the script] also had to be lively.¹⁹

Mommertz’s initial research at the Institute for Contemporary History included both secondary literature and primary sources, largely on microfilm. His archival collection at the Joseph Wulf Library contains several folders of photocopied sources from various archives, some of which with marginalia, including dialogue drafts. In a harsh review (discussed at length in the next chapter) of *The Wannsee Conference*, the *Der Spiegel* editor, historian, and Wehrmacht veteran Heinz Höhne alleged that IfZ staff warned Mommertz against writing a “creepy” film on the Wannsee Conference, something Mommertz vehemently denied.²⁰ Höhne also claimed that neither historians nor Mommertz had enough source material on the conference to either write a monograph or make a 90-minute film about it, so Mommertz must have resorted to invention and fantasy.²¹ A glance at Mommertz’s bibliography, as well as the fact that several monographs and edited volumes have been published since 1984 and a memorial site has opened at Wannsee, quickly disproves this charge. Mommertz’s public feud with Höhne led him to publish his bibliography, which is still available today on his website. It is important to remember that this bibliography does not just serve to defend the film against public charges of fictionalization – the primary sources are listed in the

¹⁹ Interview with Paul Mommertz, Munich, October 19, 2019, 1:04–10:48.

²⁰ Paul Mommertz, “Weitere Stellungnahmen zur SPIEGEL-Kritik von Heinz Höhne an meinem Drehbuch,” in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 300 “Der Autor,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

²¹ Heinz Höhne, “Eine Falle der Betroffenheit,” *Der Spiegel*, December 17, 1984, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13511955.html>.

script in order to lend it credibility and ward off charges that the producers were exaggerating the importance of the conference.²² These pages list sources from the Berlin Document Center (files on the Nuremberg Trial, Eichmann interrogation and trial, personnel files), an extensive list of material from the IfZ, mostly evidence taken from document collections such as the 15-volume *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals* and the 42-volume *Der Prozeß gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher*. The script also mentions circa 120 secondary sources but does not list them. Mommertz does list around 80 of these sources on his website. They range from standard works such as Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* to specialist studies on the SS and Holocaust. The list also includes published primary sources such as memoirs (Albert Speer and Robert Kempner) and diaries (Hans Frank).²³ The archival collection contains an almost identical typewritten bibliography dating from 1983.²⁴ This bibliography is part of a folder including Mommertz's list of primary sources, so it presumably was included with this and other documentation accompanying the screenplay. Mommertz would later conduct research in other archives, particularly Yad Vashem, but he remained in Munich for his initial research before delivering a pitch document (*Exposé* in German) to Schirck, Infafilm, and Bayerischer Rundfunk.

2 The Pitch

Before writing the script, Mommertz wrote a pitch outlining the importance of the Wannsee Conference and justifying depicting it in the way that he wanted to. It is important to keep in mind that during the early 1980s, several conference participants were still alive (Otto Hofmann, Gerhard Klopfer, and Georg Leibbrandt) and that both Holocaust deniers and more conservative historians doubted both the protocol's authenticity and the conference's importance. Thus, it was of paramount importance – and an implicitly political project – for the

²² Paul Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch von Paul Mommertz, 1983, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 135–137.

²³ Paul Mommertz, "Literatur in „Die Wannseekonferenz“: Quellen Zum Film / Presseecho," accessed October 2, 2020, <http://www.paul-mommertz.de/quellen01.html>.

²⁴ Paul Mommertz, "Literatur Drehbuch 'Wannseekonferenz' SEKUNDÄRLITERATUR," 1983, in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kap. 1000 "Quellen (IMT, Literatur)" Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–3.

filmmakers to justify including information outside of the protocol's scope, the most important of which was open discussion of both mass murder that had already taken place and future plans for industrial-scale genocide. The pitch document and others are designed to provide the script with ironclad proof of complicity on the part of the conference participants – to show not only that the Holocaust was common knowledge in the upper echelons of government, but also to show that every single participant would have either had full knowledge of the mass murder campaign or would have at least gotten wind of it beforehand – concluding that it would have been ludicrous for these men to meet and speak in euphemisms about what everyone already knew was going on. The only complete surviving pitch document (titled “Exposé”) focuses solely on historical justifications for the coming screenplay. Later, scattered documents in the archives help piece together filming strategies, but they remain fragmentary. Additionally, Mommertz wanted to avoid what he saw as the dramatic pitfalls and shortcuts of the American series *Holocaust*:

... that [*Holocaust*] was therefore purely fictional and I was very fond of believing that with Meryl Streep etc., the film had made a tremendous impression, and I was delighted that this subject had finally been addressed by the Americans, who are not as meticulous as we are in these matters, so that a huge audience finally woke up and looked at it. On the other hand, I was uncomfortable with it. I knew that this was exactly what I wanted to avoid with the Wannsee Conference, to somehow arouse emotions and to work with fictional tricks and dramaturgical finesse in order to capture and sway the audience.²⁵

The pitch document, or exposé, is nineteen pages long and predates the script (its subtitle is “Reflections on a planned screenplay about the Wannsee Conference”). It can be dated to either 1981 or 1982, as Mommertz claims he spent fourteen months researching. A note claims that it was sent to Bayerischer Rundfunk, Infafilm, and to Heinz Schirk.²⁶ The exposé refrains from commentary on filming or writing strategies and instead focuses on a historical justification for dedicating an entire film to the Wannsee Conference. It is, at its core, a historiographical essay and argument for the Wannsee Conference's significance. At the beginning of his pitch, Mommertz cites a commentary by the Nuremberg Trial defense lawyer and unrepentant Nazi Rudolf Aschenauer, who edited the 1980 publication of

25 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 12:56–14:06.

26 Paul Mommertz, Exposé, “Überlegungen zu einem geplanten Drehbuch über die WANNSEE-KONFERENZ”, undated, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kap. 300 “Der Autor” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1. The first page of this document also contains a handwritten note: “at the beginning of the research.”

Eichmann's memoirs. Aschenauer claimed that the Wannsee Conference was only about "resettlement" and that the protocol is unreliable.²⁷ It is important to note that this edition of Eichmann's memoirs was published by the far-right, revisionist Druffel Verlag in 1980 – so claims about the Wannsee Conference being unimportant were in the public sphere and could be used by far-right skeptics to dismiss the planned film.²⁸ Mommertz then devotes the majority of his pitch document to refuting Aschenauer's claim. In order to refute it, Mommertz relies on the strategy of testing the protocol's veracity by investigating what each conference participant would have known about the Holocaust at the time of the meeting. For him, it was important to document the participants' prior knowledge "because the more they had known, the less one had to beat around the bush."²⁹ Mommertz states that these men were "completely in the picture" and that they would have been relieved that Heydrich "took full responsibility" for the Holocaust and because "one finally knew how one could make the Führer's will a practical and technical reality."³⁰ Mommertz further discusses denialist and neo-Nazi claims about the Holocaust, noting that the campaign of mass murder in the East was widespread knowledge in German governmental circles, arguing that it is implausible that the Wannsee participants could not have known about what had been happening up until that point – he notes that even if a document or policy was labeled "top secret," it does not mean that knowledge of it did not travel through the various state and Nazi Party organizations.³¹ One shocking aspect of this document is how Mommertz anticipates some of the criticism Heinz Höhne would level at him after the film's release – Höhne's line of argument is uncomfortably similar to some of the revisionist and denialist arguments presented here. Mommertz also correctly notes that many of the participants knew each other and had worked together before the conference – something that *Conspiracy* ignores in its characterization of Stuckart and Klopfer's encounter. He argues that these prior relationships meant that "the usually open, secretive, but also eye-winking and mutually-agreed upon interactions at such conferences had already been worked out."³² The exposé continues, with Mommertz listing each participant and discussing reasons they would have had prior knowledge of the mass murder campaign – to varying degrees – by the time of the conference. He

²⁷ Mommertz, Exposé, 1.

²⁸ See Adolf Eichmann, *Ich, Adolf Eichmann: ein historischer Zeugenbericht*, ed. Rudolf Aschenauer (Leoni am Starnberger See: Druffel, 1980).

²⁹ Mommertz, Exposé, 2.

³⁰ Mommertz, Exposé, 2.

³¹ Mommertz, Exposé, 3.

³² Mommertz, Exposé, 5.

notes that “it would be a downright desperate assumption, namely that everyone would overly-diplomatically tiptoe around each other’s ‘secret knowledge.’”³³

Towards the end of the pitch document, Mommertz moves beyond historical analysis of the Wannsee Conference participants and whether they had prior knowledge of mass killings. In this section, he discusses how best to depict these men in the film and provides statements about the purpose of the conference and its meaning for an audience in the 1980s. He notes that the conference and all of the sources surrounding it, such as the protocol “[make] sense, everything becomes alive, simply comprehensible and plausible, when one alleges that here, ‘civilized people,’ but also ‘pioneers of the future in an ideological war’ reconcile both aspects: the great, difficult task and the ‘decent’ method.”³⁴

The pitch document is not without its flaws – Mommertz wrote it before his intensive research process, and it contains errors that appear in the final cut – for instance, the claim that the meeting took place in the Interpol villa. Nevertheless, it is forcefully argued and Mommertz convincingly justifies his decision to have the conference participants speak openly about genocide instead of in euphemism, as a film that remained in the world of euphemisms would fail to capture an audience’s attention and would contribute to the erroneous assumption that the protocol is a verbatim transcript of what was said at Wannsee. Nevertheless, one would have to be exceedingly charitable to the conference participants to read the protocol as being about anything other than genocide or, as some critics alleged, “only about resettlement.” As Alex J. Kay has noted, it only “takes little reading between the lines to recognize the murderous intentions of the conference participants.”³⁵ Mommertz noted this aspect of the protocol in the pitch, forcefully arguing that Heydrich did not have “the slightest reason” to “not call things by name, especially with people that he had invited himself.”³⁶ In a line of argument that he would later use in *Der Spiegel*, Mommertz also noted that it was “completely unrealistic” to believe that Heydrich would have asked the participants to keep quiet for ninety minutes about the genocidal methods that the majority of them either knew about or were directly involved with, arguing that Heydrich was known for his “intentionally provocative, undiplomatic language” and would probably have not behaved any differently on January 20, 1942.³⁷ Finally, Mommertz vehemently argued against what he saw as a whitewashing or apologetic depiction of the Wannsee Conference participants:

³³ Mommertz, Exposé, 9.

³⁴ Mommertz, Exposé, 15.

³⁵ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 188.

³⁶ Mommertz, Exposé, 18.

³⁷ Mommertz, Exposé, 18.

It would obviously not only be historically false, but also gratuitous beyond measure if we wanted to do the participating gentlemen a favor and let them appear milder and less harmful than they were and as they, when they had the opportunity to, depicted themselves.³⁸

This last statement prefigures Mommertz's response to charges of demonization leveled at the film by some, mostly German, critics; it also seems to be an implicit response to the negative reviews of his previous film *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror* from critics such as Walter Jens, who charged him with depicting a “demonic” Heydrich. Furthermore, it points to film's political and educational project: let the perpetrators speak as they did, that is dramatic enough. In an interview, Mommertz defended this position at length:

. . . it had always been a problem for me when I depicted historical events on film, that people should understand it. And here I soon realized that they didn't have to understand anything. They just have to understand that that's how [the Nazis] talked. You didn't have to understand anything in detail, whether quarter Jew, eighth Jew or, whether the Italians – you just have to understand how, when you're at a conference – if someone had walked past a door and listened, what he heard would have nailed him in place because he thought: “No, listen, this can't be true.” The point was to show that a conference – is it in an inappropriate tone, [are people] talking about killing millions, so – but don't amplify that, but keep it in the blabbering tone of the conference. And it couldn't be otherwise – I was sure – it couldn't have been otherwise. It must have been so. Everything also fit together. And so, that you have to keep [the film] in this anti-dramaturgical, dry way. Then I did nothing more to make it easier for the viewer to understand any connections. I didn't want them to understand them. I can imagine that when I'm at a big meeting at BMW, that it would also fascinate me even though I don't understand the half of it. I would marvel at how these experts exchange ideas about everything so casually. That would fascinate me. That is how I imagined it.³⁹

Mommertz advocated a radical experiment in historical filmmaking: throwing the viewer into the deep end of the pool, so to speak, and immersing them in a microcosm of a historical world – in this case, the conference room. Instead of making a conventional, didactic historical film, where everything is introduced slowly for the viewer, Mommertz instead opted for a dense, sometimes alienating method which sought to place viewers in the room with people using the same type of language as the various groups of participants would have. He also claimed that he did not aim to make the film “didactic”:⁴⁰

³⁸ Mommertz, *Exposé*, 19.

³⁹ Interview with Paul Mommertz, Munich, October 19, 2019, Part 2, 02:58–06:55.

⁴⁰ Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 35:46–37:19.

I did not want to make [the film] didactic. I had already seen this didactic approach too often from the early days of historical films on television and of course I knew that it contradicted any artistic aspirations. There is this problem, what is art, what is information? Now I was actually lucky with the topic: I didn't have to make anything didactic, because the didactic aspect was in the thing itself . . . "This conference, in its discrepancy between the terrible subject matter and the way it is treated, is a tremendous scandal, an unparalleled cynicism." People talked about mass killing in a blabbering tone or with bureaucratic coldness. The judgement about this forces itself upon the viewer, the message, the message arises from itself. I just had to present the facts, nothing more. And I could spare myself all the didacticism.

Whether Mommertz only "presented the facts" is certainly disputable, but his point about the film's didactic nature lying in the "thing itself" is much more important. It echoes Elvira Neuendank's argument about historical films containing "embedded pedagogy."⁴¹ Mommertz's stated rejection of overtly didactic forms of historical programming is in keeping with Edgar Lersch's thesis about German public television networks shifting towards more dramatic formats after NBC's *Holocaust* miniseries West German premiere.⁴²

The most valuable educational aspect of films depicting the Wannsee Conference is not that they go into minute details about the participants and the prerogatives of every Nazi ministry, but they depict how "civilized," "ordinary men" discussed some of the most inhumane crimes imaginable as if they were discussing logistical strategies for some sort of industrial product. It is the depiction of the language of genocide itself and the power dynamics at work within the German government, not whether or not the filmmakers spell everything out for even the most inattentive viewer, which makes these films valuable contributions to the historical – and Holocaust – film genres.

Fragments of an unnamed and undated document outline some of Mommertz's writing strategies and his vision for the film. Unlike the main pitch document, these fragments spend more time discussing questions of drama and the larger questions to be addressed by the film. One fragment discusses the "politeness and objectivity and competence and inconspicuousness and banality" of the meeting and argues that "exactly this makes it so frightening, because one encounters oneself."⁴³ It is the very incongruity of the meeting's location with its

⁴¹ Neuendank, *Film als Pädagogisches Setting*, 9.

⁴² Edgar Lersch, "Vom „SS-Staat“ Zu „Auschwitz“ | Zeitgeschichte | Online," *zeitgeschichte online*, March 1, 2004, <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/vom-ss-staat-zu-auschwitz>.

⁴³ Paul Mommertz, *Fragment of an Untitled Document on Filming Strategies*, undated, in Ordner 6, "Holocaust: Ideologie, Chronologie, Kompetenzen," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 9.

subject, the banality of its participants and of the protocol that have made it so fascinating for historians and filmmakers. This same fragment also calls for these aspects of the conference to be “presented without shrill tones” and that “the quieter, simpler, more natural the report, the more documentary-like and therefore believable it will be. All superimposed drama would also be inappropriate considering the topic.”⁴⁴ Here, Mommertz called for something different than the “Holocaust piety” that is the staple of conventional Holocaust dramas.⁴⁵ Instead, he pleaded for a drama that did not need to “invent” dramatic turns because the event and the language the perpetrators used are frightening enough. In this sense, he was operating in the tradition of playwrights like Peter Weiss and Rolf Hochhuth – unsurprising given Mommertz’s start as a playwright, especially with his piece *Aktion T4*.⁴⁶ Mommertz also wanted the entire film to take place in the Wannsee villa and said that the film should last ninety minutes, just as the conference itself did. Mommertz states that this dramatic strategy is also appropriate because “there is enough dramatic tension [in the piece] without spectacular dramatic action, without a dramatic antagonist as devil’s advocate, and without dramatic loud, argumentative dialogue.”⁴⁷

Other fragments of pre-production documents further outline strategies for depicting the conference. One draft, possibly of the same document discussed above, leans heavily on Arendt’s banality-of-evil concept when it outlines the film’s theme:

Were all of these outwardly so civilized gentlemen closeted sadists, bloodthirsty racists, murderous antisemites?

One will have to look for the answer elsewhere. In the formula of the banality of evil. There isn’t another one.

Their simple, everyday and typical functionality, that constantly repeats itself in other contexts: to analyze, make it understandable and comprehensible without excusing them – that is, beyond the historical content, the topic.⁴⁸

44 Mommertz, Fragment of an Untitled Document on Filming Strategies, 9.

45 See Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 43–48, and Matthew Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music and Film*, (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

46 See Paul Mommertz, *Aktion T4 – Schauspiel in fünf Bildern*, Textbuch (Berlin: Theaterverlag Desch, 2016).

47 Mommertz, Fragment of an Untitled Document on Filming Strategies, 9.

48 Paul Mommertz, Draft of an Untitled Document on Filming Strategies, undated, in Ordner 3, “Personen. Dokumente zu Heydrich, Eichmann, Stuckart,” subfolder “Stuckart,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 5.

The production's strong focus on the banality of evil (as well as intentionalism, which is discussed below) marks it as a product of the early 1980s. Current research on Holocaust perpetrators has called the banality of evil archetype and Hannah Arendt's conclusions in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* into question, especially when applied to Eichmann and other RSHA and SD functionaries, who in reality were highly ideologically-motivated "true believers," not Arendt's banal bureaucrats, an idea which has since been rendered into caricature.⁴⁹ This strategic document further discusses dramatic aspects of the film. At the very beginning, Mommertz declared that the film does not have a plot in the standard sense of the term, stating that instead, the film is about a "temporal, situational, and behavioral analysis with the tools of dramatic dialogue."⁵⁰

Because it is an early draft, this document states that the primary sources are the Wannsee Protocol and transcripts of Eichmann's interrogation and trial. He notes his previous work with Dr. Armand Mergen on Heydrich's personality for *Manager of Terror* and says that the production can depict Heydrich, Müller, and Eichmann without legal difficulties. This draft predates the pitch document (exposé) discussed above, and this can be determined because it offers a completely different strategy for depicting the other conference participants: composite characters. Curiously, this draft states that a "historically accurate characterization [of the remaining conference participants] is neither possible nor necessary nor desirable."⁵¹ Mommertz justifies this statement by claiming that, first of all, it would be impossible due to the paucity of source material on the participants, and that it would furthermore be "undesirable due to the legal implications." Lastly, he claims that depicting them was unnecessary because it was more important to get the "inner truth" across rather than focusing on the "surface accuracy" of depicting these participants as real individuals with names and personalities.⁵² Mommertz and the production team obviously changed their minds in respect to this last point, because much of Mommertz's later research concerns the remaining participants. He went to great lengths to depict them accurately.

In subsequent research material, as well as in the script, the characters are mentioned by name – though the released film avoids doing so in order to avoid legal trouble. Nevertheless, this mention of potential legal issues in this early production memo draft illustrates the West German public television climate at the beginning of the 1980s: depiction of perpetrators was clearly acceptable if limited

49 Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, trans. Ruth Martin (New York: Vintage, 2015), 219–220, Cesarani, *Eichmann* 343–344.

50 Mommertz, Draft of an Untitled Document on Filming Strategies, 6.

51 Mommertz, Draft of an Untitled Document on Filming Strategies, 6.

52 Mommertz, Draft of an Untitled Document on Filming Strategies, 6.

to the short list of infamous Nazis like Heydrich and Eichmann. But once a writer started to go beyond the SS and household names, they could run into trouble. The caution advised here demonstrates that West German society, even after the recent airing of *Holocaust*, was largely unwilling to discuss or confront those perpetrators who had not worn SS uniforms. Much like the “clean Wehrmacht” myth, which posits that the SS was solely responsible for the Holocaust and other wartime atrocities, this *Zeitgeist* rejected the possibility that those responsible also wore civilian suits; they reintegrated relatively painlessly into postwar West German society.⁵³ It is also significant to note that an official from Bayerischer Rundfunk (*Redakteur* Norbert Bittmann) always had a say over the script and, owing to the network’s conservative bent, was more likely to remain cautious in such matters. Heinz Schirk directly addressed this in an interview, stating that the network put the project on ice because of legal concerns and that it only came back to life when the filmmakers decided to name characters by their functions and ranks instead of names.⁵⁴ Mommertz rejected this attitude but was possibly hamstrung by network officials – in an interview, he complained about the conservatism of Bayerischer Rundfunk and about what he saw as a stifling atmosphere and lack of enthusiasm for the project.⁵⁵ In another interview, however, Mommertz praised executive producer Siegfried Glökler for his easy-going nature and claimed that although Bayerischer Rundfunk was reluctant to produce the film, they agreed to do so without much protest, likely because of Glökler’s initiative and Korytowski’s standing.⁵⁶

An undated internal memo outlines the “most important documents” about the Wannsee Conference. This memo, in the style of an annotated bibliography, discusses important sources proving that the various conference participants knew about the Holocaust and could not convincingly claim ignorance after the war. Mommertz believed that these sources were important because during production, he and the producers wanted to ensure that the conference participants actually spoke about mass murder during the conference. Both conference participants themselves and Holocaust deniers had used the protocol’s euphemistic lan-

53 For the Myth of the Clean Wehrmacht, see Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

54 Interview with Heinz Schirk, April 5, 2019, 27:23–31:06.

55 Interview with Paul Mommertz, Munich, October 19, 2019, Part 1, 30:13–32:33.

56 Interview with Paul Mommertz, Munich, October 19, 2019, Part 1, 26:45–29:40.

guage to argue that murder was not discussed at the meeting.⁵⁷ At the beginning of this document, Mommertz mentioned that “evidence and evidentiary documents for the shared knowledge (*Mitwisserschaft*) of the individual conference participants regarding the Final Solution” can be provided to the production team.⁵⁸ He first cites a letter dated October 25, 1941 from Dr. Erhard Wetzel, a lawyer and so-called Jewish expert for the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories.⁵⁹ This letter is the first known mention of gas chambers within the Nazi government and Mommertz cites it as proof that the participants had to know about extermination methods in occupied Poland. Mommertz calls the letter “the key document for our piece” and argues that “it shows that it [was] possible to speak openly” about mass murder during the conference, the *Einsatzgruppen* massacres, and the “shift from bullets to gas” in the second half of 1941, “exactly that which never ever could have been discussed according to the opinions of the doubters of the Wannsee topic . . .”⁶⁰ He continues, noting that the letter proves, among other things, that Wetzel knew about the use of carbon monoxide gas during the T4 program and at the extermination camp Chełmno – and since Wetzel was a subordinate of the Wannsee participants Alfred Meyer and Georg Leibbrandt, they would have known about it as well. He also notes that the letter proves Eichmann’s involvement in the process and that it proves that the conference participants Meyer, Leibbrandt, Lange, and Eichmann had “full knowledge” of the unfolding genocidal campaign in the General Government and occupied parts of the Soviet Union.⁶¹ He continues, noting that this same knowledge is obvious on the part of Heydrich and Müller, also arguing that it “would be absurd” if other SS and SD officials like Eberhard Schöngarth and Otto Hofmann had been kept in the dark about these developments.⁶² Mommertz notes evidence for Stuckart’s prior knowledge (via reports from his subordinate Bernhard Lösener) and Martin Luther’s complicity (Luther had received reports from the *Einsatzgruppen*). Nevertheless, this document mistakenly identifies Stuckart as Hey-

57 Paul Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz – Die wichtigsten Dokumente,” 1982 or 1983, in Ordner 6, “Holocaust: Ideologie, Chronologie, Kompetenzen,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–3.

58 Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz – Die wichtigsten Dokumente,” 1.

59 See Wetzel, “Draft of Letter to the Reich Commissioner for the East Concerning Proposed Extermination Facilities and Work Camps for Jews,” Harvard Law School Nuremberg Trials Project, accessed October 6, 2020, <http://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/documents/1675-draft-of-letter-to-the-reich?q=evidence:%22NO-365%22#p.1>, October 25, 1941.

60 Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz – Die wichtigsten Dokumente,” 1.

61 Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz – Die wichtigsten Dokumente,” 1–2.

62 Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz – Die wichtigsten Dokumente,” 2.

drich's contact in the German Foreign Office (this was actually Luther).⁶³ The list of sources continues, listing documents proving the prior knowledge of other participants and connecting the T4 euthanasia program with the Holocaust.⁶⁴ Mommertz spends so much time on proving prior knowledge because, as discussed in the following chapter, many skeptical historians and others with more explicit political agendas doubted the importance of the Wannsee Conference and argued that the protocol proved that the participants "only" discussed "resettlement," not genocide. This document is to ensure that the script is on solid historiographic ground. At the end of this memo, Mommertz sums up the state of affairs at the conference:

In short: everything is in its beginnings, everything is in flux, everything under discussion – Final Solution in Russian territory, in the General Government, in the "reclaimed" German Eastern Territory, this also and more, and the stakeholders in the SS, Nazi Party, ministerial bureaucracy, and officials in the occupied territories took part at least in the respect of trying to defend their areas of competencies from interference.

Of course it is impossible to prove which details of the possible solutions were discussed. However, it is permitted to infer that they were not forced to.

On the basis of this supported hypothesis, the author permits himself to bring up the now-known relevant facts for discussion, as they result in a total and credible, sufficiently informative image for the audience.⁶⁵

Granted, as this is part of an internal film production document and not an academic essay, Mommertz refrains from hedging. Even the most nuanced historical films inevitably simplify complex histories and scholarly debate – multiperspectivity, for example, is difficult to portray on film (with the possible exception of of homages to Kurosawa's *Rashomon*). In the case of *The Wannsee Conference*, the filmmakers consequently refused to include the perspectives of victims or bystanders, instead placing the audience at the meeting with perpetrators. There is no protagonist for the audience to root for, no sympathetic figure with whom they can identify. Most academic publications on historical films emphasize the need for identification and sympathetic protagonists, but *The Wannsee Conference* flatly refuses to follow this convention, which arguably gives the film more power to shock audiences. There is no counternarrative, no victims with whom to sympathize, no moralizing narrator to tell the audience what to think. Instead, the audience is left alone with the participants' words.

⁶³ Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz – Die wichtigsten Dokumente," 2.

⁶⁴ Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz – Die wichtigsten Dokumente," 3–5.

⁶⁵ Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz – Die wichtigsten Dokumente," 6–7.

3 Writing the Screenplay

Mommertz directly credits the 1957 courtroom film *12 Angry Men* as an inspiration during the writing process:

When writing this *Wannsee Conference*, I of course thought of *12 Angry Men*. That always encouraged me. I thought: “It worked once, a one-room piece, twelve people sitting around a table and talking, talking, so [there was] unity of time and place without action, without exterior shots. So in principle you can do that.” That encouraged me at the time even though I knew that *12 Angry Men* has an element of tension in it because that’s what it’s all about – it’s about the defendant’s head: guilty or not guilty. That was something completely different. But it was just the reality of a one-room piece.⁶⁶

Mommertz further describes the writing process as relatively quick (after his fourteen-month research period), arguing that his teenage experiences around Nazi officials helped him with writing the dialogue:

[Writing the script] went very slowly at first and then rapidly in three weeks – or even less – I suddenly had the text together and namely – with me everything is done through dialogue. When I started to let people speak [on the page], that’s when it started rolling. It was to my advantage . . . that I really knew how people [back then] talked, especially those from the Nazi Party. Actually, I can . . . the Nazi jargon was really something that . . . I had been attentive to, I studied German language and literature for a reason. I had an ear for it. Where I could hear it was at my parents’ company, where [the local Nazis] all showed up . . .⁶⁷

The only surviving example of the screenplay included in the Paul Mommertz archival collections is the 134-page shooting script, dated 1983. Based on the dates of other sources, the shooting script was likely completed sometime after April 1983 (the film would air in December of that year). The numerous instances of revised pages typed on different typewriters – at least three different typewriters (page 44A is a good example of such a revision) – point to this version likely being the shooting script. It is common practice for shooting scripts to have revisions typed just before or during filming, sometimes on differently colored paper in order to make these new script revisions clear. Since the script here is a black and white photocopy, the different typewritten fonts are the only clue to this draft’s status as the shooting script. The script is divided into thematic chapters and contains several inserts with notes for the director and cast about the Wannsee Conference and its participants.

⁶⁶ Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 15:06–16:04.

⁶⁷ Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 1:03–10:48. See also Viktor Klemperer’s influential study *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2018).

A script is not merely a transcript of a film's dialogue. Scripts also include stage directions and commentary on character behavior, which help reveal authorial intent. Furthermore, *The Wannsee Conference* depends largely on dialogue to get its historical message across, which makes access to the script invaluable. The script uses the traditional three act-structure, with the second act subdivided into three parts. The three acts are titled "Prelude," "The Conference," and "Epilogue." The script also contains several sections discussing the sources or historical situation in order to help the director and cast. These inserts reveal character motivations and larger themes that Mommertz wanted to make clear in the film. The screenplay ends with Mommertz's bibliography. The chapter titled "The Conference" is subdivided into three chapters named for – and focusing on – the characters Heydrich, Luther, and Stuckart. The "Prelude" covers the arrival of the participants and depicts a pre-meeting between Heydrich and other participants from the SS and RSHA (plus Luther). This section sets up the power dynamic at the conference; it makes clear that one of the meeting's aims is to consolidate Heydrich's power and assert SS dominance over the various civilian ministries represented at Wannsee. The conference itself begins on page 36 of the script and is divided into three sections. The first is "Part A: Heydrich – The Final Solution" and covers Heydrich's presentation on anti-Jewish measures up to that point and largely follows the protocol. This section is the longest part of the script, covering forty-one pages.⁶⁸ The next section, titled "The Conference: Part B: Luther – The Foreign Jews" focuses on possible issues with implementing anti-Jewish policy in occupied foreign countries as well as allied nations like Hungary and Italy. The final section of the script covering the meeting itself is titled "The Conference: Part C: Stuckart – The *Mischlinge*" and is the film's climax – by this point, everyone at the table knows what has been going on and how operations are to progress from here on out. It is here where Stuckart puts forth most of his arguments about sterilization versus murder and the legal issues that would rise if the state annulled mixed marriages *en masse*. The script's final section, "Epilogue" (*Nachspiel*) covers the participants' departure and Heydrich's fireside chat with Müller and Eichmann over cognac, where he expresses relief at the relatively smooth course of the day's events.

The script notes that the setting should match the architectural plans of the Wannsee villa and that the Wannsee shore will appear through a window.⁶⁹ The character list makes the production team's concern about legal action clear. With

68 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 36.

69 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, i.

the exceptions of Heydrich, Müller, and Eichmann, the participants are listed by their ranks. Many of the characters are listed as *Staatsekretäre*. According to Mark Roseman, this is a governmental rank “analogous to undersecretary of state in the United States or permanent secretary in the British civil service or their respective deputies.” Roseman notes that because of the lack of an actual cabinet, “the fifty or so *Staatsekretäre* . . . were the essential medium of policy coordination . . . [m]eetings between the *Staatsekretäre* were in effect a substitute for cabinet government.”⁷⁰ Stuckart, for example, is listed as “First *Staatssekretär* (41), Reich Ministry of Interior. Named Stuckart in script.” All other characters are similarly listed, with rank having priority over name. Some of the participants do not even have their ages listed.⁷¹ In the actual screenplay, the characters are named when they have lines or when they perform an action, but other characters only refer to them by rank, never their names. The credits sequence lists the fates of Heydrich, Eichmann, Freisler, and Stuckart, and also lists all participants by name. The script concludes with the list of primary sources discussed above.⁷² It is important to note, however, that although Mommertz was trained in historical methods and did indeed conduct archival research, he also relied on the help of a historical advisor – the same one he had sought help from for his previous film, *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror*.

Unlike in *Manager of Terror*, the Israeli historian Shlomo Aronson was credited as the film’s historical advisor and later gave interviews promoting the film. After the film’s release, he was embroiled in a controversy involving Heinz Höhne’s negative review in *Der Spiegel* and testy correspondence between Aronson and Mommertz has survived – the following chapter will examine this correspondence in detail and discuss Aronson’s reservations about the film. Aronson was more closely involved with research for *The Wannsee Conference* than he had been with the previous film; owing to Manfred Korytowski’s Israeli citizenship and Mommertz’s previous collaboration with Aronson, both Mommertz and Korytowski again traveled to Israel during the research process, mainly visiting Yad Vashem, among other research institutions. One surviving document consists of Aronson’s handwritten notes on the Wannsee Conference, with Mommertz’s comments and underlining in red ink. This document outlines various historiographical questions and problems surrounding the conference. Aronson notes that the first major issue is the “timing of the Final Solution and the conference,”

⁷⁰ Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 60–61. See also O’Byrne, “Nazi Constitutional Designs.”

⁷¹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, ii.

⁷² Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch.

arguing that the decision to murder all European Jews was likely reached in October 1941.⁷³ Aronson justifies this date by listing several factors ranging from looming American entry into the war, radicalizing Nazi ideology, a desire for “revenge” against the Jews (according to Nazi doctrine, the Jews themselves were responsible for the war’s outbreak), and Hitler’s meeting with the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin Al-Husseini.⁷⁴ Aronson frequently cited his then-newly published article “Die dreifache Falle” (The Triple Trap) as a key resource for Mommertz. In this article, Aronson claims that the Al-Husseini had not only allied with Hitler, but that he had also collaborated in planning the Holocaust.⁷⁵ Some contemporary historians, including Jeffrey Herf, expert on Nazi propaganda campaigns in North Africa and the rest of the Arab world, reject this interpretation. Herf argues that this characterization of the Grand Mufti was given new life in 2015 by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and has, historiographically speaking, fallen by the wayside – for him, no “authoritative historians of the decision-making sequence leading to the Holocaust” ascribe any importance to Al-Husseini.⁷⁶ Gerhard Weinberg, leading German historian of diplomacy, has ascribed importance to Al-Husseini’s meeting with Hitler, but with a view towards potential German expansion in the Middle East and subsequent murder of Jews living there.⁷⁷ Herf states that the claim about Al-Husseini’s importance for the Holocaust “rests partly on a misinterpretation of a meeting that the two had in Berlin on November 28, 1941.”⁷⁸ Recently, David Modatel also addressed the November 28 meeting, arguing that “biographical research on the mufti tends to overestimate his influence in Berlin.”⁷⁹ In Aronson’s notes on Wannsee, he mentions this same meeting as proof of Al-Husseini’s connection.⁸⁰ Herf discusses this misinterpretation of Al-Husseini’s meeting with Hitler, showing that there is no evidence of Al-Husseini’s importance to Nazi decision-making in Europe (Herf does detail Al-Husseini’s importance as a collaborator in North Africa and Palestine), arguing that previous interpretations that attempt to draw a connection between Al-Husseini’s Berlin visit and

73 Shlomo Aronson, “Wannseekonferenz,” 1983, Private Archive Paul Mommertz, Munich, 1.

74 Aronson, “Wannseekonferenz,” 1.

75 Aronson, “Die dreifache Falle. Hitlers Judenpolitik, die Alliierten und die Juden,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 32, no. 1 (1984): 29–65, 64.

76 Jeffrey Herf, “Haj Amin Al-Husseini, the Nazis and the Holocaust: The Origins, Nature and Aftereffects of Collaboration,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 26, no. 3/4 (2014): 13–37, 14.

77 Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 508–509.

78 Herf, “Haj Amin Al-Husseini,” 18.

79 David Modatel, *Islam and Nazi Germany’s War*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 43.

80 Aronson, “Wannseekonferenz,” 1.

the timing of the Wannsee Conference are wild exaggerations.⁸¹ Herf's argument is bolstered by the fact that Eichmann sent the initial invitations to the conference on November 29, 1941, meaning that because they were sent one day after Al-Huseni's visit, Eichmann would have had less than twenty-four hours' notice to prepare the invitations for a conference which resulted from Göring's letter to Heydrich from July 31, 1941.⁸² In the final version of the script, the Grand Mufti only appears in one line. Luther mentions him as an ally as a reason for potentially deporting Jews to Madagascar instead of Palestine.⁸³ Nevertheless, Aronson's listing of Al-Husseini in his notes and his own article claiming that Al-Huseni was directly involved in the Holocaust reveals a degree of Israeli nationalism that fortunately had little impact on the ultimately released film.

Aronson's notes on Wannsee continue, remarking that the "purpose of the conference" was another historical question that Mommertz would have to grapple with. He correctly points out – contrary to later statements in promotional material for the film – that the meeting was not about deciding whether or not the Holocaust would happen, but about the SS and RSHA bringing the civilian ministries into line, thereby "[preventing] an unending amount of bureaucratic and internal political difficulties."⁸⁴ According to Aronson, the potential "difficulties" to be solved at Wannsee included the question of *Mischlinge* and mixed marriages, keeping the meeting and its subject matter secret, "Hitler's political goal" to make the rest of Germany complicit in the Holocaust, and "Heydrich's goal to secure the SS' complete control" of the Holocaust, but also "guarantee the participation of the civilian ministries."⁸⁵

Aronson's notes on the historiographical problems surrounding Wannsee end here and the document shifts to suggestions for "possible script changes." He asked Mommertz to change the characterization of Müller in the opening scene (the draft Aronson is commenting on is not present in either Mommertz archival collection), arguing that his attitude towards other civil servants was "barely historically supportable" and that Lange's tipsy, reckless behavior should also be removed. Instead, Aronson argues that the characters should discuss meetings Hitler had attended in recent months, including the one with Al-Huseni.⁸⁶ Another of Aronson's suggestions that Mommertz ignored was one advocating introducing

⁸¹ Herf, "Haj Amin Al-Husseini," 24–25.

⁸² See Dokument 4.2, "Erste Einladung Heydrichs an Luther, 29. November 1941" in Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*, 32–33.

⁸³ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 24.

⁸⁴ Aronson, "Wannseekonferenz," 1.

⁸⁵ Aronson, "Wannseekonferenz," 1–2.

⁸⁶ Aronson, "Wannseekonferenz," 3.

various participants (Heydrich, Müller, Freisler) with historical photos and film clips of them.⁸⁷ Arguably, this would have broken with Mommertz's desires to keep the film grounded in a specific time and place. Aronson concludes this document by asking what happened to the participants after the conference, suggesting that the filmmakers utilize newsreel footage of Heydrich's state funeral (as they had previously done in *Manager of Terror*), Roland Freisler at the *Volksgerichtshof*, and, yet again, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Aronson suggested that these changes would make the film more documentary-like, but Mommertz indicated his own thoughts on these suggestions by writing "semi" over the phrase "documentary-like."⁸⁸ This is not to say that Mommertz and the production team ignored most of Aronson's suggestions, but that in some instances, particularly where his suggestions would, in their eyes, potentially hamper the film's dramatic potential without adding anything of historical value, they demurred. The script and other production documents make clear that the filmmakers would not be bothered if the audience remained confused at first – because dialogue was so important to the film's impact, they refrained from holding the audience's hand at most points.

A surviving letter to Manfred Korytowski dated April 24, 1983 indicates more of Aronson's suggestions for the script during the writing process. Unlike his more professional correspondence with Mommertz, Aronson addresses Korytowski on a first-name basis. Aronson notes that he has received a new draft of the script with changes Mommertz inserted based on his previous comments. In this letter, Aronson discusses ways to further improve the script, beginning with the disunity of the German population at the time and Hitler's need to bring disparate groups into line, arguing that the film should emphasize that the conference's goal was to make civilian ministries complicit. He also notes that the film should make clear that the Holocaust was a "half-open secret" and suggests that Mommertz utilize an incident with Wilhelm Kube, *Generalkommissar* for White Russia (current-day Belarus), to illustrate this dynamic.⁸⁹ This refers to a dispute between Kube and Heydrich over the killing of Jewish forced laborers, which David Cesarani has dubbed "symptomatic of a wider conflict over policy between civilians and the SS that would flare up repeatedly until the end of [1941]."⁹⁰ Aronson argues that "the purpose of the conference was, among others, to shut down the

⁸⁷ Aronson, "Wannseekonferenz," 3.

⁸⁸ Aronson, "Wannseekonferenz," 3–4.

⁸⁹ Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, Private Archive Paul Mommertz, Munich, 1–2.

⁹⁰ Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 397–398.

Kubes and simultaneously make them accomplices.”⁹¹ Aronson takes a strong intentionalist stance here, arguing that “[Hitler] could therefore mobilize people such as antidemocrats, conservatives, conformists, *völkisch* romantics, careerists, and bureaucrats for the Final Solution without them being fanatical antisemites like himself.”⁹² He then notes that the film could then divide the participants along these lines, with Stuckart and Leibbrandt embodying the “antidemocratic conservatives with a sense for bureaucracy,” who “believe in the ‘Führerprinzip’ but fear the NSDAP’s radicalism.”⁹³ Aronson states that Mommertz can then play Stuckart and Leibbrandt off of the SS, using them for a “very dramatic dialectic.” He continues, saying that Alfred Meyer can represent the “*völkisch* romantics,” while Neumann can represent a “conformist.”⁹⁴ For him, “the question that the program seeks to answer should be: why, in fact, did the Stuckarts and Neumanns, Leibbrandts, etc. walk into this trap [of Hitler and the SS]?”⁹⁵ Aronson also wanted the film to emphasize the need for secrecy due to the limited state resources devoted to the “Final Solution” during a total war.⁹⁶ Most importantly, Aronson strongly wished for the script to divide the characters into different, identifiable interest groups and “show a development (such as Stuckart becoming an accomplice).”⁹⁷ He also mentioned photocopies of various sources that he sent with the letter and asked Korytowski to give them to Mommertz.⁹⁸ Further script comments by Aronson remain undiscovered.

The final draft of the screenplay begins with the arrival of Meyer and Leibbrandt. Eichmann addresses them by rank, not name, and the two joke about having a meeting at the “Interpol” villa and that the villa had been recently “Aryanized” – that is, confiscated from its ostensibly Jewish owner.⁹⁹ It is important to note that at the time of filming, historians erroneously believed that the Wannsee villa was also home to Interpol – historians have since determined that this was mistaken, the Wannsee Conference villa was in reality a guesthouse and conference venue for the SD. This oft-repeated mistaken assumption stems from Eichmann’s original invitation letters listing the wrong address.¹⁰⁰ The villa’s previous

91 Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, 2.

92 Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, 2.

93 Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, 2.

94 Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, 3.

95 Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, 3.

96 Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, 3.

97 Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, 4.

98 Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, 4.

99 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 1–3.

100 Tuchel, *Am Grossen Wannsee* 56–58, 114.

owner was not Jewish, but the disgraced industrialist Friedrich Minoux.¹⁰¹ One stage direction that appears early in the script and is almost ever-present is *Heiterkeit*, or laughter or amusement. Conference participants are constantly laughing or drawing amusement from either jokes being told at the Jews' expense or the repressive policies under discussion. One key exception is Heydrich. At several points, the stage directions reiterate that everyone should be laughing besides Heydrich, who is focused on the matter at hand and is concerned above all else with getting through his presentation and forcing the other participants to acquiesce.¹⁰² This is not to characterize Heydrich as a "humorless" person, but rather to show that he was unable to relax until the end of the meeting (he cracks jokes throughout the film, but always steers the conversation back towards the conference's purpose), which is shown at the end of the film – a reference to Eichmann's testimony about Heydrich enjoying a cognac, which Eichmann found very unusual for his superior.¹⁰³ The script describes Heydrich signing paperwork before the meeting, noting his "hasty, effective style . . . Heydrich constantly keeps moving and demonstrates the ability to meet multiple expectations simultaneously."¹⁰⁴ In other words, the script underscores the fact that Heydrich is in control here and that the conference is but one of his many responsibilities.

In contrast, the script highlights Eichmann's nervousness and contradictory attitudes – subservient towards superiors, abusive and hectoring towards subordinates. Eichmann is constantly holding doors open for higher-ranking officials and trying to remain in the background. Early in the script, Eichmann's attitude is described as: "Eichmann is at the gate, telephoning in a high-pitched tone that stands in stark contrast with his keen subservience towards superiors."¹⁰⁵ One key aspect of the script – beyond dialogue – is Mommertz's commentary on particular characters and how the audience should respond. For example, when Stuckart is introduced and he begins discussing issues with *Mischlinge* and the Nuremberg laws, a key conference theme, with the puzzled secretary, Mommertz includes the following note: "One doesn't have to exactly understand Stuckart's remarks, they should instead form the impression of a macabre hairsplitting."¹⁰⁶

In addition to laughter, the script constantly mentions drinking and the loss of inhibitions as the participants consume increasing amounts of cognac during

¹⁰¹ Tuchel, *Am Grossen Wannsee* 56–58, 17–21.

¹⁰² Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 85.

¹⁰³ Dokument 8, "Adolf Eichmann, Äußerungen in der Sassen-Runde, 1957," Transkript Tonband 50, 6–13, in Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*, 69.

¹⁰⁴ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 22.

¹⁰⁵ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 16.

¹⁰⁶ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, 10.

the conference – again in keeping with Eichmann’s testimony about the meeting, where he stated “the subject was spoken about in confusion and the orderlies handed out cognac or other drinks all the time, not that any alcoholic effect came about . . .”¹⁰⁷ Drinking and the loss of inhibitions is a key theme of the film, which contrasts the enormity of the criminality on display with the almost party-like atmosphere of the smoke-filled room, the sounds of clinking glasses and men laughing. Rudolf Lange in particular is already tipsy before the meeting even begins, a nod to the *Einsatzgruppen* often being supplied with copious amounts of alcohol.¹⁰⁸ In fact, Lange is so tipsy that he coyly mentions the use of gas vans in occupied Poland during his first scene.¹⁰⁹ The participants constantly drink cognac during the conference, with Heydrich toasting everyone at the end of his presentation – but not drinking any himself until the end of the meeting. During Heydrich’s toast, the script describes an atmosphere that is simultaneously festive, comic, and sinister:

Heydrich raises his glass, but does not drink. He instead demonstratively places it back on the silver tray held out to him. The others toast Heydrich and toss down [their drinks] or sip at them according to their temperament. Kritzinger’s hand shakes a little bit. Bühler chokes a little and coughs. Stuckart only nips suggestively. Luther stretches out his hand for a new glass and tosses down his drink. Lange’s gestures indicate that he’s claiming an entire bottle, and he gets it. He serves himself hereafter completely without inhibition and simultaneously clouded in thick cigarette smoke.¹¹⁰

As the meeting approaches its close and the script reaches its climax, the participants drink even more; the script notes that the ill Stuckart (he has a cold) “drinks distractedly and agitatedly.”¹¹¹

The script makes Mommertz’s use of primary sources abundantly clear. In the *Wannsee Conference* screenplay, the viewer is invited to look at the primary sources on screen – or at least is told about them – and not just the Wannsee Conference Protocol, which is of course the most prominent primary source consulted and directly quoted from in the script. For example, when the script mentions the *Einsatzgruppen* reports sent to the German Foreign Office and Luther’s desk, Mommertz notes that photocopies of the original documents are in his possession: “Lange has taken a manuscript out of the folder, about sixty typewritten

¹⁰⁷ 107. Sitzung am 24. Juli 1961, “Verhör Adolf Eichmanns durch den vorsitzenden Richter Moshe Landau” in Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*, 107–108.

¹⁰⁸ See Edward B. Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide: Alcohol and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 2.

¹⁰⁹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 5.

¹¹⁰ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 65.

¹¹¹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 97.

pages long and stapled. (Photocopy of the original in author's possession.)"¹¹² About one-sixth of this document can be found in Mommertz's archived research files on *Einsatzgruppe A*, which was responsible for the Baltic States and which Lange led a part of. These files come from the IfZ, Archiv Fb 101/35.¹¹³ In his commentary on this source collection (most of the folders in the Paul Mommertz Archive contain short, typewritten introductory essays by Mommertz), Mommertz notes that the *Einsatzgruppen* reports were circulated at the highest levels of the German government and that "the amount of readers was in the hundreds, the amount of those who knew about them was in the thousands."¹¹⁴ Mommertz also notes that these *Einsatzgruppen* reports had been circulated "for half a year" before the Wannsee Conference.¹¹⁵

Later in the script, Freisler asks how large *Einsatzgruppen* are and what they consist of. Lange answers, listing the different groups of people within an *Einsatzgruppe*: "Four *Einsatzgruppen* at 1000 men each. Composition: Waffen SS, SS-Reservists, Stapo, Kripo, Orpo, SD. Two dozen female staff . . . Success is based on a combination of organization, the effect of surprise, deception, and an uncompromising will to exterminate."¹¹⁶ Lange's description of the composition of the *Einsatzgruppen* is taken almost verbatim from an organizational chart of *Einsatzgruppe A* found in the IfZ archives and included in Mommertz's collection of photocopied primary documents.¹¹⁷

It is here that the film descends into a meta-level and openly discusses the sources which not only provide evidence for the Holocaust, but also would have been available to many of the conference participants. Throughout the film, characters directly quote or paraphrase sources found in Mommertz's research files. It is important to note that the script itself does not contain footnotes, but in some instances, like the case of the *Einsatzgruppen* reports, it is relatively easy to trace the information contained within a particular line of dialogue back to a source document contained within Mommertz's research files. In this way, the screenplay, correspondence between the filmmakers, Mommertz's photocopied research material, and his accompanying annotations on it all come together to form the

112 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 27.

113 Paul Mommertz, "Geheime Reichssache: Einsatzgruppen Bericht der Einsatzgruppe A" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1500 "Dokumente Einsatzgruppen," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannseekonferenz, Berlin, 1.

114 Mommertz, "Geheime Reichssache: Einsatzgruppen Bericht der Einsatzgruppe A," 1.

115 Mommertz, "Geheime Reichssache: Einsatzgruppen Bericht der Einsatzgruppe A," 1.

116 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 57.

117 Mommertz, "Geheime Reichssache: Einsatzgruppen Bericht der Einsatzgruppe A," 3.

“paper trail” that allows historians to trace the process of creating a historical film.¹¹⁸

In a page inserted between pages 96 and 97, Mommertz discusses sources and strategies for Stuckart’s arguments about *Mischlinge* and mixed marriages. This is the only instance in the screenplay where Mommertz takes the time to write at length about character decisions. He claims that Stuckart’s arguments resulted in *Mischlinge* and Jews in mixed marriages being spared thanks to the orders of Himmler and possible directions from Hitler himself. At one point, Mommertz states “here too, the script remains in keeping with the verdicts of professional historians.”¹¹⁹ He also offers a word of caution in order to preempt any misunderstandings about Stuckart which could result in mistaken impressions or even identification with the character: “Here too, the impression of Stuckart becoming stylized as a resistance fighter cannot be formed when one looks at his monstrous racist argumentation – even if one grants him a good portion of ‘when in Rome’ . . .”¹²⁰

Other aspects of the screenplay that provide insight into the filmmaker’s ideas and arguments about the Wannsee Conference include instructions for the director and descriptions of nonverbal aspects of the characters’ behavior. This is key for a film depicting group dynamics, power struggles, and rivalries within the Nazi government and across different agencies. These instructions can include details about how characters should react to events nonverbally. For example, during the end of the second part of the script’s second act, “Part B: Luther and the Foreign Jews,” Heydrich exits the conference room with Luther, Müller, Lange, and Eichmann. The script notes “obvious discomfort in the faces of Kritzingner, Stuckart, and Bühler. Indifference from the others.”¹²¹ The seating arrangements at the conference table itself are also a key aspect of the film’s depiction of group dynamics at the Wannsee Conference. When the participants enter the conference room, the SS all sit on one side of the table, forming a wall of gray field uniforms – not the black uniforms seen in *Holocaust*. The script then uses this point to describe the uniforms worn by each character (through three forms of underlining which denote Nazi Party uniforms, SS uniforms, or civilian suits).¹²²

After a period of jockeying for position, with Stuckart awkwardly taking Meyer’s seat and then apologizing for it (as it disrespects Meyer’s seniority), the non-SS attendees shift one seat to the right, which leaves Kritzingner at the end of

118 See Cripps, “Following the Paper Trail.”

119 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, unnumbered page between pages 96 and 97.

120 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, unnumbered page between pages 96 and 97.

121 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 86.

122 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 36.

the table without a seat, both literally and figuratively pushing him away. To solve this problem, Kritzinger sits at one head of the table and the secretary sits at another – close to Eichmann so he can whisper to her during the conference as she writes the protocol.¹²³

The question of seating arrangements is not merely about style – in *The Wannsee Conference*, the seating arrangements illustrate power dynamics. The SS form a unified wall of opinion on one side of the table; in contrast, the ministers and Nazi Party officials form a disunited front. The secretary sits in a more neutral, observational position while Kritzinger is literally pushed into a corner, emphasizing his difficult position at the conference as the representative of the Reich Chancellery.¹²⁴ Representing these power dynamics visually is one of the challenges of depicting a meeting like that at Wannsee on film – this seating arrangements underscores lines of dialogue about institutional and personal rivalries, about the meeting's purpose, and which group is ultimately in control.

Another section of the script describes the scene when groups begin to form during the buffet lunch. The included stage directions reveal more about group dynamics and the moods of individual characters midway through the conference. During lunch, Heydrich “won’t eat, drink, or smoke anything.”¹²⁵ Lange, who has come to Berlin immediately after leading mass shooting actions in Riga “should [perhaps] not eat either, but simply sit there, drinking and smoking and – especially when the discussion concentrates on Stuckart – more or less [appear] bewildered and regularly shake his head.”¹²⁶ The stage directions describe the small cliques forming during the buffet and immediately precede the pages of dialogue taking place at lunch: “The guiding principle is that of course the people with the same uniforms get together first. Klopfer, even in an SS uniform, is obviously on good footing with the Nazi Party Officials Meyer and Leibbrandt. Stuckart with Kritzinger, Luther with Eichmann.”¹²⁷ This section concludes with a description of the general atmosphere during the meeting’s buffet lunch which emphasizes the uncanny, fundamental contradiction at the heart of the Wannsee Conference: “There are concerned, but also amused faces that do not fit at all with what has just been discussed – one’s thoughts are sometimes elsewhere . . . and through that, an unnerving drama arises from the inappropriate flippancy and superficiality.”¹²⁸ *The Wannsee Conference* is deeply concerned with depicting

123 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 36–38.

124 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 93–95.

125 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 72.

126 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 73.

127 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 72.

128 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 73.

the fundamental contrast between the enormity of the crime and the banality of the meeting, which is further underscored by the absolutely callous manner in which the participants discuss, joke, and laugh about the Jews and what has been happening – and will happen – to them. These are not cartoon villains laughing like psychopathic maniacs, but rather boring, middle-aged bureaucrats telling lame jokes to each other about the most infamous crime in history. They try to make it seem harmless while it is still happening, while through their euphemistic language and Eichmann's efforts with the protocol, they deny its reality while it is still taking place.

4 Character Profiles

Before filming began, Mommertz developed character profiles for the cast and production team. These profiles are, depending on the character, between one and seven pages long and sometimes include photocopies of primary sources related to the historical figures. It is important to note that in contrast with the initial pitch document draft, which argues for vague, composite characters, these character profiles describe the historical persons, not invented composites. In an introduction to the profiles written to help archivists and researchers, Mommertz states that “[these characterizations] do not claim to be factual in all of the smallest details, the thought behind them was for basic orientation for the director and actors.”¹²⁹ He claims that “they played a central role in the realization of the film” and that “without them, the approach to the event we had striven for would not have been reached.”¹³⁰ A degree of invention is present in these character profiles, as Mommertz includes personality traits for the characters that are not always based in historical accounts – Lange's alcoholism is most notable here. Nevertheless, the profiles are quite candid when it comes to invention – they clearly show when certain character traits are fictionalized or when certain figures portray more composite characters – especially when a particular character served to represent the more general positions of his ministry or office.

The characters belonging to the SS (this includes all SD and RSHA functionaries) have profiles of varying levels of detail. This group is comprised of Heydrich, Eichmann, Müller, Hofmann, Schöngarth, and Lange. Although Stuckart and Klop-

¹²⁹ Paul Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz – Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer” in Ordner 2, “Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch,” Kapitel 1700 “Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹³⁰ Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz – Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer,” 1.

fer also held rank in the SS, for the purposes of clarity, they are grouped with the characters representing the civilian ministries and the Nazi Party, respectively. Heydrich's character profile mentions Mommertz and Schirk's previous work on *Manager of Terror*, and because Dietrich Mattausch reprised his role in this film, this profile likely contains information gleaned from research on the earlier project.¹³¹ Mommertz has also stated that the characterization of Heydrich in *The Wannsee Conference* is the same as in his earlier film.¹³² The profile mentions the rumors about Heydrich's supposed Jewish ancestry – and acknowledges they were false – and also alludes to Heydrich's possession of “additional drive through actual or alleged deficits,” which harkens back to the “psychogram” of Heydrich in *Manager of Terror*.¹³³ The script itself does not contain such statements about Heydrich's psyche and its influence on his behavior, but this document – again, primarily meant for Dietrich Mattausch – is more about preparing an actor for a role than exploring the various methods of historiography. In a longer passage, Mommertz describes Heydrich's appearance in general:

Heydrich, the young, handsome, blond god of death, as he was characterized, functioned as sharp as a knife in his sphere of influence, super intelligent, always wide-awake, like a wound-up spring. The impression of the dangerous, competent, deliberative was not diminished by his high, thin voice (Bismarck!), but was rather forgotten, it wasn't heard anymore.¹³⁴

Another passage further describes how Heydrich should behave at the meeting:

His authority was based on, above all else, power, reputation, terror, and protection from the Führer and Reichsführer [Himmler]. Whereby it has to be said: Even Heydrich may appear a bit overstrained. Everything is a tad excessive: friendly condescension like a sharp edge; the display of his direct line to Führer headquarters and the Reichsführer-SS, as well as his casual observations: Gruppenführer suffices . . . a person whose dangerousness arises from his inconsistency.¹³⁵

These passages characterize Heydrich as an imposing, dangerous figure who overplayed his strengths in order to compensate for perceived inadequacies, thereby continuing roughly the same characterization found in *Manager of Ter-*

131 Paul Mommertz, “Heydrich” in Ordner 2, “Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch,” Kapitel 1700 “Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

132 Interview with Paul Mommertz, March 14, 2019, 16:18–18:53.

133 Mommertz, “Heydrich,” 1.

134 Mommertz, “Heydrich,” 1.

135 Mommertz, “Heydrich,” 3.

ror. Here, in contrast, the character profile for Eichmann, played by Gerd Böckmann, is relatively bare-bones, with Mommertz's only commentary noting that his personality and role is spelled out clearly in the script.¹³⁶ Instead, he included photocopies of secondary sources about Eichmann, most notably Albert Wucher's 1961 book *Eichmanns gab es viele*. One of the included scans from Wucher describes Eichmann as an awkward yet ambitious man, which he "compensated with his brash manner"¹³⁷ The character profile of Gestapo head Heinrich Müller (Friedrich Beckhaus) is similarly spartan and only includes a statement alleging that "little was known about him" and a photocopy of relevant passages from Eichmann's memoirs (which describe Müller as a "sphinx") and Shlomo Aronson's *Reinhard Heydrich und die Frühgeschichte von Gestapo und SD*.¹³⁸ Otto Hofmann (Robert Atzorn) receives a character profile which is more substantial, with Mommertz characterizing the head of the SS Race and Settlement Main Office (RuSHA) as the "picture book German par excellence," but also as a man with a "tangible coldness and lack of feeling."¹³⁹ The profile concludes by summing up Hofmann as "basically a dumb, smug, indoctrinated specialist and *Fachidiot*," a derogatory term for a person only interested in their area of specialization.¹⁴⁰

The last two characters representing the SS are Schöngarth and Lange, those who were directly involved in *Einsatzgruppen* actions and early extermination camps. Schöngarth's (Gerd Rigauer) profile underscores his brutality and his status as what the Nazis cynically referred to as "bearers of secrets" (*Geheimnisträger*): "Schöngarth appears secretive, cautious, masklike. Spooky."¹⁴¹ These character profiles also note relationships between characters; for example, Schöngarth's profile

136 Paul Mommertz, "Eichmann" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1700 "Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

137 Mommertz, "Eichmann," 3.

138 Paul Mommertz, "Müller" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1700 "Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

139 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz – Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer," 1.

140 Paul Mommertz, "Hofmann" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1700 "Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

141 Paul Mommertz, "Schöngarth" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1700 "Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

notes that as an SS officer active in the General Government, he would have likely met Bühler before, since Bühler was Hans Frank's deputy.¹⁴² Lange's (Martin Lüttge) character profile notes that members of the *Einsatzgruppen* often drank heavily and claims that in Berlin, such men were often indulged. It notes that Lange should exhibit "insensitivity" towards the civilians at the conference and that the SS "loved to shock" such people. Mommertz justifies Lange's drunkenness in the film by speculating that "internally, they could perhaps have not let Lange get away with so much drinking – but if it was suitable to throw off the gentlemen civil servants from the ministries, then please. This is left unsaid behind the scenes."¹⁴³ It is in this section where the character profiles, which alternate between purely biographical information, descriptions of appearance, and the beliefs of the various participants move more into the realm of speculation – which is always present in historical film to a certain degree but appears glaring in a film like this one, which takes pains to avoid it more than most. Here, Lange's alcoholism is used to illustrate both the stress of mass shooting operations on *Einsatzgruppen* personnel – one of the key justifications for the switch to gassing – and as an example of the acting-out of interinstitutional rivalries. According to this document, by instrumentalizing Lange's (fictional) alcoholism, the SS in the film can shock and distract the middle-class, proper bureaucrats who are used to a higher level of decorum. The presence of Lange's German shepherd in the film also underscores this unspoken strategy.

The second group of characters profiled here are those representing the interests of the Nazi Party: Leibbrandt, Meyer, and Klopfer. The profile written for Leibbrandt (Jochen Busse) contains a detailed description of how Nazi Party members routinely behaved at conferences (they "didn't play by the rules") which is used as a justification for their more boorish behavior in the film.¹⁴⁴ Here, Leibbrandt and Meyer (Harald Dietl) function more as composite characters standing in for a more "proletarian" attitude which served to set apart the representatives of the Nazi Party from the more buttoned-up civilian *Staatsekretäre* or the SS members, with their pretensions of military bearing. Mommertz describes

¹⁴² Mommertz, "Schöngarth," 1.

¹⁴³ Paul Mommertz, "Lange" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1700 "Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 2–3.

¹⁴⁴ Paul Mommertz, "Leibbrandt" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1700 "Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 2.

Nazi Party representatives' behavior at previous conferences as "affected behavior that they intentionally cultivated in order to teach the representatives of the older order the meaning of fear."¹⁴⁵ It is from these characters that most of the film's jokes and other examples of callous, arrogant attitudes stem. Mommertz describes the Nazi Party representatives' behavior in detail, portraying Leibbrandt as a boorish, unmannered simpleton:

Leibbrandt, as well as Meyer, should stand out through their markedly informal behavior. [Leibbrandt] sucks his bonbons during the entire conference, he loudly unwraps them and is constantly offering them to the whole table in an annoying manner.¹⁴⁶

Mommertz characterizes Meyer in a similar fashion. Also a Nazi Party representative, Meyer demands Stuckart's chair (directly opposite Heydrich) at the start of the conference. Mommertz uses this awkward encounter to show high-ranking Nazi Party members' (he uses the term "golden pheasants," a pejorative for Nazi Party bosses at the time) penchant for "exaggerating questions of their own prestige, rank, and status."¹⁴⁷ Mommertz uses the characters of Leibbrandt and Meyer much in the same way Loring Mandel uses his version of Klopfer to depict Nazi Party officials as literally growing fat off of the war effort: "Meyer corresponds to the well-fed Nazi Party fat cats on the home front, who lunges at the buffet and does not stop eating until the end of the conference and is also unafraid of speaking with a full mouth. He is loud, choleric, incredibly arrogant."¹⁴⁸ Klopfer's (Günter Spörrle) profile states that although he wears an SS uniform, Meyer and Leibbrandt are his "people" and that he is "actually in the Party members' squad."¹⁴⁹ This characterization stands in opposition to the visual decisions to place every character with an SS uniform (besides Stuckart) on the same side of the table. The profile notes that Klopfer "knows no inhibitions when it comes to [measures] against Jews or half-Jews. Everything about him is fanatical zeal."¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in contrast with Ian McNeice's corpulent yet scheming portrayal of

145 Mommertz, "Leibbrandt," 2.

146 Mommertz, "Leibbrandt," 2.

147 Paul Mommertz, "Meyer" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1700 "Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

148 Mommertz, "Meyer," 2.

149 Paul Mommertz, "Klopfer" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1700 "Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

150 Mommertz, "Klopfer," 1.

Klopfer in *Conspiracy*, this version of Klopfer leaves that behavior up to Leibbrandt and Meyer.

The final group of participants are the representatives of civilian governmental ministries. This group consists of *Staatsekretäre* and *Unterstaatssekretäre* (with the exception of Kritzinger): Stuckart, Kritzinger, Luther, Bühler, Neumann, and Freisler. The most important of these characters are Stuckart, Luther, and Kritzinger, with the others playing supporting roles. Stuckart (Peter Fitz) has the most extensive character profile, containing seven pages of commentary. The profile describes Stuckart as “an up-and-comer with the correct party membership” and continually emphasizes Stuckart’s credentials as a jurist and Nazi ideologue.¹⁵¹ Mommertz’s characterization of Stuckart argues that although he was responsible for “half-Jews and Jews in mixed marriages” being spared, he did so for “practical and political reasons” – Mommertz does not downplay Stuckart’s antisemitism and complicity, noting that Stuckart perjured himself at Nuremberg.¹⁵² Mommertz does note that some of Stuckart’s dialogue in the script originated with his protégé at the Interior Ministry, Bernhard Lösener, and that this practice makes his version of Stuckart partially a composite character “representing the spirit” of the Interior Ministry.¹⁵³ Most of this character profile describes Stuckart’s biography and motivations at the conference. At the end of the profile, Mommertz summarizes the character and historical figure of Stuckart:

Stuckart was a National Socialist antisemite, even with his education and his position in the civil administration, he was for ‘drastic measures’ . . . evidently, entrapping people like him more deeply into responsibility was one of the purposes of the Wannsee Conference. Stuckart is superior to all other conference participants when it comes to seniority, expertise, and experience, especially the Party representatives. He is therefore assigned a certain authority, which permits him to move a bit more outside of the given boundaries than an outsider unaware of the actual circumstances in the Third Reich’s governmental system would assume.¹⁵⁴

Mommertz does allow himself more invention with Stuckart’s character by portraying him as ill during the conference. This invention was intended to make viewers aware of Stuckart’s diminished influence and position at the conference: “In order to accommodate the viewer – who it is not easy to make things clear

151 Paul Mommertz, “Stuckart” in Ordner 2, “Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch,” Kapitel 1700 “Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 3.

152 Mommertz, “Stuckart,” 4–6.

153 Mommertz, “Stuckart,” 6.

154 Mommertz, “Stuckart,” 6–7.

to – within the television play framework, Stuckart is shown with a heavy cold – whoever could find his “boastful” behavior unbelievable may be more likely to ascribe Stuckart’s “breaking character” to his feverish flu.¹⁵⁵ Similarly to *Conspiracy*, it is clear that the filmmakers had the hardest time with Stuckart’s character, as his motivations are less obvious to viewers; depicting him having reservations about mixed marriages and the full extent of the mass murder campaign runs the risk of inattentive viewers believing that he is a type of resistance fighter within the regime – a character with whom they can identify. Reviewers would later criticize *The Wannsee Conference* on this point, but production documents and script make it clear that Stuckart was not meant to be a sympathetic, identifiable character – just because he is not as extreme as Heydrich, it does not mean that he is not a fanatical antisemite. After all, Stuckart was a key figure in the drafting and implementation of the Nuremberg Laws.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, some of the language in production documents about Stuckart – and the character’s own claims at the end of the film about wanting to quit the Interior Ministry to serve at the front – move towards apologetics.

The profile assigned to Luther (Hans-Werner Bussinger) is much less extensive than Stuckart’s, its first page is missing and the rest of the document is made up of quoted and photocopied sources which emphasize Luther’s role as Heydrich’s man in the Foreign Office.¹⁵⁷ In contrast, the character study on Kritzinger (Franz Rudnick), representative of the Reich Chancellery and “pushed into a corner” at the conference as described above, is more extensive. As he was the oldest conference participant and represented an “outmoded” institution, Kritzinger is described as “old-fashioned,” this was to be made apparent by his clothing as well.¹⁵⁸ The profile describes Kritzinger’s behavior at Wannsee as that of a pedantic, confused, and aging bureaucrat in the old style:

155 Mommertz, “Stuckart,” 7.

156 Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 1: The Years of Persecution 1933–1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 152.

157 Paul Mommertz, “Luther” in Ordner 2, “Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch,” Kapitel 1700 “Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 2.

158 Paul Mommertz, “Kritzinger” in Ordner 2, “Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch,” Kapitel 1700 “Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

The typecast representative of the Reich Chancellery ought to attract attention through somewhat strained meticulousness. He has arranged files, notebooks, and appointment calendars in front of him. He takes notes with his fountain pen, but also with an assortment of colorful pens. He wears thick glasses, is nearsighted, squints, does not seem to hear well either, often puts his hand to his ear. One can see it clearly, everything must have its correctness and accuracy, and then one has to be able to give a lecture to Mr. Meissner, his superior, and perhaps even to the Führer and Chancellor of the Reich. Certainly a man with the necessary qualifications, also with the right attitude towards the state, but all in all a little overtaxed. And old-fashioned.¹⁵⁹

This quote further underscores how the filmmakers wished to present Kritzinger and the Reich Chancellery's presence at the conference. Kritzinger "represented the shrinking group of bureaucrats who still embodied something of an earlier civil service ethos" and the film is about the SS alternately convincing or steam-rolling civilian ministries into acquiescence.¹⁶⁰

Mommertz describes Josef Bühler (Reinhard Glemnitz), Hans Frank's subordinate, as "a kind of silent eminence" who represents the interests of the General Government. In the film, he was supposed to serve as a "witness of Frank's notorious anti-Semitic outbursts and as the apparent administrative executor of adopted measures which range from the AB action (eradication of Polish intelligentsia) to the allocation of Jews for the extermination camps."¹⁶¹ The document notes that Bühler's interests coincide with Neumann's, as they are both deeply involved in wartime production and therefore questions of forced labor. It also notes that Bühler has a "strained relationship" with the Nazi Party and the SS due to questions of who exactly holds authority over Jews in the General Government.¹⁶² The document describes Bühler's appearance as "Dry, awkward, humorless. No special characteristics. He has a dry way of coughing, as if he had to blow the dust out of his insides. Correct dark suit, white pocket square, Nazi Party badge."¹⁶³

Erich Neumann (Dieter Groest), *Staatssekretär* for the Four Year Plan and deputy of Hermann Göring, is described as already knowing "most of the gentlemen" from other conferences, but that not much is known about his biography

¹⁵⁹ Mommertz, "Kritzinger," 1.

¹⁶⁰ Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 93.

¹⁶¹ Paul Mommertz, "Bühler" in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1700 "Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹⁶² Mommertz, "Bühler," 2.

¹⁶³ Mommertz, "Bühler," 2.

which could help form a better impression of his character.¹⁶⁴ Mommertz notes that “at the conference, [Neumann] is only interested in the Jews as armament industry workers – they must be excluded from the extermination measures.”¹⁶⁵ Since Mommertz had not found much biographical information on Neumann, he used his character to exemplify a type of person present at most types of administrative meetings. According to this document, Neumann “should look very bored and only wake up briefly when the question of the labor force arises. He often looks at the clock and is clearly tormented when another point of discussion is raised. By the way, he doodles whole pages full of ‘stick figures.’”¹⁶⁶ Here, Neumann functions to illustrate the conference’s banality, thereby underscoring the incongruence of its atmosphere with its subject.

Roland Freisler (Rainer Steffen), the most notorious Conference attendee after Heydrich and Eichmann thanks to his tenure as head judge of the *Volksgerichtshof*, attended the conference as representative of the Ministry of Justice. Mommertz describes Freisler as “on the one hand a fanatical National Socialist . . . on the other hand a correct civil servant.”¹⁶⁷ He also places Freisler “on the same wavelength” as his fellow regime lawyers Bühler, Stuckart, and Kritzinger.¹⁶⁸ His character profile engages in some of the psychohistorical speculation seen in Heydrich’s characterization:

He can be very nervous and thus representative for a certain faction: On the one hand, he is in favor of taking sharp action in the sense of the Führer’s policy, the correctness of which must be beyond doubt; on the other hand, however, he is also an academically educated bourgeois son who cannot possibly cope without problems with an extermination program involving eleven million men, women and children. – Even in the show trials, he gives the psychologist the impression, I am told, of a fundamentally overburdened man who shouts beyond his fear and the voice of his conscience – it is precisely those fundamentally insecure [sic] people who were suitable for ‘unreasonable’ tasks, because they were most mercifully subjected to the political and psychological pressure of proof. This was exploited. I would show Freisler as an extremely nervous chain-smoker, with a certain slightly exagger-

164 Paul Mommertz, “Neumann” in Ordner 2, “Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch,” Kapitel 1700 “Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

165 Mommertz, “Neumann,” 1.

166 Mommertz, “Neumann,” 1.

167 Paul Mommertz, “Freisler” in Ordner 2, “Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch,” Kapitel 1700 “Charakterisierung der Teilnehmer (Ausfertigung für Regie und Schauspieler),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Bibliothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

168 Mommertz, “Freisler,” 2.

ated assiduousness in voice, facial expressions and gestures. If he is observed, he gives himself a jolt, so to speak. Restless, sharply observing eyes.¹⁶⁹

In keeping with earlier, now obsolete historiographical depictions of Nazi perpetrators, Mommertz seeks an explanation for Freisler's behavior in a psychological disorder. It is here and in his profile of Heydrich that traces of Armand Mergen's work on *Manager of Terror* can be observed. Thankfully, such statements are absent from the film itself, but it is still important to note the psychohistorical origins of some of the characterizations. The character profiles provide a key window into how Mommertz envisioned the three groups of conference participants and where he added speculative personality quirks to certain characters. In some cases, such as Eichmann's, we can also see the exact historical source consulted to construct his character's personality. With others, such as Freisler, Kritzinger, and Stuckart, we can see how Mommertz used invented personality traits to explore wider questions about the Nazi government and the people who ran it – their physical or mental weaknesses in the film function as ways to show the weaknesses of the agencies and systems they represented and were part of. This is not to say that Mommertz argues that these ministers had no choice but to submit to Heydrich, but rather to say that he was able to exploit a fundamental weakness in Nazi governmental structure and use it to his advantage, thereby making the entire regime complicit in the Holocaust.

Little documentation from the production period has survived. Exterior shots were filmed at the Wannsee villa itself, but because the villa was not yet a memorial site and was still in use as a hostel for Neukölln schoolchildren, only exterior shots were filmed in West Berlin. The film was shot in January and February of 1984. The production company constructed interiors at Bayerischer Rundfunk's studios in the Munich district of Oberföhring.¹⁷⁰ Schirk has noted that the most difficult aspect of filming was getting the “axes” right, that is making sure the directions actors were looking in remained consistent throughout filming. To get around this problem, Schirk ended up drawing noses on the script in order to show him which directions each character should be looking at in each shot.¹⁷¹ Mommertz stated that he encouraged Schirk to film the proceedings with a tempo “like in an American comedy” and that it was better when characters spoke quickly, because

From the very beginning I had the idea that if people don't have to understand it at all, then it's better if [the characters] talk fast, then they appear more competent. They are specialists, they are experts. They talk fast. This is a businesslike tone and it prevents you from

¹⁶⁹ Mommertz, “Freisler,” 1–2.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Paul Mommertz, October 19, 2019, Part 1, 26:45–29:40.

¹⁷¹ Interview with Heinz Schirk, April 5, 2019, 37:54–40:09.

falling asleep. You get carried away again and again and I thought: “I can bring a moment of tension into this.” . . . I said “it’s like an American comedy.”¹⁷²

After a fourteen-month research process and a delayed production, *The Wannsee Conference*, a co-production of ORF (the Austrian public broadcaster) and Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), aired on ARD on December 19, 1984 at 8:15 pm.

172 Interview with Paul Mommertz, October 19, 2019, Part 1, 15:23–16:59.

Chapter 4

The Wannsee Conference (1984) and its West German Reception

Germans have finally made such a film themselves – after shamefully leaving making ‘Holocaust’ up to the foreigners. – Rolf Hochhuth, December 27, 1984 in *Die Weltwoche*¹

On December 17, 1984, *Der Spiegel* published a negative review of *The Wannsee Conference*, which was slated to premiere on ARD two days later. The review, penned by the journalist and historian Heinz Höhne, repeatedly asserted that the film contained “fantastical” elements and characterized Paul Mommertz as a hysterical figure, fitting Frank Biess’s analysis of West German anxieties about an “emotionalization” of Holocaust memory in the wake of NBC’s 1979 miniseries.² Titled “Eine Falle der Betroffenheit” [A trap of affectedness], the article’s title directly quoted from a correspondence between Mommertz and the historical advisor Shlomo Aronson during a dispute over the screenplay. Höhne alleged that Institute for Contemporary History staff “warned” Mommertz about the danger of creating a “horror piece” on the Wannsee Conference.³ Höhne claimed that “historians” had concluded that Wannsee was relatively unimportant and merely about deportations to the East, while Mommertz (and the film) were overly emotional and moralistic, and that the film exaggerated the Wannsee Conference’s importance. His review portrayed Mommertz as a prima donna screenwriter who refused to listen to the sober, factual assessments of Aronson and the historians at the IfZ. “This is not the Wannsee Conference as the historians know it. It is the Wannsee Conference a la Paul Mommertz.”⁴ Höhne, respected for his bestselling history of the SS, claimed that the source material for a film on the conference, let alone an academic work, was too thin: “It is no coincidence that most historical writing on the Holocaust only has room for a few paragraphs on the Wannsee Conference.”⁵ Considering Joseph Wulf’s prior efforts in the 1960s and early 1970s to convert the Wannsee villa into a research center and memorial site, as well as the avalanche of publications on the conference only half a decade later (even if one takes into account the new material made available by opened Soviet ar-

1 Rolf Hochhuth, “Die Unmöglichkeit der Sühne,” *Die Weltwoche*, December 27, 1984. A condensed, earlier version of this chapter has been published: Johnson, “I Am a Historian as Well.”

2 Biess, *Republik der Angst*, 332–342.

3 Höhne, “Eine Falle der Betroffenheit.”

4 Höhne, “Eine Falle der Betroffenheit.”

5 Höhne, “Eine Falle der Betroffenheit.”

chives as well as new historiographical angles since the 1980s) this is strange argument. The city of Berlin only fulfilled Joseph Wulf's wishes for a memorial and educational center over a decade after his 1974 suicide.⁶ More troubling is Höhne's characterization of the Wannsee Protocol itself. Although he does not outright deny its authenticity, he gives *Spiegel* readers reason to doubt its utility as a source: "Even the protocol, today recognized as an authentic document, seemed fishy to historians for a long time, it's a strange paper in terms of form: no letterhead, no date, no signature."⁷ Höhne did not have problems with filmic depictions of the Holocaust in general; he praised NBC's *Holocaust* miniseries, lauding its success and claiming it succeeded where historians had failed at raising public awareness about the Holocaust.⁸

Höhne's claims about both the conference's purpose and the protocol contradicted his earlier work. In his history of the SS, *The Order of the Death's Head*, Höhne discusses the conference in two sentences, arguing that after Wannsee, "Eichmann had only one aim in life – to be death's most reliable and indefatigable collector and transport agent." If this were the case, the conference certainly could not have only been about deportation. In this passage, he cites Raul Hilberg's account of the conference in his *The Destruction of the European Jews*, which also served as a starting point for Mommertz's screenplay.⁹ In stark opposition to Höhne's overly charitable interpretation of the protocol in his review, Hilberg's account makes it clear that Heydrich and others talked about killing, not merely deportation. Hilberg addresses the protocol's language as well: the euphemisms in the protocol were indeed euphemisms for mass killing, they "[created] a myth" among German officials; "[t]hese terms were not the product of naïveté; they were convenient tools of psychological repression."¹⁰ In other words, this type of language, which referred to deportation, allowed perpetrators to deny what was really happening – it provided both plausible deniability and eased their psychological burdens. In later statements, Höhne also criticised what he

6 Katie Digan, *Places of Memory: The Case of the House of the Wannsee Conference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 29–38, and Steven Lehrer, *Wannsee House and the Holocaust* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2000). For a discussion of historiographical developments around the Wannsee Conference and the Holocaust, including Soviet archives, see Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 6–7.

7 Höhne, "Eine Falle der Betroffenheit."

8 Höhne, "Schwarzer Freitag für die Historiker," *Der Spiegel*, January 21, 1979, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-40350862.html>.

9 Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 391–392.

10 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), 265–266.

saw as the German press' tendency to overstate Heydrich's importance. While this specific criticism is not present in his review, it may help explain his position.¹¹

It is important to keep in mind the broader context of Höhne's review. His history of the SS, *The Order of the Death's Head*, received wide acclaim; it offered a "differentiated" view of the SS in contrast with earlier depictions that rely on its wartime reputation as an organization filled with criminals and sadists.¹² However, contemporary historians have criticized Höhne for uncritically reproducing statements by Waffen-SS veterans in his work.¹³ Andreas Eichmüller shows that Joseph Wulf had previously been assigned to write the *Spiegel* article series which later became *The Order of the Death's Head*, but Höhne replaced him – Wulf strongly criticized the finished series.¹⁴ Additionally, Höhne had written a 1974 documentary for Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) about the Waffen-SS titled *Männer unter dem Totenkopf*. This documentary praised the Waffen-SS as an elite military organization and attempted to separate the Waffen-SS from the SS as a whole in order to distance Waffen-SS veterans from Nazi crimes. It strongly relied on testimonies from Waffen-SS veterans, including from *Stern-TV* producer Wolfgang Venohr, who collaborated with Höhne on the documentary.¹⁵ Recent research has also revealed that many early *Spiegel* reporters and editors had previously worked in the SS, SD, Abwehr, and Propaganda Ministry. Although Höhne was not an SS member himself, he was part of a wider institutional culture that employed former members of Nazi intelligence and propaganda units in the 1950s and 1960s. This is not to accuse *Der Spiegel* of being a secret Nazi organization, but, as media historian Lutz Hachmeister has stated, to explore "discrepancy" between the magazine's anti-establishment, antifascist image and the pasts of its early employees, as well as the "double standard" displayed by *Der Spiegel*

11 Heinz Höhne, "Hochgekochte Legenden," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 20, 2002.

12 Eichmüller, "Auf das Typische kommt es an," 290.

13 Karsten Wilke, *Die "Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit" (HIAG) 1950 - 1990. Veteranen der Waffen-SS in der Bundesrepublik* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2011), 387–388. See also Jan Erik Schulte, "Namen sind Nachrichten: Journalismus und NS-Täterforschung in der frühen Bundesrepublik Deutschland," in *Public History: Öffentliche Darstellungen des Nationalsozialismus jenseits der Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. Frank Bösch and Constantin Gschler (Frankfurt; New York: Campus, 2009), 24–51, 43–48.

14 Eichmüller, "Auf das Typische kommt es an," 294, footnote 19.

15 Eichmüller, "Auf das Typische kommt es an," 294.

when exposing the Nazi pasts of various prominent members of West German society.¹⁶

Der Spiegel granted Mommertz the opportunity to respond to Höhne's review at length in its January 1985 issue. Here, he argued that he had worked as a historian and that Höhne had demonstrated ignorance about Wannsee.¹⁷ Mommertz's argument in this piece is based on earlier documents which outline the film's historiographical position and Mommertz's justification for depicting open discussion of killing methods at Wannsee.

1 Promotional Material in the German-Speaking World

Before its December 19, 1984 premiere, BR and ARD engaged in a muted promotional campaign for the film which included press releases, promotional photos, an accompanying booklet, and a short documentary on the film.¹⁸ In an interview, Mommertz expressed bitter disappointment with what he characterized as a lackluster promotional campaign and unwillingness to defend the film on BR's part: "The film was simply broadcasted and wasn't really understood in Germany; it was a flop. It aroused aggression, the critics said: 'that can't be true, there was no such thing, that is fantasy.' And so [the film] was on the air and Bayerischer Rundfunk did not take a stand, defended nothing, it just went on with its daily routine."¹⁹

As with their previous film, *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror*, Heinz Schirk and Paul Mommertz received promotional coverage from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. An early promotional blurb for the film, published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on February 11, 1984, provided important background information on the production. It notes that pre-production had lasted two years due to Mommertz's research and named January 1985 as its premiere date, likely meant to coincide with the 42nd anniversary of the Wannsee Conference. The blurb quotes executive producer Siegfried Glökler on the film's unique approach: "We are trying every-

16 See Lutz Hachmeister, "Ein deutsches Nachrichtenmagazin - Der frühe 'Spiegel' und sein NS-Personal," in *Die Herren Journalisten. Die Elite der deutschen Presse nach 1945*, ed. Friedemann Siering and Lutz Hachmeister, (Munich: C.H.Beck Verlag, 2002), 117–118.

17 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 21:33–23:47; Mommertz, "Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd," *Der Spiegel*, December 31, 1984, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13511955.html>.

18 *Die Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen zum gleichnamigen Fernsehfilm des Bayerischen Rundfunks*, directed by Heinz Steike, 1984, in Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

19 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 16:17–19:24.

thing to avoid what could come across as Third Reich sensationalism; we show the proceedings as they took place, realistically in the original length [of time].”²⁰ Nevertheless, the piece also gives off the impression that the decision to shift to genocide from isolated mass killings was made at Wannsee. The blurb states that the film illustrates the complicity of all conference participants and their respective agencies; that “the decision about the ‘Final Solution’ was by no means a secret SS plot.” It also notes that the actors were cast to resemble their real-life counterparts and “bring color” to the program, but only names the following participants: Heydrich, Eichmann, Bühler, and Lange. The rest of the cast is listed, but those participants they portray remain nameless.²¹ Most importantly, this short piece also notes the incongruity of the meeting with its purpose: “The men who sat together at the time seemed like a casual, relaxed group, they chatted with each other, they picked on each other, and finally the whole thing dissolved into a cocktail party.” One might have thought that this was just some ordinary story, according to Glökler, “but here it was about eleven million helpless people.”²²

A *Süddeutsche Zeitung* piece published on the day of the film’s premiere at first promotes the film but then undercuts it by concluding with a paragraph on Höhne’s negative review. Titled “Criminals Behind the Keyhole,” this piece quotes at length from a since-vanished accompanying promotional document drawn up by BR which emphasizes the film’s voyeuristic “you are there” approach and its debt to Arendt’s “banality of evil” thesis. These explanatory notes from BR could have better contextualized the film but seem to have received little critical attention. They illustrate the film’s central themes, such as a concern with euphemistic, bureaucratic, yet brutal language and the transformation of the German mass murder campaign into a supposedly modern, clinical process:

The inhuman language easily passes over the participants’ lips: They “clean up,” “tidy up,” “work away,” “make Jew-free,” “bring about the possible final solution.” It is no longer a question of if, but only of how. Jewry becomes a statistical quantity, the Holocaust a filing process, genocide a transport problem. A group of quite normal-looking people triggers an extermination action unique in history: the “administered,” “orderly,” “decent” genocide. The discrepancy between the averageness of the perpetrators and the enormity of the act makes the film a shocking experience.²³

20 “Dreh-Spiegel,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 35, February 11/12, 1984, 19.

21 “Dreh-Spiegel,” 19.

22 “Dreh-Spiegel,” 19.

23 “Verbrecher hinter dem Schlüsselloch,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 19, 1984.

This preview quotes Mommertz, who says that the film provides viewers with a “keyhole perspective” that was “as authentic as possible.” The piece also claims that the film allows the viewer to become a “witness in front of the television screen.”²⁴

In its final paragraph, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s promotion piece for the film turns to Höhne’s review, which deflates its initial enthusiasm. It notes Höhne’s assertions about the filmmakers’ “reckless” interpretation of “meager source material” and reproduces his claim that historians recognized the Wannsee Conference as being only about the deportation of Jews to the East, not their murder. The article’s final sentence, thanks to Höhne, repeats now-discredited claims about the civilian participants – namely, that Heydrich’s euphemistic language confused them about the meeting’s purpose.²⁵ This latter assertion – that the participants did not know what Heydrich and the SS were actually doing with the deported Jews – simply repeats strategies used by several Wannsee Conference attendees during their interrogations by Allied investigators. In an interview conducted by Mommertz himself, Robert Kempner, the Nuremberg Trial prosecutor whose team discovered the Wannsee Protocol in the files of the German Foreign Office and the interrogator of several Wannsee Conference participants, describes how these men used this exact defense strategy.²⁶ Their alleged ignorance of the conference’s true purpose also contradicts Höhne’s other claim: namely, that the conference was only concerned with deportation, not murder. Furthermore, only an exceedingly charitable reading of the protocol, which takes the protocol’s language so literally as to ignore its murderous implications, could lead to such a conclusion. If the civilian participants were confused about the meeting’s subject matter, attendees like Bühler would not have stressed the need to clear Jews who were “unable to work” out of the General Government “as quickly as possible.”²⁷ The conference would not have devoted discussion to eliminating the “germ cell” of Jews surviving forced labor programs or to the “various possible kinds of solution.”²⁸ This claim simply served to maintain the innocence of wider German society, and instead place blame for the Holocaust at the feet of a few radicals within

24 “Verbrecher hinter dem Schlüsselloch,” 31.

25 “Verbrecher hinter dem Schlüsselloch,” 31.

26 Paul Mommertz, “Interview mit Professor R.M.W. Kempner” in Ordner 2, “Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch,” Kapitel 1200 “Eichmann (Robert Kempner, Prozess Jerusalem),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 2–5.

27 “Appendix: The protocol” in Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 111–120, 120.

28 “Appendix: The protocol” in Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 120.

the SS. This need to absolve these attendees and their agencies from culpability serves as one of the pillars of Höhne's arguments against the film, as well as those from other German critics following his lead, but has since been thoroughly discredited by historians. Nevertheless, similar to the "clean Wehrmacht" myth, the notion that the Holocaust was perpetrated by a handful of fanatics within the SS was still widely accepted in West Germany during the 1980s.

In a puzzling move, BR did not air its accompanying documentary on the film until 9:55 pm on December 20, over 24 hours after *The Wannsee Conference's* premiere.²⁹ This documentary, directed by Heinz Steike and titled *Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen* [Wannsee Conference: studio notes], contained clips from the film, an interview with network coordinator Norbert Bittmann (reading a script written by Mommertz, contained in the Mommertz archive and cited in this chapter; places where Bittmann deviated from the script are marked), and the abovementioned interview with Robert Kempner.³⁰ The Bittmann interview first provides an overview of the production's history, recounting the story of Manfred Korytowski's visit to Yad Vashem and coming across a facsimile of the Wannsee Protocol. He remarks that previous depictions of the Holocaust only concerned themselves with the Holocaust's "implementation" (*Durchführung*), but that *The Wannsee Conference* is the first production concerned with its "organizational leadership" (*Organisationsspitze*).³¹ Mommertz's script for Bittmann argues that the production team had been able to "close important information gaps and simultaneously encourage a broader public to deal with a topic that, whether we want it to or not, remains a burden to us."³² Bittmann lists the script's main sources, including the Wannsee Protocol, Nuremberg Trial interrogation transcripts, Nazi personnel files, and claims that the production team went through "hundreds" of documents that "have a direct or indirect relationship to the Wannsee Conference." This section of the interview makes clear that the protocol was not a verbatim transcript of the meeting, but instead documented the subject matter discussed.³³ In one of the most important sections of the program, Mommertz dis-

29 See Paul Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1200 "Eichmann (Robert Kempner, Prozess Jerusalem)," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1; Birgit Weidinger, "Hackenschlagen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 295, December 21, 1984, 32.

30 The documentary forms part of the film's paratext. For more on paratexts and their importance for analyzing historical television, see Weeks, *History by HBO*, 122–133.

31 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 1.

32 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 1. In the actual broadcast, Bittmann left out the word "important" (*wichtig*).

33 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 2.

cusses the basis and his reasoning for transforming history into dramatized dialogue for the medium of film. After a discussion of the different groups present at the conference, Mommertz uses his documentary script to defend the practice of creating historical drama:

As always when dealing with historical material, a part is of course left to the author's imagination and fantasy. It is helpful if, as in our case, he can still bring in his own experiences from the depicted time period. And he will be able to be most certain of his cause if, after all, all the elements fit together just so and not otherwise. Apart from that, he will be able to refer to Aristotle, who said (in his *Poetics*): "The artistic depiction of history is more scientific than the so-called exact one!"³⁴

In the actual broadcast, Bittmann does not mention Aristotle, instead saying that some of Eichmann's statements at his trial permitted the filmmakers to depict certain events in the film.³⁵ This claim is also present in the script and contained within a note typed onto the page with Mommertz's typewriter.³⁶ In this passage, Mommertz notes that fictionalization is inevitable when writing historical films, arguing that said fictionalization enables writers to explore truths that a mass of historical details alone cannot accomplish. Nevertheless, this section also argues that the film had to be as close to the truth as possible; he refers to the fictionalization present as a "remnant" (*ein Rest*). Although his claim about artistic depictions of history being "more scientific" than academic writing is certainly an exaggeration, it exemplifies a key component of historical screenwriting. Historian and screenwriter Bruno Ramirez, for example, identifies a "fictional turn" in many historical films "whereby research-generated knowledge gets transformed into filmic narration" and that this turn most often occurs during screenwriting.³⁷ For him, fictionalization can serve "as a narrative device in the service of the most expressive art form in ways that may enrich a portrayal of the past while at the same time enhance its understanding."³⁸ Ramirez is not naïve, he is well aware of the ways fictionalization has falsified history and disseminated wildly misleading messages via film. He contends that the "taboo" about fictionalization misses the point. Much like Mommertz (and later, Loring Mandel), he claims that the real test of whether or not fictionalization is appropriate is "one of plausibility versus ascertained factuality."³⁹ This is not a half-baked "postmodern" idea which

³⁴ Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 3.

³⁵ *Die Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen zum gleichnamigen Fernsehfilm des Bayerischen Rundfunks*.

³⁶ Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 3.

³⁷ Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*, 10.

³⁸ Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*, 9.

³⁹ Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*, 43.

claims that history is an arbitrary matter of opinion and that truth is a myth, but rather one that argues for fictionalization within a set of (admittedly sometimes murkily-defined) rules. In most instances where Mommertz fictionalizes, he justifies it by pointing to a historical source where a character is expressing a similar thought or opinion. There is little that could be misconstrued as “fantasy” here apart from minor instances like Stuckart’s decision to quit, Lange’s dog, the Jenny Cozzi plotline, or the presence of a female secretary at the meeting.

Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen continues with a brief discussion of emotions raised by the film’s subject matter: an imperative aspect considering negative German reviews of the film which would accuse the filmmakers of bias, a lack of objectivity, emotionality, and of demonizing the Wannsee Conference participants. The script of this section reads:

One cannot think of the Holocaust without anger. On the other hand, the obligation to take a documentary approach forbade us from coloring the events with subjective anger. However, a rather unpleasant circumstance leads out of this dilemma. You only have to portray what was – and no spiteful denunciation would be able to reveal something more frightening. Without thinking twice about it, what exposes itself here is above all the inhuman discrepancy between what [the conference] is all about and the way one *deals with it*. Namely, in the complete absence of imagination, empathy, sensitivity, and not to mention compassion.⁴⁰

In the broadcast version, Bittmann replaced the word “wrath” (*Zorn*) with “affect- edness” (*Betroffenheit*). Here, Mommertz preemptively defends the film against future charges of irrationality and of violating the norms of “cool conduct.”⁴¹ For him, the “discrepancy” between what the conference was about and how it was conducted is “frightening” enough without having to resort to filmic tricks to make the attendees seem demonic or stereotyped movie villains. He further emphasizes that the purpose of the film was to revisit a historical event which was “an event that one can only think of with anger for all time. And all the more so because all of the high-ranking perpetrators were not ready to admit their responsibility. Whereas [West German] postwar policy was all too willing to reward this otherwise not so untypical flight from responsibility.”⁴² Here, *The Wannsee Conference* was treading on dangerous ground; it was one thing to discuss the crimes of a handful of high-ranking SS and SD officials, it was quite another to implicate ostensibly apolitical government agencies which had survived in the

40 Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen,” 4.

41 See Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, trans. Don Re-
neau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

42 Mommertz, “Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen,” 5.

democratic West German government and to implicate said government by emphasizing the fact that several Wannsee attendees had escaped justice and lived comfortable bourgeois lives in the postwar era, including a few that were still living at the time of the film's production.⁴³ It was also dangerous to implicate Germany's educated professionals, a class which the Wannsee Conference participants belonged to.

The final cut of *Werkstattnotizen* includes the above passage but amends it in order to clarify the film's argument and purpose and to discuss the implications of Wannsee for contemporary society. Bittmann is clearly still reading from a script, so it can be assumed that Mommertz also wrote these lines, as the script available in the Mommertz archive contains both his handwritten and typewritten emendations. Some earlier drafts of this passage are present in the archival script, but the final, broadcasted version is worth quoting in full:

The truly shocking thing is the distance of such desk murderers [*Schreibtischtäter*] from a reality that simply disappears behind papers, paragraphs, competencies, and intrigues. A phenomenon that is certainly not bound to a specific time. The functioning of administrative measures in the hierarchies of large apparatuses is often based precisely on the fact that the people affected [by them] are simply ignored, forgotten, because only effectiveness counts and nothing but effectiveness.⁴⁴

Here, the interview clearly underscores the filmmakers' focus on desk murderers, emphasizing their intellectual debt to Hannah Arendt. Beginning in the 1990s and early 2000s, historians reframed the *Schreibtischtäter* concept; Bettina Stangneth and David Cesarani convincingly refuted Arendt's thesis when applied to Eichmann. Cesarani's biography demolishes the idea that Eichmann worked as a mere secretary, and Stangneth's biography is devoted to refuting the idea of Eichmann as a simple "desk murderer." Both claim that Arendt was duped by Eichmann's testimony in Jerusalem, which was designed to make him look as unimportant as possible.⁴⁵ However, the image of the *Schreibtischtäter* combined with Arendt's "banality of evil" concept remains powerful in the popular imagination and has become shorthand for modern, bureaucratic evil.⁴⁶ The final interview

⁴³ For a discussion of still-living Wannsee Conference participants and their potential impact on the film, see the previous chapter.

⁴⁴ *Die Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen zum gleichnamigen Fernsehfilm des Bayerischen Rundfunks*.

⁴⁵ Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, xxii-xxc; Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 114–116. Stangneth's book extensively relies on sources unavailable to Arendt, such as the transcripts of the Sassen tapes.

⁴⁶ See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 2010); Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*; Cesarani, *Eichmann*, (London:

question is not present in the script. Here, the interviewer asks Bittmann about historical guilt. His answer makes clear that the filmmakers were not only concerned with raising awareness about the Wannsee Conference, but also with providing viewers with a message about the dark potential contained within modern society as well as in bureaucratic organizational structures in general:

To demonstrate this classically typical appearance of the younger generation with an especially grave example was a particularly important motivation for the film's production, beyond all so-called coming to terms with the past [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*]. Here we also see its special topicality. Each one of us has to constantly monitor which processes we allow ourselves to be absorbed into with our functions [within such processes] we also assume responsibility. With this responsibility often comes culpability. And if one waits too long to extricate oneself, it is usually already too late.⁴⁷

Last and most importantly, *Werkstattnotizen* concludes with a statement from Robert Kempner in order to clearly state that most Wannsee Conference attendees escaped justice: “[the] Wannsee Conference, the organization of the largest mass murder in modern history on the one hand, criminally speaking, a fiasco. But law is not always about justice.”⁴⁸

The film's promotional material, although dissatisfactory to Mommertz, certainly provides a window into the ideas behind the film, albeit in retrospect. ARD and BR's decision to air *Werkstattnotizen* a full day after the film's premiere is puzzling, as is its timeslot on a weeknight before Christmas. A cursory glance at the photocopied marketing material contained in the Joseph Wulf Mediothek confirms Mommertz's feelings about the networks' muted PR efforts in West Germany. There is much more material for the film's international marketing campaign – which was done independently of ARD, ORF, and BR – in the collection. This material more forcefully advocates for the film as an important project raising awareness about the Wannsee Conference. Although little documentation exists confirming reluctance or half-heartedness regarding the film on the part of BR, ORF, and ARD, the muted public relations campaign in German-speaking countries is revelatory in itself. Confronted with little network enthusiasm and a scathing review in *Der Spiegel* two days before its premiere, *The Wannsee Conference* and its creators faced an uphill battle.

Vintage Books, 2005); Dirk Rose and Dirk van Laak, eds., *Schreibtischtäter: Begriff - Geschichte - Typologie*, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018).

⁴⁷ *Die Wannsee-Konferenz: Werkstattnotizen zum gleichnamigen Fernsehfilm des Bayerischen Rundfunks*.

⁴⁸ Mommertz, “Interview mit Professor R.M.W. Kempner,” 7.

2 Premiere

On Wednesday, December 19, 1984 at 8:15 pm, *The Wannsee Conference* premiered on ARD. In an interview, Paul Mommertz referred to the production team's desire to give the film's dialogue a quick tempo, "it has to go by very quickly, like an American slapstick comedy."⁴⁹ Besides the filmic implications of this comment, it seems in poor taste to portray the Wannsee Conference in the vein of a slapstick comedy. In addition to the film's tempo, the dialogue itself, which is densely packed with historical information, Nazi vocabulary, and institutional jargon, proved confusing to viewers. This was by design and Mommertz directly addressed this concern in *Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen*, arguing that "authenticity" trumped making the historical information easily digestible. For him, this type of realism was one of the film's strengths:

. . . we have relied entirely on the impact of authenticity. This means, for example, that whenever the understanding of the viewer could not be assumed, we preferred to demand that he listen to a few passages that were difficult to understand and that were authentic, rather than a few understandable ones that could have sounded like didactic school radio programs.⁵⁰

Here, Mommertz argues against the common idea of "translating" history to wider audiences in a fashion that inevitably simplifies it; that is, to make it as understandable as possible to as large of an audience as possible. A similar approach of throwing viewers into the deep end of the pool and letting them find their way among the layers of language and institutional power dynamics was central to the production team's goals for *Conspiracy*.⁵¹ This use of language – and other ways of eschewing exposition – was also a key aspect of HBO's television output during the period in which *Conspiracy* aired. This trend, largely spearheaded by David Simon in series like *The Wire*, exemplifies, for television scholar Ryan Twomey, "a curated, rather than completely mimetic representation of everyday speech."⁵² Paul Mommertz advocated for his dialogue choices in a similar fashion, also noting his experience growing up around Nazi functionaries in Aachen.⁵³ In this passage from *Werkstattnotizen*, and throughout production

49 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 24:01–26:37.

50 Mommertz, "Wannseekonferenz: Werkstattnotizen," 5.

51 Johnson, "A Classroom History Lesson Is Not Going to Work," 185, 192–193.

52 For a discussion of *The Wire* and dense institutional-driven dialogue, see Ryan Twomey, *Examining The Wire: Authenticity and Curated Realism* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2020) 26; Christopher Hanson, "A Man Must Have a Code": The Many Languages of *The Wire*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 29, no. 3 (May 1, 2012): 203–212.

53 Interview with Paul Mommertz, Munich, October 19, 2019, 01:04–10:48.

material and interviews, he strongly advocates for a depiction of history that is faithful to the way Germans actually spoke during the 1930s and 1940s instead of one using dialogue that, while clearer to the mythical “average viewer,” would eschew complexity and prevent the audience from thinking about and interpreting the strange yet familiar language coming from their television.

The Wannsee Conference begins with a shot of the Wannsee villa guarded by Berlin *Schutzpolizei* as the camera pans over the officials’ parked automobiles. In keeping with Mommertz and Schirk’s desire for the film to have the tempo of an “American comedy,” everything moves quickly, actors practically shout out their lines in some instances; the dialogue contains an overwhelming amount of historical information. The partylike atmosphere and nearly constant laughing and bad jokes camouflage the meeting’s true purpose – here, Mommertz lures the audience into a false sense of security.

The first section of the film, which depicts the arrival of conference attendees and introduces several characters, clues the audience in about the meeting’s true purpose (providing they have prior historical knowledge). A clearly drunk Lange immediately starts alluding to the gassing trucks used as an intermediary stage between mass shootings and permanent gas chamber facilities; Eichmann instructs him to pull himself together. Eichmann and Müller discuss the byzantine SS rank names with two switchboard operators; this scene is meant to demonstrate that the Wannsee villa was used by the SS in general and was not just a one-off site for the meeting. Nevertheless, this depiction also has to do with the mistaken idea that the villa was also Interpol’s headquarters.⁵⁴ A calendar reading “20 January” looms in the background over Eichmann and the switchboard operators. The film immediately launches into a discussion of the question of *Mischlinge* and mixed marriages, with Stuckart struggling to make the convoluted racial laws comprehensible to the female secretary, who willingly takes notes during the meeting and serves as both a stand-in for the audience’s questions and as someone Heydrich can flirt with. During this scene (see Figure 4.1), Müller and Stuckart talk to each other near a window; the lighting provides the whole scene with a sinister atmosphere and emphasizes unequal power relations between the two men at the conference, with the Gestapo chief remaining in the shadows, while Stuckart is closer to the window.

The secretary, who functions as an audience stand-in by asking Heydrich and other participants to clarify some of the more arcane bureaucratic language (*Amtssprache*), as well as the switchboard operators, brings a female presence into a series of films and television series that are overwhelmingly male. This

54 Tuchel, *Am Grossen Wannsee*, 56–58, 114.



Figure 4.1: Müller (Friedrich G. Beckhaus) and Stuckart (Peter Fitz) converse in the shadows. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Infafilm, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), 1984.

film uses women as pedagogical devices in a sexist manner (the women are inevitably doe-eyed and ignorant, the secretary flirts with Heydrich throughout the film and agrees to come work for him in Prague) and asks the experts to explain things like the Nuremberg laws and SS ranks as a plot device to help the audience. The script even refers to the (nameless) secretary as “a tall Nordic beauty,” who is of course blonde.⁵⁵ Holocaust films, in general, shy away from depicting female perpetrators. This film prefigures later points made by Wendy Lower, who noted that the women who worked for the SS and SD who “kept the mass murder machinery functioning,” were young, just like the men in the organization.⁵⁶ Lower underscores the importance of secretaries and telephone operators to this machinery: “Besides the nurses, the largest contributors to the day-to-day operations of Hitler’s genocidal war were the German secretaries and office aides, such as the file clerks and telephone operators working in state and private concerns in the East.”⁵⁷ Lower also notes that SS secretaries “were not ordinary office workers,” but women who “could fully envision themselves as members of an emerg-

⁵⁵ Paul Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch von Paul Mommertz, 1983, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 9.

⁵⁶ Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 15.

⁵⁷ Lower, *Hitler’s Furies*, 53.

ing elite.”⁵⁸ Even though its depiction of such figures through the character of the secretary unfortunately relies on gender stereotypes, this inclusion makes *The Wannsee Conference* rare among Holocaust films, which, apart from prominent exceptions like *The Reader* (2008) or exploitation films like *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975), generally refrain from depicting female complicity in the Holocaust – and when they do, they invariably depict female concentration camp guards, not female desk murderers (*Schreibtischtäterinnen*).

The film begins with a loud, boisterous, partylike atmosphere. It initially seems like all the attendees are familiar with one another and that they are all buddies. Because most characters are referred to by rank, not name, it is harder to determine just who is speaking; individuals become avatars of their respective agencies. Thus, some attendees, like Schöngarth or Neumann, fade into the background. Once Heydrich arrives, he interrupts this chummy atmosphere when he calls all of the SS attendees (except Stuckart, who represents the Ministry of the Interior even though he also wears an SS uniform in this film) into a side room in order to brief them about the impending meeting. This scene illustrates Heydrich’s busy schedule and his close working relationship with Heinrich Himmler, who calls both before and after the meeting. A photograph of Himmler looms in the background, much like in similar scenes from *Reinhard Heydrich – Manager of Terror*. Lange briefs Heydrich on recent *Einsatzgruppen* activities and shows a map of Europe depicting “Jew-free” countries. The map (Figure 4.2) lists the numbers of dead and depicts coffins in the countries where *Einsatzgruppen* have been committing mass shootings. In this sequence, Lange shows a historical source (discussed in Chapter 3) on screen. The corresponding script page contains stage directions for how this source was to be used – and understood:

One can see the three Baltic countries, plus White Ruthenia and a stretch of land in the northwestern Soviet Union going as far as Petersburg/Leningrad.

In each of these five areas nothing more than the capitals are shown – Reval [Tallinn], Riga, Kovno, Minsk, and Krasnogvardeysky near Leningrad – the number of executed in the respective area and a coffin next to each number for graphic clarification.

Heydrich’s index finger with the SS ring points to Minsk, the coffin next to it, and the number next to it.⁵⁹

This visual representation of historical sources illustrates the film’s intended authentic aura but also follows a longer tradition of Holocaust film and television

⁵⁸ Lower, *Hitler’s Furies*, 60.

⁵⁹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 29.



Figure 4.2: Lange presents the map of *Einsatzgruppen* activities. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Infafilm, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), 1984.

also seen in NBC's *Holocaust*; later productions would also use this technique. Note that *War and Remembrance* showed photocopies of the actual Wannsee Protocol on screen and *Conspiracy* would also show similar maps and the population statistical tables from the protocol.

Directly referencing Shlomo Aronson's points about the meeting's purpose,⁶⁰ Heydrich explains the day's tasks to his subordinates after Lange rants about *Gauleiter* Wilhelm Kube:

We have leftover personnel from the previous administration and government. Bureaucrats, conformists, careerists. Also former anti-democrats: Old-school conservatives, *völkisch* romantics, wackos. We must harness these insecure cantonists and half-hearted party comrades, bring them up to speed, force them into joint responsibility. Or let them stumble into it.⁶¹

This line of Heydrich's underscores both Aronson's and Mommertz's arguments about the meeting's purpose: not only was it meant to coordinate genocidal policy, it was also meant to end token opposition from the various ministries and bring them into complicity and "joint responsibility," whether willingly or not. After this pre-meeting, the SS members enter the conference room and take seats

⁶⁰ Letter from Shlomo Aronson to Manfred Korytowski, April 24, 1983, Private Archive Paul Mommertz, Munich, 2.

⁶¹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 33.

directly across from the representatives of civilian ministries and the Party leaders of occupied territories, beginning the conference.

The conference sequence opens with a presentation from Heydrich about the Jewish Problem, the Jewish population of Europe, and previous anti-Jewish measures up until the time of the meeting. Initially, it seems that the attendees are largely in agreement with Heydrich; there is little pushback, though it is clear that Heydrich has no patience for what he sees as irrelevant civilian opinions, such as those of Bühler. Throughout this section, Heydrich struts around the table (he cannot stand still). The script notes that Heydrich is to stick to bureaucratic language at the beginning: "Now, when the viewer is hopefully still relatively fresh and interested, we will begin with a deliberate emphasis on the official bureaucratic language and procedure, to the extent that the discrepancy between form and content play out here."⁶² Before a large map of Europe, he discusses the Jewish populations of various countries. In this sequence, during the longest individual speech in the film, Heydrich uses the same population figures found in the protocol. The script notes that the dialogue here "at least gives the later-born viewer a concept of the expansion of [Nazi Germany's] power [over occupied Europe] that is no longer clear to everyone."⁶³

Heydrich addresses the problems of coordinating the so-called "Final Solution": "Gentlemen, you see, the problems are not so simple. Especially not when competencies collide. It is therefore crucial that clarity be created on the question of leadership here and now."⁶⁴ This is where the mask comes off, so to speak. The SS and Nazi Party officials in the room "look satisfied to triumphant, the others surprised or depressed."⁶⁵ The film reinforces the group dynamics present in the script with a shot of the SS at one side of the table, then another shot of the other side of the table with civilians and other Party officials. During this first third of the conference, many of Heydrich's statements, such as, "In the course of the practical implementation of the Final Solution, Europe will be combed from west to east,"⁶⁶ are direct quotes from the protocol. He concludes his presentation with one of the most damning passages of the protocol, which alludes to programs like extermination through labor and, of course, leaves out what would happen to the Jews who were unfit for manual labor, such as the old, infirm, young, and pregnant:

62 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 39.

63 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 56.

64 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 44 A.

65 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 45.

66 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 61.

We will, in the course of the Final Solution, put the Jew to work in the East under appropriate leadership. We will lead him into these areas in large, single-sex columns, on foot, of course, building roads . . . Of course, a large part of these Jews will be eliminated through natural causes. Any remnant, that is, the most resistant part, will have to be treated accordingly.⁶⁷

From the beginning of this sequence, the film portrays the creation of the protocol, with Heydrich ordering the secretary to not write a verbatim transcript; Eichmann asks her to strike various statements from the record during the course of the meeting. The script provides stage directions for this point: “Again and again during the conference, Eichmann and the secretary, whispering across corners, gesticulating, even passing the stenogram back and forth, communicate about the protocol, which is obviously written as a factual and not a verbatim record.”⁶⁸ Echoing Arendt’s characterization of Eichmann as a detail-obsessed bureaucrat, Eichmann briefly presents on the transportation issue. He is concerned with timetables, cost-efficiency, and speed.⁶⁹ Lange, in contrast, is portrayed as a menacing yet clownlike figure: he talks about his experience leading an *Einsatzgruppe* but falls asleep during Heydrich’s presentation and constantly deals with his barking German shepherd, Hasso. Clearly intended for comic relief, this character trait falls flat and appears dated.

The second section of the conference sequence concerns the Foreign Ministry, Martin Luther, and the issue of Jews in allied or occupied nations. This section largely follows the protocol and discusses the willingness of Axis or occupied nations to support the coming European-wide “Final Solution.” In one part, they discuss how France will pose little difficulties and give up its Jews easily:

LUTHER: No more resistance from military commanders, ambassadors or the French.

KRITZINGER: But they have no knowledge there of the nature of the Final Solution measures.

LUTHER: But from where.

EICHMANN: There is talk of deportation, evacuation, dispatch to labor in the East.

HEYDRICH: Those are the language rules.

Agreement, knocking [on the table, in applause].⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 68–69.

⁶⁸ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 38.

⁶⁹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 63–65.

⁷⁰ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 82–83.

This passage also illustrates the film's tone once Heydrich and Eichmann have finished their presentations. Participants talk over one another and quickly retort each other. In this short section, four people are speaking at once. Throughout the film, the men rap their knuckles on the table to indicate applause. During the section on non-German Jews, the men discuss problems posed by their Italian ally using the case of Jenny Cozzi, the widow of an Italian army officer, to illustrate the difficulties. The Italian government protested on her behalf, but Eichmann sent her to a concentration camp in Riga. Here, Mommertz clearly engaged in fictionalization since this case actually occurred in late 1942 and throughout 1943.⁷¹ The men's reaction to how they solved the Cozzi case illustrates the calculating, cynical brutality the filmmakers wished to depict on screen:

EICHMANN: I have given orders regarding that. Cozzi stays.

LANGE: Order completed.

(Laughter).⁷²

The third and final "chapter" of the conference sequence concerns Stuckart and the question of mixed marriages. Mommertz's informational insert (discussed in Chapter 3), where he justifies his characterization of Stuckart, is in this section of the screenplay. At this point of the film, Stuckart (Peter Fitz), who is sweating, sick with the flu and a bit tipsy after drinking cognac, appears agitated and loses his composure at several points – not to the same degree as Colin Firth's performance in *Conspiracy*, but certainly more than any other character in *The Wannsee Conference*. Gerhard Klopfer and Stuckart argue with each other a bit in this section – perhaps this is the origin of their heated, rancorous argument in *Conspiracy*.⁷³ Throughout this section, when Stuckart defends the Nuremberg Laws against what he sees as arbitrary classifications of *Mischlinge* and when he advocates their mass sterilization instead of "evacuation," the other attendees laugh at him.⁷⁴ Although not as extreme as Höhne's characterization (Stuckart is no "half-resistance fighter," he wears his new SS uniform with pride), the Stuckart of *The Wannsee Conference* is, along with Kritzinger, sidelined by the SS and Nazi Party representatives; he is depicted as a man from a different time who has no place

71 See *The Nizkor Project*, The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Session 30, <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-030-07.html>, Accessed December 12, 2020.

72 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 94–95.

73 Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 106–107.

74 For a discussion of Stuckart's arguments at Wannsee, see Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 101–105.

in the new Nazi order – which contradicts his biography. Stuckart was a key figure in Nazi legal theory and policy and, as Hans-Christian Jasch has stated, “it was with enthusiasm that the ambitious Stuckart lent his considerable legal skills to the criminal Nazi regime, actively creating a framework for atrocities by means of legislative measures that rationalized and legitimized them.”⁷⁵ The film similarly depicts Kritzinger (Franz Rudnick) as an old-fashioned bureaucrat from the pre-Nazi era unprepared for the new realities of the younger, “uncompromising generation” represented by the RSHA and SD.⁷⁶ This representation agrees with most historiographical depictions of Kritzinger.⁷⁷ Whenever he questions Heydrich’s plans and why the Reich Chancellery has not been included or informed in them, Heydrich and the SS either stare him down or verbally dismiss him (see Figure 4.3). Kritzinger appears flustered and confused. Sometimes stammering, he constantly fiddles with his eyeglasses and shuffles papers. He often reacts to attendees’ more radical statements with a shocked expression, emphasising his unpreparedness and irrelevance. His position at the end of the table both



Figure 4.3: The SS, with Heydrich (Dietrich Mattausch) in the foreground, eye Kritzinger skeptically. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Infafilm, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), 1984.

⁷⁵ Hans-Christian Jasch, “Wilhelm Stuckart (1902–1953), Reich Interior Ministry: ‘A Legal Pedant’” in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 312.

⁷⁶ See Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*. (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003)

⁷⁷ Stefan Paul-Jacobs and Lore Kleiber, “Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger, Reich-Chancellery: A Prussian Civil Servant under the Nazi Regime” in *The Participants*, eds. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 207–223, 207.

figuratively and literally illustrates Heydrich painting him into a corner, emphasizing the Reich Chancellery's difficult position in relation to the RSHA.⁷⁸

Kritzinger asks Heydrich about how they plan to kill 11 million Jews via mass shooting, especially during wartime. Heydrich responds with:

HEYDRICH: There are other methods.

MÜLLER: More elegant ones.

HEYDRICH: More humane ones. Read Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, page seven hundred and seventy-two in the first edition. And, gentlemen, learn to take the Führer at his word!⁷⁹

A befuddled Kritzinger stays behind with Stuckart as everyone else leaves the conference room and asks him what Heydrich meant. He responds with details about Hitler's wishes:

STUCKART (agonized): The evidence is piling up. He says it would be better to just put the members of the Hebrew people under poison gas.

KRITZINGER: Gas?

STUCKART (nods).⁸⁰

The film's focus on Hitler's decision-making, as well as the section on *Mein Kampf*, clearly advocate an intentionalist view of how the Holocaust unfolded.⁸¹ As in *Manager of Terror*, Hitler looms in the background during the conference. When Kritzinger speaks, he is often shown with a large bust of Hitler directly behind him (Figure 4.4). This passage on *Mein Kampf* proved to be controversial. In his review, Höhne alleged that no such passage even existed.⁸² Mommertz's research files contain a photocopy of the *Mein Kampf* passage in question, underlined by Mommertz and located on page 772 of the complete edition (both volumes) published in 1939, not the "first edition" as noted in the script.⁸³ The

⁷⁸ Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 93–95.

⁷⁹ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 125.

⁸⁰ Paul Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch von Paul Mommertz, 1983, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 125–126.

⁸¹ For a discussion of intentionalism, see Charles S. Maier. *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). Chapter 3, "A Holocaust like the Others? Problems of Comparative History."

⁸² Höhne, "Eine Falle der Betroffenheit."

⁸³ Paul Mommertz, Photocopy of *Mein Kampf* Pages "Auswahl aus Texten zur 'Genesis' des Holocaust und der Wannseekonferenz", in Ordner 2, "Historische Vorarbeit zum Drehbuch," Kapitel 1600 "Dokumente NS-Rassenpolitik," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.



Figure 4.4: A bust of Hitler looms over Kritzinger (Franz Rudnick). *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Infafilm, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF), 1984.

passage, contained in the fifteenth chapter of the second volume, is contained within a section on World War I and Marxism. It advocated taking Jews as hostages and killing them with poison gas:

If at the beginning of and during the war, twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew subverters of the people had been put under poison gas in the same way as hundreds of thousands of our very best German workers from all classes and professions had to endure in the field, then the sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been in vain.⁸⁴

A handwritten note at the bottom of the photocopied page reads “a possibility becomes visible.”⁸⁵ The critical edition of *Mein Kampf* contains extensive commentary on this passage. The critical edition’s commentary notes that Hitler expressed a desire to “physically exterminate” the Jews in numerous instances, including a speech at the Munich Bürgerbräukeller on July 6, 1920. The commentary continues, pointing out that such eliminationist rhetoric was common during the early years of the Nazi movement. Nevertheless, the editors concur with contemporary historians, who argue that this passage in *Mein Kampf* does not constitute a direct line between Hitler’s early writings and the “Final Solution,” instead arguing that it was a gradual process.⁸⁶ Contemporary historians, when discussing Hitler’s

⁸⁴ Adolf Hitler, *Hitler, Mein Kampf: Eine kritische Edition*, ed. Christian Hartmann et al., 2 vols. (Munich: Institut für Zeitgeschichte München - Berlin IfZ, 2017), 2:1719.

⁸⁵ Mommertz, Photocopy of *Mein Kampf* Pages.

⁸⁶ Hartmann et al., *Hitler, Mein Kampf* 2:1718, note 73.

genocidal ideas and aims, generally refer to Hitler's January 30, 1939 "prophecy" during a speech before the Reichstag, in which he stated that the Second World War (inevitably caused by the Jews in his thinking) would mean the "annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."⁸⁷ Mommertz's focus on the *Mein Kampf* passage is the clearest indication of an intentionalist historiographical position; this position can falter when reading concrete policy goals into Hitler's rhetoric. For historian Richard Evans, Hitler "set the parameters; subordinates were left to fill in the details. When they acted on their own initiative, it was always within the bounds of the ideology he had created."⁸⁸ It is this aspect where *The Wannsee Conference* differs the most from *Conspiracy* in a historiographical – not filmic – sense. However, an intentionalist position is not per se inferior to a functionalist one. Most contemporary historians tend to adopt a mix of both positions, with Dan Stone recently arguing that the field needs to "return to ideology" as an explanatory factor.⁸⁹

After most of the attendees have left the villa, Heydrich, Müller, and Eichmann retire to a nearby room to enjoy cigarettes and cognac, but Heydrich only takes one long drag before putting out his cigarette and putting on his overcoat – there is much work to be done. Heydrich gives Eichmann further instructions regarding the protocol, emphasizing the film's intertextuality – showing viewers how this primary source was created:

HEYDRICH: We need thirty protocols, Eichmann. Deliver your draft to me this afternoon.

EICHMANN: Yes sir, Obergruppenführer.

HEYDRICH: As clearly as necessary and as vaguely as possible.

EICHMANN: Permission to ask a question, sir: What should be clear?

HEYDRICH: Consent to our leadership. That is the main thing.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Adolf Hitler, quoted in Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 222. For more on Hitler's "prophecy," see Cesarani, *Final Solution*, 221–222; Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume 2, 1939–1945: The Years of Extermination*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 273. Cesarani claims that the speech was "prophetic but not programmatic," while Friedländer places much more emphasis on it, repeatedly referring to the "prophecy" throughout *The Years of Extermination*. Hitler did repeat his "prophecy" throughout the war in various speeches and statements. Friedländer probably stands as the best representative of a contemporary "qualified intentionalist" position.

⁸⁸ Evans, *Hitler's People*, 101.

⁸⁹ Stone, *The Holocaust*, xix–xx. See also Evans, *Hitler's People*, 6.

⁹⁰ Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, 129.

Eichmann also expresses relief at how smoothly the day's proceedings ran. He tells Heydrich that he has "a Pilate-like feeling of satisfaction" after seeing how the members of the Party and civilian ministries agreed with the RSHA and SS taking the lead on anti-Jewish policy.⁹¹ This line is a direct reference to statements made by Eichmann at his trial; Hannah Arendt even titles her chapter on Wannsee in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* "The Wannsee Conference, or Pontius Pilate."⁹² This corresponds with the film's depiction of Eichmann overall, which leans heavily on Arendt's depiction, as noted above during the discussion of the accompanying *Werkstattnotizen* documentary. In her chapter on Wannsee, Arendt characterizes Eichmann as "secretary of the meeting" and generally downplays his importance.⁹³ Arendt notes that "the most potent factor in the soothing of his own conscience was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who was actually against the Final Solution."⁹⁴

The film concludes with Heydrich exiting the villa and briefly chatting with Lange, who is playing with his dog and a stick near the porte-cochère. Lange discusses how he uses his German shepherd to hunt Jews in hiding, and holding the stick above his dog, laughs as the frame freezes and a single, low piano tone clangs – the only music present in the film. The Lange in this film is the closest thing the movie has to a villain, he is constantly drunkenly stumbling, jokes about murdering Jews, and even falls asleep at the table. This version of Lange is a gangster in uniform, a remnant of earlier depictions of Holocaust perpetrators as sadists and criminals. He was present at Wannsee because he had firsthand experience of mass killing – to reduce him to a figure of comic relief is wide of the mark.

In contrast with *Conspiracy*, *The Wannsee Conference* remains focused on the conference room and the indoor winter garden right next to it. With the exception of the very beginning and end of the film, characters do not move between rooms, although the larger villa is sometimes alluded to, most notably with the switchboard operators and the constant presence of SS orderlies providing drinks. The film is mostly shot at eye-level, with particular attention being paid to where each character is looking in order to provide visual consistency and continuity.⁹⁵ One is struck as well by how quickly paced the film is, it really does have the quick, wisecracking dialogue tempo of mid-century American comedies, particularly those directed by Billy Wilder.

⁹¹ Paul Mommertz, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Drehbuch, 130.

⁹² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

⁹³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 114.

⁹⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 116.

⁹⁵ This is known as the 180° rule "crossing the line" and is a cinematographic problem associated with making sure visual axes are consistent. See Interview with Heinz Schirck, April 5, 2019, 37:54–40:22.

The international release of the film includes an English-language voiceover, which sets the scene but also undermines Mommertz's above-mentioned strategy of letting the viewer figure things out. The English subtitles generally correspond to the German original but often leave out important details for the purpose of clarity, for example "SD" is translated as "SS."⁹⁶ The English-language credit sequence lists Heydrich, Eichmann, Freisler, and Stuckart's fates, but does not address any other participants.

The Wannsee Conference offers a unique view of genocide and history. Especially for a film produced for German public television, known today for its conservatism and prioritizing of a "murder of the week" drama series (like *Tatort*), it is a daring experiment in form by depicting a historical meeting in real time, devoid of music, and in a strict documentary-like fashion, even if media scholar Axel Bangert argues that it "shows a rather typical emphasis on historical accuracy and observational distance in the depiction of the Nazi elite."⁹⁷ One particularly egregious example of the intersection of conventional West German television and historical amnesia was the crime drama *Derrick*, whose star was a Waffen-SS veteran, specifically of the 3rd SS Panzer Division "Death's Head," which was notorious for war crimes.⁹⁸ West German public television, however, in the 1980s did air experimental programming. For example, Bavaria Film, the production company behind *Manager of Terror*, produced Rainer Werner Fassbinder's highly experimental 14-part miniseries adaptation of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in collaboration with public television broadcaster WDR. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* prefigures later, more novelistic television storytelling practices popular in the United States during the early 2000s – each episode is more like the chapter of a novel than traditional episodic television. 1977 also saw the release of two prominent West German productions depicting Nazi criminals, the documentary *Hitler: A Career*, directed and penned by the historian Joachim Fest, and Theodor Kotulla's *Death is My Trade*, a fictionalized biography of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss. These earlier West German productions predate NBC's miniseries *Holocaust*, complicating conventional narratives about it being responsible for a shift in West German attitudes towards the Nazi era.⁹⁹ *The Wannsee Conference* fits within this rubric – although German public television at the time

⁹⁶ Because of this issue, any translations of the film's dialogue are my own.

⁹⁷ Bangert, *The Nazi Past in Contemporary German Film*, 58.

⁹⁸ Kater, *After the Nazis*, 189. See also Haass, *Herbert Reinecker: NS-Propagandist und bundesdeutscher Erfolgsautor*.

⁹⁹ For two fantastic summaries of *Holocaust* and West German memory culture, see the chapters devoted to the series and its reception in Frank Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979: Als die Welt von heute begann* (Munich: Beck C. H., 2019); Biess, *Republik der Angst*.

could be conservative politically, especially when it came to historical productions, this did not necessarily mean it was conservative artistically. The film does not forgive inattentive viewers; many lines of dialogue are rife with historical information and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate among the fifteen Nazi functionaries sitting around the table. With its intentionalist historiographical position nevertheless informed by functionalist historiography, such as that from Raul Hilberg and Christopher Browning, the film is a synthesis of Holocaust historiography from the early 1980s. In contrast with *Manager of Terror*, the film largely refrains from psychoanalyzing its characters; this is limited to highlighting personality traits instead of explaining *why* the men of Wannsee did what they did. The film succeeds admirably at depicting the incongruity of the meeting's setting with its subject matter, attendees constantly use "elegant" as an adjective, either to describe their surroundings or to cynically refer to deportation and killing procedures. Unfortunately for its filmmakers, *The Wannsee Conference* proved to be too experimental for the West German press.

3 The *Spiegel* Debate and Reception in West Germany

After Höhne's negative review in *Der Spiegel*, other West German publications tended to repeat his criticism, with a handful of exceptions. In his published rebuttal to Höhne's review, Mommertz defended the film and himself against charges of sensationalizing and falsifying history. Titled "Totally unrealistic and out of touch," this piece, published in *Der Spiegel*'s first 1985 issue, reiterates justifications for Mommertz's depiction of the conference as outlined in the previous chapter, sometimes word for word.¹⁰⁰ Mommertz opens the piece by noting that Höhne used a sentence from Eichmann, commonly cited by those who downplayed or denied the Holocaust, in order to claim that Heydrich's language hoodwinked the conference attendees, who simply believed that the conference was about deportation. He refutes this assertion by noting that during his trial, Eichmann admitted that "various killing methods" were discussed at Wannsee.¹⁰¹ Mommertz directly accuses Höhne of utilizing "apologetical" argumentation methods common on the far-right and noted that *Einsatzgruppen* reports about mass shootings widely circulated within the German government; this was proof that attendees knew about the murder campaign and could not convincingly

100 Mommertz, "Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd."

101 Mommertz, "Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd."

claim ignorance: “all knew about the mass shootings in the East.”¹⁰² Mommertz continues his rebuttal by discussing what each Wannsee attendee would have known at the time of the conference. In his key passage, Mommertz fires a shot across Höhne’s bow, arguing that the idea of agreed-upon language rules would have been absurd:

It is simply inconceivable that men of this magnitude, organizational ability, and vast partial responsibility with respect to the looming debacle in Africa and Stalingrad should not have posed the question of how to deal technically with such an enormous problem as the Europe-wide “Final Solution.” It is completely unrealistic and out of touch with life to assume that Heydrich had agreed upon or assumed that he had agreed upon a set of language rules with the majority of the conference participants, with the help of which one could have talked past some, after all, not stupid people for ninety minutes. Why should he? He needed their knowledge!¹⁰³

Here, Mommertz emphasizes the fact that those attending the conference were not stupid and, if Heydrich had insisted on using the euphemistic language contained in the protocol, they would have seen through it. With the last line, he reiterates arguments discussed in the previous chapter, where he argues that one purpose of the conference was to make civilian government ministries complicit by both ensuring their knowledge of the genocide and by their own actions in support of SS operations. This argument echoes the interpretation of Wannsee offered by Raul Hilberg (as well as later historians), which notes that Heydrich, as ordered by Göring, “was to act in co-operation with other agencies which had jurisdiction in these matters,” which meant agencies responsible for issues like mixed marriages, the labor question, and Jews living outside of the Reich. Hilberg notes that the conference was meant to cut through red tape and settle questions of which agencies held authority over Jews; previously, Heydrich had encountered pushback from various ministries and agencies, and Wannsee was meant to streamline anti-Jewish policy.¹⁰⁴ Mommertz ends his piece with a parting shot, emphasizing his years of research:

Finally, Mr. Höhne calls the sources for the Wannsee Conference meager. I have six folders with original documents from the conference and its context. I am a historian too. Perhaps it is conceivable that after 14 months of special study in a particular subject area, one historian is a little ahead of other historians.¹⁰⁵

102 Mommertz, “Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd.”

103 Mommertz, “Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd.”

104 Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 1st edition, 263.

105 Mommertz, “Völlig unrealistisch und lebensfremd.”

Here, Mommertz rejects the false dichotomy between historians and filmmakers; that history solely belongs to those who write books. Arguing against a journalist and popular historian, he rejects the idea that history solely belongs to those who write prose history; for him, this is a form of gatekeeping. Here, he prefigures later work by Robert Rosenstone, Robert Toplin, Thomas Cauvin, Rebecca Weeks, Bruno Ramirez, and Barry Langford, who all argue that filmmakers can act as historians when creating historical films. Arguing that filmmakers simply translate the work of historians is difficult to maintain when one notes that Mommertz had no historical monographs on Wannsee to consult, only smaller sections of publications and the then-available primary sources. Nevertheless, this rebuttal ignored one aspect of the production which Höhne's review did discuss: Mommertz's feud with Shlomo Aronson.

At some point during early 1984, Shlomo Aronson let producer Manfred Korytowski know that he was unhappy with the direction the film was taking and that the film "did not correspond to the historical facts."¹⁰⁶ Aronson's negative verdict is discussed in a draft of a March 26, 1984 letter from Mommertz, which was written after filming had been completed. Earlier correspondence from Aronson, discussed in the previous chapter, expresses some reservations about particular aspects of the film, but nothing indicated that he was disappointed with the way the script was going. This bitter letter from Mommertz expresses deep dismay, alleging that Aronson did not make his problems with the final screenplay draft known before filming began. Mommertz claims that he "took [Aronson's] whole wish list into consideration" when writing the screenplay.¹⁰⁷ Höhne had access to this letter and discussed it in his review (Höhne's review borrows its title from one of Mommertz's statements in this letter), but characterized the spat as one caused by Mommertz mischaracterizing Stuckart as a "half-resistance fighter," which "enraged" Aronson when he watched a cut of the film in March 1984. He also described a situation where Aronson wanted to distance himself from the film but was eventually convinced to remain associated with the production.¹⁰⁸ Mommertz's letter discusses Aronson's issues with Stuckart's characterization, pointing to the section of the screenplay which outlined Mommertz's justification for portraying Stuckart holding positions actually held by his subordinate Bernhard Lös-

106 Paul Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, March 26, 1984, in Ordner 0, "Korrespondenz von Kampe und Mommertz," Section "Korrespondenz Paul Mommertz mit Shlomo Aronson," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

107 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 1.

108 Höhne, "Eine Falle der Betroffenheit."

ener, even noting that he included this tidbit “thinking of [Aronson].”¹⁰⁹ This section of the screenplay is discussed further in Chapter 3, and shows that Mommertz was aware that he had to exercise caution with this characterization in order to prevent mistaken impressions or identification with Stuckart. Nevertheless, the film does make Stuckart appear weak-minded and less of a convinced Nazi than he actually was. This is exemplified by Stuckart’s comment about wanting to be transferred to the Eastern Front rather than to continue to be responsible for Jewish issues. Mommertz’s letter also charges Aronson with pedantism and a lack of understanding for the needs of a film, as opposed to a historical monograph: “Of course I couldn’t add in all of the nuances, otherwise I would have had to write a script with footnotes, so to speak. I also could not go into more detail, otherwise I would have overwhelmed the historically unprejudiced standard viewer.”¹¹⁰ He continues, “Of all those who have made the film and seen it thus far, none has felt that Stuckart was idealized.”¹¹¹ He then describes the special problems faced by filmed history and justified the film’s refusal to refer to every participant by name in the film, arguing that it would have resulted in lawsuits and an endless amount of “trivialities” (*Nebensächlichkeiten*): “We name the office, but we also name the rank. This signals to everyone that the typical is meant. The ministry, the office, the agency, the house policy are speaking.”¹¹² Clearly insulted by Aronson’s misgivings, Mommertz again references his historical training, saying “I am also a historian – not a stupid frivolous film guy – and I also claim the right to my historical interpretation, like you do.”¹¹³

Mommertz’s letter continues and increases in rancor, but one section nicely sums up the aims of the production, claiming that *The Wannsee Conference* “reconciles the requirements of historical fidelity, dramaturgy and didactics.”¹¹⁴ He notes that while minor errors are “unavoidable,” the film is “far removed from hermetic academicism as well as kitschy soap operas.”¹¹⁵ In his most spirited defense of the film, which Höhne would use to characterize Mommertz as hysterical, Mommertz argues that the film does something new; it “shakes up” the viewer: “We show like never before this gruesome discrepancy of cold-faced, cynical, even thoughtless frivolity and the Holocaust! We JOLT [the viewer]! We lead

109 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 2;

110 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 2.

111 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 2.

112 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 3–4.

113 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6.

114 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6.

115 Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6.

the viewer into our trap, the trap of affectedness!”¹¹⁶ The final page of the letter does veer into self-pity which comes across as an egoistic misfire in light of its Israeli recipient. Mommertz refers to himself as a “German author who since ‘45 has been in constant traumatic confrontation with Auschwitz.”¹¹⁷ The letter is also signed with one of Mommertz’s aphorisms about the Holocaust, which he often repeated in various forms throughout interviews and correspondence: “Holocaust. One can’t get old enough to get shocked enough as one would have to be.”¹¹⁸ Finally, the letter calls their dispute essentially hairsplitting among historians and a distraction from larger issues. Mommertz makes a political argument for the film. Mommertz claims first that the film is a “political issue” (*Politikum*) and then says that Aronson is unwittingly playing into the hands of the far right. The letter ends with an argument and appeal to Aronson that is alternately convincing and self-serving, yet it illustrates fundamental tensions within a production team composed of filmmakers and historians, of Germans and Israelis:

Do you really want to be responsible for the fact that certain people can gloatingly say: ‘Well, there you go! It’s all nonsense! Even the professor from Israel confirms it! So there you see again what to think of the coming to terms with the past [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*] of our damned atonement-obsessed Germans! Nothing!’ You would have the applause from the wrong side, namely the neo-Nazis, and I would have the rotten eggs from the wrong side, namely you! Are we really supposed to offer such a spectacle to the unteachable, are we supposed to score such own goals, to perform such a double suicide? That would not even be allowed if you had really serious objections. And I can’t imagine you want to take the chance.¹¹⁹

Although Mommertz’s letter was sometimes reckless in terms of its language (his rage is palpable), Aronson, rather than distance himself from the film (as he initially wished), actually sent a conciliatory letter to Mommertz praising the film and his work, though Hühne later interpreted this letter as Aronson’s desire to turn down the argument’s heat. He called the film “a very impressive accomplishment in general” and that his misgivings were limited to two instances: the portrayal of Eichmann’s excessive reliance on his statements under interrogation and while on trial, and that Mommertz lacked evidence for Stuckart wanting to leave his post and fight at the front because of the Wannsee Conference specifically.¹²⁰ It is unclear if this statement was an attempt to calm Mommertz down or

¹¹⁶ Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6.

¹¹⁷ Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 6–7.

¹¹⁸ Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Shlomo Aronson, 7.

¹¹⁹ Mommertz, Draft of Letter to Aronson, 7.

¹²⁰ Shlomo Aronson, Letter to Paul Mommertz, April 11, 1984, Private Archive Paul Mommertz, Munich, 1–2.

an honest assessment on Aronson's part. As a suggestion for improving this aspect of the film (which was ignored for the most part – see the comments above about the credit sequence for the American release), Aronson advocated showing real photos of the conference participants alongside photos of the actors at both the beginning and end of the film, with text emphasizing that Stuckart did not go to the front and remained in the Interior Ministry.¹²¹ Aronson also granted several interviews promoting the film, particularly for the American press.¹²² Still, Mommertz has noted that their personal relationship soured after this exchange and they never contacted each other again.¹²³ In this respect, Höhne's review, while correctly reporting on their exchange, mischaracterized Aronson's position.

In an undated essay (likely 1984-1985) located in the Mommertz collection, Mommertz expands on his response to Höhne and defends Aronson against assertions made in Höhne's review:

One more sentence on Professor Aronson, who I appreciate no less than Heinz Höhne does. Yes, there were differences. They were also quite natural. They always stemmed from the tension between history and the necessities of dramaturgy. The only unusual thing is that Höhne quickly destroys Aronson's compliment on a "very impressive achievement" with the interpretation that Aronson was only trying to buy peace of mind from the TV business' use of history.¹²⁴

Mommertz also responds to Höhne's allegation that IfZ staff warned Mommertz against writing a "creepy" film about Wannsee: "Such a warning is not known to me. In view of my earlier scripts on contemporary historical topics, such a warning would not have been necessary."¹²⁵ Mommertz also questions Höhne's assertions about the protocol itself, asking why he felt the need to cast doubt upon its authenticity and why he claimed that Robert Kempner doubted its authenticity.¹²⁶ It is unclear whether this essay was even sent to *Der Spiegel* or if it served as further argument, post factum, to bolster Mommertz's already-published rebuttal. In any case, it remained in the archival collection and was never published in any form. One source indicates that the version published in *Der Spiegel* was a shorter

121 Aronson, Letter to Paul Mommertz, April 11, 1984, 3.

122 See R. Jill Bradshaw, "Israeli Professor at UCLA Lends Expertise to German Film," *L.A. Reader*, February 26, 1987.

123 Interview with Paul Mommertz, November 16, 2018, 43:58–45:23.

124 Paul Mommertz, "Weitere Stellungnahmen zur SPIEGEL-Kritik von Heinz Höhne an meinem Drehbuch" in Ordner 1, "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 300 "Der Autor," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

125 Mommertz, "Weitere Stellungnahmen zur SPIEGEL-Kritik," 1–2.

126 Mommertz, "Weitere Stellungnahmen zur SPIEGEL-Kritik," 2.

version of a longer rebuttal, so it is indeed possible that these pages belong to that longer, unpublished material.¹²⁷

By casting doubt on the Wannsee Protocol's provenance, Höhne was – whether intentionally or not – legitimizing viewpoints common among Holocaust deniers in the pages of West Germany's flagship periodical. The historian Christian Mentel has documented the origins and methods behind denialist attempts to discredit the Wannsee Protocol, including the claim about the document not having the appropriate letterhead and file number.¹²⁸ Mentel has also noted that the notorious Holocaust denier David Irving claimed that the conference was merely about organizing deportations.¹²⁹ Later in the 1980s, the right-wing historian Ernst Nolte would also cast doubt on the protocol's authenticity, even going so far as to question whether or not the Wannsee Conference even took place, a contention which was still present in the revised 1997 edition of his book *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg*, where he asserts in an endnote that Heydrich may not have even been present and that historians had abandoned their objectivity by supposedly uncritically accepting Wannsee as fact.¹³⁰ In her influential *Denying the Holocaust*, the American historian Deborah Lipstadt traced how conservative historians like Nolte helped denialist viewpoints enter supposedly respectable historiography, arguing that Nolte and historians with similar arguments “are not crypto-deniers, but the results of their work are the same: the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction and between persecuted and persecutor.”¹³¹ It is ironic that Höhne accused Mommertz of unethically blending fact and fiction while simultaneously alluding to revisionist and denialist claims about Wannsee, thereby giving their dangerous ideas access to *Spiegel's* vast audience.

Mommertz was not the only member of the production team to react to Heinz Höhne's review. On January 16, 1985, producer Manfred Korytowski sent a scathing letter directly to Höhne. In contrast with Mommertz's response, this letter is addressed to Höhne personally and was not meant for publication.¹³² Kory-

127 Manfred Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, January 16, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 200 “Der Produzent,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

128 Christian Mentel, “Das Protokoll der Wannsee-Konferenz. Überlieferung, Veröffentlichung und revisionistische Infragestellung,” in Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*, 130–131.

129 Mentel, “Das Protokoll der Wannsee-Konferenz,” 132–133.

130 Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus*, 5th edition, September 1997 (Munich: F. A. Herbig Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH, 1997), 470. See endnote 26, pages 541–542.

131 Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, (New York: Penguin, 1994), 214–215.

132 Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 1.

towksi began the letter expressing deep disappointment with Höhne: “I now read your review after coming back from a long trip. It is, as the screenwriter has already addressed, either beside the point, wrong, or dangerous in all points – dangerous because it puts grist on the mills of the eternal reactionaries and the unteachable, whose embarrassing applause you are now certain to receive. But that is your problem.”¹³³ Korytowski expressed puzzlement regarding Höhne’s characterization of Aronson’s behavior, arguing that if Aronson wanted to distance himself from the film, he would not have agreed to be credited as its historical advisor: “[This is] a strange kind of distancing. Who is the ‘fantasist’ now? In any case, this example is typical of your speculations.” Immediately following this jab, Korytowski described his own goals for the film:

My intention with the film about the Wannsee Conference was to make people aware of three things – without showing concentration camp atrocities again: First, that not only the small concentration camp henchmen, who have always been shown, were involved in the Holocaust, but also Hitler’s high-level staff. Secondly, I wanted to provide a first insight into what happened in the Holocaust’s command centers. Thirdly, and most importantly, the film was intended to show how desk murderers look, behave, and talk when they organize the annihilation of an entire people.¹³⁴

He accused Höhne of ignoring the film’s goals and alleged the following:

Instead of communicating this fact as important information . . . you show yourself completely unmoved and throw yourself with the greatest eagerness into pedantic censoriousness. You unsuccessfully try to cast yourself as an expert on the Wannsee Conference – and well-behaved German critics are abandoning their own judgement by the dozen and blindly rely on the supposed authority from Hamburg.¹³⁵

He also charged Höhne with “delivering ammunition” to Holocaust deniers and other traditionalist conservatives, then speculates about the true motivations behind Höhne’s review: “The so-called better circles of that era had a grace period in the television medium up until now. My film has put an end to that. I guess you cannot forgive such a thing. Perhaps that is the real explanation for the irritated reactions in the editorial offices. One doesn’t like to see what we might be capable of.”¹³⁶

On the last page of his letter, he turns to his more personal reasons for writing Höhne and speaks as a Jewish man who grew up as a refugee from Hitler’s Germany. Societal and personal wounds were still raw and Korytowski responded

¹³³ Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 1.

¹³⁴ Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 2.

¹³⁵ Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 2–3.

¹³⁶ Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 3.

to Höhne as a man deeply affected by the murder of his family members and fellow Jews. The end to his letter is worth quoting in full:

I myself am Jewish and a victim of racial persecution. I lost my family members in the Holocaust. It would be an insult not only to these victims if I were to make a sloppy film about the events that led to their death. The subject is too serious for that, Mr. Höhne! I seriously ask myself if my decision to return to Germany, the country of my birth, where the memory of terrible truths, the confrontation of them, and the shame about them hides behind unqualified dogmatism, was the correct one.¹³⁷

In addition to Korytowski's letter, the Mommertz collection contains two letters sent to *Der Spiegel* founder Rudolf Augstein by readers in support of the film. One was penned by the translator Liselotte Julius, who identified herself as a Holocaust survivor (she claims that she only survived due to falsified papers claiming she was only half-Jewish) and claimed that Höhne's "tone betrays an almost unbearable degree of schoolmasterliness and know-it-allism" and charged him with dishonesty and sloppy historical work: "Is the inability to mourn replaced by the typically German capability of creating a mountain of refuge out of scientific and pseudo-scientific arguments, behind whose protective walls one can confidently stand up straight and right oneself?"¹³⁸

Julius further charged that Höhne's review was an exercise in journalistic "execution" of Mommertz: "there is no question in my mind that a double execution has taken place here – namely of a subject, the thematization of an important part of contemporary history, and of a person, namely the [screen]writer."¹³⁹ She described an event from her youth in Berlin during early 1942 and claimed that her father, through an acquaintance in the Wilmersdorf police, had heard that "they are killing all of them (the Jews), systematically" and that the same police officer told her father that this decision "was decided at a meeting of high-level functionaries at Wannsee."¹⁴⁰ Julius concluded her letter by stating that, to her disappointment, the NBC miniseries *Holocaust* did more to "shock" audiences than decades of documentaries offered by the German media.¹⁴¹

A letter from Herbert Zeibig, living in Bergisch Gladbach near Cologne, also expressed disappointment and anger towards Höhne's review, but argued from a more distanced, academic point of view. Zeibig claimed that "according to Egon

137 Korytowski, Letter to Heinz Höhne, 3.

138 Liselotte Julius, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, December 23, 1984, in Order 1, "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 300, "Der Autor," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

139 Julius, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, December 23, 1984, 1.

140 Julius, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, 1–2.

141 Julius, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, 2.

Friedell, historical writing is the philosophy of past events. My view is that this also includes the portrayal of history [on film]”¹⁴² Zeibig questioned Höhne’s use of Eichmann as a source and dismissed his reservations about the protocol’s authenticity, arguing that they were “meaningless.” He ends the letter with an execution of his own, to use Julius’s terminology: “Höhne has done a disservice to Germany and its citizens, who are striving to understand history; for the subject of the ‘Wannsee Conference’ was one we had to catch up on.”¹⁴³ Two of these letters illustrate the reaction of two Jewish people (Korytowski and Julius) to what they identified as German evasiveness about Nazi crimes that shaded into apologia and provided intellectual cover for Holocaust deniers. Their anger towards Höhne and *Der Spiegel* is palpable and serves as an indication of the contested arena of West German memory of the Holocaust and World War II during the 1980s: there was no “German response” to the Holocaust; but German *responses*, which included those from German Jews. Average Germans watched *The Wannsee Conference* and responded to it with letters to *Der Spiegel* and to the production team. So instead of a conversation solely between filmmakers and historians, the audience also contributed to the debate about *The Wannsee Conference*.

The Mommertz archival collection also includes a series of letters from viewers expressing contemptuous disdain.¹⁴⁴ These responses included letters from still-living Nazis. Prominent West German politicians wrote positive letters, including the conservative Bavarian Minister President Franz Josef Strauss, who promised to make the Bavarian *Landeszentrale für politische Bildungsarbeit* aware of the film but noted that it would depend on if the film was “didactically appropriate.”¹⁴⁵ It is unclear if the *Landeszentrale* ultimately included the film in its program. Jürgen Böddrich, a social democratic member of the Bavarian Landtag (SPD), sent Mommertz a similar letter, stating that “[t]he exposure of so-called ‘high carat people’ [i.e., highly respected persons] in their inhumanity has con-

142 Herbert Zeibig, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, December 30, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 300, “Der Autor,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

143 Zeibig, Letter to Rudolf Augstein, 1–2.

144 A note at the beginning of the archival folder states that the letters contained within are “a few typical examples” but that many letters that would be worth citing are not contained due to legal reasons. This note also claims that other negative letters threatened the filmmakers with assault or even murder. Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

145 Franz Josef Strauss, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, March 25, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

vinced me very much. For this taboo violation, I am very grateful to you and I also hope that you will continue to not let anyone intimidate you.”¹⁴⁶ Alexander Böker, a Wehrmacht veteran living in Bad Homburg, praised the film for its depiction of the mentality and “idealism” of the SS: “these people were really like that.” He addressed the film’s negative reception in the press: “If contemporary history is not yet ready for your film, history will honor its objectivity.”¹⁴⁷ One viewer from Schleswig-Holstein praised the film, but expressed disappointment that it “wasn’t better advertised” because he only saw the film by happenstance.¹⁴⁸ Another viewer and friend of Korytowski’s, Charles “Chuck” Kerremans, sent Korytowski (“Mannie”) a letter praising the film for its depiction of Nazi bureaucrats: “Horrible, these philistines [*Spießler*] in uniform, between their dog, their cognac, and the accommodating sexy secretary, at a ‘retreat’ like we expect today from industry bigwigs, discussing a topic such as waste disposal or the like, [with a tone] somewhere between fun and business!”¹⁴⁹ The most extensive positive letter in the archival collection is from the film producer Michael Pakleppa of Westwind Productions. Pakleppa praised the filmmakers for their artistic achievements and makes a point similar to Chuck Kerremans, arguing that the film portrayed a type of grotesque meeting undoubtedly common throughout the modern world. For him, the film “succeeded in a pushing for a reflection on the latent fascism within us, which for me is without precedent.”¹⁵⁰ Pakleppa also attacked what he saw as unfair criticism in the press, arguing that those who like Höhne, who, for him, nitpicked the film, were at the “same spiritual level” as Holocaust deniers.¹⁵¹ Of course, this is hyperbole, but the reaction against Höhne

146 Jürgen Böddrich, Letter to Paul Mommertz, January 15, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

147 Alexander Böker, Letter to Paul Mommertz, December 22, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

148 Ferdinand von Stumm, Postcard to NDR December 20, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

149 Charles “Chuck” Kerremans, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, December 20, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

150 Michael Pakleppa, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, January 23, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

151 Pakleppa, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, 2–3.

here also illustrates how common denialist or “revisionist” arguments were in 1980s West Germany.

Negative letters included hate mail from Holocaust deniers and unabashed Nazis. Their combative, threatening tone also helps place Mommertz’s and Korytowski’s strongly-worded responses to Höhne’s review in context. One postcard called the film “the most disgusting kind of propaganda” and claimed that the real Wannsee Protocol had never been published.¹⁵² Another postcard, sent directly to Mommertz, called him a “useful Bolshevik idiot,” a “demagogue” and claimed the film was a complete lie.¹⁵³ One shrill letter from an individual in Frankfurt, sent to Infafilm before the *The Wannsee Conference* aired (the letter was in response to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* piece on the film from February 1984) attacked the production team, accusing them of falsifying history and alleging that Germans did not kill Jews, but “Khazars” (a common antisemitic conspiracy theory). The author notably follows a similar line of argument later found in Höhne’s review, namely that the “Final Solution” discussed at Wannsee only meant deportation. The letter continues with usual denialist arguments and concludes by stating that the Holocaust could not have even happened.¹⁵⁴ Another letter casts doubt on whether the conference took place and then whines about German television focusing on “topic number 1,” that is, the Holocaust.¹⁵⁵ In a letter sent to Mommertz a full year after the film’s premiere, a woman rants about German victimhood and claims that the “true history” will one day be brought to light, complaining that “forty years after the end of the Second World War, there are still anti-German television productions, the propaganda of lies is running at full speed, the German people are threatened by a terror of opinion that is unprecedented in history.”¹⁵⁶

152 Postcard sent to ARD, undated. in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

153 Jörg Reinhard, Letter to Paul Mommertz, postmarked December 28, 1984. in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

154 Rüdiger Roth, Letter to WDR, December 20, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

155 R. Kerkovius, Letter to INFAFILM GmbH, February 29, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

156 Hildegard Krause, Letter to Paul Mommertz, January 24, 1985. in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

Most curious is the chilling, disturbing letter sent to Mommertz by a Dutch Waffen-SS veteran living near Hamburg. This letter praises the film, but in a very different manner than other audience letters. The writer, John Bolck, who wrote the letter by hand and completely in capital letters, lauds the film for depicting what he saw as the great achievements of the SS: “Finally, the snappy tone, the superb uniform, the comradely atmosphere, the ardent and unshakable conviction to fight for the Reich, Germanness above everything, it was not to be compared with the rotten time in which we live today, where left-wing elements contaminate life and destroy Germany!”¹⁵⁷ He went on to praise the acting: “The actors were eager, and one would almost believe that some of them had once even had the honor of having been in the SS. The Obergruppenführer Heydrich was a knockout, as superior, as serene, as R. Heydrich had once been.”¹⁵⁸ He continued with his misplaced praise, claiming that the film showed things as they were:

. . . it was the highest thing, to be allowed to experience the unfortunately extinct world again! Without ridiculous re-education hypocrisy, without socialist babble, without everything from the left, nothing red, nothing green, no third world, no rock and pop, but only and totally our SS. And its completely beautiful simplicity on the one hand, its unmatched effectiveness on the other!¹⁵⁹

The writer expressed wishes for Bayerischer Rundfunk to create more films about “SS topics” including Skorzeny’s rescue of Mussolini, the Malmedy Massacre, and the “true story” about the July 1944 massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane.¹⁶⁰ Finally, and most chillingly, he says that if he lived in Munich, he would gladly “advise [Mommertz] on SS matters” for future film projects. He thanked Mommertz again and signed the letter in the name of the SS.¹⁶¹

ARD continued to receive letters when they aired the film in subsequent years. One letter from 1992 alleges that the Wannsee Protocol was a fake document created by the Allies, a common denialist claim. It also uses the exact claims about the document’s supposed dubiousness disseminated in Höhne’s review: “[the protocol] bears no file number, no signature, no handwritten notations, no other evidence, no header, and is written on a paper format not commonly used

¹⁵⁷ John T. Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, December 20, 1984, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹⁵⁸ John T. Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, 1.

¹⁵⁹ Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, 1–2.

¹⁶⁰ Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, 3.

¹⁶¹ Bolck, Letter to Paul Mommertz, 4.

in Germany (not a DIN standard!)”¹⁶² This same letter claims that the Wannsee Protocol, and by extension the film, are meant for the purpose of defaming Germans for eternity.¹⁶³ Another letter from 1992 engages in similar denialist arguments, but claims that the conference could not have taken place because the 1957 and 1963 editions of the *Brockhaus* encyclopedia fail to mention the conference in their entries on the Wannsee lake.¹⁶⁴

This small, curated selection of audience letters nevertheless illustrates the political climate in which *The Wannsee Conference* premiered. A small group of people, some of whom were on the political left, some of whom were either Holocaust survivors or the children of Holocaust survivors, and some of whom were ordinary Germans advocated for films and other forms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* within a wider society that was either indifferent, or actively opposed, to those efforts. The shrill, threatening letters from denialists and old Nazis also illustrate the climate at the time – it is little wonder that the filmmakers were afraid of lawsuits if they named all of the Wannsee participants in the film, especially considering that three of the participants were still alive during the film’s pre-production – Gerhard Klopfer would survive until 1987 and his obituary praised him as a man “who passed away after a fulfilled life in the service of all those in his sphere of influence.”¹⁶⁵ A society where such an obituary could be printed for a Wannsee Conference participant like Klopfer is certainly one where filmmakers working for public television, like Korytowski, Schirk, and Mommert, would feel the need to exercise caution and underscores the fact that, in this climate, such a film was genuinely provocative.

Further West German journalistic reception tended to follow Höhne’s lead without making any original points. In general, these reviews charged the film with inaccuracy, demonization, engaging in stereotypes, and implied a hidden, unexplained motive on the part of the filmmakers, as if the film was some sort of stealth propaganda piece. In his review for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Karl-Ludwig Baader criticized the film for not depicting its characters in a more differentiated manner and wished for a round of experts discussing the film or

¹⁶² Dietrich K. Mauss, Letter to ARD, postmarked January 20, 1992. in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹⁶³ Mauss, Letter to ARD, 1.

¹⁶⁴ Rüdiger Weckherlin, Letter to ARD, February 19, 1992, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹⁶⁵ Südwest-Presse, February 2, 1987, quoted in Markus Heckmann, “Gerhard Klopfer, Nazi Party Chancellor - A Nationalist Ideologue and a Respectable West German,” in *The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference*, (Oxford: New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 189–206, 189.

for the film to be interrupted by said experts in order to give it a “documentary-like” character. Baader’s verdict was that the film only provided an “illusion” of authenticity and “satisfies sensational interest.”¹⁶⁶ Here, Baader retreats behind a call for more “documentary-like” productions without acknowledging the limitations of the genre. In its front-page editorial review, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* referenced the Hitler diaries hoax – a media scandal which had engulfed the *Stern* magazine – asking if that scandal had not meant that Germans should treat their Nazi past with more sobermindedness and implying that the film’s approach was the opposite of that ideal. This review ascribes sinister motives to the filmmakers and implies that they should have left the subject of Wannsee alone. It also utilizes by now shopworn arguments about mass media destroying the potential for “real” history:

There must be more than just aesthetic, dramaturgical objections here. Television grossly abuses its genuine suggestive power when, once again incoherently opening the box of horrors, it feigns historical authenticity: that’s how it was, Heydrich was such a blonde, Eichmann so powerful, so barked the German shepherd – basta! Your German television! Which historian, which serious explainer actually still has a chance against the speculative use of history, against the magic of millimeter-precise falsification?¹⁶⁷

In her review of the film, on page 32 of the same issue of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the in-house film critic Birgit Weidinger, who had given *Manager of Terror* a more positive review, echoed the opinion of the front page piece. She did express disappointment that the accompanying documentary *Werkstattnotizen* only aired a day after the film’s premiere, but her review was also tinged with a skepticism bordering on puritanism about the subject matter: “A ‘play’ about the Wannsee Conference – can something like that ever go well?”¹⁶⁸ She charged that the film only propagated simple stereotypes of Nazis and remained a surface-level exploration of the topic: “The mixture of fiction and facts presented here could only achieve artificial effect, remained unsatisfactory and unbelievable also because their motivation was not explained, because they acted so tensely.”¹⁶⁹ A reader, Werner Glöggler of Ismaning, sent a letter in response to these reviews which was printed in the January 5, 1985 edition of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Glöggler praised the film and stated that it was necessary for future generations to be aware of Wannsee, and that remembrance of the Holocaust should not be rele-

¹⁶⁶ Karl-Ludwig Baader, “Eiskalter Engel in der Herrenrunde,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 21, 1984.

¹⁶⁷ “Das Streiflicht,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 21, 1984.

¹⁶⁸ Birgit Weidinger, “Hackenschlagen,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 21, 1984, 32.

¹⁶⁹ Weidinger, “Hackenschlagen,” 32.

gated to official days of mourning. He argued that the negative front-page review in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was “callous, out of place, and also inaccurate in its critical message.”¹⁷⁰ R. Kerkovius, the Holocaust denier who had written a shrill letter to Infafilm in early 1984, also sent Werner Glöggl a threatening letter after Glöggl’s letter to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had been published.¹⁷¹ Although most West German reviews of the film were negative, there were a few exceptions. The film critic for the *Nürnberger Zeitung* praised the film for its portrayal of “cold-bloodedness” and its political message.¹⁷²

Robert Kempner, whom Mommertz had interviewed for the accompanying documentary *Werkstattnotizen*, wrote a letter in response to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s front-page review. He praised *The Wannsee Conference* for its historical accuracy but criticized its tone and portrayal of the conference as having a party-like atmosphere, as well as its lack of a historical introduction. He reiterated that the protocol, which he had discovered, was an authentic document and that the film handled it appropriately. Nevertheless, Kempner had serious problems with the film’s portrayal of the conference atmosphere, arguing that it was nonsensical and confusing to viewers:

Based on my precise knowledge, I can state that the facts presented in the television program are based on truth, with few exceptions. What is nonsensical, however, is the way they are presented in a kind of pub regulars’ table milieu [*Stammtischmilieu*] with drinking, lazy jokes and flirtations with a non-existent secretary. Kitschy. It created a jumble with which listeners could hardly cope.¹⁷³

Mommertz responded to Kempner with a letter to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, noting that the only people in the film operating at the level of the “pub regulars’ table” were those characters representing the Nazi Party and notes that this depiction is supported by the behavior of Nazi Party officials at similar conferences, such as the one held by Göring after the pogroms of November 9, 1938, popularly known as *Kristallnacht*. He also defends the secretary character, arguing that it was based on Eichmann’s statements. Mommertz brazenly mentions that while Kempner had memories of the time, he was in exile while Mommertz was living in Ger-

170 Werner Glöggl, “Wen es dabei nicht schauderte,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 5, 1985.

171 R. Kerkovius, Letter to W. Glöggl, January 24, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 700, “Zuschauerpost (Auswahl),” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

172 Rosch, “Beklemmend,” *Nürnberger Zeitung*, December 21, 1984.

173 Robert W. Kempner, “Unsinnige Darstellung im Stammtisch-Milieu,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 5, 1985.

many actually experiencing Nazi actions firsthand.¹⁷⁴ Kempner wrote Mommertz a personal letter assuaging his concerns, saying that his letter was intended to “strengthen [Mommertz’s] position” vis-a-vis the critiques that cast doubt on the murderous nature or even authenticity of the Wannsee Protocol; he ended the letter with “[y]ou can be very pleased with your work!”¹⁷⁵

Despite negative reactions from journalists, Paul Mommertz won the 1985 DAG (German Salaried Employees’ Union) Television Prize, as well as the Grimme-Preis. In his acceptance speech for the DAG Television Prize, Mommertz recounted the film’s negative reception in the press and his public defenses of the film. In this speech, which leans on Korytowski’s letter to Höhne, he posited that the film’s negative reception was perhaps due to its attack on the German educated middle class establishment, of which most of the conference attendees were members:

The educated classes thus had – apart from the Nuremberg trials of the Allies and some of Hochhut’s [sic] work – a grace period. The film about the Wannsee Conference broke with this taboo in an exemplary, irrefutable, and brutal way. One does not forgive that. And here lies probably the real explanation for the angry, vicious, spiteful criticism that film and its author attracted.¹⁷⁶

He concluded his speech by addressing the Wannsee Conference’s relevance for contemporary German society, arguing that similar meetings were going on around the world:

Are not lively fellows from next door conferring at this very moment in the committees of management, industries, and armies ruling over the property, health, and lives of millions? Of course they do not want that which they make possible. But they make possible what we do not want. Do we protest? Do we remain silent? Do we join in? The topicality of the Wannsee Conference! Discussed by whom? By no one. *Das Boot* is more important.¹⁷⁷

In this speech, Mommertz argues that the negative reaction to the film was because it implicated the German educated establishment in the Holocaust; his film

174 Paul Mommertz, “Oft analysiertes Gruppenverhalten,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 31, 1985.

175 Robert W. Kempner, Letter to Paul Mommertz, February 4, 1985, in Ordner 1, “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 600, “Presse BRD: Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.”

176 Paul Mommertz, “DIE WANNSEERKONFERENZ: Von der Abwehr einer historischen Information durch Filmkritik,” in Festschrift zum DAG-Fernsehpreis, April 20, 1985, in Ordner 1 “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 300, “Der Autor,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 42.

177 Mommertz, “DIE WANNSEERKONFERENZ: Von der Abwehr einer historischen Information durch Filmkritik,” 44.

was an act of cultural criticism. To sum up his argument, an old saying from the American South proves useful: a hit dog will holler. He also drew a comparison between his film and the miniseries *Das Boot*, arguing that those who disliked his film would rather discuss an apologetic series about a U-Boat crew.

The playwright and critic Rolf Hochhuth, most famous for his classic 1963 drama *The Deputy*, which depicts the efforts of SS officer Kurt Gerstein to inform the Vatican about the Holocaust, also weighed in with a review in the Swiss weekly *Die Weltwoche*.¹⁷⁸ Titled “The Impossibility of Atonement,” Hochhuth’s review is the most prominent positive review of the film in German. He sharply criticizes Höhne’s assertions about the protocol, arguing that anyone attending had damned himself and knew exactly what “Final Solution” meant after years of Hitler’s “prophecies.” The bulk of the review concerns itself with refuting Höhne and proving that the conference attendees knew about mass murder and could not convincingly have claimed ignorance. Hochhuth then turns to the film’s goals and makes a powerful argument about the impossibility of “coming to terms” with Germany’s dark past:

Whoever watched this film as a German – the unteachable Nazis switched the TV off anyway – belongs to those who have *known* since the end of the war that what this film tried to “come to terms with” is *true*: a word that can only be printed in quotation marks in view of the monstrosity. There is no coming to terms with the past [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*], it is *nefarious* to talk about survivors and accomplices being able to “come to terms” with what was done to murdered people. [Karl] Jaspers was right when he said in 1945, “It is our fault that we are still alive!”¹⁷⁹

Hochhuth continues, with his only comments on the film noting that it had reached the level of *Holocaust* and that such films must be made:

This film was a renewed reminder of that. This must always happen again. Not only in Germany. But everywhere where antisemites and those who hate minorities live. Pre-Christmas days are exactly the right time for such broadcasts. Germans have finally made such a film themselves – after shamefully leaving making ‘Holocaust’ up to the foreigners.

Hochhuth’s review stands out among the others for its attention to the wider societal issues at stake. His paradoxical argument that coming to terms with the past is impossible, but we still have to attempt to do so, underscores the fact that Germany’s oft-lauded, oft-derided culture of memory was never uncontested, never

¹⁷⁸ West German reception of Hochhuth’s play, *The Deputy*, was initially censorious; international intellectuals tended to praise it, similar to the reception of *The Wannsee Conference*. See Kater, *After the Nazis*, 179.

¹⁷⁹ Hochhuth, “Die Unmöglichkeit der Sühne.”

inevitable, but it was no accident of history either. In West Germany, the “vestiges of National Socialism and the Third Reich had to be defeated year by year, so as to strengthen democracy. That this was possible was in great part owing to efforts made, often pioneered, in the area of culture.”¹⁸⁰ These efforts were largely the result of the work of outsiders who went against the grain of West German society, which preferred silence and moving on.¹⁸¹ This memory work was never uniform; the people doing it came from a variety of backgrounds, but one strand connects them: they were working outside of – or came from outside – the mainstream; they did not always produce work that would appeal to the average German. This is an important lesson for public history professionals and educators: not every historical project or work of historical memory has to appeal to the widest possible number of people possible at the time of its release. Whether outsiders like Korytowski, who, while a prominent film producer, still was an outsider by virtue of his background as a Jewish exile, or Mommertz, who, as a playwright and screenwriter almost exclusively concerned with the Holocaust was a de facto outsider with respect to mainstream German television writing, these people kept the memory of the Holocaust alive in a society that was reluctant to. In the words of historian Michael Kater,: “If there were checks and balances in the West German democracy, culture was a check.”¹⁸²

The West German reception of *The Wannsee Conference* was fundamentally poisoned from the start by Höhne’s negative review in *Der Spiegel*. Most critics in prominent newspapers followed his lead, thereby repeating his assertions about the conference and the protocol. Many of these reviews were tinged by a fundamental skepticism towards depicting the Holocaust or history in general on film and relied on a pedantic definition of accuracy, implying that the depiction of Nazi perpetrators speaking as Nazis did amounted to overblown demonization. When one notes the influence of Holocaust survivors on the production and the vehement West German critical reaction, the situation appears as a farcical rehash of the all-too-familiar postwar conservative discourse around representations of the Holocaust: West German conservatives characterized Jewish voices (and those of their allies) as unobjective, undifferentiated, sensationalist, and accused them of using mass media to “trick” ostensibly innocent and passive German audiences, whereas these critics cited nameless German historians to represent “objectivity,” sober-mindedness, and “the facts,” which they set up as

180 Kater, *After the Nazis*, 381–382.

181 With the term “outsider,” I follow Peter Gay’s use of the term, thereby implicitly also arguing that these individuals followed the pluralistic intellectual heritage of the Weimar Republic: Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

182 Kater, *After the Nazis*, 381–382.

diametrically opposed to emotional, non-academic, and amateurish efforts to remember the Holocaust.¹⁸³ Nevertheless, it is important to also recognise that in spite of the film's initial negative reception in the press, the West German television community embraced the film as evidenced by its awards and subsequent re-airings. There was no uniformly negative West German attitude towards the film, but rather a *journalistic* rejection of it. Chastened by these critiques, the film's producers undertook a stronger PR campaign for the film in the United States.

4 Reception in the United States

Having learned from their negative experiences with the West German press, the film's producers prepared a PR campaign for the film's American premiere. The film had already won prizes in Japan and Brazil, but it first premiered in American theaters in January 1987 in Los Angeles. Some promotional material drew attention to Korytowski's Jewish background and Israeli citizenship. This material, which largely conformed to the historical consensus on the Wannsee Conference, included some dubious claims that are not borne out by any of the archival research material or historiography, such as a claim that a participant "came to Berlin on a shopping trip" or that "[m]ost [of the participants] could not have cared less about the Jewish Question."¹⁸⁴ This document also claims that Korytowski had attempted to interview surviving Wannsee participants, including the (unnamed) female secretary.¹⁸⁵ Korytowski sat for numerous interviews with American and Canadian publications. One interview for *The Forward*, conducted by Masha Leon, is quite extensive and was published alongside a positive review of

¹⁸³ For a detailed discussion of this dynamic, see Nicolas Berg, *The Holocaust and The West German Historians: Historical Interpretation and Autobiographical Memory*, trans. Joel Golb, (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014) and Anna Corsten, *Unbequeme Erinnerung: Emigrierte Historiker in der westdeutschen und US-amerikanischen NS- und Holocaust-Forschung, 1945–1998*, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2023). See also Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, 121: "while German memory got its due, often via the most respectable academic circles and most gifted artists, Jewish memory was condemned by both German and non-German, often also Jewish, scholars as constituting a sentimental, mythical obstruction to the understanding of the past."

¹⁸⁴ "Background Information on 'The Wannsee Conference' and Manfred Korytowski, Producer," in Ordner 1 "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 200, "Der Produzent" Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

¹⁸⁵ "Background Information on 'The Wannsee Conference' and Manfred Korytowski, Producer, 2.

the film. This review draws parallels between *The Wannsee Conference* and Claude Lanzmann's landmark documentary *Shoah*, but Korytowski makes sure to get the following message across:

I also want to make clear that the difference between *Shoah* and *The Wannsee Conference* because in all these films, *Shoah*, *Holocaust*, these are films about the victims. Not the *doers* – This is the first film about the perpetrators . . . a history of the perpetrators, those who set the actions and events into motion.¹⁸⁶

Korytowski also wanted to note the film's original context: "The main thing is that as a Jew in Germany I made the film in Germany for Germans . . . I must underscore this – a film by a Jew in Germany produced for Germany."¹⁸⁷ This was an important point when being interviewed for American Jewish publications, who would watch the film in very different cultural context.

The film's American distributor, Rearguard Pictures, advertised the film with the following tagline:

On Tuesday, January 20, 1942, at a house in the quiet Berlin suburb of Wannsee, a meeting was held. Fourteen key representatives of the SS, the Nazi party and the government bureaucracy attended at the invitation of Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Security Police and Secret Service. The Meeting lasted eighty-five minutes. There was only one item on the agenda: The Final Solution.¹⁸⁸

This tagline, similar to marketing material for *Conspiracy*, could potentially mislead audiences into thinking that the decision to murder all of Europe's Jews was made at Wannsee, instead of its coordination and details of its implementation. At the film's Los Angeles premiere, the Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt delivered remarks that praised the film's "strong impact."¹⁸⁹ American premieres tended to be associated with Jewish community organizations in Los Angeles and New York, Jewish publications such as *The Forward* also featured articles and reviews of the film. In contrast with its German reception, American critics were almost unanimous in their praise. The film did receive mainstream critical attention. In his review for *The New York Times*, film critic Vincent Canby stated that

¹⁸⁶ Masha Leon, "A Conversation with Manfred Korytowski," *Forward*, December 4, 1987, 31. Photocopy contained in GHWK archival folder on Korytowski cited above.

¹⁸⁷ Leon, "A Conversation with Manfred Korytowski," 27.

¹⁸⁸ Advertisement in *The Jewish Week*, November 1987, in Ordner 1 "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 400, "Preise, Premiere, Festivals," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

¹⁸⁹ Ekkehard Klaus, Letter to Manfred Korytowski, February 11, 1987, in Ordner 1 "Dokumentation zum Film," Kapitel 400, "Preise, Premiere, Festivals," Bestand Paul Mommertz, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1.

The Wannsee Conference was “unlike any other Holocaust film I’ve ever seen” and that “[i]t has the slightly unreal, breathless pacing of a Broadway comedy about a convention of soft-drink bottlers considering new distribution procedures.”¹⁹⁰ Canby humorously described Stuckart as “the sort of fellow who prompts groans at such meetings for being tiresome about small details” and praised Schirk’s camerawork, saying that its “movements are those of a restless, impotent ghost who sees all and can do nothing.”¹⁹¹ He also stated that Schirk and Mommertz were “clearly intentionalists” and that the fact that it was hard to identify individual characters apart from Heydrich and Eichmann was “maddening in a film so provocative that it sends one back to the history books in an attempt to find out who said what to whom.”¹⁹² Canby strongly recommended the film, noting that it, in contrast with assertions leveled by German critics, “avoids any ‘You Are There’ portentousness. In being so seemingly breezy, it finds a voice for dealing with matters that are, after all, not unspeakable. This is the film’s sorrowful accomplishment.”¹⁹³ Another *New York Times* feature on the film discussed its historical background. This feature discusses the Wannsee villa, which was declared a memorial and educational site around the same time the film premiered in New York, and quotes Korytowski saying he intended for the film to have an explicitly educative mission: “[m]y intention was to make a record for the future, a document for young people in Germany.”¹⁹⁴

The most valuable critical reaction to the film from the United States is a review Raul Hilberg wrote for *The New York Times*. In an article titled “Is It History, Or Is It Drama?”, Hilberg discussed the film from his vantage point as a historian: “When I walked into the movie theater to see ‘The Wannsee Conference,’ I did so with some trepidation. Vincent Canby’s review . . . had prepared me for an unusual experience.”¹⁹⁵ Hilberg knew that the protocol was no “verbatim record of the meeting” and that the dialogue would inevitably be fictionalized. He argues that films about history involve difficult choices and criticizes the film in a manner similar to Robert Kempner, focusing in particular on the film’s quick pace and dense dialogue:

190 Vincent Canby, “Film: Holocaust’s Birth, ‘Wannsee Conference,’” *New York Times*, November 18, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/18/movies/film-holocaust-s-birth-wannsee-conference.html>.

191 Canby, “Film: Holocaust’s Birth.”

192 Canby, “Film: Holocaust’s Birth.”

193 Canby, “Film: Holocaust’s Birth.”

194 Serge Schmemann, “FILM; 85 Minutes That Scarred History,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/22/movies/film-85-minutes-that-scarred-history.html>.

195 Raul Hilberg, “Is It History, Or Is It Drama?,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/13/arts/is-it-history-or-is-it-drama.html>.

In the film much historical background material is folded into the conference in that questions and answers are interpolated, if need be by having the participants interrupt each other. Silence is cast aside for sound, such as a dog barking outside or some loud hand-slapping on the table. Tension is heightened with arguments that at times become personal. Too many people speak, too many speak too soon, and too many questions are asked by speakers. The result is a crowded hour and a half, in which a multiplicity of facts is brought out, sometimes in inappropriate ways.¹⁹⁶

Hilberg's critique here does have some merit; although the fast dialogue and jargon is good for simulating the historical atmosphere, its pace leaves the audience with little breathing room and time to process the information – room for quiet moments between people and extended periods of silence are one of the ways *Conspiracy* improves upon its predecessor. He also criticized the film's depiction of Heydrich, who "is portrayed here as having been more genial than he had to be, more generous and forgiving to his challengers and less in command of the situation than he really was. One must not forget that he was the host at the peak of his power, and that this gathering was his show."¹⁹⁷ For Hilberg, the film's depiction of Stuckart was also problematic, arguing that "[w]ere Stuckart alive today, such a portrait would have had his full approval."¹⁹⁸ In his summary of the film, Hilberg does not denounce it, but critically assesses it as an experiment in historical filmmaking: "The makers of 'the Wannsee Conference' did not cling to the structure and chronology of the historical record. They made a hybrid film. Yet they approached the subject seriously and left us a fascinating experiment."¹⁹⁹ Hilberg's review falters in one respect – he did not know the extent to which the filmmakers also had conducted historical research, and although there are several instances of deliberate chronological errors in the film (see the example of Jenny Cozzi), other aspects of his critique can be chalked up to differences of historical interpretation and the fact that the production team was hamstrung by the needs of dramatic film as opposed to a monograph. However, Hilberg's critique about the fast-paced dialogue and little breathing room for the audience, as well as his observations about Stuckart and Heydrich, hold up upon scrutiny, though the script makes clear that Heydrich's "geniality," to use Hilberg's term, is a deceptive farce.

Raul Hilberg also discussed *The Wannsee Conference* in his memoir *The Politics of Memory*. He places the film at the beginning of a discussion of (all female) historians he disliked because of "questionable practices." In this chapter, Hilberg states

¹⁹⁶ Hilberg, "Is It History, Or Is It Drama?"

¹⁹⁷ Hilberg, "Is It History, Or Is It Drama?"

¹⁹⁸ Hilberg, "Is It History, Or Is It Drama?"

¹⁹⁹ Hilberg, "Is It History, Or Is It Drama?"

that while he appreciates those who write fiction, he considers fictionalization something that “give[s] me discomfort,” citing *The Wannsee Conference* as a “serious film” whose creators “took liberties with the facts.” He then summarizes his *New York Times* review, stating “I do not know whether my comments destroyed any chance of a meaningful distribution of *The Wannsee Conference*, but I certainly fired on the makers of the film, giving them no quarter.”²⁰⁰ Hilberg’s juxtaposition of fiction, particularly film, with the “distortions” of the female scholars Nora Levin, Lucy Dawidowicz, and Hannah Arendt (of course, like all historians, some of their work was indeed flawed; Hilberg had legitimate grievances towards Arendt in particular) points to an association of art and film with “soft” scholarship and femininity, and “real history” with masculine hardness.²⁰¹

In a 1987 interview with National Public Radio’s (NPR) *All Things Considered*, the historian Christopher Browning reviewed *The Wannsee Conference*. Browning praised the film but was critical of its portrayal of the conference’s atmosphere: “that . . . relaxed atmosphere, an unofficial, informal kind of atmosphere, is different, I think, than how the filmmaker portrayed it, which is all of these men sitting around the table and pounding the table and laughing and telling jokes. I think he took it too far. Given what they are talking about, it could have been indeed informal, but to present it as kind of a belly laugh a minute, I think was off the mark.”²⁰² Browning also noticed that Mommertz had compressed a vast amount of material from 1941 and early 1942 into the film to fill in the gaps in the Wannsee Protocol, but noted that this was “relatively honest” as a “reasonable artistic-historical creation.” The show host also pointed out the film’s negative West German reception, arguing that it was evidence of myths about the Holocaust being difficult to debunk.²⁰³

Other prominent American publications discussed *The Wannsee Conference*, offering near-universal praise.²⁰⁴ Although the filmmakers faced an uphill battle after negative press in West Germany, they found success and acclaim abroad,

200 Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 139–140.

201 See Doris L. Bergen, “‘Vieles bleibt ungesagt’. Frauen in Leben und Werk Raul Hilbergs,” in *Raul Hilberg und die Holocaust-Historiographie*, ed. René Schlott, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2019), 143–160.

202 Pacific Lutheran University Archives and Special Collections, Christopher R. Browning Papers, 1967–2015, OPV RG 6.4.2, Series 12: Audio and Visual Materials, 11.2 *All Things Considered* (Side B), 1987.

203 Christopher R. Browning Papers, *All Things Considered*.

204 For an extensive collection of press clippings, see Ordner 1 “Dokumentation zum Film,” Kapitel 800, “Presse Ausland,” Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

vindicating their efforts. For the purposes of this study, one individual's reception of the film stands out. The film editor Peter Zinner, best known for his work on *The Godfather* and *The Deer Hunter*, was a Jewish refugee from Vienna who had emigrated to the United States during the 1930s and ended up as a cab driver in Los Angeles before beginning his film career. Zinner, who had also edited the miniseries *War and Remembrance*, watched *The Wannsee Conference* on VHS during the mid-1990s before showing it to his friend, director Frank Pierson. According to screenwriter Loring Mandel, it "didn't move [Pierson] to tears, but moved him to anger."²⁰⁵ Recreating the Wannsee Conference quickly became a passion project of Pierson and Zinner, and subsequently would result in the HBO film *Conspiracy*. Loring Mandel also stated that Zinner's personal background was a driving force for the project; *The Wannsee Conference* impacted him: "As far as Peter Zinner, I think – as an Austrian exile, it absolutely influenced everything about what he did. He was very successful as a film editor, but apparently his life experiences in Austria during the war weighed on him and he wanted to do something about it."²⁰⁶ The next chapters will now turn to just what doing "something about it" entailed for Zinner, Pierson, and Mandel.

²⁰⁵ Alexander Tang, "A Conversation with Loring Mandel." *The Harvard Crimson*. November 12, 2013, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/11/12/interview-loringmandel/> (accessed November 12, 2019)

²⁰⁶ Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, New York, March 14, 2018. 1:06:43–1:08:56.

Chapter 5

The Origins of HBO's *Conspiracy* and its Unproduced Sequel, *Complicity*, 1995–1997

1 Beginnings

Frank Pierson was angry. The director and screenwriter, best known for authoring the Academy Award-winning screenplay for *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), as well as for writing *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), had just finished watching *The Wannsee Conference* on videotape and was incensed by how its characters spoke so casually about genocide. His friend and longtime collaborator Peter Zinner, a prolific editor who won an Academy Award for *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and also worked on other classic films like *The Godfather* (1972) and *In Cold Blood* (1967), had introduced Pierson to the *The Wannsee Conference*, and the pair decided to pitch a new film about Wannsee for HBO.¹ Zinner had also, notably, been an editor on ABC's *War and Remembrance* miniseries. He and Pierson had worked together on the HBO historical dramas *Truman* (1995), and *Citizen Cohn* (1992), a biopic focusing on Joseph McCarthy's underling and Donald Trump's attorney, Roy Cohn. Loring Mandel had also worked with Pierson on *Citizen Cohn's* script but remained uncredited.² Peter Zinner's history as a Viennese Jewish exile was an early parallel with the production history of *The Wannsee Conference*: he and Manfred Korytowski shared similar pasts and both provided their respective film projects with their initial drive. Their personal histories as persecuted Jews, as well as their loss of family members in the Holocaust, provided both works with a gravitas that complicates our understanding of the two films as simply "German" or "American" productions.³

A combative figure who was protective of his artistic vision, Frank Pierson was no stranger to controversy, having penned an infamous *New York Magazine* article on his experiences creating *A Star is Born* (1976) in which he savaged his

1 Alexander Tang. "A Conversation with Loring Mandel." *The Harvard Crimson*, November 12, 2013, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/11/12/interview-loringmandel/> (accessed November 12, 2019)

2 Frank Pierson, "Visual History with Frank Pierson," February 10, 2009, Directors Guild of America, <https://www.dga.org/Craft/VisualHistory/Interviews/Frank-Pierson.aspx>. Chapter 7, Clip 11, 17:21.

3 Peter Zinner's story was featured in the 2009 PBS documentary *Cinema's Exiles: From Hitler to Hollywood*. See "Cinema's Exiles | PBS," *Cinema's Exiles*, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/cinemasexiles/>.

star, Barbra Streisand, and her lover Jon Peters, accusing them of derailing the widely panned film.⁴ Pierson's HBO films *Truman* and *Citizen Cohn* dealt with little-known aspects of American history and, especially in the case of *Citizen Cohn*, had a strong antiestablishment, left-leaning political bent, in keeping with HBO's branding as a home for more progressive stories which could not be told on broadcast networks: Roy Cohn, as a key figure in the McCarthy hearings, was notorious for his anticommunist stance and prosecutorial zeal. Pierson's depiction of Cohn's life as a closeted gay man who had led purges of "subversive" homosexuals from the United States government, but later died of AIDS-related complications, helped humanize his character in the film, who was played by James Woods.⁵ Pierson's work on *Truman*, starring Gary Sinise, oddly enough prefigured the later casting of Kenneth Branagh as Reinhard Heydrich. According to Pierson, then-head of HBO Pictures Bob Cooper pressured him to hire Branagh in the title role for *Truman*. Pierson resisted, arguing that an iconic Midwestern politician like Harry Truman had to be played by an American, not a classically trained and recognizable English actor. Branagh assented and the role of Truman went to Sinise.⁶

It is unclear when Pierson and Zinner first got the idea to create a new film about Wannsee. One promotional article for *Conspiracy* claims that it had been an eight-year process, which would place the origins around 1993.⁷ In 1995, Pierson, who had already directed several pictures for HBO, met with HBO executives Bob Cooper and Michael Fuchs, who agreed to produce an English-language film on the Wannsee Conference titled *Wannsee*: "after seeing [*The Wannsee Conference*], Cooper agreed that it was time to do it in English for a new generation." Fuchs, "an outspoken liberal" who "openly flashed his progressive beliefs at every opportunity," was a key, if brash, figure in HBO's early days. As Felix Gillette and John Koblin put it, his style was "[n]o holding back, no bullshit," a hyper-masculine attitude which would eventually lead to his downfall.⁸ His Canadian colleague Bob Cooper helmed HBO Pictures from Los Angeles, with a decidedly "openly liberal, pugilistic point of view," producing original films about topics

4 Frank Pierson, "My Battles with Barbra and John," *New York Magazine*, November 15, 1976.

5 In an ironic twist, the actor James Woods later became a staunch and vocal Republican activist and vehement supporter of Roy Cohn's former client, Donald Trump.

6 Pierson, "Visual History with Frank Pierson," Chapter 3, Clip 10, 13:58.

7 Christian Raymond, "CONSPIRACY Program Notes - Austin Film Society," Austin Film Society, Archived from the original on March 4, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160304085729/http://www.austinfilm.org/page.aspx?pid=3341>.

8 Felix Gillette and John Koblin, *It's Not TV: The Spectacular Rise, Revolution, and Future of HBO* (New York: Viking, 2022), 24–25.

network TV sponsors would rather avoid.⁹ HBO soon developed its brand “as a vigilantes’ den of fearless storytellers shedding light on difficult social truths.”¹⁰ After a shakeup of HBO management which resulted in Cooper and Fuchs leaving the network, Zinner and Pierson then approached Colin Callender, the head of HBO NYC Productions, with their idea for a new film about the Wannsee Conference.¹¹ Callender, “an erudite British producer who’d grown up in a Jewish family in London,” preferred producing films “that filtered real-world events through a prism of progressive righteousness,” much like Cooper and Fuchs.¹² HBO NYC Productions was one of HBO’s two in-house original movie divisions. Unlike its counterpart HBO Pictures, which was devoted to more standard fare, HBO NYC Productions was concerned with more difficult, pathbreaking dramas – that is, not your average television films. By 1999, HBO NYC Productions and HBO Pictures merged to form HBO Films under the leadership of Callender, which produced not only original television films and miniseries but also theatrical releases. HBO executive Chris Albrecht described Colin Callender’s tenure at the head of HBO Films as “the golden age.”¹³

Dana Heller has argued that the history of HBO Films “constitutes a significant chapter in the history of the ongoing merger between the film and television industries, as the very notion of film has shifted from a box office medium to a home-based medium.”¹⁴ For her, the subset of HBO’s original films which depict history “negotiate the past and interrogate cultural memory through the depiction of individual lives that are positioned at the center of national struggles, community conflicts, social movements, and scandals.”¹⁵ These films generally refrained from the stereotypical happy endings or inspiring messages so common on broadcast television. Heller notes the “broader tendencies” of HBO’s original films (which were key to its branding) during this period: “[a] focus on the under-represented figures of history; their use of multiple-perspective, which allows for

9 Gillette and Koblin, *It’s Not TV*, 60.

10 Gillette and Koblin, *It’s Not TV*, 61.

11 Frank Pierson. Letter to Stanley Sheinbaum, September 30, 1998, Box 11, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1. For more on the departure of Fuchs, see Gillette and Koblin, *It’s Not TV*, 72–73.

12 Gillette and Koblin, *It’s Not TV*, 61–62.

13 James Andrew Miller, *Tinderbox: HBO’s Ruthless Pursuit of New Frontiers* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2021), 375. Miller erroneously refers to HBO Films as “HBO Pictures” in this section.

14 Dana Heller, “Films,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffery P. Jones (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 44.

15 Heller, “Films,” 46.

the narrative portrayal of collective rather than individual heroism; their experimentations with the conventions of cinematic realism, such as anachronism; and their unabashedly progressive vision of the lessons generated by the past.”¹⁶ Other authors note that HBO films became “darker” and that “HBO’s choice of historic figures grew more violent and misanthropic.”¹⁷

In contrast with HBO series like *Oz*, *Sex in the City*, *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, or *The Wire*, HBO’s films have received comparatively little scholarly and critical attention. Countless academic and critical publications focus on shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* which, similar to *Conspiracy*, place viewers in unfamiliar worlds and refrain from holding the audience’s hand – a key feature of HBO programming in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁸ Lastly, *Conspiracy* was part of a wider trend of programming focusing on the Holocaust and the Second World War in light of that conflict’s fiftieth anniversary. The Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks-helmed war miniseries *Band of Brothers*, released in 2001, was also a joint HBO/BBC production, and was partially filmed at the Shepperton Studios near London, like *Conspiracy*. This HBO/BBC partnership ensured financial support from the BBC, as well as filming locations, crew, and cast members from the United Kingdom. This public-private partnership earned the BBC and Prime Minister Tony Blair scorn from the British press, particularly from conservative publications which saw *Band of Brothers* as a typically American attempt to glorify US soldiers while ignoring the sacrifices of British soldiers during World War II – much like some parts of the British press had reacted to Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).¹⁹

¹⁶ Heller, “Films,” 50.

¹⁷ Gillette and Koblin, *It’s Not TV*, 58.

¹⁸ Several valuable recent works on HBO original series include: Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised*; Jonathan Abrams, *All the Pieces Matter: The Inside Story of The Wire* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2018); DeFino, *The HBO Effect*; Twomey, *Examining The Wire*; Bernie Cook, *Flood of Images: Media, Memory, and Hurricane Katrina* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); Jaimey Fisher, *Treme*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019). A valuable counterpoint to the “Golden Age of Television” narrative espoused by critics like Alan Sepinwall is Paoletta’s “Party Monsters.”

¹⁹ For more on the controversy surrounding the BBC and *Band of Brothers*, see: Simone Knox, “Bringing the Battle to Britain: Band of Brothers and Television Runaway Production in the UK,” *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 17, no. 3 (June 3, 2020): 313–333; Jason Deans and Lisa O’Carroll, “BBC Dumps Spielberg Special,” *The Guardian*, August 14, 2001, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2001/aug/14/bbc.broadcasting>; Andrew Billen, “The True Drama of War,” *New Statesman*, October 8, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090531132154/https://www.newstatesman.com/200110080038>.

Frank Doelger, executive producer of *Conspiracy* and later known for series like *John Adams* and *Game of Thrones*, also recounted the pitch:

Peter [Zinner] had seen the Austrian-German film, had brought it to Frank Pierson, who brought it to Loring Mandel, who brought it to me. I thought it was a great idea, and I went to Colin Callender, who was the head of the division for which I was working for at the time at HBO . . . it was incredibly difficult to sell, because we had to basically convince everybody that we could recreate in 90 minutes a 90-minute meeting, which is essentially men in a room talking. At that point we argued very strongly for no score at all, just the straightforward recreation of the conference.²⁰

Loring Mandel recounted his initial involvement with the project as follows:

I was asked to do it by Frank Pierson, after consulting with Peter [Zinner] the story editor. Peter Zinner, who was from Austria and who had long known about the Wannsee thing . . . I had never heard of it before. Frank [Pierson] had never heard of it before. Peter told Frank, Frank and Peter went to HBO. Colin [Callender] thought that it was a good project and Frank turned to me, I believe turned to me first, I think, to do it. He sent me material and after looking at the material, I said that I thought I would like to try and that's how it started. It was not a long and difficult thing, really the negotiations happened later. First was a commitment, then they worked out the deal.²¹

It is unclear when Mandel exactly became involved in the production process. A 1998 letter from Pierson to the liberal lawyer and activist Stanley Sheinbaum indicates that Mandel was already on board by the time he and Zinner pitched the project to HBO.²² Frank Doelger recalls Mandel bringing him the idea – the two had wanted to work together on a project for a while, and *Wannsee* seemed like a good opportunity for collaboration.²³ It is likely that Mandel was brought on board after the initial meeting with Bob Cooper and Michael Fuchs, but before Pierson made his pitch to Colin Callender. Doelger describes Callender as “a fantastic executive . . . a great intellectual reader. With great dramatic instincts, [he] fought very hard, and gave us a lot of support”²⁴ In contrast, Frank Pierson describes Callender as more of a nitpicker, in keeping with Pierson’s protective attitude towards his projects:

²⁰ Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020, 07:11–10:32.

²¹ Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 46:15–53:21

²² Pierson, Letter to Stanley Sheinbaum, 1.

²³ Interview with Frank Doelger, 07:11–10:32.

²⁴ Interview with Frank Doelger, 46:56-end.

The other kind of thing is, oh my god, the guy who was just running HBO [Home Box Office]. You know. [INT: Colin [Colin Callender]? Not Colin, but –] Colin, yeah. Colin was running HBO on *CONSPIRACY*, and his way of working in the editing, and so on, is you get these voluminous notes that say – and he'll give a scene number and frame number. "So and so," you know, and "Three frames plus," and so on. "Take out three scenes – three feet and move it to –" and he tells you where to go, and all the rest of it, and so on, with no explanation of why. And my way of dealing with that was, I came back to him and I said, "Colin. Tell me what's wrong. Don't tell me what to do because—I don't know. I can't understand this. It doesn't make any sense to me at all. But is the problem because, you know, it seems slow to you? Or it's confusing to you? Or it's misleading to you? Or it just, you know, seems like a bad performance? Tell me that. And then I will go and see what I can do to make that work for you. If I agree." And in most cases, I do, 'cause he's very good. But that way of working, you know, it's just impossible. [INT: Was he able to understand and therefore –] He accepted it. Not with grace and grace, but he did. [INT: Got it. Interesting.] Well he's a very smart guy. [INT: Oh yeah.] So some of his bigger ideas, and so on, were very, very good.²⁵

Callender recalls accepting the pitch because of Pierson's artistic daring:

[Frank Pierson] wanted to shoot it all in one room in long takes. And he wanted the camera to be the height of the table, so that the camera would actually be at eye-line height, as though it were a character sitting at the table. And the idea of doing a film entirely in real time, from the beginning of the meeting through the end, basically with no time jumps, was equally provocative.²⁶

Callender's feedback on the script drafts, historical research, and aims of the project would prove essential. His shepherding of the project, however, also led the production team to take on another project that was never produced: *Complicity*. Before Pierson, Zinner, and Mandel formally became part of Callender's other project, Mandel began work on his screenplay for what was then still called *The Meeting at Wannsee*.

Loring Mandel had a long career in television and stage writing before Pierson and Zinner approached him about their *Wannsee* project. He had also written historical pieces throughout his career. Born in 1928 in Chicago, he began his writing career by writing radio dramas while attending Nicholas Senn High School and during his studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He credited his early interest in dramatic writing to his childhood experiences as a "radio boy" helping broadcast educational programming from the Chicago Radio Council into Chicago's public schools.²⁷ For him, this formative experience sparked his interest

²⁵ Pierson, "Visual History with Frank Pierson," Chapter 4, clip 10, 13:48.

²⁶ Miller, *Tinderbox*, 377.

²⁷ See Jerry Field, "A History of Educational Radio in Chicago with Emphasis on WBEZ-FM, 1920–1960" (Chicago, Loyola University Chicago, 1991), https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/2273.

in drama and writing: “By the time I was in high school, I had auditioned as an actor for the Chicago Radio Council and often I would get out of school a day – a whole day to go into the Loop to the Builders Building, where the Board of Education was, and be a part of the Chicago Radio Council and act on their shows that were being beamed to the schools.”²⁸ His time working in radio helped provide him with an ear for dialogue which he would later demonstrate in his television career:

[R]adio was very important to me. I used to hear the soap operas and I used to be offended by the dialogue because of – the people didn’t speak the way I knew people spoke . . . you were missing certain senses, you didn’t have the visual sense, you have the ears, but you didn’t have the eyes, and you didn’t have the environment, you just had the sound coming out of the radio. So, radio writers would insist on having characters continually speak to one another by their – by giving their names so that you can identify them. That was one of the characteristics of what I considered to be unreal dialogue.²⁹

Mandel counted the playwright S.N. Behrman, the novelist John Dos Passos, and the various writers behind the Marx Brothers among his early influences, the latter “because of the playfulness with which they took words and used their alternate meanings to get comedy.”³⁰

As the middle child of a non-practicing Jewish family, Mandel experienced antisemitism on Chicago’s streets:

I knew that if I wanted to go to the movies, I had to walk past a Catholic school and if I did it at the wrong time of day, when their school was letting out or something, I might have to fight. But that’s what I knew growing up in Chicago . . . when the subway was finally done in Chicago – built in Chicago, I was teenager. I remember the day before the subway became operative, they let everybody just walk through the tunnels and I did that. Once it was operative, I began to see things written on the wall like “kill the Jews.” Then when I moved to New York and went on the subway there and saw [graffiti that] said “kill most Jews,” I figured hey, New York is a really far more civilized place than Chicago.³¹

During the 1930s and 1940s, Chicago was a hotbed of American Nazi activity (primarily through the German American Bund), particularly on its North Side, where Mandel grew up. Bundists often clashed with members of Chicago’s Jewish, Polish, and Czech communities throughout the late 1930s.³² Mandel later de-

28 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 00:31–10:13.

29 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 00:31–10:13.

30 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 00:31–10:13.

31 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 53:34–57:55.

32 Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 265–267.

scribed his experiences with American antisemitism as “just a fact of normal life” and that they were not limited to schoolyard bullying or graffiti, but were also present in the family home.³³ His father, a doctor from Cincinnati and son of German immigrants, was a “self-hating Jew” who ran from his background: “he would read the newspaper and he would see something that bothered [him] . . . or someone who did something bad who had a Jewish name, my father would get angry and say, ‘Another Heb. Another Jew.’”³⁴ This formative experience with antisemitism and the refugee question helped shape his later personal motivations for writing *Conspiracy* and *Complicity*:

I was a Jew in Chicago. I knew that my father had relatives in Germany that he had heard from, but he did not answer. I felt – I knew my father was a self-hating Jew. It lasted his whole life. We knew about the Holocaust. I knew that my father did not help people that had reached out to him from Germany. He was born in Cincinnati, but his mother and father were from Germany. I really didn’t know those people. [There was] a period in my father’s young life where he and his mother moved from Cincinnati to Chicago and left the rest of the family – there were ten children – left them all in Cincinnati. They showed up a couple years later, and I knew most of them, but not well. I knew that my father had – was the one son in the family that did not receive a bar mitzvah and there was an anger about his Jewishness that lasted his whole life.³⁵

Mandel’s experiences here clearly informed his later work on *Conspiracy* and *Complicity* and help situate these films within a more specific American-Jewish response to the Holocaust. He did note that his father’s refusal to respond to the requests of relatives trapped in Europe to help them get the required affidavits for a US Immigration Visa was symptomatic of his father’s fears about his background: “he was always fearful that being Jewish would ultimately turn people against him, and taking some positive step re: German relatives he didn’t even know was too scary for him. He just did nothing in response to the telegram, and I don’t know that a second one ever came.”³⁶ Mandel’s strained relationship with his father eventually made its way into the *Conspiracy* script.

Throughout his career, Mandel had worked on historical pieces. Some of his earlier historical dramas included the television programs *Lincoln*, *The Lives of Benjamin Franklin* (1974–1975), and a *The Seven Lively Arts* episode on the 1947 coal mine disaster in *Blast at Centralia No. 5* (1958). Although better known for his stage adaptation of *Advise and Consent*, Mandel had been a prolific early television writer; he was best known for his work on television plays such as *Do Not*

³³ Interview with Loring Mandel, March 2, 2019, 16:50–20:47.

³⁴ Interview with Loring Mandel, March 2, 2019, 10:39–13:55

³⁵ Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 53:34–57:55.

³⁶ Loring Mandel, E-Mail to Author, 6, July 2018.

Go Gentle Into that Good Night (1967), which he had written for *CBS Playhouse*.³⁷ Television plays were an early form of television programming which consisted of plays being performed live on television.³⁸

Mandel also became known as something of an expert on the docudrama, a genre he recognized the limits of, referring to it as a “bastard form. I mean, it was successful, but it is a bastard form. I would really [have] preferred to be able to either say ‘this is true’ or ‘this is made up,’ but it’s just too much that you can’t justify.”³⁹ In 1979, Mandel attended and spoke at the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences’ Docudrama Symposium in Ojai, California. A number of television executives, screenwriters, and even the Reconstruction historian Eric Foner attended this symposium.⁴⁰ In a set of index cards containing summaries of arguments about docudramas, Mandel’s handwritten notes and marginalia indicate some of his earlier thoughts on docudramas, history, and television during a time when he was frustrated by broadcast networks’ standards and practices departments, which he viewed as conservative entities that inevitably hamstrung creative freedom with their concerns about offending audiences and advertisers. One of his notes reads “is it art[?] it is neither. Artistic impulse replaced [by] corp [orate] authority structure of network defeats purpose.” He also criticized a statement about the “purpose of television” being “not only educative but civilizing”: “Docu[drama] by itself does neither.”⁴¹ During the actual symposium, Mandel expressed his frustration with networks who rejected or modified scripts that strayed from the standard “happy ending” format, something he would later praise HBO for refraining from when it came to *Conspiracy*: “I have had the circumstance on a number of occasions of finding that when the script reaches program practices that there is an urge to balance the point of view so that it is somehow blander, and is balanced by something more positive if it’s a negative point of view.”⁴² Throughout the writing process of *Conspiracy* (and its unproduced sequel, *Complicity*), Frank Pierson, and to a much lesser extent, Mandel, would

37 Loring Mandel, *Advise and Consent: Drama in Three Acts* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1961).

38 For a lively discussion of television plays, see David Thomson, *Television: A Biography* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), Chapter 10, “Play, for Today?”

39 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 39:23–46:06.

40 Advanced Copy of Edited Transcript of Ojai Docudrama Symposium, “Academy of Television Arts & Sciences’ Docudrama Symposium,” edited by Lee Margulies, *Emmy Magazine*, Summer 1979, in Box 19, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

41 Index Cards in Box 19, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

42 Advanced Copy of Edited Transcript of Ojai Docudrama Symposium, D-29.

grapple with their fears that HBO and other members of the production team were trying to compromise their creative vision. These fears were the result of working in network television and negative experiences with the corporate side of film and television production for decades. Fortunately, in the case of *Conspiracy*, these fears were mostly overblown – but not necessarily so in the case of *Complicity*.

It is impossible to tell a more complete story about *Conspiracy*'s production history without discussing *Complicity*, alternately referred to as a companion film, the second half of a double feature, or its sequel – during its production history, *Complicity* was all of the above at various points. Early in the writing stage, Colin Callender approached Mandel regarding another project he was producing on the Holocaust. Frank Pierson was already on board the *Complicity* project and had offered comments on a script earlier in 1996.⁴³ This drama was to be about Allied indifference to the Holocaust and would focus on Gerhart Riegner, a German-Jewish refugee living in Switzerland and secretary of the World Jewish Congress. Riegner is best known for his 1942 attempts to notify the American and British governments about the Holocaust after receiving word about the Germans using gas to murder Jews by the thousands. Callender already had a script by this time but was unsatisfied. He would quickly turn the script over to Mandel and the project would evolve into a double feature or three-hour epic: “[Callender] felt that this was big enough that he could do the two scripts in consecutive Saturday nights on HBO.”⁴⁴ Before Mandel would be brought on board, he first had to deliver the first draft of what would become *Conspiracy*.

2 The First Draft of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*

In early November 1996, Loring Mandel completed the first draft of a screenplay titled *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*.⁴⁵ During the writing process, Mandel was in contact with Frank Pierson about the screenplay, consulting him about the historical sources he was using or about certain scenes. Pierson would provide

⁴³ Frank Pierson, Online Summary of *Complicity* Script, August 31, 1996, in Box 2, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁴⁴ Interview with Loring Mandel, March 2, 2019, 50:00–55:24.

⁴⁵ Sources from the Loring Mandel Papers, held at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research in Madison, are a mix of printed-out digital files (mainly script drafts and emails), faxes, scripts with handwritten emendations, or photocopied material. It is often unclear whether a document is original, a photocopy, or a printed-out file.

feedback and the two often collaborated intimately on scripts before Mandel would deliver them to HBO. For example, one fax indicates that Mandel sought advice about individual scenes – in this case, whether Luther’s dog (later cut from the script) should bite a cook or not. This subplot involving Luther’s dog remained in early drafts of the script as a kind of misplaced comic relief; Heydrich is constantly irritated by its barking during the meeting.⁴⁶ Luther dotes on the dog – a German shepherd, of course, named Lilli – throughout the script.⁴⁷ Mandel described his creative relationship with Pierson at this stage as being similar to Neil Simon, who, when writing, “imagined Walter Kerr standing behind him, looking over his shoulder and nudging him when Simon allowed himself to write something he hoped he might get away with.”⁴⁸ In an email to Mandel, Pierson praised the initial draft and identified some of the difficulties they would have convincing their colleagues:

I think it works! I think it works! It’s extremely dense, and needs close attention to reading in order to understand what’s going on – the sub textual relationships of the characters are as important as the text, and that’s going to be the biggest stumbling block to everyone understanding what an audience is really going to be reacting to, aside from the growing horror what it is that they are doing. It’s amazing what you’ve done . . .⁴⁹

In an interview, Mandel described his research process at length. He mentioned spending “several days in the archives” of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D. C., visiting the Leo Baeck and YIVO Institutes in New York, and contacting the Simon Wiesenthal Center.⁵⁰ Much as Mommertz had done with *The Wannsee Conference*, Mandel relied heavily on Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews* for his screenplay. Of the 47 endnotes contained within his screenplay, 18 reference Hilberg.⁵¹ In contrast with Mommertz – and likely due to the language barrier and the fact that historiography paid more attention to Wannsee in the years since Mommertz’s film – Mandel relied much

46 Loring Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, November 14, 1996, in Box 2, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 30.

47 Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 33.

48 Loring Mandel, Fax to Frank Pierson, November 13, 1996, in Box 11, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

49 Frank Pierson, Email to Loring Mandel, November 9, 1996, in Box 15, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

50 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 14:02–18:51.

51 Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, Appendix 1–5.

more on secondary sources in the beginning (outside of primary sources contained in published source collections, like the protocol). More in-depth research would come later thanks to the hard work of Andrea Axelrod. Other sources in his initial bibliography – some accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington – included Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Leni Yahil's survey *The Holocaust*, as well as *Das deutsche Führerlexikon*, *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, and *Who's Who in Nazi Germany*.⁵² In a 1996 letter to Pierson, Mandel outlined some of his ideas about Wannsee. He quoted from *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* and Hilberg's account of the conference from *Destruction of the European Jews* in order to justify his depiction of the conference's shift in atmosphere from one of formality to informality – bolstered by alcohol. He also notes making photocopies of the Eichmann trial transcripts found at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's library and includes quotes from Eichmann about the meeting's purpose, one describing it as “a struggle for power” another emphasizing Heydrich's need to assert dominance over the rest of the agencies present at the meeting. The letter concludes with Mandel noting that he has chosen “the working title ‘Conspiracy’ with the subtitle ‘The Meeting at Wannsee.’ I think it's close to what the piece is about and it makes a nice pairing with ‘Complicity.’”⁵³ This letter proves that from Mandel's very first draft, *Conspiracy* was thought to be a companion film to *Complicity*. It is only through this original context that its title fully makes sense. It was not simply about a conspiratorial atmosphere or the criminal nature of the meeting, a literal conspiracy to commit mass murder. It was also meant to allude to another, unproduced film about Allied indifference and even Allied culpability.

The Dutch filmmaker Willy Lindwer's 1992 documentary *The Wannsee Conference: 11 Million Sentenced to Death* was also an early source Mandel consulted.⁵⁴ The documentary, distributed in the US by the Christian video publisher

52 Loring Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, Draft 2, 12/18/96, December 12, 1996, in Box 2, Folder 5, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 6; Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961); Robert S. Wistrich, *Who's Who in Nazi Germany*. Who's Who Series (London: Routledge, 1995); Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); *Das deutsche Führerlexikon 1934/1935*, (Berlin: Otto Stollberg G.m.b.H., 1934).

53 Loring Mandel, Letter to Frank Pierson, 1996, in Box 11, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

54 Order form for Willy Lindwer's film *Wannsee Conference*, undated, in Box 11, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison.

Gateway Films/Vision Video, is largely based on interviews with the Holocaust historians Yehuda Bauer and Eberhard Jäckel, as well as those by the prosecutor and witnesses at the Eichmann Trial. The film interprets the conference as representing the “pinnacle” of Heydrich’s power and depicts his desire to gain the consent of both civilian ministries in Berlin as well as Hans Frank, head of the General Government in occupied Poland. The documentary also draws attention to the protocol’s deceitful language and uses clips of Eichmann’s trial in order to show that the participants talked openly about killing methods. Eberhard Jäckel also notes that it was unusual to have a luncheon accompanying these types of conferences, meaning that it must have been very important to Heydrich, it was something to celebrate. Shlomo Aronson is listed in the film’s acknowledgments.⁵⁵ The documentary is a good introduction to the conference from the standpoint of early 1990s historiography but suffers by including sinister shots of the empty Wannsee villa set to cheap-sounding horror film music.

The first draft of *Conspiracy*, at first glance, seems very similar to later drafts of the screenplay and the shooting script. It differs in the nuances of dialogue and historical details – such as ranks, opinions, and specifics of chronology – that would be (mostly) corrected in later drafts. It begins with an introductory page, a preface, character list, and seating chart. The script’s introductory page describes a beginning and end to the film very different from what would actually be filmed:

The producers want to add a short first and third act. The first would be an introduction of Heydrich as the governor of Prague, violently prosecuting the execution of Jews in that city, and – unknown to him – threatened by an assassination plot involving the parachuting of Czechoslovakian freedom fighters from a night-flying British plane. Thus the enclosed script would be the second act of the picture.⁵⁶

This depiction of the prelude to Heydrich’s assassination eventually made its way into later drafts of the script and were key to the filmmakers’ ambitious plan to combine *Conspiracy* and *Complicity* into one film. The producers envisioned *Conspiracy*’s third act as:

. . . enact[ing] the assassination, planned to take advantage of Heydrich’s known penchant for daring danger (he always rode in an open car without bodyguards). The assassination becomes a bloody farce, failing by virtue of unpredictable, incalculable circumstances and Heydrich’s own bravery. But Heydrich, injured by the initial bomb blast, dies of infection two weeks later. Eichmann receives the news while bowling with chums. He takes the news

⁵⁵ Willy Lindwer, *Wannsee Conference: 11 Million Sentenced to Death* (Worcester, PA: Distributed by Vision Video, 1992).

⁵⁶ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, unnumbered cover page.

calmly, only remarking that it shows that history is more than personality, that the work would be done. And became the relentless soul of the Holocaust.⁵⁷

The film industry has long been fascinated with the story of Heydrich's assassination (Operation Anthropoid) and HBO was no exception. Wartime films such as Fritz Lang and Bertolt Brecht's *Hangmen also Die* (1943) and *Hitler's Madman* (1943) depicted Heydrich's brutal reign in Czechoslovakia; the Lidice Massacre, which was a reprisal meted out upon an entire Czech village and celebrated in Nazi propaganda, quickly became shorthand for Nazi brutality: Thomas Mann devoted one of his *Deutsche Hörer!* broadcasts to Lidice; Lidice's destruction became central to Allied anti-Nazi propaganda.⁵⁸ Recent films *Anthropoid* (2016) and *The Man with the Iron Heart* (2017) each dramatized the assassination, with the former film focusing on the assassins Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík more than the latter, which spends half of its running time focusing on Heydrich's biography – including Wannsee. Mandel also possessed a copy of an unproduced script on the assassination.⁵⁹ Operation Anthropoid became central to the *Conspiracy/Complicity* project and its mention here reveals that the filmmakers were already thinking about combining the two projects as early as 1996.

This introductory passage's depiction of Eichmann also reveals some of Mandel and Pierson's views of his place in the history of the Holocaust. Here, Eichmann acts as Heydrich's successor – but not because he was uniquely qualified to follow in his master's footsteps, but rather because “history is more than personality,” i.e., that because Eichmann was a “desk murderer” according to Arendt, his status as a bureaucratic cog made the machinery of the Holocaust continue without Heydrich's leadership. This depiction also roughly corresponds with David Cesarani's later biographic depiction of Eichmann, which argues that Eichmann was “a middle-ranking player, a subordinate, operating in an arena of conflicting power élites and policymakers, rather than the executor of a centrally determined and inexorable policy” and that after Wannsee, Eichmann “became the managing director of the greatest single genocide in history.”⁶⁰ Curiously, this passage at the beginning of the script also contradicts assertions Pierson made in a 2009 interview, in which he claimed that the idea to end the film with Eichmann in a bowling alley came to him during filming and had to be written on the spot:

57 Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, unnumbered cover page.

58 Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 283–284.

59 Steve Garvin, *The Butcher of Prague*, August 1993, in Box 15, Folder 11, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

60 Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 116–117.

I invented a whole new ending which Loring [Loring Mandel] wrote, because it was a fascinating thing that had happened in the real situation. And that had to do with the day that Eichmann [Adolf Eichmann], who was off bowling with some friends of his and getting drunk, heard that Heydrich [Reinhard Heydrich] had died. And they brought him the news that Heydrich was dead, and he knew now that he was in charge of the Holocaust. And we thought, “You know something? That’s an interesting scene for this.” So we got it written, and HBO [Home Box Office] approved the budget, and so on. Another \$60,000 bucks. We flew back to East Germany, found a bowling alley of that era, and one thing and another. Staged the scene, which I totally fucking botched, by the way. I put the camera in the wrong place. It was, you know, I shot it from – I shot it from the pinball’s point of view, and so on, and I should have been off there in the other room with the Actors. Christ almighty, you know, it just drives me crazy. But in any case, no matter – even if it had worked, suddenly realized, “No. This movie is finished. You don’t want to go back there.” So we threw it all away⁶¹

The script’s preface reveals early motivations and ideas about the film’s depiction of Wannsee – some clearly informed by functionalism, likely informed by Raul Hilberg’s work. First, it mentions group dynamics: “When you put a group of diverse individuals in a confined situation, there are always pressures of some kind. And the one inevitable pressure is competition. In this case, the competitiveness is obvious; it existed beforehand and was an underlying cause for Heydrich to convene the Conference.”⁶² Mandel argues that during the meeting, “these men were not always at their best and not always on the point. There are moments of lightness, moments of hostility, plenty of defensiveness, a few moments when the subtext is utterly revealed, and much self-protective gameplaying. I want, too, to show how, in any individual, cruelty and sociopathology can coexist with the sappiest sentimentality.”⁶³ This section notes the dramatic aspects of the screenplay – that is, invented conflicts between individuals which Mandel could only speculate about – but also highlights the infighting and interinstitutional rivalries stressed by the historiography he had been reading in preparation for this script. Later in the preface, he outlines the film’s primary historiographic argument. Rather than claim that the decision to murder all European Jews was made at Wannsee (often erroneously repeated in the media or in promotional material for *Conspiracy*), here he says that “Heydrich called this meeting primarily for the purpose of consolidating his own power as the sole commander of the *Final Solution*. The various ministries of the *Reich* in Berlin had been doing things in various ways at various speeds . . . Heydrich assumed command, dealt with almost all of the technicalities and put

⁶¹ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 7, Clip 6, 07:49.

⁶² Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, i.

⁶³ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, i.

the *Final Solution* on a fast track.”⁶⁴ This passage also sums up the motivations of the other groups present at the conference: the representatives of the General Government wanting a quicker solution in order to ease the burden of overfilled ghettos, and Berlin-based civilians wanting to defer mass extermination until war's end. The preface also further develops Mandel's view of Eichmann expressed earlier: “Heydrich's use of Eichmann as a glorified flunky gave Eichmann the opportunity to involve himself in every detail of the program, and left him in a perfect position to become the prime mover once Heydrich was assassinated.”⁶⁵ As the film moved closer to production, and especially after Stanley Tucci's involvement, the Eichmann character became more nuanced and adhered less to Arendt's description of him as a rigid, unthinking bureaucrat – though traces would remain. Earlier drafts, especially those that connected with *Complicity*, tended to combine Arendt's depiction of Eichmann as the quintessential banal bureaucrat with a characterization reminiscent of the origin story of an archetypal comic book supervillain.

The section in the early script describing the conference participants contains some of the more historically questionable aspects of the first draft. For example, Mandel states that he's “given [SS Major Rudolf Lange] some heart” and claims that Heydrich was “son of a possibly Jewish Music Teacher.” Eichmann is “the archetypal bureaucrat” while Stuckart – in contrast with later critical comments – is “a malignant anti-Semite.” Strangely, the first draft of the script makes a big deal about Staatssekretär Martin Luther of the Foreign Ministry receiving his invitation later than the other participants.⁶⁶ Frank Doelger and Colin Callender would later attack these characterizations, stating that “The Descriptions of Participants needs to be more factual. Statements such as ‘I've made him a generally cheerful Social Anti-Semite . . .’ or ‘I've given him some heart’ suggest a degree of invention that undermines the factual basis of the script.”⁶⁷

The first draft's front matter concludes with a seating chart. The seating plan, similar to that included in Mommertz's script, shows initial planning for the visual depiction of the conference. In contrast with the Mommertz script, this is an oval instead of rectangular table. The members of the SS and the RSHA largely sit to Heydrich's right, with Eichmann in a corner with access to the (male) stenotypist. Stuckart sits directly across from Heydrich and Kritzinger sits on his extreme left as they both had in *The Wannsee Conference*. The civilian *Staatssekretäre* –

⁶⁴ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, i.

⁶⁵ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, i.

⁶⁶ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, ii-iii.

⁶⁷ Frank Doelger, “Notes Conspiracy – Complicity,” June 28, 1997, in Box 10, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

with the exceptions of Neumann and Freisler – all occupy the part of the table to Heydrich's left. Frank Pierson would later modify this seating arrangement during filming, most notably by placing Eichmann directly to Heydrich's right, so the two could whisper to one another.⁶⁸

The first draft of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee* is unusual because it contains endnotes, usually to explain character motivations and opinions not found in the Wannsee protocol. These references are absent from the shooting scripts, but are present in earlier drafts, before the production team had more or less finalized its historical research. Mandel referred to his use of other, peripheral sources to justify character statements and behavior as “informed speculation,” which Simone Gigliotti has discussed at length and referred to as “not entirely dissimilar from historians investigating Wannsee.”⁶⁹ Mandel described this process at length:

Informed speculation is what I call trying to write dialogue based on everything that I knew about that character, what his life, was like, what his personality was like, what other actions were in his life. I – from a lot of research, you know. A lot of research. I wasn't just making things out of the air, I was creating words that seemed to me, as far as I could tell, that represented the attitude of the character in almost every case . . .

I write elliptical dialogue, but I try to indicate in parentheses for the actor what lies beneath it said or what the conclusion of an interrupted line is and so on. It's just been a part of my process. I think I've talked about informed speculation.⁷⁰ I think I gave to – how you create these characters. Characters are – once again are created out of what I have absorbed about them, what I think I have come to understand about them, from what I've read, and then in the end, you have to make that imaginative leap to become – at the moment that you're writing the line – you have to become the character, as much as you can intuit about – and imaginatively intuit what that character is like, and what he would say in that situation. I hear it and I put it down. There are times when I then have to edit what they say, but it usually comes from wherever the hell that comes from. And what I become at the moment that I'm writing dialogue, I become a stenographer for what I'm hearing from those characters in my head.⁷¹

In her study on HBO's historical series, Rebecca Weeks engages with a similar idea, noting that “[i]nvention is difficult for many historians to come to terms with, because on the surface it upends the traditional empirical approach to his-

⁶⁸ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, Clip 9, 12:06.

⁶⁹ Gigliotti. “Commissioning Mass Murder,” 125–127.

⁷⁰ For more on Mandel's term “informed speculation,” see Johnson, ““A Classroom History Lesson Is Not Going to Work,”” 186.

⁷¹ Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 31:55–36:20; 1:09:03–1:12:09

tory.”⁷² For Weeks, “[i]nventions do not render history on-screen *unhistorical* or invalid; instead, they are precisely what make history on-screen possible;” for her, “invention in history on TV is more effective at conveying historical truths than is ‘fact.’”⁷³ But she does not advocate *carte blanche* for screenwriters, instead, she argues along the same lines as Mandel: “What is crucial in crafting all types of inventions is that they are based on knowledge rather than ignorance.”⁷⁴

The first draft roughly retains the structure of the final screenplay. There is no opening sequence of the maid, butlers, and kitchen staff preparing for the day's meal. Heydrich is immediately introduced, “smiling” in the cockpit as he flies over Wannsee.⁷⁵ Eichmann is a stiffer bureaucrat than in later drafts, even saying “preparation is everything.”⁷⁶ Minor errors abound; for instance, Lange, a major in the character list discussed above, is alternately a lieutenant colonel and captain in this draft. He also inexplicably discusses experience in Ukraine instead of Latvia, where he was actually present – and Mandel knew this, his character list and later scenes get this right.⁷⁷ Luther “tries to control his sense of outrage” about his late invitation and does not yet know Eichmann – this bit of invented conflict is absent from the final film, which depicts a more cordial relationship between Luther and Eichmann.⁷⁸ Mandel's past as a comedic writer is more apparent here, for instance, he makes fun of the constant “heiling” and notes that as the men begin to drink, “[a] party spirit is augmenting their Party spirit.”⁷⁹ The first draft makes power relations and the meeting's purpose more blatantly obvious than the released film. For example, Schöngarth, Lange, and Hofmann discuss Heydrich's aims:

HOFMANN

What's predictable with the man? I have no idea what he plans here.

SCHÖNGARTH

It's all about power.

(pointing up)

His.

(pointing down)

Ours.

⁷² Weeks, *History by HBO*, 20.

⁷³ Weeks, *History by HBO*, 20–21.

⁷⁴ Weeks, *History by HBO*, 185.

⁷⁵ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 1.

⁷⁶ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 3.

⁷⁷ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 3–4.

⁷⁸ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 5, 7.

⁷⁹ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 6.

Schöngarth turns to Lange for support. Lange just stares at him as if he were a creature from another planet.⁸⁰

A brief scene, later cut from the screenplay, references *The Wannsee Conference*. Here, Eichmann discusses his rank with a female switchboard operator and expresses frustration because she incorrectly refers to him as a colonel instead of lieutenant colonel.⁸¹ The first draft also repeats the erroneous claim that the Wannsee villa had previously belonged to a Jew, as in *The Wannsee Conference*.⁸² Later drafts and the film's final cut would modify this claim. Mandel's initial version also highlights Heydrich's reputation for womanizing, with Gerhard Klopfer – already portrayed as a piggish individual – crudely commenting on Heydrich having numerous affairs right before a scene where Heydrich flirts with a telephone operator.⁸³ Later biographies of Heydrich do mention his playboy lifestyle, but emphasize it much less than earlier, more lurid depictions of the *Reichsprotektor*.⁸⁴ A later scene goes even further. After the initial part of the conference, where Heydrich has given a presentation on the Jewish Problem largely following the protocol, Klopfer confronts the same telephone operator, teasing her about Heydrich and asking her if he was “the kind of attractive man you'd want to get together – go off with?” The script describes this as a “poor woman” frightened by Klopfer, who tells her that Heydrich could order her into bed with him and that it would be “a German woman's duty.”⁸⁵ Later versions of the script, including the shooting script, include this conversation, but it is with the maid featured in the first and last shots of the Wannsee villa in the completed film – this scene was likely filmed but not included in the final cut of the film.⁸⁶

In contrast with the final film, Kritzinger's role is more restrained, he is described as “dour and detached . . . [h]e feels like a professional among amateurs,” in keeping with earlier depictions of him as a Prussian bureaucrat in the old style.⁸⁷ For example, Kritzinger's story about a man and his abusive father, which

80 Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 9.

81 Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 11–12.

82 Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 16.

83 Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 26.

84 Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman*, 112–113.

85 Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 51–52.

86 Loring Mandel, *Conspiracy, The Meeting at Wannsee*, Screenplay by Loring Mandel, Director: Frank Pierson, Salmon Revisions. Dated 14–11–2000, Yellow Revisions. Dated 30–10–2000, Green Revisions. Dated 25–10–2000, Blue Revisions. Dated 24–10–2000, Pink Revisions. Dated 23–10–2000, Shooting Draft October 20, 2000, in Box 9, Folder 3, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 58–69.

87 Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 34.

he tells Heydrich and plays a key role in the film's climax, is something Stuckart tells him in this draft.⁸⁸ Instead of Kritzingen wandering the villa's grounds, in shock at what is being discussed, this draft has Luther wandering the grounds in search of his dog.⁸⁹ The later expansion of Kritzingen's role may have been due to the hiring of Colin Firth – which meant David Threlfall lost the Stuckart role and was instead offered Kritzingen. Frank Pierson spoke about this process at length in an interview.⁹⁰ This draft is also missing the confrontation between Kritzingen and Heydrich, which in the shot film ends with a chilling sequence as Heydrich stares Kritzingen down, assuring him that Hitler will continue to deny all knowledge of the Holocaust.

The first draft ends with Eichmann driving off from the Wannsee villa, much like in the final film, but without the masterful sequence depicting the orderlies and maids cleaning up the villa after the meeting or the end titles detailing the fates of the participants. Here, Eichmann simply drives off and “WE MOVE BACK AND UP until the Wannsee Mansion is no bigger than a toy mansion in its lovely, snowy landscaping. WE HEAR only the rustle of the wind.”⁹¹ Mandel's first draft is, in its structure and dialogue, quite similar to the final version of the script. It retains the structure of the meeting interspersed with scenes between smaller groups of participants during breaks in the main storyline. Much of the dialogue is the same as that in the aired film, but sometimes different characters speak it. This draft also contains more instances of stereotyping and more cartoon-like behavior than the final film; this is most notable in the depictions of Eichmann, Klopfer, and Luther. Even considering its flaws, this early draft shows Mandel' was a master at writing dialogue – particularly small, intimate conversations between people. Whereas *The Wannsee Conference* is characterized by speed, *Conspiracy* gives the audience more breathing room and time to process what is happening. Much more is said through looks and expressions – the visual language of cinema is much more present in this script than in Mommertz's. The most obvious differences between this draft and later drafts, besides historical details, are the depictions of Kritzingen (he has a much smaller role here) and the beginning and end sequences, which would change multiple times over the course of the film's production history. Now that Mandel had delivered his first draft to HBO, it was time for the production team to comment on it and suggest changes.

⁸⁸ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 77.

⁸⁹ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 47.

⁹⁰ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, Clip 7, 08:02.

⁹¹ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 1st Draft 11/14/96, 105.

3 HBO's Feedback and Mandel's Second Draft

HBO's initial feedback was overwhelmingly positive. As a result of this script, which would mostly remain unchanged until 2000, HBO gave Mandel the task of rewriting the script for *Complicity*, which had been penned by the British playwright David Edgar. Colin Callender's initial comments stated that the script "works extremely well, and is going to be a very strong piece." He noted that Mandel had "given great variety and drive to what is essentially a roomful of men talking."⁹² Referencing earlier conversations, likely during a meeting, Callender discussed the central narrative and the difficulties it posed the production team:

The two narrative lines that inform the events being presented are the consolidation of power by Heydrich, and the ascension of Eichman [sic]. Both stories are there, but need to be dramatized more clearly. My thoughts on how to achieve this, besides the pruning I know you intend, are to clarify in the beginning that the treatment of Jews In [sic] Germany at the time of the conference was not centralized: that each agency, each individual throughout Germany and the controlled territories was operating somewhat differently, and, it would seem, with differing degrees of independence.⁹³

Callender's feedback continued, alternately speculating about Heydrich's plans for Eichmann (again emphasizing the mistaken idea of Eichmann as a kind of supervillain) but at the end emphasizing that the "decision" at Wannsee had already been made before the meeting:

. . . we also have to decide (I'm assuming there's no way to actually know) if Heydrich knew before the conference that he was planning to elevate Eichman [sic], or did he decide during the conference itself? This may seem academic, but I don't think it is . . . Right now, it's not clear, which I think undermines the narrative line. I think either scenario could work, although I think it is more likely, and perhaps more manageable for the scope of the drama, if the fix is in in the beginning . . .⁹⁴

Callender also advocated trimming the discussion of the question of mixed marriages, arguing that "there is too much time spent of the question of who is and who isn't a Jew, it's wonderful material, but we should thin it a bit" but that "[a]nything we can do to punch up the insanity of this idea – that laws, which are created to protect the rights of the individual and promote a code of behavior that makes civilization possible, are here used to promote this monstrously bar-

⁹² Colin Callender, "Notes/Wannsee" December 6, 1996, in Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

⁹³ Callender, "Notes/Wannsee," 1.

⁹⁴ Callender, "Notes/Wannsee," 1.

baric plan – would be great.”⁹⁵ This emphasis on the law, lawyers, and its instrumentalization for genocide remained key themes of the film and are explored even further in its final version. The producer Steven Haft, who had produced Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989), also provided feedback. Haft's comments, though he praised Mandel's work, were limited to those about the script's dramatic flaws. For example, he wondered if it took too long for the meeting to get started and complained that “Eichmann continues to be a functionary in the meeting, not a villain. Was his role this limited? Feels flat, not conclusory enough. Not a strong moment, even of a banal meeting.”⁹⁶ Haft would continue to provide comments on the *Complicity* script until the end of the millennium, but played a minor role (he is absent from the film's credits). Armed with this initial feedback, Mandel would quickly deliver a second draft before year's end.

The second draft of *Conspiracy* differed only slightly from the first draft apart from its beginning, which included a new introductory sequence. This introduction began with an animated plane flying over a map of Europe intercut with stock footage of anti-Jewish persecution as well as the course of the war, such as the 1940 Dunkirk evacuation. It was accompanied by a narration outlining each step towards war and of Germany's radicalizing anti-Jewish policy as the map showed the Nazi march through Europe. This stock footage was also to be intercut with shots of Eichmann beginning to work as “an expert on the ‘Jewish Question’” in Vienna.⁹⁷ This script contains the first depiction of the combined *Conspiracy/Complicity* project, which sets out to tell the story of the Holocaust with Eichmann as its primary antagonist and Gerhart Riegner as its protagonist. The new introduction, after showing shots of Eichmann going about his work, cuts to Gerhart Riegner in Geneva: “The office is crowded with Jews seeking visas. These are mostly well-dressed men and women. Gerhart RIEGNER, 28, is furiously writing and talking at the same time as applicants shout and wave for his attention.”⁹⁸ The stock footage and map animations continue into June 1941, introducing Anthony Eden and Winston Churchill as the narrator states that “[s]ecret German dispatches describing the massacres were known at once to the British as a result

⁹⁵ Callender, “Notes/Wannsee,” 1.

⁹⁶ Steven Haft, Fax to Frank Pierson, “Re: Conspiracy,” December 4, 1996, in Box 11, Folder 1, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

⁹⁷ Loring Mandel, “Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, written by Loring Mandel, Second Draft, 12/18/96,” December 18, 1996, in Box 2, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1–3.

⁹⁸ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 3.

of the ingenuity of their cryptographers, who had broken the German codes. All that summer, the Prime Minister had access to the Nazis' own reports of the Jews, Russians and Poles they murdered."⁹⁹ John Pehle, U.S. Treasury Department lawyer and later director of the War Refugee Board, also appears in this section. The script describes him as someone who "routinely arranged licenses to permit American citizens to spend dollars in friendly or foreign countries," then shows stock footage of the Pearl Harbor attack and notes that this process continued even after the Axis declaration of war. Finally, the new introduction mentions German defeats on the Eastern Front, then transitions seamlessly into the early *Conspiracy* script discussed above.¹⁰⁰ The introduction, in comparison with the remainder of the script, appears conventional due to its inclusion of stock footage and its omniscient narrator, who leads the audience around the world and introduces key characters. It is maximalist whereas earlier drafts (and the final version) of *Conspiracy* were minimalist.

A commented version of the second draft of *Conspiracy* also exists, with red emendations typed by Frank Pierson.¹⁰¹ These comments provide valuable information on the evolution of the script and also illustrates other later-abandoned avenues. One such avenue, which according to Mandel was only abandoned during filming, is the use of an older style of filmic English. As Pierson noted: "I think we're going to cast American and British actors with a 'mid-Atlantic' accent, so the speech patterns are consistent. You could then indicate a suggestion of class or country of origin flavor in the individual speech patterns."¹⁰² Mandel also recounted his inclusion of German idioms in the script:

I made an effort so that – when there were idioms spoken in the language – that I could justify the idioms by finding a German counterpart for that idiom. There was – I remember – there was a note that I got from Colin Callender – the producer – complaining about Heydrich using the reference to summer camp in his opening address to the other participants. I was able to show him that this was a standard event in their lives . . . the summer camps were a big thing, and so it was not an American idea, it was a German idea and some

⁹⁹ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 4–5.

¹⁰⁰ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 4–5.

¹⁰¹ This is not immediately apparent. Due to the comments on camera angles at this early stage in production, as well as the fact that the commenter discusses the use of Schubert at the end of the film, it can only be Pierson, who later claimed credit for including Schubert – but also claimed he had chosen the piece used. That was Andrea Axelrod, who chose the Adagio from Schubert's String Quartet in C Major, D.956.

¹⁰² Frank Pierson and Loring Mandel, Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, December 18, 1996, in Box 2, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 2.

of the idioms that I had Heydrich and others use were actually translations of German idioms that I found.¹⁰³

Forcing the actors into a type of English reminiscent of the Transatlantic Accent made famous by classic films of the 1930s and 1940s would likely have made the whole enterprise seem even more ridiculous than fake German accents. While the most historically faithful choice would have been to shoot the film in German with German and Austrian actors, subtitled programming was not yet mainstream in American television during the 1990s. It would take until the decades after *Conspiracy*'s airing for subtitled, non-English television to become widespread in the United States.¹⁰⁴ Stefanie Rauch has rightly referred to this use of recognizable British actors (with the exception of Stanley Tucci) speaking their normal accents in *Conspiracy* as contributing to the film's "peculiar Britishness."¹⁰⁵

Other comments on the second draft include one about Eichmann's later-cut proclamation to the stenotypist that "preparation is everything": "This seems general and self referent, neither of which are Eichmann's characteristics. Suggest instead of 'Preparation . . .' he congratulate[sic] the Steno[grapher] on having plenty on hand or reprimand him for having too much; something that has in it the quality of judgmental attitude and bureaucratic exactitude. Nothing is ever right for this guy."¹⁰⁶ The comments continue and chiefly focus on the script's characterization of Eichmann, noting "I think he should seem to us to be a sly subservient sort at this point to build the ground for his emerging at the end as the man de facto in charge. Heydrich may be the architect, but Eichmann as the carpenter and plasterer is the man who will do it." It also notes that "we need more of this – the sense that these men have their business and their personal lives outside this room – that keep intruding."¹⁰⁷ The commenter – again, likely Pierson – criticizes Mandel's characterization of Klopfer as a pig, arguing that "We have to watch out for overkill; the most interesting thing about the whole conference is the dispassionate rationality of it all."¹⁰⁸ Peter Zinner also offered comments: "Zinner raises an important point here: in German society especially

¹⁰³ Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 10:25–13:49.

¹⁰⁴ See Naveen Kumar, "TV without Borders," *Vox*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/8/13/20803186/subtitled-tv-netflix-los-espookys-made-in-heaven-sacred-games>.

¹⁰⁵ Rauch. "Understanding the Holocaust through Film," 165.

¹⁰⁶ Pierson and Mandel, Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Pierson and Mandel, Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 6.

¹⁰⁸ Pierson and Mandel, Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 33–34.

at the time, nobody would stand and leave thje [sic] table without getting permission."¹⁰⁹ These early script comments also address Stuckart's (later Kritzinger's) parable about the man with an abusive father:

Maybe I'm being too simple minded, but I think this is too important to risk having our audience miss the point. If it is too much we can always cut it in editing, but I'd like to add something like the following:

MULLER [sic]

(as Eichmann obviously still doesn't get it.)

He's saying, who will we have to blame for our misfortunes when we have no Jews?¹¹⁰

Mandel responded to this comment with a handwritten note, which reads "shows a disbelief in antisemitism."¹¹¹ Here, Mandel is harkening back to earlier, erroneous historiography which argued that the high-ranking members of the SS were not necessarily antisemites, but opportunists. Later versions of the script contain this story but modify its larger significance, portraying the story as a "warning" about how after the war, Heydrich and the SS should have something else to live for rather than subsist on their hate for the Jews. Lastly, this commented version of the second draft contains the first mention of the film's score. With the exception of the final scene, there is no music in *Conspiracy* and the film eschews non-diegetic music altogether. Here, Pierson suggests the following: "The thought is that Eichmann at some point puts on the Schubert, out of curiosity about the phonograph perhaps, and we use 'Death and the Maiden,' starting as source but becoming track over the closing of the show, over Eichmann driving away, etc."¹¹²

During July 1997, after Mandel had written a draft of *Complicity*, Colin Callender and Frank Doelger delivered more detailed comments on the *Conspiracy* script. These comments go through the script at a page-by-page level. Early in this document, they mentioned their problems with Mandel's "a bit too elliptical" dialogue, arguing that it was probably too hard for the audience to follow (on this

¹⁰⁹ Pierson and Mandel, Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 35.

¹¹⁰ Pierson and Mandel, Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 108.

¹¹¹ Pierson and Mandel, Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 108.

¹¹² Pierson and Mandel, Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, 109–110.

issue, Mandel would eventually win the upper hand).¹¹³ They also advocated a technique similar to Mommertz's script for *The Wannsee Conference*, stating that "[w]hen the characters introduce themselves to one another, it would be extremely helpful if they can get in as much information as possible."¹¹⁴ Callender and Doelger asked for clarifying language to help make Heydrich's initial presentation easier for the audience to follow, including defining the Nuremberg Laws and emphasizing that Heydrich is "rewriting the law and the way things are done."¹¹⁵ They also asked questions about which references they could reasonably expect an audience to understand (like IG Farben, Kritzinger's role, etc.). They also noted when they thought language was too contemporary – usually lines that either used profanity or sexual references.¹¹⁶ Some of these concerns would be readdressed later in the film's production history, with Mandel eventually winning out on questions of elliptical dialogue or retaining instances of language perceived as too graphic or vulgar.

4 *Complicity*: Origins

Back in late 1996, after delivering his draft of *Conspiracy*, HBO NYC Productions asked Mandel to rewrite David Edgar's script for *Complicity*. For most of its production history, *Conspiracy* was the first half of the story told in *Complicity* – the majority of pre-production documents from this period address both films. This would only change in the year before filming began. In some cases, the scripts contain both stories. For the next two years, the production team would grapple over how to best depict the Allied response to the Holocaust – until the project's cancellation and subsequent revival. When a film project is canceled, the only way for historians to investigate it is through the written record. Because we are left with scripts, meeting minutes, and sources, we essentially only have fragments of an unfinished film. No complete work survives. Some scholars refer to these fragments as "shadow cinema;" *Complicity* is an example of "shadow quality TV."¹¹⁷

113 Frank Doelger, "Notes Conspiracy – Complicity," June 28, 1997, in Box 10, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

114 Doelger, "Notes Conspiracy – Complicity," 2.

115 Doelger, "Notes Conspiracy – Complicity," 2.

116 Doelger, "Notes Conspiracy – Complicity," 3–4.

117 See Fenwick, Foster, and Eldridge, *Shadow Cinema*. Some of my passages on *Complicity* and its unmaking have been previously published in a special issue edited by Sue Vice, James Fen-

When Colin Callender turned over the *Complicity* script to Mandel, the playwright David Edgar had already delivered two drafts of his screenplay to HBO. Frank Pierson had by then provided extensive comments on this screenplay. Edgar, a left-wing journalist from the UK, had built his reputation on his plays about right-wing ideology, such as *Destiny* (1979), a drama about the rise of the National Front in Britain, or *Maydays* (1983). His most famous work was the Charles Dickens adaptation *The Life and Death of Nicholas Nickleby* (1980). Compared to *Conspiracy*, which tightly focuses on a single historical event and location, Edgar's *Complicity* script is much broader in scope. It tells the story of Gerhart Riegner's efforts to inform the Allies about the Holocaust, Eichmann's activities between Wannsee and the war's end, the 1943 Bermuda Conference, infighting within the Roosevelt administration, tensions within the American Jewish community between radical Zionism and caution, a Jewish woman hiding in France, and the decision not to bomb Auschwitz. The meandering script contains scenes which take place in each of the following countries: Switzerland, Germany, France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the United States, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and Turkey.¹¹⁸

David Edgar's script also covers a wide range of events.¹¹⁹ Beginning with Jewish refugees fleeing into Switzerland, the script quickly moves through events such as Heydrich's assassination and Riegner's efforts to inform the Allies. Other key events in Holocaust history are present, such as the Vrba Report and Eichmann's efforts to exterminate Hungarian Jews. Eichmann is the film's antagonist, Riegner is its protagonist. The heart of the script is concerned with Riegner's efforts to get word out and the reactions of the British and American governments. A scene with Eichmann learning about Heydrich's assassination while bowling is present.¹²⁰ This scene stems from Eichmann's statements at his trial in Jerusalem.¹²¹ The script inventively portrays how Riegner's telegram about the Holocaust made its way through Allied bureaucratic channels.¹²² The core of Mandel's

wick, and Kieran Foster. See Nicholas K. Johnson, "Shadow Quality TV: HBO's *Complicity* and the Failure to Portray Allied Indifference to the Holocaust, 1995–2003," *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 17, no. 3 (July 2, 2024): 269–291. For more on the term "quality TV," see Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, eds., *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

¹¹⁸ David Edgar, untitled script of *Complicity*, no date, in Box 1, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁹ Undated, this script was most likely written in late 1995 or early 1996.

¹²⁰ Edgar, untitled script of *Complicity*, 14–15.

¹²¹ Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 149.

¹²² Edgar, untitled script of *Complicity*, 33–35.

later efforts on *Complicity* is present, though there are some major differences. For example, there is a will-they-won't-they romance between Riegner and his secretary Myra, as well as a story about Riegner's cousin Lotte's capture in France and deportation to Auschwitz. The Bermuda Conference features, and Edgar juxtaposes it with the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto, which occurred at the same time. Eberhard Schöngarth also makes an appearance in a scene of Eichmann visiting Auschwitz as American bombers fly overhead to attack the Monowitz synthetic rubber plant.¹²³ In its most powerful scene, Riegner, despondent about the Allied failure to rescue Jews or bomb Auschwitz – and directly after a refugee accuses him of doing nothing to help victims – destroys his US immigration visa application, resolving to remain in Geneva and continue helping refugees.¹²⁴ In this script, Riegner's story ends with him “look[ing] at the portraits of Roosevelt and Churchill. Then he goes to look out of the windows, at the mountains. His eyes are filled with tears.”¹²⁵ The script ends in April 1945, with Eichmann providing Red Cross officials with a tour of Theresienstadt. Here, he utters his infamous statement which has been reprinted countless times; that he “would gladly, myself, jump into the pit, Knowing that in the pit were five million enemies of the state.” His glance then meets that of Riegner's cousin Lotte, and the script ends.¹²⁶

David Edgar provided a summary of his script which included footnotes expanding on some of his ideas for the film. One, commenting on a scene depicting Eichmann and Luther, noted that “I am putting in every possible moment of contrasting allied prevarication with Axis action.”¹²⁷ Another footnote refers to “the dubious role Roosevelt played and the faith that the American Jews placed in him.”¹²⁸ Again and again, the filmmakers would run into problems revolving around the depiction of Roosevelt – was he hamstrung by other American officials? The realities of war? Or was he simply indifferent to Jewish suffering? Many sources were contradictory, and the production team would never reach satisfying answers.¹²⁹

Throughout 1996, HBO NYC Productions staff, as well as Frank Pierson, provided comments on Edgar's script. Pierson, clearly attached as director by then,

¹²³ Edgar, untitled script of *Complicity*, 145.

¹²⁴ Edgar, untitled script of *Complicity*, 156.

¹²⁵ Edgar, 158.

¹²⁶ Edgar, 159.

¹²⁷ David Edgar, “COMPLICITY - Revised summary of 2nd draft August 1996,” in Box 2, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 7.

¹²⁸ Edgar, “COMPLICITY - Revised summary of 2nd draft August 1996,” 8.

¹²⁹ Interview with Frank Doelger, 10:32–15:04.

sent Edgar a one-line summary, which is a document describing each scene with a single sentence. Pierson's one-line suggested edits to the script adding even more content, which included a scene of German troops razing Lidice.¹³⁰ In a lengthy document, Pierson commented on Edgar's summary of *Complicity* – a document which briefly outlined each scene. Pierson noted that the film would have a maximum running time of 130 minutes based on the number of scenes in the screenplay. Throughout this document, he suggests areas where Edgar could trim the screenplay of unnecessary dialogue or characters. He praised Edgar's "extraordinary job of organizing the mass of material," but was critical of the script's tendency towards exposition: "I think there are still too many scenes that tell their story in dialogue rather than actions."¹³¹ He notes a prologue (contained in the second draft of the script) which contained stock footage and a discussion of Hitler's "prophecy," criticizing the script for relying too much on explanation rather than depiction; on telling rather than showing: "the Hitler speech is right on the nose: we're telling the audience what the story is about instead of letting it unfold."¹³² He describes his ideas about Riegner as a character at length:

[W]e begin with a Riegner who still hopes, believes that Hitler and the Nazis are an aberration in an otherwise fine people and culture. It is through the news of the atrocities and then of the nature and scope of the holocaust[sic?], that he comes to lose that faith, and realize his identity with Germany – as a German – is denied by Germany itself; he fully realizes his lonely status as a stateless Jew. But he – the optimist, still – transfers his idealistic hopes to the Americans. And it is in the second half of the story that he is forced to realize that America does not want him or his people either; that America is also a false hope.¹³³

Pierson also discusses the characterization of Eichmann, arguing that in the scene where he learns about Heydrich's death, the filmmakers should highlight that "Eichmann goes on grimly bowling; it doesn't matter. It is only one man; wars are won and great things done by nations and cultures, not individuals."¹³⁴ Throughout the document, Pierson alternates between comments focusing on improving the script's drama and comments on improving its depiction of history; he cau-

130 Frank Pierson, Online Summary of *Complicity* Script, August 31, 1996, in Box 2, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

131 Frank Pierson, *Complicity* - FRP Notes on Edgar's August '96 2nd Draft Outline, August 1996, in Box 15, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

132 Frank Pierson, *Complicity* - FRP Notes on Edgar's August '96 2nd Draft Outline, 1.

133 Frank Pierson, *Complicity* - FRP Notes on Edgar's August '96 2nd Draft Outline, 1–2.

134 Frank Pierson, *Complicity* - FRP Notes on Edgar's August '96 2nd Draft Outline, 5.

tions that “we run the danger constantly of burying ourselves alive in facts.”¹³⁵ This is a key problem with the early *Complicity* scripts – they constantly pile on more information and characters, overwhelming the reader in a way that goes beyond *Conspiracy*'s strategy of immersing audiences in an unfamiliar world and letting them figure things out for themselves.

After HBO put Mandel in charge of writing *Complicity*, David Edgar provided him with information on the source material he had used for his script, as well as his notes which were contained on a floppy disk. Additionally, Edgar acknowledged that he had “piles of copies” from David S. Wyman's published primary source collections on America and the Holocaust, which provided the bulk of source material for his groundbreaking 1984 book *The Abandonment of the Jews*.¹³⁶ Other secondary sources listed by Edgar included Martin Gilbert's *Auschwitz and the Allies*, Heinz Höhne's *The Order of the Death's Head*, Henry L. Feingold's *The Politics of Rescue*, and Yehuda Bauer's *American Jewry & the Holocaust*.¹³⁷

David S. Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945* was the single most important secondary source for all versions of the *Complicity* script. Mandel would later go so far as to describe *Complicity* as an “cable adaptation” of Wyman's book.¹³⁸ Mandel's first draft, which contains sixty-three endnotes, cites Wyman a total of twenty-seven times.¹³⁹ In 1994, PBS had previously produced a documentary film partially based on *The Abandonment of the Jews* titled *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference* as part of its long-running *American Experience* docuseries. This documentary aroused protest from William vanden Heuvel, then-president of the Franklin and Eleanor Roose-

¹³⁵ Frank Pierson, *Complicity* - FRP Notes on Edgar's August '96 2nd Draft Outline, 25.

¹³⁶ David Edgar, Letter to Loring Mandel, January 14, 1997, in Box 10, Folder 10, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin; David S. Wyman, ed., *America and the Holocaust: A Thirteen-Volume Set Documenting the Editor's Book The Abandonment of the Jews*, 13 vols. (New York: Garland Pub., 1989).

¹³⁷ David Edgar, *Complicity* Booklist, July 29, 1996, in Box 10, Folder 10, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹³⁸ Loring Mandel, Fax to Elon Steinberg, World Jewish Congress, April 4, 1997, in Box 11, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹³⁹ Loring Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, June 7, 1997, in Box 3, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, i-iv.

velt Institute, who alleged that the film unfairly portrayed the president.¹⁴⁰ In the course of the ill-fated journey to get *Complicity* produced, vanden Heuvel would appear again. David Edgar continued to provide feedback on both of Mandel's scripts throughout the 1990s – he remained on board, it seems, until HBO canceled the project in 1998. Mandel quickly hired a researcher, Angelica LeJuge, a German journalist living on Long Island.¹⁴¹ No further trace of LeJuge appears in the archives. She was presumably replaced by Andrea Axelrod sometime in the late 1990s.

In June 1997, Mandel delivered his first iteration of the *Complicity* screenplay to HBO.¹⁴² His first draft is similar to Edgar's version – it follows the basic plotline, but some subplots, such as the one with Riegner's cousin Lotte, are abandoned in favor of a more detailed depiction of the Roosevelt administration and the Bermuda Conference. The script still follows Eichmann and dramatizes several events in the history of Auschwitz: the Vrba escape and report, the failure to bomb the camp, and the *Sonderkommando* uprising of October 7, 1944, later dramatized in the films *The Grey Zone* (2001) and *Son of Saul* (2015).¹⁴³ Although the plotlines are tightened, the script still retains Riegner as its tragic hero protagonist and Eichmann as its antagonist. In comparison with *Conspiracy*, it is quickly apparent that the early *Complicity* scripts depict enough events for several movies, let alone a single cable television drama. Perhaps a filmmaker approaching this story today would consider a miniseries format instead – although HBO was producing historical miniseries during this period, the filmmakers were clearly limited to the two-film format.

Mandel's script directly draws a thematic parallel between Wannsee and Bermuda:

140 Karen de Witt, "TV Film on Holocaust Is Criticized as Unfair to Roosevelt," *New York Times*, April 6, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/06/us/tv-film-on-holocaust-is-criticized-as-unfair-to-roosevelt.html>.

141 Loring Mandel, Fax to Frank Doelger, January 15, 1997, in Box 12, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

142 Note that Mandel would consult with Pierson and most likely Zinner before delivering drafts to HBO, letting them provide feedback on "assembly drafts." See Loring Mandel, "Pt 1" (handwritten on first page): untitled script of *Complicity*, "First Assembly Draft 5/22/97", with notes, with handwritten emendations, May 22, 1997, in Box 3, Folder 1, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

143 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97.

INT. BANQUET ROOM, THE HORIZONS – MORNING

In this room, refurnished as a Conference Room, the American and British delegations sit around a highly-polished mahogany table, the Technical Experts (their briefcases and heavy research binders at hand) seated behind the major participants: Dodds, Bloom, Lucas and Reams; Law, Peake and Hall. Dodds actually has a gavel. There are pads and pencils, water pitchers and glasses, cigar and cigarette humidors. Reams has a heavy folder of papers, and will be taking notes. NOTE: The table, the room, the arrangement should all recall the Wannsee Conference as much as possible.¹⁴⁴

This juxtaposition of Wannsee with Bermuda follows Herman Wouk's depiction of the conferences in his novel *War and Remembrance*. Editor and executive producer Peter Zinner and his daughter, Katina Zinner, had edited ABC's television adaptation of Wouk's novel. One sentence in the novel, written from the perspective of the character Leslie Slote, an American diplomat working in Switzerland, reads like a pitch for the joint *Conspiracy/Complicity* project: ". . . history will say that the Jews of Europe were destroyed between the hammer of the Wannsee Conference and the anvil of the Bermuda Conference."¹⁴⁵ Later in the same chapter, the fictional US diplomat, William Tuttle, sends a memorandum to FDR entitled "The Bermuda Conference: American and British *Complicity* in the Extermination of the European Jews" [emphasis added].¹⁴⁶ Although no documentary evidence can be found in the Loring Mandel Collection proving the connection, Peter Zinner's status as both impetus behind the *Conspiracy* project and co-editor on *War and Remembrance* is a potential clue. This juxtaposition of the two conferences does not appear in any major historical works and *War and Remembrance* is the most prominent example of the comparison available.

At one point in the script, Riegner and his colleagues discuss the Wannsee Conference and who attended it – highly unlikely considering the conference remained secret until Allied investigators discovered Martin Luther's copy of the protocol. They discuss the protocol as a "plan" to exterminate all of Europe's Jews; a fictionalized turn of events similar to *War and Remembrance's* treatment of the protocol. For example, the characters speak about Müller, Kritzinger, Klopfer, and Freisler attending the meeting.¹⁴⁷ Unlike Edgar's script, Mandel's first draft of *Complicity* relies heavily on cinematic devices. The first of these is Riegner's voiceover narration, which the filmmakers would continue to insist upon until very late in the script's development. For example, Riegner's narration pops up at the beginning of the film as Heydrich leaves the Wannsee villa, stating "this

¹⁴⁴ Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 52.

¹⁴⁵ Herman Wouk, *War and Remembrance* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1980), 752.

¹⁴⁶ Wouk, *War and Remembrance*, 754.

¹⁴⁷ Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 13–14.

man here is Reinhard Heydrich. He's leaving a mansion in Wannsee, near Berlin, where he's just taken charge of Hitler's Final Solution for the Jews."¹⁴⁸ After Heydrich is attacked in Prague, Riegner's voiceover returns: "The good news: ten days later, Heydrich was dead of infection. The bad news followed."¹⁴⁹ Riegner's voiceover is present throughout the script, even breaking the fourth wall and having the modern-day (late 1990s) Riegner directly address the audience.¹⁵⁰ After the scenes depicting the Bermuda Conference, Riegner laments: "I heard the rumbling of great nations planning to hold out a hand to touch, to pull to safety how many remaining millions of Jews? But there was no hand reached out, all the imagination of these great powers seemed to be as barren as Lidice's scorched fields. As silent as Warsaw's empty ghetto."¹⁵¹ At the end of the script, the elderly Riegner addresses the audience, stating "I won't forget. (long pause) It's all . . . the saddest story ever told," then stares at the audience as the screen fades to black.¹⁵² Other cinematic devices appear misguided in retrospect. For example, Mandel included a proposal for a running onscreen counter of the number of murdered Jews, which would rise at different rates throughout the film:

And at the bottom of the screen a counter begins the fatal addition – similar to those signs that announce the acres of rain forest disappearing every minute, or deaths from cigarettes; it is running at medium fast rate now, later it will accelerate alarmingly, and towards the end of the movie when the total approaches six million, it will slow as there are fewer and fewer remaining Jews to kill. It will be more or less prominent – scene by scene – according to what is going on. Sometimes it may disappear entirely. We don't want it to become distracting, but it will have a distinctive sound, counting the dead while the bureaucrats waffle and the anti-Semites stonewall, and the well-intentioned fail to act.¹⁵³

When contrasted with *Conspiracy*, the *Complicity* script's early reliance on narration seems overwrought and stands in contrast to the minimalist aesthetic and the avoidance of exposition established in Mandel's first draft of *Conspiracy*, which are some of that film's strongest aspects. Compared to *Conspiracy*'s minimalism and wit, the dialogue here is often wooden, particularly that in action scenes or in Riegner's voiceover narration. The script's depictions of bureaucracy are striking, such as montages which depict Riegner's telegram going through different offices as it makes its way to the White House.¹⁵⁴ As for its depiction of the

148 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 1.

149 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 5.

150 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 11.

151 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 61.

152 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 120.

153 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 18 (original in all caps).

154 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 20.

American government, this draft of *Complicity* depicts Undersecretary of State Breckinridge Long as a Mussolini-admiring antisemite. Roosevelt is portrayed ignoring a group of Orthodox rabbis delivering a petition asking the government to commit to rescue, with Riegner stating in voiceover that “FDR had a light schedule, so that just before the Rabbis arrived, he left to go see some Yugoslavian pilots join the Army Air Force, passed his hand over four bombers they were going to fly, and took a five-day weekend at Hyde Park, New York. No surprise.”¹⁵⁵ The script also excels when depicting Riegner and his rescue efforts during the 1940s. In one scene depicting a conversation between Riegner and Carl J. Burckhardt, then a leading figure in the International Red Cross, Riegner asks the following question which may as well sum up the film’s message: “At what point, do you suppose, does neutrality become complicity?”¹⁵⁶ In a conversation with Secretary of the Treasury and rescue advocate Henry Morgenthau, the Treasury Department official Randolph Paul states “I don’t know how we can blame the Germans for killing them when we’re doing this [i. e., delaying efforts at rescue]. The law calls it *para-delicto*. Of equal guilt.” This is a direct quote from a conversation quoted in Wyman, which stems from Morgenthau’s diaries.¹⁵⁷ The script exudes a bitterness at America’s failure to live up to its ideals, at Roosevelt’s humanitarian image, and how inconsequential the Bermuda Conference was. It is a polemic against America’s image of itself and of its conduct during World War II.

Comments on Mandel’s early drafts of *Complicity* (he would deliver his second at the end of July 1997 and his third that September) took priority over work on *Conspiracy*, which largely remained the same except for sections connecting it to its companion film. The producer Steven Haft commented on the script, providing a series of questions and suggestions. One comment worried that the script did not portray the British storylines as effectively as the American ones, and that because the BBC was co-producing the film, this area required improvement. He also questioned the script’s characterization of Roosevelt. His most emphatic suggestion was about Riegner’s narration, which he felt robbed the audience of suspense: “Overall, I do believe [the script] needs more tension. It also needs to reflect the passions of the period as much as possible. I do believe the narration, as rendered, hurts us on all these counts.”¹⁵⁸ Mandel addressed Haft’s feedback in a letter to Frank Pierson, agreeing with some of it but rejecting Haft’s main suggestion about the narration,

155 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 72–73.

156 Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, 26.

157 Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 183.

158 Steven Haft, Fax to Frank Pierson, “Re: COMPLICITY Script,” June 11, 1997, in Box 11, Folder 1, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1–3.

calling it “naive” because “the reality of [the Holocaust] is too ingrained to be left in doubt; there will be no suspense on that question, no matter how the narration is framed.”¹⁵⁹ Mandel argued instead that “the suspense in *Complicity* is about [w]hether anything is done and [h]ow incredibly obtuse (or worse) the Allies were.”¹⁶⁰ Mandel also pointed out that HBO needed to secure the rights to Gerhart Riegner’s story, as Riegner was still living at the time: “I have nothing whatever to base Riegner’s dialogue and narration upon, other than the mostly factual basis of what he’s reporting. The attitudes ascribed to him have been given to him as if he were a fictional character . . . Rights to his story should be negotiated before HBO gets into an even bigger money-hole on the project.”¹⁶¹

In June of 1997, Frank Doelger and Colin Callender sent comments on both *Conspiracy* and *Complicity* to Pierson and Mandel. Their comments on *Complicity* were quite brief and limited to asking if other figures present at Wannsee are present in this script and asking if there was a way to include the American and British press in the storyline, in order to show what the public knew at the time.¹⁶² In July, Pierson sent Doelger a fax responding to feedback on *Complicity* and a production meeting they had attended. This fax includes an early mention of combining the two scripts “into one evening’s production,” with “Wannsee becom[ing] a long and strong first act.” The second act would then be Riegner’s storyline, with the third being John Pehle’s efforts at rescue and “the attempt to force Allied bureaucracy to whatever little it could be forced to do.”¹⁶³ This letter also claims that Pierson and Mandel were “reducing the Riegner voice over” and focusing more on the Bermuda Conference, as well as more strongly emphasizing the British roles in the storyline.¹⁶⁴

In August, Doelger sent another document to Pierson outlining issues with *Complicity*. In their back-and-forth over this document, the collaborative nature of historical filmmaking, as well as the tensions between drama and information become more apparent. First, Doelger criticized the new opening of *Conspiracy*,

159 Loring Mandel, Letter to Frank Pierson, June 14, 1997, in Box 11, Folder 1, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

160 Loring Mandel, Letter to Frank Pierson, June 14, 1997, 1.

161 Loring Mandel, Letter to Frank Pierson, June 14, 1997, 1.

162 Frank Doelger, “Notes Conspiracy – Complicity,” June 28, 1997, in Box 10, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 4.

163 Frank Pierson to Frank Doelger, July 13, 1997, Box 11, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

164 Pierson to Frank Doelger, July 13, 1997, 1–2.

which introduced Riegner and Pehle alongside a narration and animated map. For him, the narration “assumes too much knowledge on the part of the audience” and that it was a “mistake” to introduce Riegner and Pehle in such an early scene.¹⁶⁵ Doelger also argued that the narration should “better link” the two films. He noted that the Wannsee Conference should be used as a “mystery” for Riegner and the audience to investigate – that is “that something happened on the winter and spring of 1942 that dramatically changed the plight of the Jews. What had seemed haphazard (deportations, executions) now seemed planned. What was happening?”¹⁶⁶ He proposed that this “mystery” had to be the “organizing principle” for the first part of the film and that other scenes, like Heydrich’s assassination and the reprisal in Lidice, should go.¹⁶⁷ Pierson responded to Doelger on the same day, clarifying some of the things Doelger had asked questions about. He reframed Doelger’s proposal about the “mystery,” arguing that “what needs to be done is to read [both scripts] as a whole piece, with Wannsee being the first act in order to understand what the mystery is at any given point. For the audience, there is no mystery as to the plan; it’s a mystery to Riegner and all the other participants in *Complicity*.”¹⁶⁸ He also defended what he saw as the necessity of depicting Heydrich’s death in Prague because “the whole point is that we’ve just seen [Heydrich] outline his entire plan, get it set and put in motion and delegate the powers to carry it out to Eichmann and then bang, he dies, so the audience’s question is ‘what’s going to happen to the plan without Heydrich?’ That’s why we need to have Heydrich die right at that point.”¹⁶⁹ Pierson bristled at suggestions to provide the audience more background information, arguing instead for something that engaged in less handholding:

In sum, there’s absolutely no disagreement between Loring, you and me or anybody about the necessity for clarity in something as complex and now 50 years away from the current knowledge of the great body of our audience. But I’m concerned that in the effort to be clear we not go overboard towards a form of narration that turns it into a dry documentary. What we’re dealing with here is the issue of people getting angry and it should be emotional. The behavior is more important than the description of it. Which is why I think much of this is going to be far clearer when seen onscreen and out of the mouths of actors

165 Frank Doelger to Frank Pierson, “RE: COMPLICITY/Second Revision,” August 15, 1997, in Box 10, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

166 Doelger to Frank Pierson, “RE: COMPLICITY/Second Revision,” August 15, 1997, 2.

167 Doelger to Frank Pierson, “RE: COMPLICITY/Second Revision,” August 15, 1997, 2.

168 Frank Pierson to Frank Doelger, August 15, 1997, Box 11, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

169 Pierson to Frank Doelger, August 15, 1997, 1.

than may sometimes be apparent on the page. We are almost always up against the tendency to move the subtext into text – which is the exact opposite of drama.¹⁷⁰

Essentially, the argument between the two here is one between a producer wanting to make sure the audience would understand each story thread and a director wanting to maintain his artistic vision.

The British journalist Alasdair Palmer, whom HBO had brought on board as a consultant and researcher, also provided comments on *Complicity* towards the end of 1997. His early comments praised *Conspiracy* but identified several problems with the *Complicity* script, which would eventually prove fatal. First off, he stated that the script was “much, much, *much* too ambitious in its scope. The movie aims to outline the complete story of the Holocaust, the Nazis, and World War Two. It simply isn’t possible to tell that story, even in the barest outline, in a couple of two-hour films.”¹⁷¹ Palmer claimed that *Complicity* was “too diffuse” and meant that “we lose focus.” Roughly corresponding with Pierson’s comments, he argued that most audience members already knew the broad strokes of World War II history and did not need narration to bring them up to speed, arguing that it would make audiences “feel bored, and possibly insulted, at being told the obvious in such elementary terms.”¹⁷² The second problem Palmer identified was even more problematic from a historiographical and moral sense. For him, the film’s contrast between Riegner and Eichmann “seriously distorted and misrepresented” the history of the Holocaust, because it implied Eichmann being “more or less single-handedly responsible for the Holocaust: using him as the focus for all those scenes creates the impression that if only the allies had decided to assassinate *him*, they would have stopped it all. The effect is to create the false impression that all the bureaucratic battles and meanderings in Washington and London about plans to evacuate the Jews are really an irrelevant side-show.”¹⁷³ Palmer rightly noted that this portrayal was “a serious distortion of the truth” because it ignored that “[t]here were thousands of Germans (and Austrians) like Eichmann, all equally fanatical, and all equally willing . . . [a]ssassinating Eichmann would have had the same effect on the pace of the Holocaust as assassinating Heydrich: zero.”¹⁷⁴ He also argued that “the Holocaust was the result of a system, not a sin-

170 Pierson to Frank Doleger, August 15, 1997, 1.

171 Alasdair Palmer, “Comments on *Conspiracy/Complicity*,” November 12, 1997, in Box 11, Folder 3, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

172 Palmer, “Comments on *Conspiracy/Complicity*,” 1.

173 Palmer, “Comments on *Conspiracy/Complicity*,” 2.

174 Palmer, “Comments on *Conspiracy/Complicity*,” 2.

gle evil genius,” and that the film’s current portrayal of Eichmann portrayed him as one.¹⁷⁵

Palmer also noted that the script, which was already guilty of “distorting the reality, and over-loading the drama with a recitation of facts,” also “suggests that the movie is setting up a straight moral parallel between Eichmann and US bureaucrats . . . But there is no parallel here. Failing to stop the Germans from gassing millions of Jewish women and children is *not* the same as actually ordering it yourself.”¹⁷⁶ Instead, he suggested that the movie should refocus, noting that had Allied bureaucrats “acted on the Riegner plan, and accepted Romania’s offer to sell 70,000 Jews,” they would have acted as “a kind of inverse of Oskar Schindler.”¹⁷⁷ Palmer criticized the script because “the main stories get swamped, lost in a blizzard of facts and narration,” and that Riegner’s omniscient narration “diminishes alot [sic] of the drama” because “[Riegner’s] gradual discovery of the true nature and extent of the Holocaust, and of the failure of the allies to do anything about it, ought to be highly tense and dramatic.”¹⁷⁸ Palmer suggested improving the script by focusing tightly on Riegner’s telegram and the Allied response to it, as well as the above-mentioned proposal to ransom Romanian Jews. For him, the script would greatly improve if it devoted more time to Riegner and less to tangential events, as Riegner was “the perfect character.”¹⁷⁹ Later versions of the *Complicity* script would focus more strongly on Riegner and shorten the Eichmann storyline of earlier drafts. Palmer and Doelger would travel to Geneva to interview Riegner and Frank Pierson would also film an interview with Riegner.¹⁸⁰ However, in his first round of feedback, Alasdair Palmer identified the salient problems with *Complicity* which would plague it until Mandel decided to take a completely different tack by focusing solely on the Allied governments, using the Bermuda Conference as a centerpiece. Before Mandel made this change, the script would remain too bloated, too ambitious, too expensive, and too conventional for HBO to commit to it.

By mid-1997, Pierson, Zinner, and Mandel’s idea to produce a new film on the Wannsee Conference had grown into an effort to explore the history of the Holocaust’s origins and the Allied response to it. What had begun as an attempt to

175 Palmer, “Comments on *Conspiracy/Complicity*,” 2.

176 Palmer, “Comments on *Conspiracy/Complicity*,” 2.

177 Palmer, “Comments on *Conspiracy/Complicity*,” 3–4.

178 Palmer, “Comments on *Conspiracy/Complicity*,” 4.

179 Palmer, “Comments on *Conspiracy/Complicity*,” 4–5.

180 See discussion of the interviews in Chapter 6.

make a smaller, more intimate film about an infamous conference had become a story about the entire history of the Holocaust. Later on, their focus would shift to examining the two conferences that took place within a year and a half of each other at Wannsee and Bermuda. HBO's decision to tie *Conspiracy* in with the *Complicity* project would prove near-fatal to both projects.

Chapter 6

Writing and Filming *Conspiracy*, 1998–2000

I think it's a story that has to be told over and over and over again. – Stanley Tucci¹

1 Further Script Development

During 1997, when Mandel wrote his initial drafts of *Complicity*, he also revised the *Conspiracy* screenplay as part of “assembly drafts” or “combined scripts” which brought the two stories together (see Figure 6.1). By 1998, Mandel’s initial drafts of *Conspiracy* and *Complicity* went through several rounds of discussion and editing. In these combined scripts, *Conspiracy* remains identical to earlier drafts except for refinements to the beginning and end of the film in order to help the story connect better with *Complicity*. One of the early combined scripts ends the *Conspiracy* half with Heydrich flying in his plane back to Prague after the meeting, and the *Complicity* half immediately begins with Heydrich just before his assassination.² For the remainder of 1997 and 1998, all script drafts conceived of the films as one larger story; development of the *Conspiracy* script slowed as Mandel and the production team devoted most of their energy to refining and refocusing *Complicity*.

The historian Michael Berenbaum, perhaps best known for his early tenure at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. as director of its research institute, served as a historical consultant for the production. When he first joined the team, he was the President and CEO of Steven Spielberg’s Survivors of the Shoah Foundation, which he would leave by 1999.³ Berenbaum stated that HBO brought him on board because of his work on the 1995 documentary *One Survivor Remembers: The Gerda Weissmann Klein Story*. Berenbaum was

1 Transcript of Interview with Stanley Tucci, *Charlie Rose*, April 19, 2001, Box 15, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 6.

2 See Loring Mandel, “Mid-revision unformatted,” a combined script of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, and *Complicity* Second Draft 7/20/97,” Box 3, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 117–118.

3 See “Dr. Michael Berenbaum to Join Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation,” November 25, 1996, USC Shoah Foundation, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://sfi.usc.edu/news/1996/11/10333-dr-michael-berenbaum-join-survivors-shoah-visual-history-foundation>; Tom Tugend, “Stepping Down,” *Jewish Journal*, June 3, 1999, https://jewishjournal.com/old_stories/1762/.

frequently present at production meetings and provided comments on the script throughout the production process.⁴ In February 1998, while he was still working for the Survivors of the Shoah Foundation, Berenbaum delivered his initial comments on the *Conspiracy* and *Complicity* scripts in a seven-page fax to executive producer Frank Doelger, opening by telling Doelger that the project was “a most important topic, an exceedingly powerful story,” but arguing “the [*Conspiracy*] script doesn’t make it.” Berenbaum continued his criticism, noting that “The Wannsee Conference is inherently undramatic, important and decisive, perhaps the most ‘evil’ meeting in history, but undramatic nevertheless. I don’t believe that the script has added drama to the meeting, whose importance cannot be overstated.”⁵ He praised *Complicity* but noted that “[t]here may be too many characters and too little context.”⁶ Most importantly, Berenbaum identified one of the central weaknesses of the combined project at that stage of writing: “the linkage between the two parts of the script is historically flawed. The Allies did not know of the Wannsee Conference. It was not known even at Nuremberg and certainly not by Riegner, whose famous telegram of August 1942 speaks of a ‘plan under consideration and the Führer’s[sic] headquarters’ and not an operational decision.”⁷ Berenbaum then reviewed the scripts page by page. For example, he noted that this draft’s reference to Heydrich’s supposed Jewish ancestry “was used to politically weaken and demean him and this must be conveyed in the context of the script,” noting that this rumor was most likely false.⁸ Berenbaum also drew attention to a characteristic of the Wannsee Conference attendees that would prove central to *Conspiracy*:

The age of the characters is important. They are relatively young and high ranking. There is little room for them to go up the ladder unless others but a year or two older descend . . . Seven of 15 have advanced higher education. Lawyers, they are called ‘doctor’ in status [conscious] Germany. They are ‘the best and brightest’ and not the monstrous men as depicted in film and some accounts of Nazi Germany. It is their status and education that in part accounts for their demonic deeds.⁹

Berenbaum’s initial comments on the *Conspiracy* script were mostly concerned with details, errors like inconsistent ranks, language that participants would not have used, erroneous figures, and the like. He also provides context and motiva-

⁴ Interview with Michael Berenbaum, April 13, 2021, 0:53–01:19.

⁵ Michael Berenbaum. Letter to Frank Doelger, February 5, 1998, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

⁶ Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, February 5, 1998, 1.

⁷ Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, February 5, 1998, 1.

⁸ Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, February 5, 1998, 2.

⁹ Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, February 5, 1998, 2.

tions for some of the groups represented at the table like the Nazi Party and Government Ministries. His comments are not without flaws; he erroneously claimed that the villa had previously had a Jewish owner.¹⁰ But for the most part, the production team took these comments seriously, as most of these errors are absent from later screenplay drafts. For the *Complicity* script, Berenbaum's comments ran along a similar line. He noted that Eichmann "would not have spoken so openly and scornfully of Heydrich," one of the most puzzling aspects of these earlier script drafts.¹¹ He also pointed out that the *Complicity* script "greatly exaggerated" Eichmann's importance in the Holocaust and that "the story loses credibility because of it."¹² Berenbaum ended this fax by expressing his wishes to meet with Loring Mandel and the production team, praising their efforts but firmly stating that the screenplays needed improvement in certain areas: "The topic is fascinating. The program should be proximate to the Event it narrates."¹³ The writer David Edgar, who had penned the first version of *Complicity*, also commented on the scripts that February. He praised *Conspiracy*, devoting most of his comments to improving its opening narration. Edgar did not limit himself to commenting on dramatic issues but instead also corrected various minor factual errors.¹⁴

After Edgar and Berenbaum commented on the scripts, Mandel delivered a fourth draft at the end of March 1998. In this stage of pre-production, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee* was written to begin with Gerhart Riegner introducing the audience to the events about to unfold at Wannsee.¹⁵ *Complicity* was now titled *Complicity: The Meeting at Bermuda* and was more tightly focused than earlier drafts, which leaned more heavily on David Edgar's script and covered a much wider range of events and locations.¹⁶ A list of *Complicity* scenes for a proposed May 2000 shoot, dated July 6, 1998, shows that the team had already vastly trimmed down the project's ambitious scale. It includes a list of deleted scenes such as Heydrich's assassination, which was still included in script drafts

10 Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, February 5, 1998, 2–4.

11 Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, February 5, 1998, 4.

12 Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, February 5, 1998, 5.

13 Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, February 5, 1998, 7.

14 David Edgar, "Conspiracy\Complicity Notes," February 22, 1998, Box 10, Folder 10, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

15 Loring Mandel, "Conspiracy (The Meeting at Wannsee)" (first page) "Complicity (The Meeting at Bermuda)" (page 121): combined script, "Rev Fourth Draft 4/27/98," Box 6, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1–4.

16 Mandel, "Conspiracy (The Meeting at Wannsee)" (first page) "Complicity (The Meeting at Bermuda)" (page 121): combined script, "Rev Fourth Draft 4/27/98."

as late as the spring of that year. Curiously, this script erroneously has Heydrich's assassination taking place in Lidice instead of Prague.¹⁷



Figure 6.1: Script Title Page with proposed *Conspiracy/Complicity* logo, April 1998.¹⁸ Image courtesy Alan and Josh Mandel; Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

In a script preface from April 28, 1998, Frank Pierson outlined his vision for the two films. This vision was more refined and clearer than Pierson's earlier film "thesis statements" and was clearly informed after the now several years of input from HBO officials, as well as the recent addition of Michael Berenbaum to the production team. For *Conspiracy*, Pierson discussed the Wannsee Conference at length, noting early on the film's strong points, particularly when it came to revealing the truth behind the subtext:

At Wannsee, near Berlin, the plan [coordinating the so-called Final Solution] was outlined and Germany's ruling bureaucrats were given their instructions. The meeting's atmosphere was like a corporate board meeting. In "*Conspiracy*," the meeting at Wannsee – a beautiful lakeside mansion confiscated from a Jewish family – is dramatically recreated from the actual minutes of the meeting, written and edited by the then obscure Lt Col Adolf Eichmann and General Heydrich, himself. The meeting lasted approximately an hour and a half. Certainly, in that period, these men were not always at their best and always on the point. There are moments of lightness, moments of hostility, plenty of defensiveness, a few mo-

¹⁷ HBO NYC Productions, *Complicity*, one-line schedules for a proposed May 2000 shoot, July, 1998, Box 6, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1–10.

¹⁸ Frank Pierson. "Preface," April 28, 1998, Box 6, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

ments when the subtext is utterly revealed, and much self-protective game-playing. I want, too, to show how, in any individual, cruelty and sociopathology can coexist with the sappiest sentimentality.¹⁹

This preface outlines the film's key themes, most notably the seeming discrepancy between conference's subject matter with its location in an elegant suburban villa. Pierson also argued that the conference was "primarily for the purpose of consolidating [Heydrich's] power as the sole commander of the Final Solution. The various ministries of the Reich had been dealing with the 'Jewish Question' in various ad hoc ways . . ." ²⁰ This characterization of interinstitutional rivalries clearly follows a more functionalist historiography and departs from earlier, more Hitler-centric descriptions of the conference alluded to in earlier script drafts and production documents. For *Complicity*, Pierson's preface strayed more from the historical record and claimed dramatic parallels between the Wannsee Conference and the Bermuda Conference, stating that after the contents of Gerhart Riegner's telegram got out "President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill finally ordered that a meeting of the Allies be held – a meeting in answer to the meeting at Wannsee, if you will – to determine what the world could do to halt the holocaust [sic]."²¹ Pierson described *Complicity* as the story of the Bermuda Conference, arguing that it, too, "had been systematically planned by the men who arranged it . . . to do nothing."²² Drawing further parallels, Pierson said:

[o]n the day they ended their meeting in Bermuda it was not quite a year and four months since the Conspiracy met at Wannsee. More than two million five hundred thousand Jews had been gassed and burned in those sixteen months, vanished in smoke while their houses and businesses were taken over by Germans, their art hung in the collections of Nazi officials, their fortunes disappeared into German banks and Swiss accounts. While they had talked in Bermuda the Warsaw ghetto fell. At Auschwitz almost 50,000 had died. While they talked . . . We use the actual American and British minutes, incorporating the original language where feasible. And we cut away to other events that went into planning the meeting and in the end leading to its' failure. All told through Gerhart Riegner, our storyteller, and himself a central figure in the drama of the time . . .²³

The preface, which contains detailed descriptions of the characters in both pieces, as well as a bibliography, also includes a section titled "historical accuracy." This section emphasizes the filmmakers' use of the Wannsee Protocol and claims that

19 Pierson, "Preface," April 28, 1998, 1.

20 Pierson, "Preface," April 28, 1998, 1.

21 Pierson, "Preface," April 28, 1998, 3–4.

22 Pierson, "Preface," April 28, 1998, 4.

23 Pierson, "Preface," April 28, 1998, 4.

the script “is fleshed out with extensive research on the participants, their jobs and their personalities to the extent that they are in the printed record. The dialogue is invented but follows the minutes as to the substance of what they said. The fact that they drank, socialized and ate is well documented in the memoirs of the survivors, including Eichmann himself.”²⁴ *Complicity*’s screenplay, meanwhile, was based on the US and British delegation meeting minutes, but Pierson clarified that “in social situations and the dialogue of the newspaper reports we have had to invent, but in words attributed to individuals who were actually there we have them express the same positions they took on the record.”²⁵ Here, Pierson devoted more attention to Breckinridge Long, arguably the villain of *Complicity*, stating that “Long’s statements and positions in meetings . . . are taken from his writings, his memoirs, and official documents.”²⁶

Frank Pierson’s preface also illustrates something about his own attitude as a writer and director. In an interview, Frank Doelger discussed Pierson’s personality at length, which would both strongly benefit the production but also prove exceedingly difficult:

Frank started as a writer. He moved from writing into directing and I think that he came of age when – especially working for feature films, where he had a lot of creative control, a lot of creative freedom – I think when he started moving into television, I think he found it to be a difficult transition. I think that especially working for HBO, HBO was always incredibly respectful of talent, but at the same time they were very protective of the brand, particularly with historical dramas. I remember being told repeatedly that it’s fine to depart from the truth to use your creative imagination but you must do it in a very informed way. If anybody ever questions you, you have to know absolutely why you departed from the truth. You have to absolutely know what the truth is. And you have to be able to defend it. And that was expected of all of us. I think that was one thing that Frank [resisted] a little bit. Yes, he wanted the film to be truthful, but he also wanted it to be effective creatively. I think that the combination of that and Frank having less respect for researchers and executives than for the creative community – he would bristle when notes came which he felt indicated that the people that were giving them did not understand what he was trying to accomplish, what we were trying to accomplish. I was fortunate in that I was able to wear both hats. I came with the authority and the backing of HBO but at the same time he knew my own career, that I come from a creative path, from a studio path. And Loring also understood that. But it was very contentious at times. Sometimes it was definitely about the film, other times it was really more about Frank’s lifelong toiling in Hollywood, the battles he had had to fight to protect his vision. The films he wanted to make as director, as a writer.²⁷

²⁴ Pierson, “Preface,” April 28, 1998, 7–8.

²⁵ Pierson, “Preface,” April 28, 1998, 8.

²⁶ Pierson, “Preface,” April 28, 1998, 8.

²⁷ Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020, 21:52–24:52.

Two weeks after Pierson wrote his preface to the script, Michael Berenbaum provided additional comments on the new draft of the combined screenplay, writing again to Doelger on May 14, 1998 with extensive comments on *Complicity* and a handful of suggestions for fine-tuning the details of *Conspiracy*. He noted that this version was “much, much better” and “a great improvement over the first.”²⁸ For the *Conspiracy* half, Berenbaum remarked on a line from Heydrich (originating in the protocol) about “practical experience” showing that “evacuation” was “the policy that takes the place of emigration.”²⁹ Berenbaum argued that the original language of the protocol was “much more suggestive” and emphasized that “[t]he men at the table needed little explanation. They understood that ‘evacuation to the East’ was a euphemism for concentration camps, and that ‘the Final Solution’ was systematic murder.” He noted that the various killing methods were already either already happening or under testing at this stage, though the screenplay already accounted for these developments and mentioned them in this draft, at this point mostly through Rudolf Lange’s dialogue (later drafts would shift some of this information to Eichmann as Lange was not deployed to the camps in the General Government, but instead active in Latvia).³⁰ The protocol’s original language Berenbaum referred to was not that different from that in the script:

Another possible solution of the [Jewish] problem has now taken the place of emigration, i.e. evacuation of the Jews to the East . . . such activities are, however, to be considered as provisional actions, but practical experience is already being collected, which is of greatest importance in relation to the future final solution of the Jewish problem.³¹

For *Complicity*, Berenbaum went into much more detail (his comments on this version of *Conspiracy* only last one page, he devoted three to *Complicity*). He identified problematic aspects of the script’s portrayal of Riegner, noting that the “plan” mentioned in Riegner’s August 1942 telegram “was implemented in January [1942] . . . the drama is there. We don’t have to overstate the case. Perhaps Riegner can reflect on the gap between what he now [retrospectively] knows actually happened and what information he had at the time. Unless we specify this gap all the defenders of

28 Michael Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, May 14, 1998, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1–4.

29 Mandel, “Conspiracy (The Meeting at Wannsee)” (first page) “Complicity (The Meeting at Bermuda)” (page 121): combined script, “Rev Fourth Draft 4/27/98,” 34.

30 Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, May 14, 1998, 2; Mandel, “Conspiracy (The Meeting at Wannsee)” (first page) “Complicity (The Meeting at Bermuda)” (page 121): combined script, “Rev Fourth Draft 4/27/98.”

31 Wannsee Conference Protocol, quoted in Michael Berenbaum. Letter to Frank Doelger, May 14, 1998, 2.

FDR will come out of the closet and attack this piece as unfair.”³² Berenbaum also stated that the screenwriters “must juxtapose” the Bermuda Conference with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which occurred simultaneously. He also suggested the removal of Benzion (“Benjamin” in the script) Netanyahu, father of the Israeli Prime Minister of the same name and head of the New Zionist Organization of America during the war, from the script, noting that “Netanyahu was even less than a bit player. He was of no significance and the connection to Bibi would lead to misunderstandings.”³³ Although Berenbaum was nominally the production’s historical advisor, he mostly commented on drafts and did not have the time to visit archives, photocopy source material, and conduct what historian John Lewis Gaddis has referred to as the “ductwork” of research.³⁴ For that, HBO would need to hire their own full-time researcher.

Based on comments at this point and the available archival material, the bulk of the production team’s efforts by mid-1998 were focused on *Complicity*. *Conspiracy* had a screenplay that was in need of more detailed historical input and fact-checking, but the broad strokes were there. *Complicity* was much more difficult. At the behest of Frank Doelger, HBO hired Andrea Axelrod, a journalist and freelance writer with a background in drama, as a full-time researcher and fact-checker. She had attended Williams College and remained friends with Doelger, her former classmate:

[Frank] contacted me, [and asked] ‘how would I like to do some research for HBO?’ And what he explained was that he wanted someone who did not have a background in Holocaust studies, so I would come to it without a bias. Also, somebody who had a sense of drama. And he knew from my theater and musical background and particularly in opera, you know what drama is, that I could spot things and say ‘oh, that’s something could add some coloring to the scene.’ Loring Mandel had already written a draft. He may have already written 2 or 3 drafts, but that’s when they brought me in. I proceeded to read for around 2 years.³⁵

In the same interview, Axelrod contended that “my charge was to document every line, so that Holocaust deniers couldn’t come after us.”³⁶ The most likely explanation for this claim about combating Holocaust denial has more to do with the historical context than any concrete wishes on the part of the production

32 Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, May 14, 1998, 1.

33 Berenbaum, Letter to Frank Doelger, May 14, 1998, 3.

34 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), xi.

35 Interview with Andrea Axelrod, March 9, 2018, New York City, 21:51–25:27.

36 Interview with Andrea Axelrod, 00:53–03:46.

team. The verdict in the Holocaust denier David Irving's libel case against the historian Deborah Lipstadt was reached in April 2000. This trial was extensively covered by the press and certainly would have been of interest to people working on a Holocaust film at the time.³⁷

The earliest known document mentioning Axelrod is a letter from July 1998, so she likely began several months earlier and concerns primary source documents related to the Bermuda Conference, which she had requested from the US National Archives.³⁸ The Loring Mandel archive contains several boxes of photocopied research material gathered by Axelrod at various archives throughout the US, the vast majority pertaining to *Complicity* and the Bermuda Conference.³⁹ Because most of her early work was devoted to finding and gathering source material, very little correspondence involving Axelrod has survived from this period. She would later go on to provide the bulk of fact-checking support once filming was imminent.

By 1998, both scripts focused on Gerhart Riegner as narrator, with *Complicity* directly depicting his efforts to inform the British and American governments. Frank Doelger and Alasdair Palmer had previously traveled to Geneva and interviewed Riegner.⁴⁰ One surviving fifty-three-page transcript of a June 1998 interview with Riegner conducted by Frank Pierson, Loring Mandel, and Frank Doelger can be found in the Loring Mandel Collection. In this interview, Pierson mentions meeting Riegner three years prior and discusses Mandel's script up to that point. The interview also mentions Peter Zinner having met Riegner the day before.⁴¹ Pierson also filmed an interview with Riegner, which would have likely been used in either an accompanying documentary or directly spliced into *Complicity*.⁴² The interview also mentions possibly filming on location at The Horizons in Bermuda, the resort where the Bermuda Confer-

37 For the Irving v. Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt Trial, see Richard J. Evans, *Lying About Hitler*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002); D. D. Guttenplan, *The Holocaust on Trial* (New York: Norton, 2001); R. J. van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); and Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denial: Holocaust History on Trial*, Media Tie In edition (New York, NY: Ecco, 2016).

38 NARA to Andrea Axelrod, July 20, 1998, in Andrea Axelrod Private Archive, New York City, New York.

39 See Boxes 12 and 13, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

40 Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020. 18:00–18:35.

41 Interview with Gerhart Riegner, Geneva, June 28–29, 1998, Box 11 Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1, 49.

42 Interview with Loring Mandel, March 2, 2019, 41:23–55:24.

ence took place.⁴³ These interviews are not contained in the Mandel collection, but photographs of Pierson and Riegner at Lake Geneva, surrounded by cameras and lighting equipment, have survived (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3). The multiple trips to Switzerland, as well as the costs for filming an interview, would not have been cheap and illustrate the degree of HBO's financial commitment to the project.



Figure 6.2: Gerhart Riegner and Frank Pierson on the shore of Lake Geneva, Summer 1998.⁴⁴ Image courtesy Alan and Josh Mandel; Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

2 Cancellation and Revival

In summer 1998, HBO abruptly dropped the combined project. Little archival documentation exists surrounding HBO's decision, just statements from people like Frank Pierson after the fact. In an extensive interview with the Directors Guild of America, Frank Pierson stated that "HBO was not comfortable with CONSPIRACY. They were very worried about it and we had a – lots of long, difficulties and try-

⁴³ Interview with Gerhart Riegner, Geneva, June 29–29, 1998, 36.

⁴⁴ Photo of Trip to Geneva, Box 19, Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.



Figure 6.3: Filming Pierson and Riegner at Lake Geneva, Summer 1998.⁴⁵ Image courtesy Alan and Josh Mandel; Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

ing to convince people about this, that, or the other thing, and so on.”⁴⁶ Mandel’s last screenplay draft before cancellation was dated September 9, 1998.⁴⁷ One document written by Frank Doelger during the same year mentions that “budgets are under great scrutiny at HBO,” asking Mandel and Pierson to shorten planned montages in *Complicity*, which would have simply cost too much to shoot.⁴⁸ In an interview, Loring Mandel credited producer Colin Callender with reviving the project after its 1998 cancellation:

⁴⁵ Photo of Trip to Geneva, Box 19, Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁴⁶ Frank Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” February 10, 2009, Directors Guild of America, <https://www.dga.org/Craft/VisualHistory/Interviews/Frank-Pierson.aspx>. Chapter 4, Clip 7, 8:02.

⁴⁷ Loring Mandel, “Conspiracy/Complicity, written by Loring Mandel, Sixth Draft, 9/9/98”: combined script, Box 8, Folder 1, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁴⁸ Frank Doelger to Loring Mandel and Frank Pierson, undated, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

But then HBO started dragging their feet . . . [after our 1998 trip to interview Riegner in Switzerland], we did a demonstration of the script for [unintelligible] in New York . . . and it looked like it was going forward and then you just started hearing that there was unhappiness about the way Roosevelt was depicted. And then I think Colin, I don't know if he just gave up or what because everything was dropped. Because it was going to be two consecutive Saturday nights and then it was dropped. And then Colin managed to get it back alive. And that was just the *Conspiracy* part not the *Complicity* part.⁴⁹

The most detailed – if not biased – account of HBO's 1998 passing on the project can be found in a fax Frank Pierson sent (alongside Mandel's screenplay and Pierson's preface) to the liberal activist and lawyer Stanley Sheinbaum at the end of September 1998. In this letter, Pierson expressed deep bitterness and anger about the fate of what had been his passion project, stating that "I am devastated by this, but more than anything I am saddened and angered by the reasons for it happening. The historical record needs to be read; it is not enough for a few scholars to know and understand – if history is not recreated for each generation it might as well be forgotten and its lessons left unlearned."⁵⁰ Regarding HBO's decision to pass on the project, Pierson alleged that "HBO has lost its nerve" and that the executives Bob Cooper and Michael Fuchs, whom he had originally pitched *Conspiracy* to, "[were] a different management team" than the HBO executives who had just passed on the project and that Colin Callender "had the brilliant idea of coupling the two productions."⁵¹ In this document, where Pierson reminisced about the project and looked at it from what was then a retrospective vantage point – he could not have known that HBO would pick it back up a year and a half later – the director noted the difficulties faced by the production team:

The Wannsee [C]onference lent itself to dramatization; finding a workable concept for "Complicity," was extraordinarily difficult as it involved so many threads, and discovering what to keep in and what to leave out was agonizing. Within the compass of a single night on HBO, for example, it proved impossible to deal with the role of the Vatican, to do more than mention the Red Cross in passing, and in the end we left out entirely the issue of bombing the gas chambers at Auschwitz . . . And during this period of writing and rewriting, a new regime at HBO was grappling with formulating their own production philosophy, but also growing more and more uncomfortable with the idea of depicting our wartime leaders as in any way complicit. I believe they are particularly disturbed by the portrayal of some of Roosevelt's trusted officials (Breckinridge Long in the State Department, for one) as

⁴⁹ Interview with Loring Mandel, March 2, 2019, 55:24–57:52.

⁵⁰ Frank Pierson, Fax to Stanley Sheinbaum, September 30, 1998, Box 11, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 2.

⁵¹ Pierson, Fax to Stanley Sheinbaum, 1.

openly anti-Semitic, and of Roosevelt himself avoiding the issue because of feared political backlash⁵²

Pierson continued, stating that he was “trying to get them to at least make the Wannsee segment on its own, as it is relatively inexpensive to make. Also it does not touch on what HBO seems to feel are too sensitive political issues. If they will not do that, I am trying to get them to let me set it up elsewhere – Turner cable being the only real alternative market for it.”⁵³ Pierson also noted that reviving *Complicity*, which “HBO [had] definitively abandoned,” would have been difficult due to lost money already invested in the project, as well as “conflicting rights issues.” The German production company UFA had invested a significant amount in the project and promised support for production in Germany.⁵⁴ Pierson ended his letter expressing worry at what he saw as a new and disappointing direction HBO was taking:

I hope HBO is not losing its nerve and adventurousness that made it a vibrant and exciting place to work and – because of the excitement that conveyed – made it a commercial success as well. It was – perhaps may yet be – the last best place for a cinema of ideas to leaven the tsunami of commercial entertainment.⁵⁵

Frank Doelger also spoke about the difficulties HBO had in getting the *Complicity* story right, noting the twisted paths taken by the production and what he saw as the dead end of the Bermuda Conference:

. . . what was very effective about *Conspiracy* was that it was so narrowly focused, and we realized that the other story, *Complicity* was just spiraling out of control. Every time we tried, we looked at something new and found it was just getting bigger and bigger. And it was very hard to be definitive about it . . . We then tried to boil it down to a recreation of the Bermuda Conference. So the final effort was to try to recreate 2 conferences, one of which at Wannsee and the second of which being the Bermuda Conference. But again, the Bermuda Conference was not particularly exciting, particularly definitive, and also it just never seemed to – we never found a way in to actually to give it the gravitas or this darkness hanging over obviously over a very, very dark shadow which is informing every aspect of *Conspiracy*. So we finally abandoned the project.⁵⁶

Fortunately for Pierson, the *Conspiracy* project was not completely abandoned. By 1999, developments in HBO’s corporate structure opened the window for *Con-*

52 Pierson, Fax to Stanley Sheinbaum, 2.

53 Pierson, Fax to Stanley Sheinbaum, 2.

54 Pierson, Fax to Stanley Sheinbaum, 2.

55 Pierson, Fax to Stanley Sheinbaum, 3.

56 Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020. 11:15–15:04.

spiracy's revival, and Pierson's efforts to get it produced would succeed. Loring Mandel would deliver a final draft of *Complicity* in 2003, but by that point, the project would finally pass into development oblivion.

During 1999, HBO dissolved HBO NYC Productions and HBO Pictures, combining the two divisions into HBO Films. In the second half of the 1990s, HBO NYC Productions had been devoted to producing HBO's more unconventional or controversial original films while HBO Pictures handled "safer" dramatic fare.⁵⁷ Film scholar Dana Heller has characterized the merger as "HBO's strategic diversification of projects – large and small, innovative and mainstream – under one banner that would produce original feature films and miniseries for the television market as well as feature films for theatrical distribution."⁵⁸ During this shakeup, Colin Callender, the former executive vice president of HBO NYC Productions, was named president of HBO Films, while Chris Albrecht was given overall command of HBO's original productions.⁵⁹ A *Variety* piece discussing 1999's developments noted that "[m]ore than most networks, HBO is known for allowing various fiefdoms to exist. Organizing all original programming under Albrecht will put HBO more in line with the structure of other networks, which tend to have one chief of entertainment programming."⁶⁰ This same article mentions that recent offerings from HBO NYC Productions under the helm of its ousted president, John Matoian, including several historical films, had proven lackluster.⁶¹ Perhaps the *Conspiracy/Complicity* project fell victim to wider skepticism of HBO NYC Productions' original offerings during this period; moreover, as a multi-night period piece, it would have required a large budget expenditure. In any case, in his capacity as the new head of HBO Films, Colin Callender was in an ideal position to bring *Conspiracy*, one of his passion projects, back to life. In an interview just before the film's premiere, Frank Pierson also credited Callender with "giving the greenlight" to the film after he tried funding it himself as an "indie feature."⁶² In late September 1999, Loring Mandel wrote a summary of the project – a type of pitch document, possibly to get HBO to rethink their decision:

57 Heller, "Films," 42–51, 43–44.

58 Heller, "Films," 43–44.

59 Chris Pursell, "HBO Films Taps Exex," *Variety*, November 17, 1999, <https://variety.com/1999/biz/news/hbo-films-taps-exex-1117758117/>.

60 Richard Katz, "HBO Punts Pic Head," *Variety*, April 13, 1999, <https://variety.com/1999/biz/news/hbo-punts-pic-head-1117493189/>.

61 Katz, "HBO Punts Pic Head."

62 Army Archerd, "HBO Takes Hard Line with 'Conspiracy,'" *Variety*, May 8, 2001, <https://variety.com/2001/tv/columns/hbo-takes-hard-line-with-conspiracy-1117798795/>.

Every effort has been made to delineate the individual characters of the participants. Enormous research, aided by prominent scholars of the Holocaust, has been the foundation of the writing. The atmosphere of the Conference, which was at first a powerful invocation of mission by Heydrich and which slowly became a semi-drunken orgy of egotism, is carefully developed. The tone is shifting continually, but the undertone is that of a massive juggernaut, about to be released, with consequences that will make the whole world shudder.⁶³

By early 2000, production was back, the team reconvened; this time utilizing a script draft virtually unchanged from the abandoned project – with the exception of the deletion of Riegner’s voiceover.⁶⁴ This script, dated April 29, 2000, is the most commented-on script in both the Mandel and Axelrod document collections. Little documentation on the project’s cancellation and revival is contained in these collections – the correspondence, meeting minutes, and script comments simply end in September 1998 and pick up again in the spring of 2000, with only one or two exceptions.

3 Further Historical Consultation and Refining *Conspiracy’s* Script

During 2000, HBO’s speed increased rapidly for a planned shoot in November of that year. Andrea Axelrod, no longer tasked to research for *Complicity*, began annotating and fact-checking the *Conspiracy* screenplay. Before filming began, a final consultation with Michael Berenbaum and other historians would also be necessary.

The screenplay is one of the most important elements of the historical film. It is where historiographical arguments, characterizations, and the most errors take place – despite the abundance of pedantic criticism focusing on military uniforms, vehicles, and the like.⁶⁵ Not all historical filmmaking is so script-centered. For example, when filming *NYPD Blue*, the screenwriter David Milch routinely completely re-wrote script pages on the fly (or changed them verbally) or spontaneously rearranged scenes, requiring lots of patience from the cast and crew.⁶⁶ Such changes

⁶³ Loring Mandel, Project Summary, September 28, 1999, Box 11, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 2.

⁶⁴ Loring Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, annotations and comments by Andrea Axelrod, April 19, 2000, copy in possession of author.

⁶⁵ See Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*.

⁶⁶ Matt Zoller Seitz, *The Deadwood Bible: A Lie Agreed Upon* (New York, Los Angeles, Dallas: MZS Press, 2022). 66–67.

are not likely to be traceable in the archive. For *Conspiracy*, this process of revision is best illustrated by the script review routine. In consultation with Frank Pierson, Loring Mandel would draft a new version of the script and send it to the producers. They would then each provide comments on the draft and meet to discuss it. The April 19, 2000 draft best illustrates this process, as comments on this script are available across multiple archives. These range from meeting minutes and faxes to handwritten marginalia on the screenplay's pages. In an interview, Frank Doelger explained the script review process at length:

[W]e really wanted to do everything we could to make sure, given the information we had, given the information provided by a variety of experts and consultants, to be as accurate as possible. That was one factor we had to take very seriously. However, we also had to make sure or try to make sure that we made it compelling dramatically. We had to make sure that each of the characters – you got a sense of who they were, how we would cast it. We wanted, at least on the page, to get a sense of their personalities, so we were simultaneously evaluating every draft, asking ourselves ‘are we as close to the truth historically?’ at the same time, “is it beginning to emerge as a compelling character drama?” Each pass, those were the questions I asked. I was working with other executives at HBO, acting as the go-between between HBO and Frank [Pierson] and Loring. It was a very difficult balancing act because you always wanted to be completely fair to both . . . there are some places where we may have strayed too far, we may have had to pull back some places where we felt that we were sticking too close to the truth and we can take . . . license.⁶⁷

In an interview, Frank Pierson also expressed mild irritation about Colin Callender's attention to detail.⁶⁸ Frank Doelger also mentioned Pierson's “prickly” attitude towards critical comments and suggestions: “I would have to take notes, take the moment to wonder – is this really about the idea or is this because Frank is prickly?,” noting that Pierson's tumultuous past in Hollywood had left him sensitive and protective of his creative projects.⁶⁹ Andrea Axelrod recalled a humorous exchange between her and Pierson: “I was arguing a point with him one day, how this wasn't in history and I said, ‘Frank, you know you are paying me to be anal.’ And he said, ‘And you're doing a very good job of it!’”⁷⁰ Frank Doelger also discussed working with Axelrod at length, characterizing their working relationship with Pierson and Mandel as a “dance”:

[Andrea] was very good, what I really liked about her was she would always call me and discuss things. She would get my opinion and wonder what I would think before she presented things and most of the time, I would just say that if she felt strongly about it, she

⁶⁷ Interview with Frank Doelger, 23:38–33:43.

⁶⁸ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, clip 10, 13:48.

⁶⁹ Interview with Frank Doelger, 56:43–58:46.

⁷⁰ Interview with Andrea Axelrod March 9, 2018, New York City, 03:46–4:58.

should present it. Occasionally we would agree that there were certain things that we would back off on for the moment. It was very much a dance. We had the filmmakers, which were Frank and Loring and Peter [Zinner], all of whom were very distinguished. They were also of a generation of fighters. Frank particularly was someone who I think somewhere along the line had had enough experience with studios to never quite accept them as partners. I think he always saw them a little bit as antagonists and I think he also understood that kind of creative exchange was good. But at the same time, you had to be very careful with him and how you presented notes and make sure he never felt that you were interfering on his creative process or with his vision of the film. Andrea was very good with working with me to make sure that things were presented in a way that we thought would probably get through.⁷¹

On June 23, 2000, Andrea Axelrod provided detailed comments and fact-checking on the April 19, 2000 script draft. This document, along with Axelrod's annotated copy of this script draft and another document including responses from the filmmakers, are key to understanding the multiple script review passes discussed by Doelger. The first page of her annotated script contains three handwritten comments: "1) was snow on the ground?, 2) where is there to land [a plane] near [the Wannsee villa], 3) possible [if one could hear a train whistle from the villa]."⁷² In the script review document, Axelrod answers each of these queries. For the first question, the answer was "The weather in Berlin on January 20, 1942: It was a cloudy day with sometimes little snow-showers. A moderate wind was blowing from the east. The temperature was over the day below -10 degrees C (below 14 degrees Fahrenheit). The ground was frozen and covered by snow." Axelrod sourced this information from a meteorologist from the German Weather Service.⁷³ For the second and third questions, Axelrod had information from Gaby Oelrichs, the head librarian at the Joseph Wulf Mediodothek at the time, which confirmed that Heydrich flew himself to Wannsee and that hearing a train whistle from the villa was unlikely.⁷⁴ Axelrod's script review document also illustrates the quality of historiography consulted by the production team. The document contains quotes and photocopies from various primary and secondary sources. These include the Wannsee Memorial and Education Center's website; the Eichmann Trial transcripts; the 1946 affidavit of Eichmann's lackey, Dieter Wisliceny; Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; Albert Speer's memoir *Inside the Third Reich*; a dissertation on the Holocaust in Galicia; an article

⁷¹ Interview with Frank Doelger, 20:17–22:08.

⁷² Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, annotations and comments by Andrea Axelrod, 1.

⁷³ Andrea Axelrod, "Conspiracy: Script Review," June 23, 2000, copy in author's possession, 2.

⁷⁴ Axelrod, "Conspiracy: Script Review," 2. For more on Axelrod's correspondence with Oelrichs, see the discussion about the Wannsee Memorial and the production later in this chapter.

from Hans Mommsen titled “The Civil Service and the Holocaust,” and Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews*.⁷⁵ Axelrod’s review also identifies some major errors with this draft later identified by the historian Christopher Browning (see below), particularly the characterization of Martin Luther as an incompetent buffoon invited late to the conference and (in this draft, he does not even know Eichmann, which was absolutely wrong) more concerned with his dog than work: “Would Luther, based in Berlin, really bring his dog to a meeting in the suburbs? . . . Luther knew exactly who was in charge, as the most informed propagandist at the foreign office and its liaison with the SS on issues having to do with the East. He had regular contact with Eichmann – we know by memo, and, most likely, in person.”⁷⁶ Axelrod also noted that this draft’s depiction of Luther being invited late to the conference was patently false.⁷⁷ Mandel’s reasoning for this late-abandoned characterization of Luther is unclear – perhaps it was intended to foreshadow the reasons for Luther’s copy of the protocol surviving the war and falling into the hands of American investigators.⁷⁸ Axelrod’s script review also addresses two aspects of Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. First, Axelrod included a photocopy of Arendt’s section on euphemisms for mass killing.⁷⁹ In this section, Arendt introduces the concept of “bearers of secrets” (*Geheimnisträger*), who knew about mass killings, and then discusses “language rules” (*Sprachregelung*) at length, a key theme of *Conspiracy*, which the historian Simone Gigliotti has rightly referred to as a “visual essay about language”.⁸⁰

Furthermore, all correspondence referring to the matter was subject to rigid “language rules,” and except in the reports from the *Einsatzgruppen*, it is rare to find documents in which such bald words as “extermination,” “liquidation,” or “killing” occur. The prescribed code names for killing were “final solution,” “evacuation” (*Aussiedlung*), and “special treatment” (*Sonderbehandlung*); deportation – unless it involved Jews directed to Theresienstadt, the “old people’s ghetto” for privileged Jews, in which case it was called “change of residence” – received the names of “resettlement” (*Umsiedlung*) and “labor in the East” (*Arbeitseinsatz im Osten*), the point of these latter names being that Jews were indeed often temporarily resettled in ghettos and that a certain percentage of them were temporarily used for labor . . . Only among themselves could the “bearers of secrets” talk in uncoded language, and it was very unlikely that they did so in the ordinary pursuit of their murderous duties – certainly not in the presence of their stenographers and other office personnel. For whatever other reasons the language rules may have been devised, they proved of enormous

75 Axelrod, “Conspiracy: Script Review.”

76 Axelrod, “Conspiracy: Script Review,” 6.

77 Axelrod, “Conspiracy: Script Review,” 7.

78 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 3.

79 Axelrod, “Conspiracy: Script Review,” 14.

80 Gigliotti, “Commissioning Mass Murder,” 128.

help in the maintenance of order and sanity in the various widely diversified services whose cooperation was essential in this matter. Moreover, the very term “language rule” (*Sprachregelung*) was itself a code name; it meant what in ordinary language would be called a lie.⁸¹

Arendt’s discussion here clearly had a great influence on Mandel and the other filmmakers; the script examines the use of language at Wannsee and, in one of its key scenes, has Major Rudolf Lange, head of an *Einsatzgruppe* in Riga, dispense with the camouflage of “language rules” and ask just what “evacuation” means, thereby perfectly illustrating Simone Gigliotti’s discussion about Mandel’s script and language.⁸² Lange was the youngest and lowest ranking attendee and his presence (the historians Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein refer to this as his “special role”) at the conference was most likely due to his “practical experience” in mass killing – this observation also should put to rest claims, such as those by Heinz Höhne, about the conference merely addressing deportation and forced labor. There is no other reason for Lange’s presence at Wannsee except for his direct, firsthand experience at the execution pits outside Riga.⁸³ Lange’s breaking the illusion of language rules is a key moment in the film and shifts the meeting’s tone away from evasiveness and understatement to pitiless, laconic honesty. Mandel’s script underscores the power of the dialogue by directly addressing the issue of euphemism:

Upon hearing “evacuation”, Lange slowly gets to his feet during the following.

HEYDRICH (CONT'D)

-they, too, will fall within categories . . . (DEPENDING UPON ETC)

LANGE

(he speaks reasonably, but the liquor has triggered a deep anger)

Could you, General . . . sorry . . . I have the real feeling that I evacuated 30,000 Jews already by shooting them. At Riga. Is what I did “evacuation”?

When

they fell, were they “evacuated”?

Everything stops. The accepted euphemism has been challenged.

EICHMANN’s “no” wag of the head and staying hand stop the STENOTYPIST.

⁸¹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 84–85.

⁸² Gigliotti, “Commissioning Mass Murder,” 129.

⁸³ Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, *The Final Solution in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941–1944*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 260.

LANGE (CONT'D)

. . . There're another 20,000 at least waiting for similar "evacuation." I just think it's helpful to know what words mean. With all respect.

This time it's KRITZINGER who raps on the table. Angrily.

EICHMANN

If I might suggest that it's unnecessary to- (BURDEN THE RECORD WITH THIS QUESTION)

HEYDRICH

Yes. In my personal opinion, they're evacuated.⁸⁴

Axelrod did not limit her use of Arendt to the discussion of language rules and euphemism. In one instance, she pushed back at Arendt's now-discredited depiction of Eichmann as a "nobody," a nonentity, which was present in the script.⁸⁵ At the end of the script, Eberhard Schöngarth and Josef Bühler refer to Eichmann as "a stick" and "unimportant."⁸⁶ Axelrod criticized this depiction, which did remain in subsequent drafts but fortunately did not make it into the final cut, arguing that "[g]iven Eichmann's role in Vienna, touring the East and Berlin, I don't think they'd say that . . ."⁸⁷ The filmmakers did not always accept Axelrod's comments, even when she was correct. One example of this is the personal and institutional conflict between Stuckart and Klopfer, one of the film's few truly historically unjustifiable aspects. In the script (and released film), Stuckart and Klopfer have a heated argument about the fate of *Mischlinge* and at one point, the argument gets personal, with Klopfer threatening Stuckart:

And Stuckart, once again, turns his superior countenance to Klopfer,
who is scarlet with anger.

KLOPFER

I'll remember you.

STUCKART

You should. I'm very well known.

⁸⁴ Loring Mandel. "Conspiracy by Loring Mandel, As Aired, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01" May 19, 2001, Box 1, Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 45.

⁸⁵ The two most important works in challenging Arendt's view of Eichmann are Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* and Cesarani, *Eichmann*.

⁸⁶ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, annotations and comments by Andrea Axelrod, 101.

⁸⁷ Andrea Axelrod, "Overall Issues Part II," June 26, 2000, copy in author's possession, 5.

Stuckart and Klopfer stare at one another. After a few moments of intense silence, Heydrich resumes the dialogue.⁸⁸

Axelrod correctly identified this exchange as ridiculous and identified Mandel's underlying motives: "I suppose this is supposed to represent some deeper conflict between Bormann and Stuckart, the Nazi Party and the Chancelleries, but I expect they 1) already know each other 2) even if they hadn't met, Klopfer would certainly have known about him already, making the exchange moot."⁸⁹ This was indeed correct. Stuckart and Klopfer not only knew each other since their student days but had also co-edited the legal journal *Reich – Volksordnung – Lebensraum*.⁹⁰

That same day, an unknown author (likely Ani Gasti of HBO's Story Department) compiled a document called "HBO combined notes on 4/19/2000 draft." The suggestions were from Colin Callender and compare *The Wannsee Conference* with the April 19 draft.⁹¹ The copy contained in the Loring Mandel collection includes responses to each suggestion in red text by another unidentified author, but most likely either Mandel himself or Pierson.⁹² This author was annoyed by suggestions to provide more background information and context for the audience, which he saw as attempts to turn a piece of art into something overly didactic:

Making this into a classroom history lesson is not going to work [this is in response to a suggestion to "describe the historical significance of the meeting in an opening caption"] . . . The dramatic situation here is a bunch of people are gathered together for a purpose they do not know, but that frightens them because – having been summonsed [sic] by an authority of which they are terrified – their lives will not be the same after. It is *Waiting for Godot*, only Godot actually comes. When he does he is not as they thought he would be. This is the drama of the piece. The more we add explanations and clarity and add historical footnotes [on screen] the more we undercut the very strength of the drama we want to tell. But, but, but – the banality of evil. We must also avoid the pitfalls of conventional dramatization: dramatic revelations, bold confrontations, big turning points, gasping denouements: every-

⁸⁸ Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, annotations and comments by Andrea Axelrod, 66.

⁸⁹ Axelrod, "Overall Issues Part II," 4.

⁹⁰ Markus Heckmann, "Gerhard Klopfer, Nazi Party Chancellery: A Nationalist Ideologue and a Respectable West German" in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 189–206. 190, 193.

⁹¹ Colin Callender, "The Meeting at Wannsee – CC Notes 6/5" June 5, 2000, in Andrea Axelrod Personal Files, New York City, New York.

⁹² "Combined Notes on 4/19/00 Draft," 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. Earlier research, as well as the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, mistakenly attributed the authorship of these comments to Andrea Axelrod, who has since provided clarification.

thing is very small, ordinary, and even silly. . . . the drama of [*Conspiracy*] is how the worst crime of history was done by ordinary men, worried about the weather and their jobs [sic] security, their digestion and their sex lives, their dog and their wife.⁹³

The writer (again, either Mandel or Pierson) was also clearly exhausted by some of the comments. In one section on Heydrich, the author strongly rejects comparisons to *The Wannsee Conference*, advocating a more cunning, sharklike depiction of the head of the RSHA:

Heydrich is [a] weak, cliché Nazi and poorly played in the Austrian film; we need a silky and diplomatic Heydrich, who hides his cards until he sounds out who is who and where the weaknesses he may exploit are. He shouldn't come on strong – he will let himself appear in doubt – wanting your input – until he makes his move. We want to show [him] at first through the eyes of the other bureaucrats [sic] who underestimate him. This is drama. If we are going to make everything clear from the start, there's no point in telling the story.⁹⁴

This paragraph echoes earlier comments from the filmmakers about not wanting to hold the audience's hand, about leaving room for the audience to think about what they were witnessing on screen. The same author also responded to a suggestion that the filmmakers incorporate more of the information included in Mommertz's script, arguing that the included facts were:

"interesting" if we are doing a documentary: we are making drama about sixteen people in a room planning the worst crime in history who show no moral compunction, and who get drunk, worry about dogs and their cars. That is the single thing setting this drama apart from all else. The documentary details of the history are in fact irrelevant to the drama, and the moral outrage it should both express and encourage. That doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to be accurate, but it does mean we should, concentrate on the dynamics within the room rather than trying to tell the whole history of the holocaust . . . [in response to Eichmann discussing "detailed logistics" in *The Wannsee Conference*] This is specifically what I never wanted to do: document the holocaust! When we began I said we will not show Jews being rounded up, mountains of shoes, gas ovens, etc., that's all been done. What makes this unique and shocking is the ordinariness of how that came into being.⁹⁵

Here, the author argues for a key distinction between *Conspiracy* and *The Wannsee Conference*: *Conspiracy* would ideally avoid much of the information-packed dialogue contained in *The Wannsee Conference*, it would not spell everything out for the viewer nor try to tell the entire history of the Holocaust in 90 minutes – a key difference between *Conspiracy* here in 2000 and the filmmakers' previous ambi-

⁹³ "Combined Notes on 4/19/00 Draft," 1.

⁹⁴ "Combined Notes on 4/19/00 Draft," 2.

⁹⁵ "Combined Notes on 4/19/00 Draft," 4.

tions with *Complicity*. At another point in this document, the author stated that “[w]e cannot simply use the Austrian [f]ilm, as the history. It’s an interesting film, but neither perfect dramatically nor historically accurate. I am only interested in it as a matter of some issues of style, and a way of avoiding some dramatic blunders. I passionately believe our script is head and shoulders above this.”⁹⁶ This passage exemplifies the production team’s difficulty of making art which they felt lived up to the gravity of the event they were portraying. Making an obviously didactic film was something they felt would be inappropriate, not just something HBO’s audiences would balk at due to not being entertaining. Frank Doelger also spoke about this aspect of HBO’s programming in an interview:

One of the great luxuries of working at HBO is that while they want to make sure, if at all possible, that things are understandable. They always try to encourage everybody to shy away from being overly expository. There are certain things you just have to assume the audience will know or you have to assume that if they don’t know them, they can get the sense of things. You don’t ever want to be in a situation where you feel that the characters are saying things simply to inform the audience. You don’t want to ever feel as if the drama is being undermined by obviousness. So I think that was very much the brief I accepted and I really tried to embrace and promote in all the films that I did. That was a question of asking yourself ‘will people go to *Conspiracy* knowing exactly who everybody is, what their roles are, how they relate to each other?’ Absolutely not. We go through getting a sense of the type of men sitting around that table, and what they were talking about, the grossness and severity of what was being discussed. So that’s – I’ve always tried to err on the side of letting the drama and the performances, the material, speak for themselves. A sense of it, rather than trying to be overly expository.⁹⁷

Doelger’s comments here echo several scholarly discussions of HBO programming and its *expectations* from the audience, that is, HBO’s assumption that audiences come to its programming with a certain degree of sophistication and prior knowledge – they are not the passive classroom audiences of children attentively staring at a projector so often seen on the covers of so many academic books about media and education.⁹⁸ And arguably, such an approach is exceedingly important when dealing with subject matter as serious and complicated as genocide. An overly didactic approach would only hamper drama and invite sneering cynicism, and if historical films want to offer something beyond mere entertainment or pure information dumps, the HBO approach discussed here offers a difficult yet rewarding path.

⁹⁶ “Combined Notes on 4/19/00 Draft,” 3.

⁹⁷ Interview with Frank Doelger, Interview with Frank Doelger, 39:36–41:53.

⁹⁸ See DeFino, *The HBO Effect*; Twomey, *Examining The Wire*; Cook, *Flood of Images*; Fisher, *Treme*.

On July 5, 2000, only a few days after the above-mentioned script review, Michael Berenbaum provided more comments on the screenplay. These focused on detailed corrections about errors still present in the script and compared its portrayal of the meeting with that of *The Wannsee Conference*, pointing out where he thought the script improved upon the older film and where it failed to. He praised the script for its improvements on the earlier film:

there is much better tension between the men [in Mandel's script]. In the Austrian film they seemed too friendly and at ease. There was no dramatic tension. In the HBO script there are asides, snide comments from some about others – a much more realistic feeling of how a group of such men – who would all be upset by any [imposition] on their authority – would act. Heydrich is [a] much more compelling figure in the HBO script – he is shown to be arrogant, threatening, politically intuitive, and mean. In the German film he is too boyish and easy going.⁹⁹

Some comments, like the one about Eichmann's claims regarding Auschwitz's capabilities, point out that "[y]ou can communicate a sense of the scope of Auschwitz without such pie in the sky descriptions of 60,000 per day. The [Eichmann] speech is too fanciful, and leaves too wide an opening for historians to criticize and *Holocaust* [emphasis in original] deniers to ridicule."¹⁰⁰ Others are more wide of the mark: "The Darwin reference is too subtle for most of the audience to capture," wrote Berenbaum, who then suggested that Mandel add a scene where Heydrich, Müller, and Eichmann discuss "changing the human species today."¹⁰¹ The reference in question is a key line from Heydrich which takes place at the meeting's end, which in this draft also references plans for British Jews after a German invasion:

HEYDRICH

For Britain, we'll ship [ovens] over, less than half a million. America, maybe they'll dispose of them themselves. And history will mark us for having the vision and the gift and the will to advance the human race to greater purity in a space of time so short that Charles Darwin would be astonished . . .¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Michael Berenbaum to Frank Doelger, July 5, 2000, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 3–4.

¹⁰⁰ Berenbaum to Frank Doelger, July 5, 2000, 1.

¹⁰¹ Berenbaum to Frank Doelger, July 5, 2000, 1–2.

¹⁰² Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, annotations and comments by Andrea Axelrod, 90.

Frank Pierson directly responded to Berenbaum's suggestion, typing "LORING: I'M NOT CRAZY ABOUT THIS BIT OF CREATIVE COMMENT" into the word processor file.¹⁰³

The historian Christopher Browning, best known for his groundbreaking study on Reserve Police Battalion 101, *Ordinary Men*, also provided comments on this draft. Browning had written his dissertation on the German Foreign Office and the Holocaust, so he was also an ideal person to contact.¹⁰⁴ Browning criticized the script's "a little too rowdy" depiction of the meeting, acknowledging that while food and alcohol were served, this version of the script contained too much of it. He also noted that "they were men in high positions who had a full afternoon of work ahead of them."¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Browning approved of the script's main argument: "the basic notion that the Wannsee Conference was about confirming Heydrich's leadership role in the Final Solution is correct."¹⁰⁶ Browning then commented on "small errors and questionable embellishments" contained in this draft. Most notably, he sharply criticized this draft's bizarre portrayal of Martin Luther, who is more concerned with his German shepherd than his job:

I find the whole portrayal of Luther and his dog absurd. An Undersecretary of State attending a high-level meeting does not bring his dog with him! Luther was portrayed as vulgar by the stuffy, traditional aristocrats of the Foreign Office . . . but as an extremely hardworking and modern professional manager by his own subordinates, who were quite loyal to him. This meeting would have been a huge professional opportunity for him, he was tremendously ambitious, and he would hardly have come acting in the way portrayed. Moreover, Luther suffered from chronic sinus infections, presumably allergies, and (unless you have evidence to the contrary) I do not think would have been a dog lover.¹⁰⁷

Browning was not alone – individuals at HBO also thought the inclusion of the dog was ridiculous. An undated letter from Frank Pierson to Loring Mandel (presumably from 2000) about an upcoming meeting regarding copyright issues and *The Wannsee*

103 Frank Pierson, comment on Michael Berenbaum to Frank Doelger, July 5, 2000, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 2. Line directly typed into the file at the top of the page.

104 See Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017) and Browning, *Final Solution and the German Foreign Office: A Study of Referat D III of Abteilung Deutschland 1940–1943*, (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1978).

105 Christopher Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, August 22, 2000, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

106 Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 1.

107 Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 1–2.

Conference ends with “they’re going to attack the dog. We must defend the dog.”¹⁰⁸ Many of the errors identified by Browning were also identified by Axelrod and other individuals commenting on the scripts. One instance, also involving Luther, was the script’s portrayal of Luther’s anger about being invited late – Browning noted that this was also incorrect, as Axelrod had also done earlier that summer, writing “ALL WRONG! Luther invited 29 Nov. 1941” on the script page.¹⁰⁹ Browning also criticized some of the informality present in this draft, mentioning that “[t]he use of first names . . . is unreal. At a meeting of this kind, everyone would have addressed each other by titles and/or last names. The Germans even now are very formal about this, and a German audience would burst into laughter at this scene.”¹¹⁰ Browning also corrected an error in the portrayal of Lange, noting that it was incorrect to have Lange report about gassing in Chełmno and instead noted that Eichmann would have been the person at the conference to discuss this topic.¹¹¹ As with *The Wannsee Conference*, *Conspiracy’s* portrayal of Wilhelm Stuckart did not match the historical record. Browning discussed this at length, arguing that this portrayal was “problematic” and noted that “[Stuckart] certainly objected to Heydrich’s proposals concerning *Mischlinge* and mixed marriages, but his own proposals (sterilization and compulsory divorce) were hardly moderate.”¹¹² He also noted Stuckart’s berating of his subordinate Bernhard Lösener as further evidence of Stuckart’s commitment to genocide, arguing that

[t]here is no ‘conversion’ that needs explaining; Stuckart is angry about Heydrich’s triumph, not policies being announced . . . Thus, as in the case of the German TV movie version, I think this screenplay fails to capture Stuckart’s position accurately. He was not against the Final Solution . . . he was against what he considered an administratively unworkable treatment of one tiny segment of the intended victims . . . I know there is a great temptation to try to thicken the plot by finding conflict and opposition, but historically the most significant aspect of the Wannsee Conf. was the almost total lack of just that (which doesn’t make particularly interesting cinema). Moreover, the portrayal of Stuckart crushed and defeated

108 Frank Pierson to Loring Mandel, undated fax or email (presumably 2000) Box 11, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

109 Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 2; Andrea Axelrod, annotation of Loring Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, annotations and comments by Andrea Axelrod, April 19, 2000, in possession of author, 8.

110 Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 2.

111 Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 6.

112 Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 4.

by Heydrich is not true. On these two narrow issues [*Mischlinge* and mixed marriages], subsequent meetings were held, and Heydrich did not get his way.¹¹³

All screenplay drafts and the final cut of the film also include Stuckart stating that the Jews “reject the Christ.” Browning commented on this incongruity, forcefully stating “I have never seen any Nazi document invoking the religious issue of Jewish rejection of Christianity as a justification for the persecution.”¹¹⁴ In her June 2000 review of the script, Andrea Axelrod also identified this error: “recognizing the Christ was hardly a merit in the anti-Church Third Reich; that would be a root of antisemitism in pre-War Germany, but not on the top of the list citable in this company in 1942.”¹¹⁵ Other script reviewers, however, seemed to overlook this error, which remains arguably the most problematic aspect of the creative liberties taken with Stuckart’s portrayal.

Saul Friedländer has offered a different view of the relationship between older Christian antisemitism and Nazism, arguing that the Nazi movement fused forms of antisemitism based on modern racial theories with the older, Christian forms into “redemptive antisemitism,” where “the struggle against the Jews is the dominant aspect of a worldview.”¹¹⁶ A likely source for this characterization of Stuckart stems from Raul Hilberg’s classic *The Destruction of the European Jews*. A key source for Mandel (it is cited extensively in the script’s endnotes), Hilberg’s first chapter, “Precedents,” discusses the longer history of Christian antisemitism in Europe.¹¹⁷ It is possible that Mandel drew inspiration for this aspect of Stuckart’s portrayal from here, as it cannot be found in biographical depictions of him either. In a 2018 interview, Mandel defended this characterization of Stuckart:

¹¹³ Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 4–5. For Stuckart’s conversation with Lösener, see Bernhard Lösener, *Legislating the Holocaust: the Bernhard Lösener memoirs and supporting documents*, ed. Karl A. Schleunes, trans. Carol Scherer (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 111–152; Bernhard Lösener, “DOK. 56 Bernhard Lösener bittet am 19. Dezember 1941 um seine Versetzung aus dem Innenministerium, nachdem er erfahren hat, dass Juden ermordet werden,” in Susanne Heim, ed., *Band 6 Deutsches Reich und Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren Oktober 1941 – März 1943*, vol. 6, *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 230–233.

¹¹⁴ Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 5.

¹¹⁵ Andrea Axelrod, “Overall Issues Part II,” 4.

¹¹⁶ Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol 1, 86–87. For a classic account of antisemitism’s integration with modern “race science,” see George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, The Collected Works of George L. Mosse (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

¹¹⁷ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1:1–27. Many Jewish scholars attacked Hilberg for statements in this chapter which allege a history of Jewish passivity and acquiescence in the face of antisemitism.

all of the research that I had done indicated that Stuckart had been an antisemite long before the Nazis came to power. He was probably though the most legitimate – or in terms of his background – antisemite in the group. The basis of that antisemitism in earlier years had a lot to do with the Jews and the crucifixion of Christ. Stuckart at that point is very much as out of control as the character Stuckart would ever get. That comes out and I think it's perfectly fine for that to come out.¹¹⁸

In this bit of “informed speculation,” Mandel is using Stuckart as an illustration of earlier European forms of antisemitism, though his chronology is wrong – Stuckart being an antisemite before the Nazis took control of the German government does not mean that he was a throwback to the antisemitism of centuries past. Race-based antisemitism was what made late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European antisemitism “modern,” as George Mosse, among others, has thoroughly demonstrated.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, this version of antisemitism did indeed exploit and build on already-present Christian antisemitism.¹²⁰ At the end of his review of the *Conspiracy* script, Browning acknowledged that his comments could be seen as pedantic but argued that “critics will consult historians as to the general accuracy and will ‘pan’ the film if they get solid information about factual distortion.” Browning was only able to provide this one-time consultation and charged the production team \$600.¹²¹

In October, one month before shooting began, Ani Gasti, HBO Films’ Director of Development, compiled HBO’s answers to their own notes on the script – a combination of comments from Colin Callender, Frank Doelger, Andrea Axelrod, Gasti himself, and others – plus those from Browning and Berenbaum into a document titled “Notes Review.” In this document, Gasti indicated “how the notes are addressed in the current draft of the script (9/13/00)” and what the justifications were for comments that they ignored, though it is important to remember that a collaborative document such as this has no single author.¹²² In one instance, they responded to Michael Berenbaum’s statement about the audience possibly not understanding the script’s reference to Charles Darwin, echoing Frank Doelger’s above comments about HBO’s view of its audience: “The Darwin reference remains in the script. Poor practice to assume that the audience is insufficiently educated.”¹²³ On the other

118 Interview with Loring Mandel, March 2, 2019, 14:02–18:51.

119 See Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*.

120 Stone, *The Holocaust*, 24–26.

121 Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 7.

122 Ani Gasti, “CONSPIRACY/notes review,” October 2, 2000, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

123 Gasti, “CONSPIRACY/notes review,” 11.

hand, this document also includes a terse response to Christopher Browning's concerns about the depiction of Stuckart as an antisemite motivated by medieval Christian ideas: "What is in the documents is irrelevant to what Stuckart might have felt or said."¹²⁴ In another response to Browning's concerns about Stuckart's attitude towards Heydrich's proposals, the document reads "[n]ot changed. Browning seems to have missed the point that Stuckart feels his work [the Nuremberg Laws] is being trampled on."¹²⁵ They also responded to Berenbaum's concerns about Eichmann's statements on Auschwitz's killing capacity: "[a]lthough the numbers reached such a high count, we cannot correct Eichmann's figures since they were his projections for what was possible."¹²⁶ In another response to Berenbaum, the producers wrote "[w]e intentionally do not use 'the actual language' because it is not natural as dialogue. Also, it never was the actual language of the meeting since the language of the document was a summary that was twice revised."¹²⁷

4 The Remake Question

HBO was keen to avoid the impression that they simply made a remake of *The Wannsee Conference*. In most of the archival documents and in all interviews for this study, the members of *Conspiracy*'s production team referred to *The Wannsee Conference* as an "Austrian" film. This likely has to do with ORF's status as co-producer and, as Peter Zinner himself was an Austrian exile, perhaps a bit of local patriotism influenced this error. Zinner was the individual who saw *The Wannsee Conference* and brought it to Frank Pierson, after all.¹²⁸ In a message to Mandel, Pierson discussed HBO's legal department and the reason why it was concerned:

I have a deep misgiving about this meeting on or about the 10th [presumably of October 2000]. In an effort to get hold of a copy of the German film someone at HBO called the distributor, who said something like oh, are they going to remake my film? How much are they going to pay me? I sense that we are going to go through a detailed grilling about what elements are common between us and them, and everything in common will be subject to question. Overall, I see little, especially since I'm doing it in quite a different style and of course there is a

¹²⁴ Gasti, "CONSPIRACY/notes review," 13.

¹²⁵ Gasti, "CONSPIRACY/notes review," 13.

¹²⁶ Gasti, "CONSPIRACY/notes review," 11.

¹²⁷ Gasti, "CONSPIRACY/notes review," 11.

¹²⁸ See Alexander Tang. "A Conversation with Loring Mandel." *The Harvard Crimson*. November 12, 2013, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/11/12/interview-loringmandel/> (accessed November 12, 2019)

historical background in the public domain that no one can claim as copyright, but nonetheless I expect the meeting to be long and irritating.¹²⁹

As discussed above, HBO's legal department was also concerned that the inclusion of a dog in the script was too similar to *The Wannsee Conference*, which featured Rudolf Lange bringing his vicious German shepherd to the meeting. For the department, the subplot with Luther and his dog was too similar to the earlier film, which Pierson mentioned in the same message.¹³⁰ In a memo from HBO's legal department, "Luther bringing his dog to the meeting (including concerns re: dog being sick, dog biting cook, Luther leaving the meeting to check on the dog, dog being fed to stop barking, final scene between Luther and dog" were listed as potential problems, though they noted if the dog plot was (among a few others) "revised or supported, we can live with the remaining similarities."¹³¹ In short, it appears that the ridiculous scenes with Martin Luther's dog fell victim to the combined efforts of HBO's legal department and Christopher Browning's criticism.

HBO's legal department also agreed with Christopher Browning's concerns about the amount of drinking depicted in the script, which listed "pre-meeting drinking" and "dialogue regarding quality of liquor" in their list of "historically unsupported similarities between screenplay and film," with "film" referring to *The Wannsee Conference*.¹³² Although historians now largely accept that drinking took place at the Wannsee Conference, there are disagreements about how much took place, as evidenced by Browning's comment about the script's "rowdy" atmosphere.¹³³ For example, Mark Roseman ends his account of Wannsee noting that "sipping their cognac, the Staatssekretäre really had cleared the way for genocide."¹³⁴ Edward B. Westermann opens *Drunk on Genocide*, his study of alcohol and the Holocaust, with an account of Heydrich and Eichmann enjoying a cognac at the conference's end but does not mention the other participants drinking during the conference.¹³⁵ Most mentions of the conference's atmosphere cite Eich-

129 Frank Pierson to Loring Mandel, undated fax or email (presumably 2000) Box 11, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

130 Frank Pierson to Loring Mandel, undated fax or email (presumably 2000), 1.

131 "CONSPIRACY – copyright concerns," October 9, 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

132 "CONSPIRACY – copyright concerns," 1.

133 Browning, Letter to Ani Gasti, 1.

134 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 110.

135 Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide*, 2.

mann's interrogation and trial transcripts, as well as his memoir *Götzen*, for this depiction.¹³⁶ A further legal department memo catalogued every instance of food and alcohol in *The Wannsee Conference*.¹³⁷ Indeed, a comparison of earlier script drafts with the released version reveals that *Conspiracy* had a few more lines about specific French wines, for example, but the overall tone does not change. When compared with *The Wannsee Conference*, *Conspiracy* has much less of a fraternity party atmosphere, with the former film often including scenes of characters laughing it up. If anything, *Conspiracy* uses drinking to illustrate the RSHA winning the day and bringing bureaucrats in line, with Schöngarth and Lange indulging before the meeting and the former enjoying a celebratory cigar.

The legal team also discussed whether or not the conflict between Stuckart and Klopfer – also present to a smaller degree in *The Wannsee Conference* – constituted a copyright concern.¹³⁸ As late as November 1, Ani Gasti stated that “Loring might want to look at the real similarity of dialogue, but the premise, I still think, is okay. I still protest VOCIFEROUSLY, however, against Stuckart’s marking the comment about ‘rejecting the Christ,’ which Browning, the guy at Wannsee Haus [Wulf Kaiser or Norbert Kampe] and I (humbly) have all said is absurd in this context.”¹³⁹ But by this late point in production, the script was nearing its final stage and filming was about to begin.

5 Casting and Rehearsal

Historian Stefanie Rauch has noted *Conspiracy*’s “peculiar Britishness” due to its heavily British cast, with the exception of Stanley Tucci.¹⁴⁰ Frank Pierson credited UK Casting director Gilly Poole with finding actors that fit the parts, saying “that’s the richness of the London theater. You know, you’re just up to your ass in wonderful, wonderful Actors.”¹⁴¹ Pierson also described auditions in London:

¹³⁶ These are reprinted in Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*.

¹³⁷ Steven M. Blacher to Kim Hershman, “The Wannsee Conference – Portrayal of Drink/Food,” October 10, 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹³⁸ Steven M. Blacher to HBO Legal, October 26, 2000, in Andrea Axelrod Private Archive, New York City, New York.

¹³⁹ Andrea Axelrod to Frank Doelger, November 1, 2000, in Andrea Axelrod Private Archive, New York City, New York, 1–2.

¹⁴⁰ Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film,” 165.

¹⁴¹ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, Clip 2, 2:17.



Figure 6.4: David Threlfall (Wilhelm Kritzing) after lunch on location at Wannsee, November 30, 2000. Photo courtesy Norbert Kampe.

[The actors] did come in and they read. And then we would talk and then they would read a little bit more. [INT: And what would they—would they read the scenes from the characters that they're playing in there?] Yeah, yeah. Some of them, you know, they only have one line, you know, it was really difficult to do that so I just really had to just have them do my usual thing, conversing with them and looking at them and just getting that feeling that they emanated, you know? This is a guy, this is a military officer. [INT: There's one guy who—] This is an officer with a conscience, you know? And that kind of thing.¹⁴²

Pierson originally wanted Timothy Spall for the role of Stuckart, but prior commitments dampened his hopes.¹⁴³ David Threlfall (Figure 6.4) initially got the role

¹⁴² Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, Clip 2, 2:17.

¹⁴³ Pierson to Loring Mandel, undated fax or email (presumably 2000), 1.

but was replaced by Colin Firth. In an interview for the Directors Guild of America, Pierson described the awkward situation:

I'd already cast [David Threlfall] and it became a condition on HBO's part of—if they were gonna go ahead with it, to convince that actor to move over, to make room for Colin [Colin Firth]. That was one of the more difficult things I've done in my life.¹⁴⁴ . . . I took him to dinner. And I said – and I didn't put this on HBO. You have to take the responsibility yourself and so I said, "Listen, you know I've been rethinking. And I would really like you to do this other role." And [Threlfall] said, "You know, I really took this job on the condition that I'd play [Stuckart], and it's a very interesting role for me and that's what I would like to do." I said, "I know you'd like to do it. But I really think that we need what you can bring to it in this other role," one thing and another. And at the end of, you know, after buying a few Scotches for him and one thing and another, he finally said, "Well, you know? I really want to be part of this. I like what is happening here. And if that's the condition," and so on, "I'll accept your better – your judgment. And let's hope you're right." I said, "I know I'm right. I know I'm right." [INT: He also–] So he . . . and he brought that part off and made room for Colin [Colin Firth].¹⁴⁵

As a result of this situation, and likely as a thank-you to Threlfall, Mandel expanded some of Kritzingner's role in the script:

I improved the Kritzingner role. I made it a bigger role in the script, but not without [sic] in any way violating what we knew about what happened in the story. But you know, every moment in a script is a choice. The choice of whether to do another little bit about this guy or reveal another separate moment with this guy. So, I gave more of those moments to Kritzingner and got Colin Firth to play Stuckart.¹⁴⁶

In a similar situation, Stanley Tucci originally wanted the role of Heydrich before it was given to Kenneth Branagh: "it was very hard to convince him to play–[INT: Eichmann?]-to play Eichmann, but he finally, he finally agreed to do it – but it took a lot of arm-twisting."¹⁴⁷

Tucci, the cast's only American, was forty years old at the time and best known as a character actor, but he was also an accomplished director and writer, most notably of *Big Night* (1996), a comedy about Italian immigration to the US and food. Tucci had already worked on an HBO historical film, winning an Emmy for his role as the journalist Walter Winchell in the 1998 drama *Winchell*.¹⁴⁸ In an interview on the CBS *Early Show*, Tucci stated that HBO and Pierson directly approached him re-

144 Pierson, "Visual History with Frank Pierson," Chapter 4, Clip 7, 8:02.

145 Pierson, "Visual History with Frank Pierson," Chapter 4, Clip 8, 11:05.

146 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, New York, April 5, 2018, 1:03:23–1:06:40.

147 Pierson, "Visual History with Frank Pierson," Chapter 4, Clip 1, 0:00.

148 Paul Mazursky, *Winchell*, Biography, Drama, Romance (HBO Films, Fried Films, 1998).

garding the role in the summer of 2000.¹⁴⁹ Loring Mandel met with Tucci at his upstate New York home to discuss the role and recalled Tucci being “very serious” about it; the actor had already read several books on Eichmann.¹⁵⁰ In a message to Frank Pierson responding to the September 13, 2000 script draft (and the only document penned by a cast member contained in the Loring Mandel collection), Tucci discussed his ideas for the character. Some of these ideas made it into the film, others were ignored. Tucci expressed several concerns, arguing that “more work is necessary to make [Eichmann] a complete character.”¹⁵¹ First, Tucci claimed that according to the “many sources” (he names no titles) he had been reading on Eichmann portrayed him “as a heavy drinker and smoker,” and thus the final scene by the fireplace, in which Heydrich “practically orders” Eichmann to take a drink, “seems overly simple and ultimately redundant with regards to their relationship.” Tucci instead suggested that Eichmann begin drinking without waiting for his superior, followed by a comment from Heydrich about it, a discussion about wine ending with Heydrich “pulling rank” on Eichmann.¹⁵² Tucci advocated this change in order to portray Eichmann as a more complicated figure, which he forcefully did in his letter to Pierson:

This would allow us a glimpse of another side of Eichmann. We need to see him as a human being. That to me is what this film is all about. That these were men, like you and me, with families etc, etc. They were not monsters. That is what is so terrifying. Therefore we need go find the humanizing aspects of Eichmann. And I don't mean the sympathetic aspects. As he is written now, Eichmann is still too much one note. He is efficient and dry. As I suggested a while back I think we need to create little pieces here and there that show us glimpses of other sides of him. I still feel that the exchange with the secretary and Klopfer should be Eichmann's (as he was supposedly somewhat of a ladies man), because it would show us another color, quite unexpected . . . With each one of these pieces, each little glimpse we must start to see a complicated man taking shape. A man who was capable of becoming what he became. Since the film focuses only on the conference we don't have the opportunity to see him in a variety of settings and situations' so we have to create them on [a] smaller more intimate scale. As of now I do not think it is there. By all accounts he could be very charming, even warm, he would suddenly fly into fits of rage and could be incredibly cold and cruel. How do we catch sight, even a little, of all of these aspects that exist beneath the guise [of] a dry and efficient organizer. I don't think that there is enough there yet for

149 Transcript of Interview with Stanley Tucci, *The Early Show*, May 15, 2001, Box 15, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 2.

150 Interview with Loring Mandel, March 2, 2019, 41:23–55:24

151 Stanley Tucci to Frank Pierson, undated (most likely late 2000) in Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

152 Tucci to Frank Pierson.

me to sink my teeth into. There are not enough colors. I hope you know that I write this not to make waves or be a pain in the ass, but because I want him and the piece to be as complex and as rich as possible.”¹⁵³

Tucci's desire for smaller scenes illustrating Eichmann's complexity reflects one of the aspects that *Conspiracy* arguably excels at most: small, intimate scenes between characters which complicate the audience's view of the Wannsee participants. These are not one-dimensional villains out of a pulp novel or action movie, contrary to what some critics and journalists continue to allege about the American film industry and its portrayal of Nazis, a now-exhausted stereotype that was already outdated when *Holocaust* aired in 1979.

During HBO's publicity campaign, Tucci gave several interviews about *Conspiracy* and his role. HBO's official press release introduces Eichmann by referencing Arendt's "banality of evil" concept and quotes Tucci's characterization of the genocidaire: "[Eichmann's] personal technique with people was to be more silkily persuasive, and he often played the card of self-deprecation and modesty. He was different in that way from Heydrich."¹⁵⁴ Tucci also noted that the televised Eichmann trial "had a huge impact on people and is why Eichmann is such a well-known player."¹⁵⁵ On PBS's *Charlie Rose*, Tucci stated that he "was most desirous to understand [Eichmann], and then I realized that I couldn't the more I read. And I realized that I don't think anybody could," alluding to historiographic debates about Eichmann. He further noted that Eichmann's humanity was central to the power of *Conspiracy*: "In the end, my goal – my job was to simply make him human, and to simply make him – which would make him more horrible . . . and more incomprehensible."¹⁵⁶ Tucci also summed up the historiographical consensus on the Wannsee Conference's purpose:

That's the thing that the piece shows is all those – all that little sort of infighting, all that – all people vying for different positions of power within this structure. That's the thing that makes this film so interesting also is that you see these very complicated relationships sort of unfold before your eyes and how they change during the course of this hour and a half.

153 Tucci to Frank Pierson.

154 Stanley Tucci, quoted in HBO Films, "Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star in HBO Films' *Conspiracy*, Debuting May 19," April 5, 2001, Box 15, Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 3.

155 Tucci, quoted in HBO Films, "Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star in HBO Films' *Conspiracy*, Debuting May 19," 3.

156 Transcript of Interview with Stanley Tucci, *Charlie Rose*, April 19, 2001, Box 15, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 5.

And how everybody comes in with their own agenda, their own personal agenda but also their own sort of political agenda. They have their job to do. And when they come in, they all have these different agendas, and suddenly by the end the walk out sort of with the same problems but they know that they're all under now the aegis of the S.S.¹⁵⁷

Here, it is remarkable to see one of the film's stars correctly summarizing historians' consensus about Wannsee as a demonstration of Heydrich and the RSHA's power, in contrast to other promotional material on the film, which either implied or outright stated that the decision to exterminate all European Jews was made at Wannsee.¹⁵⁸

In contrast with Stanley Tucci's more intellectual statements on the film, Kenneth Branagh discussed how the Heydrich role negatively affected his mental health.¹⁵⁹ Branagh also mentioned that he had lost sleep due to the role, stating in an interview for the *Jewish Journal*: "I just felt this underlying revulsion at what happened and at the man himself. I didn't want to say the lines. It was the most disturbing experience of my 20-year acting career."¹⁶⁰ In the same interview, Branagh described Heydrich as an unideological, potentially disturbed individual:

We were looking for elements that would lend to an understanding of his behavior, whether it be a childhood trauma or some physical or mental disability, but nothing seemed to make psychological sense . . . My previous experience of playing somebody quite so dark and evil was Iago in [the Castle Rock film of] 'Othello,' . . . yet, inside that part are many motivations – sexual jealousy, thwarted ambition – that you might regard as human, however unappealing. But I didn't find that with Heydrich. It was very difficult to discover what was human inside him . . . he relished power, his ability to judge and be ruthless with people . . . I didn't even think he had any deep-rooted hatred against the Jews. I think that if he had been asked to get rid of 11 million tennis players, he would have done it with exactly the same efficiency and skill.¹⁶¹

Loring Mandel later expressed disappointment with Branagh's statements and performance:

157 Transcript of Interview with Stanley Tucci, *Charlie Rose*, 7.

158 See the film's taglines: "One of The Greatest Crimes Against Humanity Was Perpetrated in Just Over an Hour" and "One Meeting. Six Million Lives." – IMDb. "Conspiracy," <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0266425/taglines> (accessed November 12, 2019).

159 See David Gritten, "When the Job Is Odious," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2001, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-may-13-ca-62810-story.html>.

160 Naomi Pfefferman, "Planning the Holocaust," *Jewish Journal*, May 17, 2001, <https://jewishjournal.com/culture/arts/4312/>.

161 Pfefferman, "Planning the Holocaust."



Figure 6.5: Stanley Tucci (Adolf Eichmann) looking through a viewfinder on site in Wannsee. Frank Pierson is visible on the far right. November 30, 2000. Photo courtesy Norbert Kampe.

We – Frank and I – feel that we failed to get from Kenneth Branagh an agreement to do the character as someone who really needed for his own plans and his own ego to get a validation from this meeting. Kenneth never came to an agreement with us about what was the heart of Heydrich and he made in interviews – subsequently he talked about his difficulty with really becoming convinced of Heydrich’s character. We felt that was important for the script – for the situation as we knew it. Heydrich was in competition to be the guy that Hitler was going to turn to more than the others and he felt this was his avenue to improve his position. So there had to be just that little bit of anxiety to make this work in his character. And that is the one thing that Branagh could not either accept or perform.¹⁶²

The actors rehearsed for three weeks on set in Shepperton – and in costume. Frank Pierson and cinematographer Stephen Goldblatt settled on filming with

¹⁶² Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, New York, April 5, 2018, 1:12:20–1:14:18.

Super 16mm cameras which were smaller and unobtrusive, important when filming close-ups of conversations around a table: “we moved right into that set and we rehearsed at the table and my idea was that every shot would be – we would run out the magazine, so every shot was ten minutes long. Which gave the actors the maximum kind of ability to play it the way they might be doing it on-stage.”¹⁶³ Pierson consulted Sidney Lumet, who had directed *Dog Day Afternoon* (which Pierson had written) about ways to film the conference. Lumet was best known for *12 Angry Men*, a film Mommertz also counted as a key influence on *The Wann-see Conference*:

of course I went and looked at 12 ANGRY MEN and I had a long talk on the telephone with Sidney Lumet. And I didn't want to do it the way he did that, and so on, which was, he spent a week shooting this way, and a week shooting this way, and a week shooting this way, and a week shooting that way. So my feeling was, that we needed – it's like a musical rhythm. That there's a period of time when they are anchored at the table and they can't move and they can't move, and so on. And it builds to a certain point of tension in the dramatic line of the piece; the narrative itself. And when it reaches that point, and so on, I wanted to release that pressure and get them up and moving around, da da da da, and so on, and now, “Let's go have something to eat,” and so on, and then he gets them back down, and so on. So you have the feeling that [Heydrich] is the guy, you know, the lion tamer with a whip. And he's the one who's controlling the situation 'cause he tells them when to get up and when to sit down. [INT: And that was in the script, or did it involve–] It was in the script.¹⁶⁴

The actors would rehearse these long scenes while Pierson and Stephen Goldblatt would watch via video feed:

The DP [Director of Photography] and I and all the rest of us were outside on the set, entirely watching it on video. But the actors were in there, in their costumes, with their material and so on for the most maximum kind of – so it was the least like a, a movie set as it could possibly be and as close to the actuality of what it must have been to be there at that table. They found it very difficult because every once in awhile, they would begin to get a sense of what it was they were actually saying. The first day of rehearsal Kenneth [Kenneth Branagh] came to me and we had our first reading and so on, and I said, “Listen, just read through – let's just go,” you know? So we did it. I didn't stop for anything. We just wanted to see what everybody did and one thing and another.¹⁶⁵

Pierson also revised the seating arrangements around the table (discussed in Chapter 5), which he rearranged during rehearsal:

¹⁶³ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, Clip 9, 12:06.

¹⁶⁴ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 6, Clip 7, 09:46.

¹⁶⁵ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, Clip 9, 12:06.

Mostly what I was interested in at that point was the seating around the table; whether or not, you know, it would change anything to move the people and so on. And, as a matter of fact, I did exchange – Eichmann [Stanley Tucci], I moved up to be next to – to Kenneth [Kenneth Branagh]. [INT: So initially, you didn't have Eichmann next to him?] No, not to – not when I first started, but – [INT: Did you have him opposite him? Or where did you put him?] No, I had him separated by one of the characters so that he was closest to the–the–[INT: The typist, or–] the stenographer [Simon Markey].¹⁶⁶

Ian McNeice (Klopfer) also mentioned experts being brought in to brief the actors on the history they were reenacting and to help them research their roles, stating that “any research is very useful as an actor because it just gives you a grounding, a bedding of somewhere . . . it sort of gives you, sort of, a comfort zone, underneath, that you do know a little bit more about the subject.”¹⁶⁷

During rehearsal, one issue did appear regarding dialogue. That autumn, in a response to some of Colin Callender's suggestions about the script's language, which asked for Mandel to replace the word “fucking” with “bloody,” the answer was simply “[n]ot done so that script maintains consistency of American English throughout.”¹⁶⁸ According to Loring Mandel, this emphasis on American English, which was to have been portrayed as a type of Transatlantic accent common in older Hollywood films, was something the mostly British cast rebelled against:

In *Conspiracy*, at the outset we decided that we tried to – we wanted to create a totally unaccented English, which we thought was the most honest way of reproducing the original event, the Wannsee Conference. We thought that having English actors speaking in German accents was kind of ridiculous. It didn't make sense. They were obviously not German and so we – we tried to do it as a translation that took away the ethnicity. For the first 2 days of rehearsal in London we had a speech instructor from the Royal Theatre – the Royal Academy come to try and teach all of these British actors how to speak unaccented English. The actors all revolted and they told Frank [Pierson], the director, that if he continued to have this woman there, they would strike! And so, they got rid of [her] and [the actors] just tried to do it as naturally as they could.¹⁶⁹

Ian McNeice confirmed this account in a 2005 interview:

during that week they brought in a voice coach, because they decided that they were trying to work out (because it was, because we were all Germans) what they should do. I mean,

¹⁶⁶ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, Clip 9, 12:06.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Ian McNeice by Derek Paget, June 23, 2008, 3.

https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/ftt/Ian_McNeice_23rd_June_2008.pdf

¹⁶⁸ Ani Gasti, “CONSPIRACY/notes review,” October 2, 2000, Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 10.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Loring Mandel, April 5, 2018, 10:25–13:49.

were we going to do German accents? . . . And so, I think the brief at the beginning was that it wouldn't be German accents, but it would be some type of different accent . . . be given a flavour. Which was hopeless, I mean no one could hit on the right accent, so there was a revolt in the end. And I think she went her way and we were able to do it exactly the way we wanted to do it, really, which is much better . . .¹⁷⁰

By early November, rehearsals wrapped and it was time for filming to begin at Shepperton Studios in London and at the Wannsee villa in Berlin.



Figure 6.6: Filming at the Villa Gate, November 30, 2000. Signage for the memorial entrance as well as a cameraman filming from a crane are visible. Photo Courtesy Norbert Kampe.

6 Filming in London and Berlin

Conspiracy had a twenty-two-day shoot in November and December 2000. After a few days of rehearsals and read-throughs, filming began at Shepperton Studios,

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Ian McNeice by Derek Paget, 4.

London on November 2.¹⁷¹ Production later moved to Berlin for exterior shots at Wannsee from November 27 until December 1.¹⁷² Shepperton Studios had been an important location for HBO productions since the early 1990s, with the studio “[adopting] a more embracing attitude towards television.”¹⁷³ *Conspiracy* was one of the “smaller films” that filmed in that busy year for Shepperton, with more expensive international productions like *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, *Spy Game*, *Chocolat*, and *The Mummy Returns* all shooting at the studio.¹⁷⁴ No records pertaining to HBO’s financial arrangement with the BBC remain in the Loring Mandel collection, but it is likely that the production received tax breaks for shooting in the UK and employing UK cast and crew, as Simone Knox has discussed in an article on *Band of Brothers*, an HBO miniseries also shot in the UK that year, primarily on a set built in the town of Hatfield.¹⁷⁵ HBO would continue to film its “runaway productions” in locales outside of Hollywood and New York in exchange for large tax breaks and public money throughout the 2000s, a practice which arguably reached its zenith in post-Katrina New Orleans as the city rebranded itself as “Hollywood South.”¹⁷⁶ HBO set large projects like the series *True Blood*, *Treme*, and *True Detective* in Louisiana, and many other production companies relocated to the state.¹⁷⁷ A similar arrangement was occurring in the UK during the late 1990s, and *Conspiracy* was a part of this wave – even if the production team had agreed on hiring British actors early on in the writing process. HBO paid its British cast members in *Band of Brothers* lower salaries than their American counterparts, though the British cast had secured more favorable royalty payments due to guild negotiations.¹⁷⁸ A similar arrangement arguably applied to *Conspiracy*, the star power of Kenneth Branagh

171 Labrador Film Productions Ltd, “Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee” Call Sheet No 02, November 2, 2000, Box 15, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

172 Labrador Film Productions Ltd, “Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee” Revised Schedule, November 15, 2000, Box 15, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

173 Gareth Owen, *The Shepperton Story*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2009), 249.

174 Owen, *The Shepperton Story*, 272.

175 Knox, “Bringing the Battle to Britain.”

176 A “runaway production” is an American film industry term which refers to the practice of shooting an film or television program outside of Hollywood, usually for financial reasons. Typical examples would include the many productions shot in Vancouver, British Columbia which, although shot in Canada, take place in the US. Current productions often shoot in the Atlanta, Georgia area in order to save on costs.

177 See Vicki Mayer, *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans: The Lure of the Local Film Economy*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017) and Helen Morgan Parmett, *Down in Treme: Race, Place, and New Orleans on Television*, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2019).

178 Knox, “Bringing the Battle to Britain,” 324–326.

and Colin Firth notwithstanding. Simone Knox has also noted that such arrangements between HBO and the BBC complicate conventional notions of “co-production,” arguing that *Band of Brothers* can be “more meaningfully understood as a US runaway production made in the UK (that was, or eventually became, defined as British) than as a co-production.”¹⁷⁹ As *Conspiracy* filmed at Shepperton Studios during the same period as *Band of Brothers*, and, apart from US-based British producer Colin Callender and consultants like Alasdair Palmer, contained an almost exclusively American pre-production team (this would change once filming was imminent, with the addition of Nick Gillott of Labrador Films as a producer and Stephen Goldblatt as cinematographer), it also fits into Knox’s definition of a runaway production. In a recent interview, Stanley Tucci recounted his difficulty playing Eichmann while at Shepperton Studios, arguing that the script’s very lack of emotion was mentally taxing:

Part of the way through shooting, I was really having difficulty remembering the lines. It was hard. I talked to Ken [Branagh] about it and Ken said that he was having trouble, too. And then we realized that because there was nothing to connect to, you had no emotional connection, it was very hard. You finished at the end of the day, and it felt like you hadn’t done anything, but you were exhausted. More exhausted than if you had a big emotional scene. And you realize that it was because there was nothing to cling to, you were lost. These people didn’t feel anything.¹⁸⁰

On Monday, November 27, the team moved to Berlin for five days of shooting. These included all exterior shots at the Wannsee villa, Heydrich’s plane flying over the villa and landing, and the later cut scene of Eichmann bowling in Bratislava. A production schedule document notes that the crew only had around eight hours of daylight due to the time of year.¹⁸¹ The production team had been in contact with the Wannsee Memorial during pre-production, but also had previously been in touch during 1998, via their then-partners at UFA.¹⁸² In October, 2000, Andrea Axelrod contacted the head librarian, Gaby Oelrichs, with various

¹⁷⁹ Knox, “Bringing the Battle to Britain,” 316.

¹⁸⁰ Miller, *Tinderbox*, 377–378.

¹⁸¹ Labrador Film Productions Ltd, “Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee” Revised Schedule, November 15, 2000, Box 15, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹⁸² Marcus Loges to Nellie Nugiel, “AW: WANNSEE CENTER,” Folder 15, September 1, 1998, Frank R. Pierson Papers, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, California, 1.

questions about the conference.¹⁸³ A handwritten note on the printed-out email indicates that Axelrod had also contacted Wulf Kaiser, a historian then employed by the memorial's education department.¹⁸⁴ Norbert Kampe, then-director of the memorial site, received copies of Mandel's script drafts and commented on them.¹⁸⁵ The memorial also provided Andrea Axelrod and Labrador Films with photos and biographies of all the participants.¹⁸⁶ Members of the production team, including Nick Gillott of Labrador Films, met with Kampe at the memorial site in the last week of August 2000. A fax from Gillott also confirms that Frank Pierson traveled to Wannsee repeatedly before filming.¹⁸⁷

In a June email to Axelrod, Oelrichs noted that the owner of the Wannsee villa, Ernst Malier, was not Jewish (as earlier script drafts still indicated), that the villa had been sold to Stiftung Nordhav at "market price," and that the weather was at the freezing point with "a little bit of snow covering the ground" during the conference. Oelrichs also stated that "Heydrich did indeed fly his own plane to Berlin but landed at Gatow airport and then took a car out here which might have taken 45 minutes at the time."¹⁸⁸ Most negotiations for shooting on location went through Labrador Films, with Nick Gillott as the Wannsee Memorial director Norbert Kampe's chief contact person. Gillott offered the memorial site a donation of 30,000 Deutschmark (21,000 Euro adjusted for inflation in 2021).¹⁸⁹ Gil-

183 Andrea Axelrod. "Conspiracy: Script Review," June 23, 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 2.

184 "URGENT: emergency questions," Email from Andrea Axelrod to Gaby Oelrichs, October 9, 2000, in Andrea Axelrod Private Archive, New York City, New York, 1–2.

185 Loring Mandel, *Conspiracy: the Meeting at Wannsee*, Shooting Draft, October 20, 2000, in Ordner 0, Korrespondenz Norbert Kampe mit Labrador Film, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

186 Norbert Kampe, "The Participants of the Wannsee Conference," 2001, in Ordner 0, Korrespondenz Norbert Kampe mit Labrador Film, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin; Andrea Axelrod to Frank Doelger, "RE: Conspiracy - characters, bibliography, background," June 22, 2000, Box 13, Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

187 Nick Gillott to Norbert Kampe, September 5, 2000, in Ordner 0, Korrespondenz Norbert Kampe mit Labrador Film, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

188 Email from Gaby Oelrichs to Andrea Axelrod, June 21, 2000, in Andrea Axelrod Private Archive, New York City, New York.

189 Nick Gillott to Norbert Kampe, October 4, 2000, in Ordner 0, Korrespondenz Norbert Kampe mit Labrador Film, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin, 1–2.

lott also mentioned that the team would remove “the reference to the Jewish owners,” in the script, an error which Kampe and Oelrichs had clearly notified them about.¹⁹⁰ It appears that the errors in the script which Kampe and other employees of the Wannsee Memorial identified were minor enough for them to still agree to filming at the memorial. In an interview, Kampe stated that allowing filming on location was worth it as this could increase international attention for the Wannsee Conference and for the site – refusing to grant permission would have been the wrong move as the memorial’s director. He also mentioned that it was impossible to allow the production to film inside the memorial because it would have meant shutting down the exhibit and public access for an inordinate amount of time.¹⁹¹ In a cover letter for a revised script – dated after Kampe signed the contract for filming on location – Labrador Films production secretary Stephanie Dölker stated “I hope that we have eliminated most of the mistakes.”¹⁹² The contract between Labrador Films and the Wannsee Memorial stipulated that the production team could access the site for two days of preparation and at least four days of filming, plus a final day to clean up. The contract also finalized the donation of 30,000 DM and granted the production teams exclusive copyright over images produced at the villa and also freed the memorial from any liability for damages caused by the production.¹⁹³

In preparation for filming, the Wannsee Memorial needed to coordinate with various Berlin authorities. The local Berlin police precinct expressed reservations (“[the precinct captain] and the police, respectively are less than thrilled”) about Nazi flags potentially flying at the villa and Nazi symbols being displayed on the vehicles used during filming and suggested closing the streets leading to the memorial site. The same message indicated that a helicopter flyover required permission from the Federal Aviation Office (*Bundesluftfahrtamt*) and had to occur at an altitude of at least 150 meters.¹⁹⁴ Kampe later noted that the artificial snow used by the produc-

190 Gillott to Norbert Kampe, October 4, 2000, 2.

191 Interview with Norbert Kampe, July 25, 2018, Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannseekonferenz, Berlin. 01:00–03:28.

192 Stephanie Dölker to Norbert Kampe, November 1, 2000, in Ordner 0, Korrespondenz Norbert Kampe mit Labrador Film, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

193 Location Contract between Labrador Film Productions Ltd. and Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannseekonferenz, October 23, 2000, in Ordner 0, Korrespondenz Norbert Kampe mit Labrador Film, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

194 Michael Haupt to Norbert Kampe, “Bewachung,” October 6, 2000, in Ordner 0, Korrespondenz Norbert Kampe mit Labrador Film, Bestand Paul Mommertz, Joseph Wulf Mediothek, Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin.

tion team was very difficult to remove and that local firefighters had to be called in to help remove it.¹⁹⁵

The production team also provided Kampe with photos of the set in Shepperton (Figures 6.8 and 6.9) in order to show how they had recreated the meeting room based on a comparison photo from 1922 (Figure 6.7). Rebecca Weeks has argued that historians often overlook how key art departments, including set designers, are for historical filmmaking, noting the vast amount of research required. For her, “production design must express a specific historical time and place . . . while also maintaining an ‘invisible neutrality.’”¹⁹⁶ In an interview for this study, Frank Doelger discussed the set design at length:

We had photographs of the house, not exactly of the period, so in terms of what we were creating, we had a pretty good blueprint for that. I remember something that the production designer [said]. I came in and was absolutely fascinated because the production designer had furnished the conference room with furniture from different periods. I said, “I’m curious, could you explain the choice to me.” He (production designer Peter Mullins) said, “Well in my experience when I’ve gone around looking around houses, people add things at different times. So you may have a dining room or a room in a house that was furnished in one period, the 1920s, the 1930s, but there could have been someone who came along in the early 1940s who had seen a chair which was slightly more modern and added that.” So I think for me that was interesting that you try to start with the archives and the images you have out there, but you have to use your own creative judgement and imagination and think how they may have been changed. So that’s a question of getting what we can get right, right.¹⁹⁷

Little archival documentation of shooting survives; therefore, most of the information about filming can be gleaned from interviews conducted after the film’s premiere. The best information about filming, particularly about filming techniques and the philosophy behind them, can be found in Frank Pierson’s 2005 interview with the Directors Guild of America. His description of the strategic configuration of the set deserves to be quoted at length:

it was a replica of the room in which the meeting actually happened. And we built it on a sound stage with a whole, whole first floor of the thing. And . . . but I had it built so that it was maybe, oh, six feet longer and maybe three or four feet wider so that I could keep all four walls so we never pulled a wall out. The table, we shot it all in super 16. So the cameras are very small. We had two cameras shooting on every shot and the cameras were sitting, for the most part, on sandbags on the edge of the table and the operators were working with, you know, what do you call ‘em? Periscopes. But sitting on the floor so that they were

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Norbert Kampe, July 25, 2018, Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannseekonferenz, Berlin. 01:00–03:28.

¹⁹⁶ Weeks, *History by HBO*, 30–31.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020, 34:40–36:30.

out of sight of the Actors. But, they could make little, tiny adjustments, you know, on the sandbags. Up and down and around and so on so they could cover. Every place at the table was miked and the one boom that we had was operated from up in the – [it] flies up above so everything, as much as possible, was out of sight of the actors.¹⁹⁸

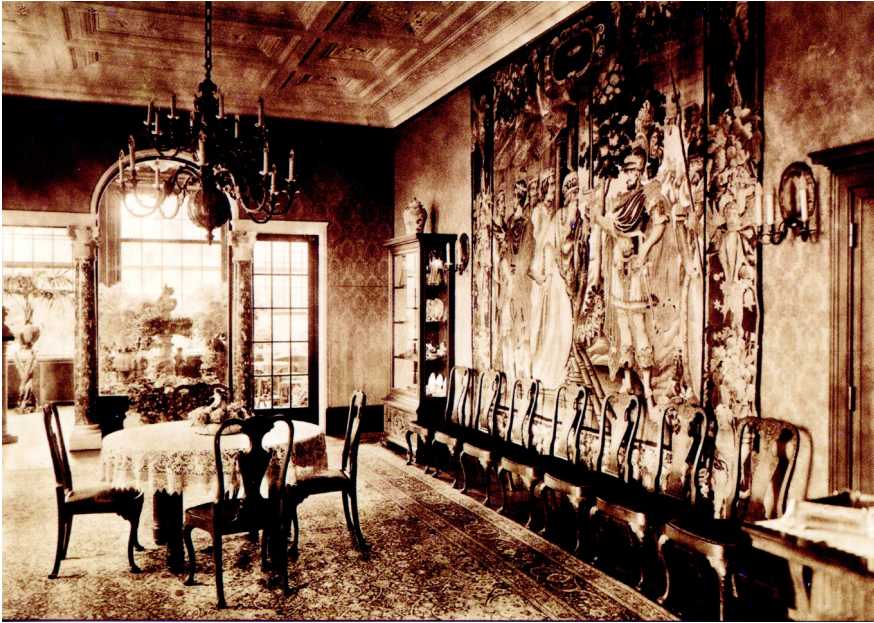


Figure 6.7: The Wannsee Villa and Winter Garden in 1922, Photo Courtesy Norbert Kampe.



Figure 6.8 and 6.9: Photos of the Set at Shepperton Studios, Images courtesy Norbert Kampe.

¹⁹⁸ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, Clip 10, Chapter 4, Clip 9, 12:06.

Pierson also noted that the problems of keeping sight lines and axes consistent, which was also faced by Heinz Schirk, similarly frustrated the filmmakers, who decided they would have to fix them in editing: “the sight lines—[INT: What a challenge.]—were unbelievable. You know, in fact, finally we just gave up trying to draw diagrams and trying to figure out left to right, and so on.”¹⁹⁹ Pierson’s copies of the shooting script contain many drawings of the conference table which identify positions of both actors and cameras.²⁰⁰ Filming in Berlin also entailed wrangling up period-appropriate vehicles for the cast to arrive in. Michael Berenbaum noted that each type of car was chosen based on the rank and personalities of the characters – so for example, some of the characters stationed in the occupied East arrive in a mud-spattered truck and Martin Luther’s car is poorly maintained.²⁰¹ Stanley Tucci discussed a change in atmosphere when production moved to Berlin:

It was a very, very weird experience. We were like five, six weeks in the studio and shooting around that table and the different rooms on the set . . . And then we went to Wannsee and we shot the exteriors. It was winter. They put some snow all over the place. There was already snow, but I think they added more. Everybody was all dressed up, and all the extras dressed up in Nazi uniforms. They were all German. I had to do this thing where I come stand at the threshold of the estate and go in. And as I stood there and I looked at the whole thing and I heard everybody speaking German and saw the uniforms, there was nothing contemporary there. All of the emotion that I had felt doing the research and sort of suppressed doing the filming in the studio came welling up. Tears came to my eyes and I almost vomited. I had never experienced that before.²⁰²

In his memoir about food and battling cancer, *Taste*, Tucci also briefly discusses shooting *Conspiracy* in Berlin, but in a much more lighthearted manner: “[t]he shots were mostly establishing exteriors, so the days were quite short; therefore my only experience with German film catering was the breakfasts, and they were extraordinary. I have never seen such a selection of meats, spreads, cheeses, and breads anywhere except a farmers’ market at Christmastime, and all of them were delicious.”²⁰³ While the food is clearly Tucci’s focus in this quote, it helps illustrate that even with the heavy subject matter and emotions he experienced on location, it was still, in many ways, just an average film shoot experience, an-

¹⁹⁹ Pierson, “Visual History with Frank Pierson,” Chapter 4, Clip 10, 13:48.

²⁰⁰ Loring Mandel, *CONSPIRACY* [television] – script, Folder 2, October 2000, Frank R. Pierson Papers, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, California, 50A, 59. See also the notebook pages included in this document, which also contain many drawings where Pierson planned out camera angles and scene blocking.

²⁰¹ Interview with Michael Berenbaum, 11:54–14:38.

²⁰² Miller, *Tinderbox*, 378.

²⁰³ Stanley Tucci, *Taste: My Life Through Food* (London: Fig Tree, 2021), 169.

other workday with, at least in Tucci's eyes, extraordinary catering. But as his interview betrays, being physically present on location at Wannsee was, at least for him, incredibly emotionally powerful; his memories of the Berlin shoot (See figures 6.5 and 6.6) strike a balance between the pleasures of food and literal stomach-turning discomfort at finally being where the history he was portraying took place.

Conspiracy wrapped shooting on December 1, 2000, with a budget somewhere between ten and twelve million dollars.²⁰⁴ Pierson would fly back to Berlin to shoot pickup shots, and a new ending would also be filmed in Shepperton.²⁰⁵ The years of hard work trying to write and shoot this new depiction of Wannsee were behind them, but editing lay ahead. Here is where Peter Zinner finally would be able to realize his long-gestating ambition and contribute to an English-language production on Wannsee. Mandel and Pierson did not forget *Complicity* and would try to revive the project. The story of *Conspiracy*'s pre-production and filming is dense and tough to untangle – many paths, like the *Complicity* script, ended in dead ends. Others, like the arguments about the inaccuracy of the depiction of Wilhelm Stuckart, remained unresolved and ended up onscreen.

Lastly, this story, although Pierson's voice seems to dominate at times, shows that historical filmmaking – and filmmaking in general – is a fundamentally collaborative exercise.²⁰⁶ *Conspiracy* is not simply the realized vision of an auteur named Frank Pierson, but instead the combined work of hundreds of individuals – Loring Mandel, the screenwriter; actors like Branagh, Firth, and Tucci; historical consultants and advisers like Michael Berenbaum, Andrea Axelrod, and Christopher Browning; the editor, Peter Zinner; the art department; the cinematographer; producers such as Colin Callender and Frank Doelger, and many others – all of whom were crucial to the project's success.

²⁰⁴ Exact figures are hard to find, Frank Doelger claimed 10–12 million USD in an email to author, May 2, 2021.

²⁰⁵ This refers to the film's opening and closing sequences, which depict the Wannsee Villa staff preparing for and cleaning up after the meal without dialogue.

²⁰⁶ Weeks, *History by HBO*, 59.

Chapter 7

Wannsee as Prestige Television Drama and the fate of *Complicity*: 2001–2003

It's so devoid of emotion, that's what makes it so emotional.¹ – Stanley Tucci on *Conspiracy*

1 Editing, Reshoots, and Promotional Campaign

Executive Producer Frank Doelger was in shock. He had just seen Frank Pierson's rough cut of *Conspiracy* and could not believe what he was seeing:

We shot the film. We had gone back and we had reshot a section, and I had seen an assembly of the film which was where the whole film was put together. I gave notes on that and its faults. I was then invited to the screening room. At that point, we were editing in London and the editing room moved to Los Angeles and I was invited into the editing room to look at Frank's [Pierson's] now first cut of the film. And I was shocked to discover that Frank had completely intercut the film with stock footage of the Holocaust. Jews being loaded on trains, being transported, footage of the camps, the crematoriums, corpses, piles of corpses that were found by the Allies when they entered the camps . . . The film finished and I said to Frank, 'what have you done?' He said, 'I decided the film was boring. We'd never get an audience. It's men in rooms talking. We're not going to hold their interest, and we have to make it more cinematic.' And I said, 'Frank, I have to tell you, you have destroyed it. You have completely destroyed the film. It has now become people in rooms talking in between sections of stock footage. And I have no idea what to say, but if this is the film you want to put out there, you better go to HBO right now and tell them, because I guarantee you this will never be aired.' And he was furious at me. It was the biggest fight we ever had. He stormed out of the cutting room and there was radio silence for about 3 days. Then I got a call from Loring [Mandel] and then I got a call from Peter [Zinner], who said that they had felt the same thing and tried to mention it to Frank and they weren't getting anywhere. They think that Frank was beginning to soften. So, I then went back into the cutting room. I just said, 'I would really love to see your version of the film, Frank, without this footage, because you're telling me something didn't work and I haven't had the chance to see it. Please restore what it was before you put the footage together.' And he did. It was terrific. It was really interesting to me that someone who had a vision of this film as ninety-minute film of men talking had lost his way – he had also added a big score, almost every scene had underscoring, and then again the whole idea of the film was that music would only come in at the end when Eichmann was listening to the Schubert Quintet. So that was the real shock of the project.²

1 Miller, *Tinderbox*, 377.

2 Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020, 23:38–28:54.

Pierson had been one of the most vociferous advocates for presenting *Conspiracy* without a score, without stock footage, and instead, letting the words of the Wannsee Conference participants drive the story and stand for themselves without resorting to cinematic artifice. This incident recounted by Doelger illustrates that even by that stage of post-production, Pierson was not immune from resorting to pure didacticism, splicing the film together with archival footage of the Holocaust and overlaying a “big score” to act as signposts for the audience – robbing the film of any subtext as well as doing the audience’s thinking for them. This was no sudden change on Pierson’s part: earlier drafts for *Complicity* also contained plenty of stock footage and Riegner’s narration as a didactic storytelling device – but these always fundamentally contradicted Pierson’s statements at previous meetings, in notes to Loring Mandel, and his impassioned letter to Stanley Sheinbaum. However, up until this point, Pierson had believed in the power of the history and the power of the script to carry the film without resorting to the methods of overly didactic after-school specials. Pierson himself never discussed this incident.

In the runup to the May 2001 premiere, HBO began a promotional campaign for the film which, in contrast with the actual film, promoted outdated notions of Wannsee being the key moment in the history of the Holocaust where “the decision” was made. For example, HBO’s April 2001 press release opens by describing the Wannsee Conference as both “the 90-minute meeting that set in motion the details of Hitler’s Final Solution” and as “a clandestine meeting that would ultimately seal the fate of the European Jewish population. Ninety minutes later, the blueprint for Hitler’s Final Solution was in place.”³ These statements are slightly contradictory, but they are by no means as strongly worded as the film’s taglines. In contrast with the film itself, HBO Films’ press release makes Hitler’s involvement clearer and takes a much more intentionalist tack than Mandel’s script. The press release dubs the protocol “the only document where the details of Hitler’s maniacal plan were actually codified.”⁴ During pre-production, the team debated what kind of (offscreen) role Hitler should have in the film. For example, in a June 1998 memo, Ani Gasti, Frank Doelger’s assistant at HBO NYC Productions, noted that “[t]here is a lack of Hitler’s presence. Perhaps a sidebar discussion at the end of the meeting could suggest an admiration for Hitler having got it accomplished without having been there and dirtying his own hands.”⁵ In contrast with

3 HBO Films, “Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star,” 1.

4 HBO Films, “Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star,” 1.

5 Ani Gasti to Frank Doelger, June 22, 1998, Box 15 Folder 1, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 6.

The Wannsee Conference, in which a bust of Hitler literally looms in the background during the conference, *Conspiracy* instead has its characters mention Hitler and his will – and how it is their duty to carry it out. They are, in the words of historian Ian Kershaw, “working towards the Führer.”⁶ For example, in one pivotal scene, Kritzinger, representative of the Reich Chancellery, states that mass killings cannot possibly be happening and is quickly disabused of that notion:

KRITZINGER

That is not – no, that’s contrary to what the Chancellery has been told, I have directly been assured, I have – that we have undertaken to systematically eradicate all the Jews of Europe, that possibility has been personally denied, to me, by the Führer!

HEYDRICH

And it will continue to be.

KRITZINGER has been fearful that all the assurances he and Lammers have received have been lies. He stands again, HEYDRICH looks at him coldly. His following words, sounding regretful, are in fact a warning: this is the way it is, accept it

HEYDRICH (CONT'D)

My apologies.

KRITZINGER turns and walks toward the doors, wanting to walk out of the room but undecided; can he insult HEYDRICH by walking out. He paces randomly, knowing in his heart there’s only so far he can push it. All watch. KRITZINGER finally comes back to his chair.

KRITZINGER

Yes, I understand.

HEYDRICH has locked gaze with KRITZINGER; one of them will look away. Which one. The moment is attenuated until it’s unbearable for KRITZINGER, who, with the few empathic instincts he has left, can see HEYDRICH’s side of it.

KRITZINGER (CONT'D)

Yes, he will continue to deny it.

HEYDRICH

(forcing the moment)

Do you accept my apologies?

⁶ Ian Kershaw, “‘Working Towards the Führer.’ Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship,” *Contemporary European History* 2, no. 2 (July 1993): 103–118.

KRITZINGER
(Still straight in the eye)
Of course.

KRITZINGER's gesture of abdication ends the immediate tension.⁷



Figure 7.1: Heydrich (Kenneth Branagh) stares at Kritzinger, demanding acquiescence. *Conspiracy*. HBO Films, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2001.

This scene illustrates several key themes of the film. First, Hitler is absent at the meeting, but his presence is felt. He clearly has knowledge of and has approved this meeting, but he will not directly get involved. Second, the stage directions in the screenplay clearly show the importance of nonverbal communication for dramatic film. Much of the power dynamics in *Conspiracy* are illustrated with nonverbal communication. In this scene, Kritzinger debates with himself about whether or not he should leave the room but decides on staying in order to avoid offending Heydrich, who brings Kritzinger into line with a chilling, unblinking stare (Figure 7.1). It is, of course, debatable as to whether the real Heydrich would have intimidated his colleagues in such a fashion, but Branagh's performance in this scene is undeniably effective.⁸ The theme of Hitler's knowing distance from

⁷ Loring Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, October 21, 2003, Box 1 Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 46.

⁸ See Evans, *Hitler's People*, 303 for a discussion of Heydrich's personality, how he “always made people feel uncomfortable.” Other parts of this passage include postwar statements from his subordinates, who describe him as “devilish,” “the most demonic personality in the Nazi leadership,”

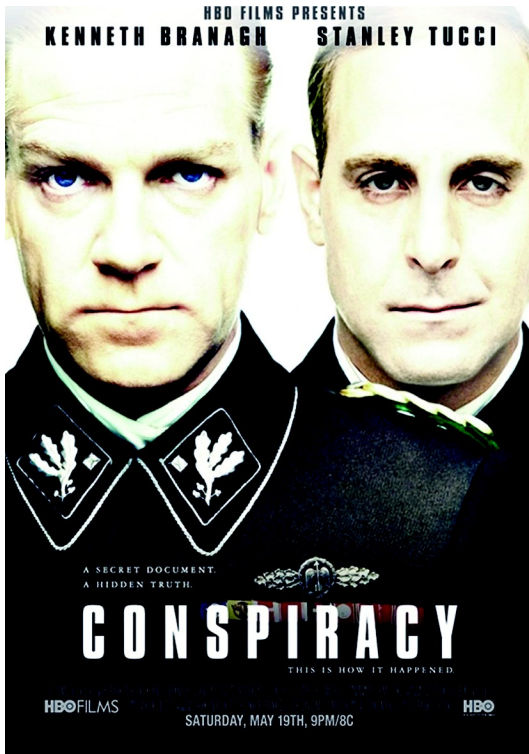


Figure 7.2: HBO Films Poster for *Conspiracy*, 2001. see IMDb., <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0266425/mediaviewer/rm2184429569/> (accessed August 11, 2021). HBO Films.

the meeting and its top-secret nature is also underscored in another scene, in which Eichmann orders a telephone operator (Tom Hiddleston) to stop accepting calls: “This meeting is not taking place. You are to take no phone calls for anyone at this meeting. Anyone. Unless the Führer calls. And he won’t.”

The film’s posters rely on both its star power and Nazi iconography. The posters (Figure 7.2) show a uniformed Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci in close-up, with the more common poster and subsequent DVD cover placing them either in front of a Nazi flag or barbed wire (depending on the country of release). The film’s taglines, “One of The Greatest Crimes Against Humanity Was Perpetrated in Just Over an Hour” and “One Meeting. Six Million Lives” repeat, as previously noted, an old, erro-

and how Einsatzgruppe leader Arthur Nebe “was said to have shaken with fear when he was in Heydrich’s presence.”

neous understanding of the Wannsee Conference.⁹ Another, more neutral tagline read “A Secret Document. A Hidden Truth. This is how it happened.”¹⁰ The historical consensus on the conference was, by this time, in agreement that Wannsee represented a key point where genocide became state policy, but not where Hitler’s decision to commit it had been made – that had happened in 1941 or 1942, but historians still debate about exactly when.¹¹ HBO’s current description of the film is more restrained. Its streaming service, HBOMax, describes the film as a “story of the top-secret Nazi meeting to debate the merits of Hitler’s ‘Final Solution.’”¹²

HBO Films’ April 2001 press release contains more information about the production. Frank Pierson held up the film’s long takes compared to “how movies are traditionally made” and noted that the cast uses their normal voices because speaking with German accents “would have interfered with the immediacy of the performances, distracting audiences from the emotional truth of the material.”¹³ This practice is still common in HBO historical productions. For example, the 2019 miniseries *Chernobyl* features a mostly British cast speaking with their normal voices. Quotes from the cast discussed the difficulty of the material, with Kenneth Branagh arguing that Heydrich “seems to be soulless” and that “[p]laying such a character, I didn’t want to say the lines, I didn’t want to be connected to this moral vacuum that seems to be the man himself . . . There is something purely evil about him that is absolutely repellent and I’ll be very happy not to wear his uniform or play him ever again.”¹⁴ The press release cites Hannah Arendt and her famous depiction of Eichmann, connecting it with Tucci’s performance. Colin Firth discussed the film’s relevance for the world in 2001, prefiguring arguments by scholars like Michael Rothberg, who propose a “multidirectional memory”.¹⁵

I am reading a book about Rwanda at the moment, and it is remarkable to me how many parallels there are . . . The Balkans might be a more fitting comparison, but nevertheless the attacks by machete in Rwanda were not performed by frenzied mobs and not necessar-

9 See the taglines at IMDb. “Conspiracy,” <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0266425/taglines> (accessed August 11, 2021).

10 See IMDb., <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0266425/mediaviewer/rm2184429569/> (accessed August 11, 2021).

11 See Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 37–39, 76–79; Browning, “When Did They Decide?”

12 See HBO.com, “Conspiracy,” <https://www.hbo.com/movies/catalog.conspiracy> (accessed August 11, 2021).

13 HBO Films, “Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star,” 2. See the discussion in the previous chapter for the production team’s reasons behind this decision.

14 HBO Films, “Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star,” 3.

15 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

ily by tribesmen. The people who were committing these murders were doctors, parish priests, research scientists and all sorts of other professional people . . . They weren't doing it in the spirit of passion, but because they felt it was necessary and that their lives would not be better until they got rid of an entire race of people. The same sort of normalization of what is absolutely unthinkable is still happening today.¹⁶

The press release also contains a detailed synopsis of the film which explains the meeting's purpose more clearly than its misleading taglines: "it's obvious that Heydrich is not proposing a final solution to the Jewish problem; he's telling the group that such a solution is already in place."¹⁷ Future historical writing on *Conspiracy* should pay more attention to the actual film instead of relying on the marketing copy added to the DVD cover and poster. The film does not ultimately argue that the Holocaust was conceptualized at Wannsee; rather, in many scenes, it emphasizes that the mass murder is already taking place, and makes clear that the meeting's main purpose was informing and implicating the civilian ministries, as well as Heydrich and the RSHA assuming control. Nevertheless, HBO's own promotional material was contradictory, seemingly torn by the need to get the point across to as many people as possible with as little words as possible.

Conspiracy premiered on HBO at 9 pm on Saturday, May 19, 2001. It would not premiere in the UK until the following January – a common practice with such so-called "runaway" productions, which often premiere in the United States before their partner country.¹⁸ Like HBO's other major production on World War II released that year, the miniseries *Band of Brothers*, *Conspiracy* would enjoy critical acclaim before quickly vanishing from public spotlight in the wake of 9/11 and its aftermath.

2 *Conspiracy*, 2001

Conspiracy begins with a cold open: a maid opens curtains, a cut to cooks preparing a meal, orderlies unrolling rugs and polishing silverware, and Eichmann meticulously filling out and arranging place cards around the conference table. This sequence unfolds without dialogue; a group of servants and kitchen staff prepare for a big event before a cut to a shot of Heydrich's plane flying over the Wannsee as the narrator provides context for the meeting. This montage, complemented by a similar scene of the Wannsee House staff cleaning up after the conference as

¹⁶ HBO Films, "Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star," 3–4.

¹⁷ HBO Films, "Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star," 6.

¹⁸ For example, the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*, which was also filmed in England, received British tax money, and had a large British cast, was officially a BBC co-production. *Band of Brothers* premiered on HBO on September 9, 2001 but did not premiere on BBC2 until October of that year.

the participants leave and the end titles roll, only became included in the story after the bulk of the film had been shot in November 2000. Frank Doelger recounted how he came up with the idea for the film's new opening:

[W]hen I had seen the assembly of the film, one of the things that always fascinated me was that the conference took place in this fantastic, beautiful villa. From what I imagine and what I had read, it was a very formal lunch, well-staffed. And I thought the incongruity between the setting and the subject. The setting of the meeting and the subject were so fascinating. I felt that we hadn't really solved that. So, I tried to figure out what to do with the credit sequence. Frank [Pierson] had wanted to use some aerial maps of where Wannsee was, he was thinking of using a long sequence of Heydrich arriving by his plane, and I asked him if we could imagine a scenario where we are preparing for the meal. Again, I wanted everything that spoke of a certain level of civilization and sophistication, of refinement. We created a sequence of the silver being polished, the crystal being shined, the place cards being written, the table being laid. It was really a way to try to punch up, again, the incongruity of that situation.¹⁹

The narrator also bookended the film. Used sparingly, at the film's beginning, the narration only introduces the wider developments in the war up to January 1942, as well as the reason Heydrich convened the meeting. Frank Pierson discussed the problems he had finding the right narrator (the role eventually went to the British actor Rod Culbertson), stating that he constantly had to avoid the risk of priming audience emotions and reactions:

I went through probably twelve actors before I could find one who could read without introducing inflection; trying to produce an effect with the sound, and so on, because I said, "Listen," I wanted a rather thin voice that doesn't comment on it at all. Just simply tell us the story and let us feel what we feel about it because that is so much more powerful because it is then we who are producing the emotion out of ourselves; out of what it is that we are seeing, and what we have seen when it comes at the end that is the most telling thing. And to have an actor who is making a performance out of it, then he is telling us how to feel.²⁰

Previous versions of the screenplay had relied on Gerhart Riegner's narration, which sardonically remarked on the events portrayed on screen.²¹ Earlier drafts of the opening narration included claims contradicting the rest of the screenplay and made it seem like the decision to exterminate European Jews was made at Wannsee. For example, one early draft states that "Hitler dreamed of a German military empire that would last one thousand years . . . and Hitler had another

¹⁹ Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020, 29:20–30:49.

²⁰ Frank Pierson, "Visual History with Frank Pierson," Chapter 7, Clip 16, 26:39.

²¹ Loring Mandel, *Complicity*, written by Loring Mandel, First Draft, 6/7/97, June 7, 1997, in Box 3, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

dream. In January of 1942, 15 men were convened to make it come true.”²² An April 21, 2001 draft rewords this to “Hitler’s dream of an Aryan Empire to last a thousand years was, for the first time, in doubt . . . But though a German military victory was threatened, Hitler was determined to leave as his legacy a Europe of one dominant race. On January 20th, fifteen men came to Wannsee – a quiet lakeside resort near Berlin – to create that legacy. Here, in less than two hours, these men changed the world forever.”²³ The final version of the opening narration is more moderate and places more emphasis on the developments on the Eastern Front and keeps the meeting’s purpose more vague: “While [Hitler] hired and fired generals and winter grew colder, fifteen of his officials were ordered from their commands and ministries to meet in a quiet lakeside residence at Wannsee, near Berlin, far from the crisis at the front. In two hours, these men changed the world forever.”²⁴ The narration provides minimal background information; the rest of the information necessary for understanding the historical situation and context is conveyed through conversations between the characters.

In comparison with the 1984 West German film, *Conspiracy* retains the former film’s speed but allows for more pauses, giving the audience a bit of breathing room between long stretches of dialogue and information. The camera acts as a “you are there” device, placing the audience at the conference table. *Conspiracy* is what Alex Kay has referred to as an “intimate film” due to its eye-level camera and extensive close-up shots.²⁵ (see Figure 7.3) Pierson and cinematographer Stephen Goldblatt utilize long takes, which give the film both a sense of suspense and a theatric quality. In its most cinematographically inventive sequence, the camera emerges from a hole in the center of the conference table and spins 360 degrees around the room as each participant assents to Heydrich’s proposals.²⁶ Additionally, the film relies on a cold, naturalistic lighting, emphasizing both the wintry time of year and the coldness of the subject matter. The film’s soundscape is also equally naturalistic. We constantly hear glasses and silverware clinking, cigarette lighters clicking, papers shuffling, and other repetitive noises which con-

22 Loring Mandel, Undated Opening and Closing Narration Drafts, Box 9 Folder 10, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

23 Loring Mandel, Fax to Frank Pierson, April 21, 2001, Box 9 Folder 10, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

24 Loring Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, October 21, 2003, Box 1 Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 2.

25 Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 189.

26 Interview with Andrea Axelrod, March 9, 2018, New York City, 29:49–31:00.



Figure 7.3: Cinematographer Stephen Goldblatt keeps the camera at eye level, as if the viewer is sitting at the conference table. *Conspiracy*. HBO Films, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2001.

vey the busy atmospheres of both a hotel being run and a conference underway. Most notably, we constantly hear the sounds of the stenographer's typing, especially when the participants pause dramatically, underscoring the fact that the meeting minutes are being drafted in real time as we watch the conference unfold. Lastly, the film is almost completely devoid of a soundtrack. Music is only present in the final sequence and is diegetic; that is, it comes from the film's world – a Schubert record that Eichmann places on the phonograph – and not from an offscreen source.

After the opening narration, the film introduces Eichmann, who promptly scolds an orderly for breaking china, ordering another orderly to “itemize the cost,” emphasizing older depictions of Eichmann as a meticulous bureaucrat “absent of ideology” and portraying him as a man “severe in his treatment of subordinates,” (see the scene where he slaps a driver for participating in a snowball fight) as the historian Alex J. Kay has pointed out.²⁷ Kay claims that the filmmakers “appear to have followed an image of [Eichmann] that corresponds to the widespread misconception that Hannah Arendt portrayed Eichmann as a dutiful and obedient functionary, bereft of motives beyond personal advancement . . . his ideological zealotry is entirely absent in his depiction in *Conspiracy*.”²⁸ Kay's

²⁷ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 193.

²⁸ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 193.

assessment is borne out by the archival material. Stanley Tucci's letter to Frank Pierson, while it argues against a one-dimensional depiction of Eichmann, does not mention Nazi ideology at any point, instead focusing on the complexities of his personality – these suggestions did make it into the final film.²⁹ Andrea Axelrod, however, pushed back against the script's depiction of other characters viewing Eichmann as a “nobody” considering Eichmann's importance in deporting Jews from Vienna.³⁰ These remarks appear to have had no influence on the final cut of the film. The Eichmann of *Conspiracy* is more prominent and strays further from Hannah Arendt's characterization of him than does the portrayal in the 1984 version of *The Wannsee Conference*, but it still largely follows the classic depiction of Eichmann as an unideological desk-bound murderer (*Schreibtischtäter*), albeit with some notable exceptions. The script also directly alludes to Arendt's view of Eichmann, but in a more complicated manner. Instead of just dramatizing Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann, the script portrays a discrepancy between the actual Eichmann and how the other attendees underestimated him much in the same way Arendt did. For example, one section of the script states that “[a]ll turn to this man [Eichmann] whom they consider a glorified secretary.”³¹ This is contrasted with the end of the film, which states that Eichmann pursued mass extermination with an unwavering singlemindedness after Heydrich's death. Stanley Tucci's performance is admirable, and the film does move away from Eichmann's self-portrayal as an unimportant flunky sitting in the corner of the room during the conference – the Eichmann here is clearly much more involved and is more than a meeting-organizer and notetaker – but the character still does not stray far from the archetype of a cold, dispassionate functionary. Recent biographies of Eichmann recenter ideology and convincingly demonstrate that he was, in fact, a passionate Nazi and antisemite.³²

As the participants begin to arrive, the different groups are made clear. For example, the members of the SS/RSHA all clump together, intimidating several of the civilian *Staatssekretäre* (see Figure 7.4). Wreathed in smoke, Schöngarth and Lange swagger through the buffet line; Kritzinger notes their presence. It is clear that this meeting involves a power struggle. Mandel's final screenplay draft explicitly describes the situation before Heydrich's arrival at the villa:

²⁹ Stanley Tucci to Frank Pierson, undated (most likely late 2000) in Box 10, Folder 7, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

³⁰ Andrea Axelrod, “Overall Issues Part II,” June 26, 2000, copy in author's possession, 5.

³¹ Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, 55.

³² See Cesarani, *Eichmann* and Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*.

Present in the room, with various degrees of conviviality, are LANGE, SCHÖNGARTH, BÜHLER, MEYER, LEIBBRANDT, LUTHER, NEUMANN, STUCKART, and HOFMANN. They mill about, forming brief combinations which alter and dissolve as clouds in the wind. Wine flows, the room is enveloped in cigar and cigarette smoke, murky and acrid. We will see that those in the SS tend usually to congregate with one another. There is, in this room, a general unease among the non-SS as to what will happen here. Plans may be cancelled, sinecures shattered.³³



Figure 7.4: The SS officers Otto Hoffman (Nicholas Woodeson), Eberhard Schöngarth (Peter Sullivan), and Rudolf Lange (Barnaby Kay) eye the *Staatssekretäre* while enjoying cigars and wine. *Conspiracy*. HBO Films, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2001.

These early scenes also illustrate what Frank Doelger called “the incongruity of that situation,” depicting silver trays full of smoked herring and shrimp, boxes of “fine” cigars, and glasses of undoubtedly stolen French wine. While not as boisterous as the scenes in the 1984 film (which sometimes veers into a depiction of the participants reminiscent of pub regulars on a night out, *Conspiracy* constantly references alcohol in order to depict both the refinement of the setting and the loosening of characters’ inhibitions as the day progresses. The script is full of references to different characters pouring themselves wine and liquor – usually whisky or cognac – clearly confiscated from their French and British enemies. Usually, the characters on the “winning” side at the table – the SS members, Luther, and Klopfer – indulge more than those like Kritzing and Stuckart, who are

³³ Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, 12.

placed on the defensive. In one scene towards the end of the film, the script mentions Schöngarth breaking decorum due to his indulgence: “his speech slightly slurred by the whisky, [Schöngarth] attempts an unjustified familiarity; he waves extravagantly at Heydrich.”³⁴ The film’s most important depiction of alcohol – besides that at the conference table, where tongues are increasingly loosened as the liquor flows – occurs at the film’s end, when Heydrich, Müller, and Eichmann retire to a study to discuss the day’s success by the fire. Here, Heydrich has a drink for the first time in the film and orders Eichmann to “take a fucking drink” with him. *Conspiracy*’s portrayal of this scene, which comes directly from Eichmann’s postwar testimony, chillingly illustrates how this was a very important workday for Heydrich and a cause for celebration.

Conspiracy similarly thematizes food in order to contrast the opulent setting with the meeting’s purpose. The attendees, especially Gerhard Klopfer, played by the corpulent Ian McNeice, discuss the merits of Nuremberg sausages (“those greasy little things”) and pile their plates high with hors d’oeuvres unavailable at either the front or in the occupied territories, further accentuating the film’s depiction of the Nazi Party man Klopfer – who was based in Berlin – as an unscrupulous glutton. Indeed, one of the film’s more comical – and historically absurd – aspects is how Heydrich calls attention to the buffet and takes breaks for food multiple times during a ninety-minute meeting, something the HBO Films press release directly alludes to, stating how, “with the deftness of a master politician, Heydrich defuses tense confrontations by taking several prudent breaks for drinks and lunch. There’s nothing like booze and food to temper a foul mood.”³⁵ Indeed, the film is not all doom and gloom. At times, *Conspiracy* is darkly comic. This is particularly evident during the film’s beginning, when each character shouts “Heil Hitler!” upon meeting a new arrival. The “heiling” goes on throughout the beginning of the film and only pauses once Heydrich arrives, telling them “[i]f we keep doing this all day we’ll never finish. With no disrespect to our Führer, it’s suspended till the conclusion of business.”³⁶ The heiling is indeed suspended until the end of the conference, when the attendees all stand up and shout it in unison.

In contrast with the role of alcohol in the film, *Conspiracy* portrays tobacco use in several different ways. Besides its visual aspect – smoke-filled rooms being shorthand for conspiratorial behavior – and, of course, its simultaneous importance in faithfully depicting the wide acceptance of smoking in the 1940s, the activity of smoking in *Conspiracy* also furthers both storytelling and character de-

³⁴ Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, 63.

³⁵ HBO Films, “Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star,” 5.

³⁶ Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, 21.

velopment. First, it depicts cigar smoking – almost exclusively on the part of the SS and Party members – in a manner that highlights both the refined setting and the confidence of Heydrich’s men – which goes overboard, as shown in a scene where Hofmann becomes ill after a discussion of killing methods, blaming it on the cigar, much to Schöngarth’s chagrin, prompting Heydrich to ban cigars for the remainder of the meeting. In this scene, Lange offers the ill Hofmann a cigarette, stating that “there aren’t enough of them in the world.” In contrast with the depiction of cigars, the film’s portrayal of cigarette smoking is one that stresses their necessity for stress relief. In contrast with the other SS men, who smoke cigars for enjoyment, Lange, who has just arrived from the front, only smokes cigarettes in the film. He clearly relies on them for stress relief, as evidenced by his comment to Hofmann and depiction as an individual psychologically burdened by the mass shootings he carried out in Latvia.

Several of Lange’s most important scenes in the film occur either when he is on a smoke break or is drinking. In the scene directly preceding Kritzinger’s stare-down with Heydrich, Lange challenges Heydrich about his use of the euphemism “evacuation,” Lange has already had several drinks by this point. The script notes that Lange “speaks reasonably, but the liquor has triggered a deep anger.”³⁷ As Simone Gigliotti has discussed in detail, *Conspiracy* is “a visual essay about language.”³⁸ The script, as seen above, is full of discussions about the meaning of words, euphemisms, and language rules, much as in *The Wannsee Conference*. Nevertheless, the film often sticks to language directly from the protocol, particularly in the first half when Heydrich presents his proposal for the “Final Solution.” However, in another scene, Kritzinger and Lange discuss language in the context of both the ongoing mass killings and Lange’s legal training, also introducing the concept of genocide, a word which had not yet been coined:³⁹

KRITZINGER

What gas chambers? Gas chambers?

LANGE

I hear rumors, yes.

KRITZINGER

This is more than war. There must be a different word for this.

³⁷ Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, 45.

³⁸ Gigliotti, “Commissioning Mass Murder,” 128.

³⁹ This scene introduces the concept of genocide, a word first coined by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin during the war.

LANGE
Try chaos.

KRITZINGER
Yes. The rest is Argument. The curse of my profession.

LANGE
I studied Law as well.

KRITZINGER
How do you apply that education to what you do?

LANGE
It has made me . . . distrustful of language. A gun means what it says.⁴⁰

The number of lawyers and other highly educated people at Wannsee (note that Kritzinger was not actually a lawyer, a common mistake) is also a constant theme in the film, which exudes elegance, culture, and refinement – their presence at this beautiful villa in the heart of one of Berlin's affluent suburbs functions as a scathing indictment of German *Kultur* and Western Civilization.⁴¹ No elegance, refinement, *Bildung*, or *Kultur* was able to prevent this meeting from happening or to prevent what would follow. In fact, it enabled it: As Alex Kay has pointed out, “[t]he filmmakers are playing here with the common perception of lawyers as cold and narrow-minded. The gravity of the subject matter, however, allows them to go one step further: the lawyers’ traditional role as upholders of the law is now inverted; they become criminals on a mass scale.”⁴² Here, Kay also underscores the importance of the film’s title. A conspiracy is criminal by definition and we are witnessing, as the drug kingpin Stringer Bell famously said in Season 3 of *The Wire*, people “taking notes on a criminal fucking conspiracy.”⁴³

In contrast with the 1984 *The Wannsee Conference*, which depicts Lange as a brutal, drunken buffoon, Mandel, in keeping with earlier historiography like Eugen Kogon’s *Der SS-Staat*, instead portrays Lange as a highly educated member of Heydrich’s “fighting administration” (*kämpfende Verwaltung*), whose doctorate is by no means an impediment to his work.⁴⁴ In highlighting the educated status of members of the RSHA and SS who also led *Einsatzgruppen*, *Conspiracy* follows

40 Mandel, *Conspiracy*, 68.

41 For a discussion of the misidentification of Kritzinger as a lawyer, see Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 190.

42 Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 191.

43 Daniel Attias, “Straight and True,” *The Wire*, December 30, 2009.

44 For more on the “fighting administration,” see Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*.

developments in perpetrator studies throughout the 1990s, which, thanks to the work of scholars like Christopher Browning, had begun to move away from both the older depictions of Holocaust perpetrators as “demonic” figures as well as from the notion of the cold, rational “desk murderers” made famous by Hannah Arendt’s and Raul Hilberg’s studies.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, *Conspiracy* does not fully disconnect from earlier views of Nazi perpetrators, as its previously-discussed depiction of Eichmann as an obsessive administrator and meticulous planner illustrates.

Lastly, the film’s use of language is at its most effective when Mandel deploys it to break the veneer of refinement and professionalism, which is at its most explicit during the debate on mixed marriages and *Mischlinge*. After much back-and-forth with Stuckart and others over just who would be exempt from being “evacuated,” Heydrich loses patience and utters one of the most brutal and graphic lines in the entire screenplay:

We will not sterilize every Jew and wait for the race to die. We will not sterilize every Jew and then exterminate them, that’s farcical. Dead men don’t hump, dead women don’t get pregnant; death is the most reliable form of sterilization, put it that way.⁴⁶

Mandel and Pierson fought to keep lines like these in the screenplay. Producers like Colin Callender had felt that such lines were “too contemporary,” but such language helped keep the film grounded, if not in “reality,” in an emotional truth: for all their outward refinement, for all their doctorates and villas and nice cars, these men exhibited brutality at an unprecedented scale – one can depict this contradiction without falling into the trap of “demonization” or caricature. These are not cartoonish Nazis out of a 1970s exploitation flick or old Hollywood war movie. This use of harsh, graphic language in the place of depicting violence visually is one of the great strengths of *Conspiracy* and the two German films about Wannsee. This language manages to disturb the viewer without overwhelming them emotionally. These perpetrators speak with a casualness and brutality that still manages to shock upon repeated viewings.

As the film progresses, Heydrich’s presentation – which largely sticks to the language of the protocol – is continuously interrupted, first by Lange, then by Kritzinger. At each interruption (and after each one) he becomes increasingly irritated and tells the interrupter to please wait until the end of his presentation, at-

⁴⁵ See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ Loring Mandel. “*Conspiracy* by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01” May 19, 2001, Box 1, Folder 6, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 59.

tempting to assuage their concerns by stating that everyone's questions will be answered in due time. As the discussion shifts to the question of mixed marriages and *Mischlinge*, Wilhelm Stuckart (Colin Firth) breaks his silence and begins arguing with Heydrich's proposals, which he vehemently rejects. Firth's admirable performance does not excuse the more problematic aspects of Mandel's portrayal of Stuckart. Stuckart, one of the architects of the Nuremberg Laws, had reason to defend them against what the film calls "ad hoc law," i.e. just dissolving all mixed marriages by decree. Stuckart argues that such a move would bog down the courts for decades and instead suggests that all *Mischlinge* and Jews in mixed marriages be sterilized. Alex Kay has noted that in this film, "one almost gets the impression that Stuckart not only objects to the disregard shown for the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935, of which he was co-author, but to the mass murder of Jews per se."⁴⁷ To be sure, by the end of the film, it is clear that Stuckart is an ardent Nazi, but his commitment to the cause is not portrayed as being as strong as it was in reality. He is not as much of a dissenter as in the 1984 film, but he is still too much of one when compared with the historical record.⁴⁸

Throughout this section, Stuckart runs into opposition from Klopfer, Müller, and others, who accuse him of philosemitism. Unfortunately, even though both Christopher Browning and Andrea Axelrod had objected to it, the film still includes both the line about Jews "reject[ing] the Christ" and an improbable exchange between Stuckart and Klopfer, who in reality knew each other and would not have yelled at each other in this manner.⁴⁹ The film's portrayal of Stuckart additionally falters when it depicts Heydrich taking him onto the villa's terrace and intimidating him, where the following conversation occurs:

HEYDRICH

We will accomplish this. I won't allow administrative technicalities to slow it down. Every agency will jump to follow my order, or asses will sting, and there are no shortages of meat hooks on which to hang enemies of the State. This will be an SS operation, and as the war goes on, the SS will more and more command the agenda and put marks against the names of the less than cooperative. You have a choice to make.

STUCKART

You understand- (THAT I RESPECT ETC)

⁴⁷ Kay, "Speaking the Unspeakable," 192.

⁴⁸ See Jasch, "Wilhelm Stuckart."

⁴⁹ Heckmann, "Gerhard Klopfer," 190, 193. See the discussion of Klopfer's conflict with Stuckart in the previous chapter.

HEYDRICH

Please. But you're still going to make your choice. Don't let a strutting imbecilic porcine prick like Klopfer make it for you.

. . .

HEYDRICH

I don't wish to see the bullies – I admit we have more than our share of them in the SS – take too much of an interest in you.

STUCKART

. . . interest in me . . .

HEYDRICH

Do you not think? And all I want from this meeting is unanimity, and no trouble getting what has to be done done.

STUCKART understands, and nods to indicate as much. HEYDRICH again puts an arm around STUCKART's shoulder to draw him close, his tone now lighter.

HEYDRICH (CONT'D)

With you at my side, so much is possible.⁵⁰

This exchange is not so problematic at first glance, as Heydrich was known for intimidating subordinates. His goal at Wannsee was also to bring the civilian ministries into line. However, his direct intimidation of Stuckart goes too far. As a *Staatssekretär* in the Interior Ministry, Stuckart had an equivalent rank to Heydrich. Additionally, Stuckart held rank in the SS, as seen in the 1984 film. Heydrich had worried about Stuckart's potential objections at the conference and was "very satisfied with the outcome of the conference" in part due to Stuckart's agreement. Stuckart also was well aware of the SS taking over responsibility for the "Jewish Question," therefore making his objection to it in *Conspiracy* "very doubtful."⁵¹ Although the script drafts, historical consultant memos, and other production documents make it clear that the filmmakers were aware that this characterization of Stuckart veered too far from historical reality, they stuck to their desire to use Stuckart's differences on the issue of mixed marriages and *Mischlinge* for dramatic license. In one darkly comic moment, however, the film addresses the byzantine and contradictory nature of Nazi racial law, openly acknowledging just how convoluted these definitions

⁵⁰ Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, 64–65. Quote trimmed to reflect final cut of *Conspiracy*.

⁵¹ Kay, "Speaking the Unspeakable," 192.

were, with a confused Schöngarth interjecting to ask which degrees of *Mischlinge* they are talking about.⁵²

Other civilian ministries represented are given less attention than the Interior Ministry and the Reich Chancellery. In keeping with the protocol, Bühler (Ben Daniels) requests that deportations begin in the General Government, because the ghettos are overcrowded and those in the General Government administration (including his boss, Hans Frank) fear that their fiefdom will become the Reich's dumping ground for Jews. This is in keeping with the protocol, which notes that Bühler "stated that the General Government would welcome it" if the deportations began there, especially because of fear of "epidemics."⁵³ *Gauleiter* Albert Meyer and Georg Leibbrandt of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories are also depicted as fanatical Nazis who are concerned with the need to maintain a pool of forced labor. Erich Neumann, who directly answered to Goering, the Plenipotentiary for the Four Year Plan, is single-mindedly concerned with the issue of labor in the film and is depicted as a buffoonish man out of his depth who constantly tries to network with other participants, inserting his job title in every possible conversation. Alex Kay has rightly criticized the film for this portrayal.⁵⁴ The Office of the Four Year Plan is not really explained in the film. The Four Year Plan was the 1936 plan to reorient Germany's economy towards rearmament in preparation for the coming war. It was extended after the war's outbreak in 1939.⁵⁵ Christoph Kreutzmüller has noted that at Wannsee, "Neumann, along with Kritzinger, represented the old, Prussian administrative elite and so contributed to the 'success' of the conference by his mere presence."⁵⁶ None of this aspect comes through in the film, with Neumann acting like a careerist more interested in hobnobbing with bigwigs, belying his actual importance to Goering and consistent presence at other conferences about the "Jewish Question."⁵⁷

In its greatest departure from the Wannsee Protocol, the final section of the conference in *Conspiracy* discusses killing methods explicitly. In the protocol, Heydrich explicitly refers to extermination through labor:

52 Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, 48–49.

53 "Appendix: The Protocol" in Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 120.

54 Kay, "Speaking the Unspeakable," 194.

55 Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Penguin, 2007), 213–230.

56 Christoph Kreutzmüller, "Erich Neumann, Plenipotentiary for the Four Year Plan: A Colorless, Compliant Prussian," in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 290.

57 Christoph Kreutzmüller, "Erich Neumann," 286–289.

In the course of the final solution and under appropriate leadership, the Jews should be put to work in the East. In large, single-sex labour columns, Jews fit to work will work their way eastward constructing roads. Doubtless the large majority will be eliminated by natural causes. Any final remnant that survives will doubtless consist of the most resistant elements. They will have to be dealt with appropriately because otherwise, by natural selection, they would form the germ cell of a new Jewish revival. (See the experience of history.)⁵⁸

The filmmakers' justification for this departure is based both on a line from the protocol about "practical experience" as well as Eichmann's trial testimony, wherein he stated that the participants spoke quite freely about killing methods.⁵⁹ In his study on Wannsee, Mark Roseman notes that while "[t]here are some indications that Heydrich *did* talk at the meeting about how the Jews would be murdered," but "there is no hard and fast proof that the participants learned at the meeting that Jews were going to be gassed."⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Roseman concludes that after Wannsee, "whether or not the means were already established, the 'final solution' now unambiguously meant the death of all European Jews."⁶¹ Moreover, in his article on *Conspiracy*, Alex Kay also points out that "the film cleverly provides an explanation for such talk not appearing in the Protocol: Eichmann . . . gestures to the stenographer to stop typing."⁶² (see Figure 7.5)

Conspiracy discusses the *Einsatzgruppen* mass shootings via Lange's firsthand testimony, but Eichmann reports on gas vans and experience learned from the T-4 euthanasia program, which provided the knowledge base and personnel for stationary gas chambers in the first extermination camps located in the General Government: Chełmno, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka, which were either under construction or, in the case of Chełmno and Bełżec, already running at the time. Eichmann also mentions the construction of Auschwitz II at Birkenau. Early experiments with Zyklon B on Soviet prisoners of war had begun in Auschwitz as early as September 1941 and the gas chambers in Auschwitz II-Birkenau began operation in March 1942.⁶³ In 2021, a Dutch historian also revealed that Dutch Jews were gassed at Hartheim as early as August 1941, a finding that will no

58 "Appendix: The Protocol" in Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 116.

59 For a detailed discussion of if killing methods were discussed at Wannsee, see Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 74–80.

60 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 78.

61 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 78–79.

62 Kay, "Speaking the Unspeakable," 189.

63 Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 2, 236, 359.



Figure 7.5: Eichmann (Stanley Tucci) silently orders the stenographer (foreground right) to pause as Lange (Barnaby Kay) discusses the true meaning of “evacuation.” *Conspiracy*. HBO Films, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2001.

doubt change our understanding of when the shift to gassing began.⁶⁴ In late 1941, Heydrich ordered Eichmann to visit the extermination sites under construction in the General Government, which the film also directly references.⁶⁵ The film’s explicit discussion of killing methods does not stray too far from historical plausibility and, to be blunt, is necessary when making a film about Wannsee; otherwise audiences, production companies, and filmmakers would likely have found the entire purpose of the meeting rather murky and vague.

In his new study of the efforts to exhume the mass graves of *Einsatzgruppen* victims and burn the corpses, also known as *Aktion 1005*, Andrej Angrick has also noted perhaps the most chilling aspect of Wannsee yet unremarked on by filmmakers: *Aktion 1005* “can also be seen in connection with the Wannsee Conference or as a result of it” as Paul Blobel, the leader of *Aktion 1005*, received his initial orders from Müller by way of Heydrich around the same time as the conference. This also served as a way for Heydrich to gain access to extermination

⁶⁴ Paul Kirby, “Dutch Jews Died in ‘secret Nazi Gas Chamber’ in 1941,” *BBC News*, February 17, 2021, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56096686>.

⁶⁵ Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten*, 636–637.

sites (they were not directly under his control) with the justification of “national security” requiring removal of human remains and covering up all evidence.⁶⁶

At the end of the meeting in *Conspiracy*, Heydrich exhorts the participants to get on with the work ahead, stating that “the machinery is waiting. Feed it.” This choice of vocabulary is likely a reference to Raul Hilberg’s emphasis on the “machinery of destruction.”⁶⁷ Hilberg, whose *The Destruction of the European Jews* was a key source for Mandel’s screenplay, discusses this idea of the machinery of destruction at length. For him, the machinery of destruction encompassed disparate parts of the German bureaucracy acting in concert, whether in German railway offices, financial authorities, or the SS itself: “when we speak of the machinery of destruction, we refer to the German government in one of its special roles.”⁶⁸ Hilberg also stated that

The destruction of the Jews was in sum the work of a far-flung administrative machine. The apparatus took each step in turn. The initiation as well as the implementation of decisions was largely in its hands. No special agency was created and no special budget was devised to destroy the European Jews. Each organization was to play a specific role in the process, and each was to find the means to carry out its task.⁶⁹

Later historiography, although still indebted to Hilberg’s work as a starting point, would focus on more up-close-and-personal aspects of the extermination process, particularly the *Einsatzgruppen*, police, and local collaborators instead of Hilberg’s focus on bureaucratic structures. Mandel’s use of the machinery term, while at first glance seemingly relying on older characterizations of Holocaust perpetrators as desk murderers disconnected from the killing sites, is actually more complicated and instead relies on Hilberg’s depiction of the German effort as a complex bureaucratic machine set in motion. Once Heydrich exhorts the attendees to feed the machinery of destruction, they rap enthusiastically on the

66 Andrej Angrick, »Aktion 1005« - Spurenbeseitigung von NS-Massenverbrechen 1942 -1945: Eine »geheime Reichsache« im Spannungsfeld von Kriegswende und Propaganda, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag GmbH, 2018), 1–76. For a detailed discussion on the connection between genocide and “permanent security,” see A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

67 For a detailed discussion of Hilberg’s term “machinery of destruction,” see Wulf Kansteiner, “Der Holocaust als Bild, Argument und Erzählung. Raul Hilbergs Vernichtungsmaschine,” in *Raul Hilberg und die Holocaust Historiographie*, ed. René Schlott (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 183–202.

68 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003), 52.

69 Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 58.

table in applause and jump to their feet, shouting their approval and saluting, an impassioned display that would hardly suit a group of mere *Schreibtischtäter*.

After the conference has ended and Heydrich, Müller, and Eichmann retire to the study for a fireside drink, Heydrich recounts the following fictional story which Kritzingen had told him during one of the film's many quiet moments:

HEYDRICH

He told me about a man he has known all his life. Boyhood friend. This friend hated his father, but loved his mother fiercely. The mother was devoted to him. The father would beat him, demean him, and disinherit him. The friend grew to manhood, but he was still in his thirties when the mother died. The mother who had nurtured and protected him, she died. The man stood as they lowered her casket and tried to cry, but no tears came. The man's father lived to a very extended old age. Withered away and died when his son was in his fifties. And at the father's funeral, much to his surprise, the man could not control his tears, his sobbing, his wailing. He was inconsolable. Even lost.

(pause)

That's the story Kritzingen told me.

EICHMANN

I don't understand.

HEYDRICH looks at MÜLLER, who smiles

HEYDRICH

You don't?

EICHMANN shakes his head, still not understanding. Waiting.

HEYDRICH (CONT'D)

The man had been driven his whole life by hatred of his father. When his mother died, that was a loss. When his father died, when the hate had lost its object, the man's life was empty, over.

EICHMANN

Interesting.

HEYDRICH

That was Kritzingen's warning.

EICHMANN

That what? That we shouldn't hate the Israelites?

HEYDRICH

No no. That it shouldn't so fill our lives that once they're gone, we've nothing left to live for. So says the story.

EICHMANN looks at HEYDRICH without expression. HEYDRICH looks at his watch, then stands.

HEYDRICH, (CONT'D)

I won't miss 'em.

(to Müller)

Time.⁷⁰

This story, while fictionally attributed to Kritzinger (and to Stuckart in earlier drafts), possibly stemmed from Mandel's own biography. It is unclear whether this incident directly happened to Mandel or to one of his friends, but in an interview, he simply stated "[Kritzinger's story] actually is true, but not from the Wannsee story, from another story that happened to me."⁷¹ In interviews, as previously discussed, Mandel accused his father of internalized antisemitism and of ignoring pleas from relatives trapped in Europe.⁷² Additionally, Mandel's father, Julius, died in 1982, and his mother, Frieda, died in 1961 – when Mandel was in his fifties and thirties, respectively.⁷³

The film ends with a montage echoing that from the beginning. Before leaving the villa, Heydrich admires a shellac record of Schubert's String Quintet in C Major, stating "[t]he Adagio will tear your heart out." After he leaves, Eichmann inspects the record and places it on the Victrola turntable as the final montage begins. The villa's staff clean up after the meal and burn the place cards and notes, in keeping with the film's thematization of the secret nature of the meeting. Title cards show images of each character and mention the fates of the historic figures – Andrea Axelrod drafted these with Frank Doelger.⁷⁴ The narrator returns and discusses the fate of the protocol and Eichmann's continued role in the Holocaust. In his last line, Eichmann, raised in Austria, gets in a dig at hated Vienna and is portrayed as a man devoid of taste:

WE HEAR the music. The BUTLER likes it, and smiles when EICHMANN turns to him without expression.

EICHMANN

Does it tear your heart out?

⁷⁰ Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, 105–106.

⁷¹ Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 31:55–36:20.

⁷² Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 53:34–57:55.

⁷³ "Dr. Julius I. Mandel dies at 89; Chicago physician for 60 years," *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1982, p. 30, <http://www.newspapers.com/image/387740668/>

⁷⁴ E-Mail from Amanda Gray to Vivien Jordan and Frank Doelger, April 4, 2001; "The fate of the participants," undated, in Andrea Axelrod Private Archive, New York City, New York.

BUTLER
Beautiful, sir.

EICHMANN is clearly unreachable, even curious as to what in the music could have such an effect.

EICHMANN
I've never understood the passion for Schubert's sentimental Viennese shit.⁷⁵

Tracking the source of the choice for the Adagio from Schubert's String Quintet illustrates the difficulties faced by a media historian. In the early production stages, Frank Pierson had suggested using Schubert's "Death and the Maiden."⁷⁶ In an interview with the Directors Guild of America, Frank Pierson alleged that he had made the final musical choice.⁷⁷ Andrea Axelrod claimed that she had chosen it and that it was her "major contribution" to *Conspiracy*.⁷⁸ Further confusing things, Loring Mandel claimed that Peter Zinner had come up with the idea for Schubert's String Quintet in C Major.⁷⁹ The shooting script includes a revision from as late as November 1, 2000, just before filming, which has "The Trout" from Schubert's Quintet in C Major.⁸⁰ Axelrod's script notes from October 24, 2000 prove that she made the first suggestion for the Schubert's String Quintet. In this document, Axelrod stated that "The Trout" was "generally known as a cheery work" and therefore inconsistent with Heydrich's praise of it as "music to wring your heart out with its beauty."⁸¹ Frank Pierson's personal copy of the November 1, 2000 script revisions contains a handwritten emendation mentioning the String Quartet in C Major,

⁷⁵ Mandel, *Conspiracy*, As Aired Screenplay, 107.

⁷⁶ Frank Pierson and Loring Mandel, Commented Version of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, 2nd Draft 12/18/96, December 18, 1996, in Box 2, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 109–110.

⁷⁷ Pierson, "Visual History with Frank Pierson," Chapter 7, Clip 12, 20:05.

⁷⁸ Interview with Andrea Axelrod, March 9, 2018, New York City, 0:00–1:00.

⁷⁹ Interview with Loring Mandel, March 2, 2019, 48:08–50:20.

⁸⁰ Loring Mandel, *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee*, Shooting Draft dated October 20, 2000, Lilac Revisions dated November 1, 2000, in Box 9 Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 107.

⁸¹ Andrea Axelrod, "Re: Script/Page Notes for Conspiracy, Oct. 20 draft with pink revisions PART 2 page 41 to the end," October 24, 2000, in Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 8.

likely added during filming.⁸² It is telling that Pierson – who never discussed Axelrod in his interviews, in stark contrast with Mandel – erased her input in his interview, claiming sole credit for the soundtrack choice. While he would have had ultimate veto power as a director – and Frank Doelger’s account of the editing room fiasco, where Pierson added a maudlin soundtrack to the entire film attests to this – it is undeniable that Axelrod, a trained opera singer and the most prominent woman on the pre-production team besides HBO executives and legal representatives, first had the idea to use the Schubert’s String Quintet. In any case, it was a fitting choice for the film’s only musical piece. Without the production archive, answering this question would have proven much more difficult, if not impossible.

The Schubert Adagio comes to an end, the end montage with the participants’ fates comes to a close, and Eichmann leaves the villa. The butler finishes cleaning off the conference table and shuts off the lights. We are left with a coldly-lit shot of the empty table and utter silence before the end titles roll (Figure 7.6).

Conspiracy argues that the Wannsee Conference was called to consolidate Heydrich’s power by bringing civilian governmental ministries into line. It masterfully depicts the infighting between different strands of the German govern-



Figure 7.6: *Conspiracy*’s Final Shot.

⁸² Loring Mandel, CONSPIRACY [television] - script, Lilac Revisions, Folder 2, November 1, 2000, Frank R. Pierson Papers, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, California, 107.

ment, clearly reflecting a more functionalist historiographical position compared to the 1984 West German film – though it is not without nods to Hitler’s will and his subordinates seeking to carry it out – in keeping with developments in historiography. This depiction is not without its flaws when it comes to the details about specific historical individuals, but it successfully depicts rivalries between institutions. It does not argue, contrary to the assertions of some critics, that “the decision” was made at Wannsee. After all, when Eichmann reveals some of the killing methods being tested in the occupied East, Josef Bühler asks “If it’s already built, what is this meeting? Why bother?” Other dialogue refers to the extermination camps being constructed “under our noses” and emphasizes that the SS has already been conducting mass killings whether the civilian authorities knew or not. In contrast with other films and television programs depicting Wannsee up until this point, *Conspiracy* is a film full of quiet, intimate moments interspersed with scenes of men shouting at each other across a conference table. This juxtaposition underscores the film’s power, and the quiet moments also provide the audience with a bit of breathing room after the long, expository scenes at the conference table. *Conspiracy* excels as a drama thanks to Mandel’s dialogue and to its quiet moments between characters, as well as Pierson’s direction and Peter Zinner’s editing. Much is conveyed in this film through expressions and looks between characters – and much of this filmic language is present in the screenplay. The direction and cinematography, in keeping with cinematic realism, emphasizes a “you-are-there” perspective by keeping the camera at eye level, sticking to long takes, and keeping the film soundtrack-free until the very end. Lastly, the film attempts to portray the Wannsee Conference participants as complicated human beings, not monsters. In a recent interview, Stanley Tucci stated that the strength of *Conspiracy* is “[i]t’s so devoid of emotion, that’s what makes it so emotional.”⁸³ If the characters, nevertheless, come across as emotionless and monstrous, perhaps that is because their very words and deeds were monstrous. If the film does not depict them as “ordinary men,” it depicts them as a mixture of the highly-educated and highly-ideological. *Conspiracy* contends that such potential is present within modern society in general and that some of the greatest crimes in history can be perpetrated by society’s supposedly “best and brightest.” In short, the film functions as both a lesson from the past and a warning for the future.

⁸³ Miller, *Tinderbox*, 377.

3 Academic Reception

Conspiracy achieved almost universal acclaim from critics and received many awards, including a Golden Globe Award for Stanley Tucci, Emmy Awards for Kenneth Branagh and Loring Mandel, and a Peabody Award. In contrast with the West German press's reaction to *The Wannsee Conference*, press reaction both in English-speaking countries and Germany was generally quite positive. No debates about the film's merits were unleashed and Mandel received no character assassinations or hate mail from unrepentant Nazis, as Paul Mommertz had experienced. In contrast, *Conspiracy* has received muted attention from historians until more recently. Alan Steinweis was the only historian to review the film in an academic journal upon its release. Steinweis criticized the film for "present[ing] conversations that are mentioned neither in the *Protokoll* itself nor in related documentation. One tendency of these embellishments is to overstate the degree of disagreement and dissent at the conference."⁸⁴ While Steinweis is correct that these "embellishments" do serve to insert dramatic conflict into the narrative, it seems to be a standard impossible for dramatic films to fulfill – the same goes for conversations in the film that are not present in the protocol. Steinweis argues that the film presents Kritzinger as a "moral dissenter," a debatable assertion given that Kritzinger provides, at most, token resistance to Heydrich in the film.⁸⁵ Steinweis does praise the film for its production values and acting, as well as its portrayal of Eichmann, which he calls "a refreshing departure from the old, and inaccurate, cliché of the 'banal' bureaucrat." For him, although the film "does not stray very far from what is factually plausible," he maintains his reservations because "[t]he main danger with this kind of film is that most viewers will not be able to tell the difference between plausible speculation and documented fact."⁸⁶ These criticisms have less to do with this particular film and more so indicate a problem that some academic historians like Steinweis have with historical film as a genre.

The only way to solve the issue highlighted by Steinweis (and later, by Stephanie Rauch) would be to destroy films as works of art by including footnotes running along the bottom of the frame, letting audiences know exactly which lines are "fiction" and which are "historical." The issues he identifies with *Conspiracy* are universal in historical filmmaking and, as the production documents and interviews show, were all well known to the filmmakers. Such rigorous crite-

⁸⁴ Alan E. Steinweis, "Review of Conspiracy," *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 2 (2002): 674–675, 674.

⁸⁵ Steinweis, "Review of Conspiracy," 674.

⁸⁶ Steinweis, "Review of Conspiracy," 675.

ria for art depicting history would arguably either lead to complete misfires, like the 2019 Netflix docudrama series *The Last Czars*, which splices dramatic reenactment with commentary by historians, or highly-avant garde experiments, which, while satisfactory to historians, may alienate non-specialist audiences and remain a product for an educated few. The German theater collective *Historikerlabor* has staged the Wannsee Conference as a verbatim recitation (by historians in their everyday clothing, not costumed actors) of the protocol and other primary sources, but its dramatic and popular appeal is limited.⁸⁷ A drama with footnotes would likely fail in a democratic medium like television – but it can be valuable in literary fiction, which can more freely play with the conventions of form, with the Italian novelist Antonio Scurati's fictionalized biography of Mussolini, *M: Son of the Century*, which juxtaposes the author's prose with primary sources being the most recent promising example.⁸⁸

The best recent compromises illustrating the interplay of fact and fiction in historical film have occurred thanks to the possibilities offered by the internet and by Blu-ray technology. The former is evidenced by the educational website for the 2016 Civil War drama *Free State of Jones*. The screenwriter and director Gary Ross directly addressed the issue of fictionalization and created a scene-by-scene guide complete with footnotes and timestamps.⁸⁹ Most filmmakers do not put in the effort to play with such open cards, and *Free State of Jones* is a promising example of potential best practices for the future. As for Blu-ray technology, the Blu-ray releases of HBO's World War II miniseries *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific* include special features which allow viewers to pause the episodes and read historical background information on what is taking place on screen, explore maps, or watch snippets of oral history interviews with the veterans whose stories are dramatized on film. Rebecca Weeks has discussed the advantages of such "paratexts" for historic television.⁹⁰ While not nearly as historically rigorous as the website for *Free State of Jones*, perhaps such technology could be adapted for future historical cinema, though this is unfortunately unlikely to occur, as streaming services increasingly replace physical media. The question for historians is do they want to continue to tow a conservative line and fret about the dangers of historical films or to deconstruct them in order to figure out just how and why instances of fictionalization happened, to understand such films' appeal for audiences instead of dubbing them frivolous entertainment. Lastly, in an age of

⁸⁷ See "Historikerlabor e.V. – The Wannsee Conference," accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.historikerlabor.de/seite/297685/the-wannsee-conference.html>.

⁸⁸ Antonio Scurati, *M: Son of the Century* (London: HarperCollins UK, 2021).

⁸⁹ See <http://freestateofjones.info/>, accessed August 15, 2021.

⁹⁰ Weeks, *History by HBO*, 132–133.

fake news and propaganda spread throughout social media, it is likely that historians' continued skepticism of dramatic historical films has been eclipsed by the renewed danger of manipulative "documentary" films, which demand more respect from their audiences and claim a far higher degree of "realism" than dramatizations.

In her article, "Commissioning Mass Murder: *Conspiracy* and History at the Wannsee Conference," Simone Gigliotti directly responded to Steinweis's review. She echoes arguments leveled by scholars of film and history like Robert Toplin, Robert Rosenstone, and Alison Landsberg by noting that "Mandel faced hurdles not entirely dissimilar from historians investigating Wannsee – lack of clear evidence of planning and of first-hand testimony."⁹¹ She notes the contrast between the "anger and passion" on display and the film with the cold rationality of the protocol. She also identifies Mandel's script as a historiographical intervention: "Mandel's method of informed speculation aspires to become a plausible historical conversation between these men at Wannsee and historians who have written about them."⁹² Responding to Steinweis, she notes that "historians have applied, unsurprisingly, rigid assessment criteria that limit the possibility of artistic license in creating an alternative visual truth and memory of the meeting at Wannsee."⁹³ She argues that the film is not an "exercise in translation," as Steinweis alleges, but rather a "speculative re-interpretation of a discursive and subjective text."⁹⁴ Here, she also echoes Paul Mommertz's claim to be "a historian, too." Indeed, while Mandel, of course, acted as a screenwriter, he did "do history" with his script.

In her study on Holocaust film reception, "Understanding the Holocaust through Film: Audience Reception between Preconceptions and Media Effects," Stefanie Rauch includes *Conspiracy* alongside the Holocaust films *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, *The Reader*, *Defiance*, and *The Grey Zone*. Her study is grounded in interviews with individuals in the United Kingdom after they had viewed the selected films. She questioned them about their historical knowledge of the depicted events prior to and after viewing the films. Rauch utilizes a reception studies approach, noting that studies of Holocaust films usually lack such sophistication.⁹⁵ She focuses on individual reception of the films – and viewers' prior knowledge – and argues that "the impact of Holocaust films on viewers has been

⁹¹ Gigliotti, "Commissioning Mass Murder," 127.

⁹² Gigliotti, "Commissioning Mass Murder," 125.

⁹³ Gigliotti, "Commissioning Mass Murder," 131.

⁹⁴ Gigliotti, "Commissioning Mass Murder," 131.

⁹⁵ Rauch, "Understanding the Holocaust through Film," 151.

overstated due to reliance on assumptions and text-driven analysis.”⁹⁶ One strength of her article is she restores agency to the audience and takes their prior knowledge seriously. That is, she does not treat audiences as sponges that passively absorb a film’s message. She notes that the result of her project could provide evidence for “either argument” about Holocaust films; they either “transmit a simplified, trivialized and sensationalized version of history” or they “increase awareness of a given topic and thus keep the memory of the Holocaust alive.”⁹⁷ She claims that *Conspiracy* “enabled and encouraged” “problematic misconceptions” in viewers by “overstating the role the meeting played in the development of the genocide” and implying that “those present at *Conspiracy*’s Wannsee Conference had moral qualms about the extermination of the Jews and had to be coerced into agreement.” Echoing Steinweis, Kritzinger appears most often as the bearer of “moral qualms” in these interviews.⁹⁸ Both issues are legitimate, though the question of the conference’s importance is a historiographical debate that is largely still occurring; nevertheless, no historian working today claims that the Holocaust was “decided” at the meeting – and neither does the film itself, though its marketing material arguably did.⁹⁹ Rauch does note that *Conspiracy* “may have been the film with the strongest impact on the interviewees.”¹⁰⁰ She concludes that if we are to continue to consider historical films worthy of study, it is important for historians to use “a mix of sources and methods” and that we should acknowledge how little we know “about the impact of historical films on historical understanding and collective memory.”¹⁰¹

Alex J. Kay’s article “Speaking the Unspeakable: The Portrayal of the Wannsee Conference in the Film *Conspiracy*,” is the most recent and most detailed academic analysis of the film. Kay’s article “examines the historical accuracy of the portrayal, and where *Conspiracy* is forced to fill in what is missing from the historical record, it considers the film’s authenticity and credibility.”¹⁰² Kay claims that the presence of a male stenographer is accurate, contrary to claims advanced in the press and in *The Wannsee Conference*. He argues that the film’s minimal-

96 Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film,” 152.

97 Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film,” 160.

98 Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film,” 161.

99 *Conspiracy* is not innocent of promoting this erroneous view of the Wannsee Conference. Although the film itself makes no such claim, HBO’s promotional material for it certainly did, with the taglines “One of The Greatest Crimes Against Humanity Was Perpetrated in Just Over an Hour” and “One Meeting. Six Million Lives.” See IMDb. “Conspiracy,” <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0266425/taglines> (accessed November 12, 2019)

100 Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film,” 165.

101 Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film,” 180.

102 Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 188.

ism, such as its grounding in the protocol and the absence of a score, “adds considerably to the film’s credibility.” He also states that “[for] those aspects of the conference about which we know nothing . . . improvisation on the part of the filmmakers was absolutely essential.” Kay also correctly points out that although the protocol contains euphemistic language, it only “takes little reading between the lines to recognize the murderous intentions of the conference participants.”¹⁰³ The article examines the film’s portrayal of each participant, most notably Kritzinger, Stuckart, and Eichmann.

In contrast with Steinweis, Kay argues that conversations absent from the protocol are justifiably in the film, at least those that explicitly mention killing.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Kay agrees with Steinweis in his criticism of the film’s portrayal of Kritzinger as a “moral dissenter.” Kay explains this choice as one “clearly for dramatic purposes” and that the filmmakers likely chose Kritzinger because of his post-war regret (under interrogation). In contrast with Steinweis and Rauch, Kay states that this characterization, while inconsistent with the facts about Kritzinger, was “necessary” in order to “provide viewers with someone to identify with.” He argues that this invented conflict arguably made *Conspiracy* a better film.¹⁰⁵ He also discusses the characterization of Stuckart in the film: For Kay, although the filmmakers certainly had “leeway” in their portrayal due to disagreement among historians about Stuckart’s role, the film risks giving the impression that Stuckart opposed mass murder on principle. In contrast with Steinweis, he asserts that the Eichmann of *Conspiracy* embodies Arendt’s “banality of evil” conceptualization.¹⁰⁶ Kay ultimately determines that the film “does not stray too far from what is factually plausible” and that its less-than-accurate portrayals of Kritzinger and Stuckart “are to be explained – but not entirely excused – by the filmmakers’ pursuit of dramatic effect.”¹⁰⁷ For Kay at least, *Conspiracy* is worth watching alongside other classics of the genre and certainly succeeds in its aims: “In *Conspiracy*, the unspeakable is indeed spoken . . . [t]his recreation of an event of unquestionable evil does indeed represent evil in words. It is moreover these words that constitute the vital ingredient of the dramatization.”¹⁰⁸

A recent article by Steffen Hantke examines *Conspiracy* from the perspective of the prestige horror genre. According to Hantke, prestige horror films are characterized by restraint, they are “as far removed from the over-the-top transgres-

¹⁰³ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 188.

¹⁰⁴ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 189.

¹⁰⁵ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 190.

¹⁰⁶ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 192.

¹⁰⁷ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 195.

¹⁰⁸ Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 195.

siveness some types of horror film claim as the genre's essence (Nazisploitation among them)."¹⁰⁹ Hantke notes that *Conspiracy* "aligns itself in eerie anticipation" of the genre.¹¹⁰ For him, *Conspiracy*, in contrast with its West German predecessor and other more mainstream Holocaust films, is an example of a Holocaust film utilizing the techniques of a horror film; it is a minimalistic blend of the two genres and "has remained an experiment in cinematic austerity, a case study in radical reduction of cinematic options."¹¹¹ Hantke also points out that, as argued elsewhere in this study, *Conspiracy* is at its most powerful during its quiet moments beyond the conference table.¹¹² Colin Callender himself has also stated that *Conspiracy* "reminded me that there was power in simplicity."¹¹³ *Conspiracy*'s cinematic minimalism and restraint can be observed in recent Holocaust dramas, particularly the 2023 film *The Zone of Interest*, and in this respect it echoes Holocaust literature and historiography, which tend to have restrained, spartan styles.

Other contemporary German academic reactions to the films have been more muted. In their introduction to the edited volume *The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference*, editors Hans-Christian Jasch and Christoph Kreutzmüller express a typically dismissive attitude towards historical films like *Conspiracy*:

Notwithstanding the 2001 TV film *Conspiracy*, and specifically Kenneth Branagh's Heydrich, who seems to have stepped out of a Shakespeare play, these men do not at first glance appear to be evil psychopaths. As shocking as it seems, they were "ordinary men"¹¹⁴ (Christopher Browning) who knew how to behave, who could appreciate fine architecture (with a view of the lake) and the good things in life, including the refreshments, possibly looted from across Europe, provided after the meeting.¹¹⁵

This passage's criticism of *Conspiracy* initially focuses on Kenneth Branagh's earlier career adapting Shakespeare rather than his performance in *Conspiracy* (are they criticizing him for being a well-trained English actor?) and secondly, relies on a misreading of the film. The documents contained within the Loring Mandel

109 Hantke, "Horror and the Holocaust," 416.

110 Hantke, "Horror and the Holocaust," 416.

111 Hantke, "Horror and the Holocaust," 428.

112 Hantke, "Horror and the Holocaust," 418.

113 Miller, *Tinderbox*, 378.

114 "Ordinary Men" refers to a concept pioneered by Christopher Browning. See Browning, *Ordinary Men*. Browning, using a social psychology approach, explores the "normality" of Holocaust perpetrators in contrast with other authors like Daniel Goldhagen, who argued that the brutality of Holocaust perpetrators was due to a uniquely virulent antisemitism in German culture. See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

115 Hans-Christian Jasch and Christoph Kreutzmüller, "The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference," in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 2.

Collection prove that the filmmakers sought to portray the conference participants as “ordinary men,” not “psychopaths”:

. . . everything [in the film] is very small, ordinary, and even silly . . . the drama of [*Conspiracy*] is how the worst crime of history was done by **ordinary men**, worried about the weather and their jobs [sic] security, their digestion and their sex lives, their dog and their wife.¹¹⁶

Obviously, this passage alone does not prove whether or not the filmmakers succeeded with their intentions (see Rauch).¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, it points to an authorial intention that is in direct opposition to the criticism leveled by Jasch and Kreutzmüller. Additionally, almost all writing and criticism on the film (and on *The Wannsee Conference*, for that matter) praises it for portraying the participants as normal, well-educated and refined professionals instead of as stereotypical Nazi villains.¹¹⁸ One wonders if the authors of this passage, so used to conventional depictions of Nazis in American film, simply responded to a *perceived* stereotype with one of their own. Except for the portrayals of Stuckart and Klopfer, *Conspiracy* does not stray far from accepted historical truth and, contrary to the assertion here, largely manages to avoid caricature and cliché.

The GHWK memorial site previously ignored the filmic adaptations of the conference (this would change in 2022). The memorial only includes documentary films in its educational programming, despite the fact that its library contains a large array of dramatic films and literature on film in general. Its earlier exhibit did not mention the films at all, but the new permanent exhibit, which opened in January 2020, includes a brief section highlighting the films, noting that interest in the conference has grown since the 1980s.¹¹⁹ In 2019, Hans-Christian Jasch, the then-director of the Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz, provides another example academic opinion on the two films. In his afterword to the German translation of Fabrice Le Hénanff's

¹¹⁶ Frank Pierson, “Combined Notes on 4/19/00 Draft,” 2000, Box 10, Folder 8, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 1.

¹¹⁷ Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film.”

¹¹⁸ See Melvin Backman, “The New Yorker Recommends: ‘Conspiracy,’ a Withering Study of the Bureaucracy of the Holocaust,” *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/recommends/watch/conspiracy-a-withering-study-of-nazis-in-a-room>.

¹¹⁹ Elke Gryglewski, Hans-Christian Jasch, and David Zolldan, (eds.) *Die Besprechung am Wannsee und der Mord an den europäischen Jüdinnen und Juden: Katalog zur Dauerausstellung*, (Berlin: Druckhaus Berlin Mitte, 2020), 212.

graphic novel *Wannsee*,¹²⁰ he again notes Branagh's Shakespearean qualities and briefly discusses *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy*. He claims that the former film adhered more closely to the contents of the Wannsee Protocol than the latter, but that "fantasy" was needed as the protocol was no verbatim transcript.¹²¹

David Cesarani, Holocaust historian and Eichmann biographer, pointed out that *Conspiracy*'s UK premiere date was set to coincide with Holocaust Memorial Day. Complicating other studies, which claimed that Stanley Tucci's performance adheres too closely to Hannah Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann, Cesarani, no fan of Arendt, calls Tucci's performance "outstanding" and contrasts it with more conventional, depictions which follow Arendt's lead. For Cesarani, it is Arendt, not *Conspiracy*, who is guilty of distorting Eichmann's biography and spreading falsities to a wider public.¹²² He argued that Arendt erased the particularities of Eichmann's biography in order to make a wider point: "For decades, largely as a result of Arendt, Eichmann's cultural legacy was shaped so as to universalize the meaning of the man and to occlude what was special about him and the machinery of extermination that he served. The reasons for this lie partly with Arendt herself. Rather remarkably, in view of all the evidence to the contrary, she insisted that Eichmann was not anti-semitic and was not ideologically motivated."¹²³ Film scholar and producer Rich Brownstein recently discussed *Conspiracy* in his comprehensive study and teaching guide *Holocaust Cinema Complete*. Brownstein moves beyond film analysis and recommends what he considers to be the 52 best Holocaust films, *Conspiracy* among them. He places *Conspiracy* in the subcategory of "antisemitic Gentile films," that is films depicting antisemitic gentiles as opposed to righteous gentiles involved with rescue or bystanders.¹²⁴ In his review of *Conspiracy*, he calls it "a breathtaking reenactment of the Wannsee Conference . . . *Conspiracy* is perfect . . . [it] is an amazing film that should be mandatory for all English-speaking high school students."¹²⁵

120 *Wannsee*, originally published in French, largely relies on both *Die Wannseekonferenz* and *Conspiracy* for its images and dialogue (Le Hénanff cites both in his list of sources). This is the first cultural depiction of the Wannsee Conference that has included a public "endorsement" from the director of the memorial site (even if, for example, Dr. Norbert Kampe, the former director of the GHWK, was consulted by the *Conspiracy* production team and granted them permission to film exterior shots at the Wannsee villa).

121 Hans-Christian Jasch, "Nachwort," in Fabrice Le Hénanff, *Wannsee*, trans. Thomas Laugsteine (Munich: Knesbeck, 2019), 86.

122 Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 343–344.

123 Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 351.

124 Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete*, 217.

125 Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete*, 227.

With the rise of streaming services in recent years, *Conspiracy* has received more attention. A 2018 review in *The New Yorker* described the film as “a testament to the power of meetings” and directly referenced Donald Trump’s immigration advisor Stephen Miller:

Think about every bad decision you’ve read in a memorandum. Generally, those memos were the result of people sitting in a room. In that room, probably, were people with less bad ideas who were overpowered by more forceful or charismatic personalities. (President Trump’s adviser Stephen Miller is said to embody the latter traits.)¹²⁶

In a period where the nationalist right is on the rise around the globe, *Conspiracy* has also gained new life as an antifascist film.¹²⁷ The widely popular and explicitly left-wing comedic podcast *Behind the Bastards*, hosted by the Portland, Oregon-based journalist Robert Evans, repeatedly references *Conspiracy* as an important film, most recently in a two-part episode on Heydrich.¹²⁸ Additionally, the less-popular but more investigative antifascist podcast *I Don’t Speak German* devoted an entire episode to the film, arguing that the film’s portrayal of Nazis speaking coarsely about murder among themselves is in keeping with how neo-Nazis talk to each other when they think no one else is listening.¹²⁹ This renewed appreciation of *Conspiracy* as an antifascist film will no doubt continue if the political situation in the Western world continues on its rightward trajectory. When compared with the political statements of the filmmakers (discussed below), calling *Conspiracy* an antifascist film is not wide of the mark – this statement would equally apply to Mommertz’s 1984 film. The filmmakers, particularly Frank Pierson, did not restrict themselves to criticizing the Nazi Party of the 1940s, but argued that the film offered universal political lessons about the dangers of us versus them thinking, racism, and extreme right-wing ideology applicable to the new millennium and was anything but a self-contained story limited to Germany in the 1940s. The filmmakers’ renewed efforts to get *Complicity* off the ground in the post-9/11 era only attest to that fact.

126 Melvin Backman, “The New Yorker Recommends: ‘Conspiracy,’ a Withering Study of the Bureaucracy of the Holocaust,” *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/recommends/watch/conspiracy-a-withering-study-of-nazis-in-a-room>.

127 For more on this concept, see Jennifer Lynde Barker, *The Aesthetics of Antifascist Film: Radical Projection*, (New York: Routledge, 2012).

128 Robert Evans, “Part Two: The Young, Evil God of Death: Reinhard Heydrich - Behind the Bastards,” *Behind the Bastards*, July 8, 2021, accessed August 15, 2021, <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/105-behind-the-bastards-29236323/episode/part-two-the-young-evil-god-84563385/>.

129 Daniel Harper and Jack Graham, “51: Conspiracy,” *I Don’t Speak German*, May 12, 2020, accessed August 15, 2021, <https://play.anghami.com/album/1018355626>.

4 Death of *Complicity*

In an interview for a recent oral history of HBO, *Tinderbox: HBO's Ruthless Pursuit of New Frontiers*, then-HBO CEO Jeff Bewkes briefly discussed the decision to cancel *Complicity*:

Given the wider considerations of the war, I questioned whether it was fair to charge the United States with conscious complicity in the Holocaust. The answer I got was that we'd get a lot of attention, to which I said, "No shit. Let's talk it over with the creative team." I had to respond with, "No, in a war for survival of the country, the duty of the American president is to save 'our' people, the American people, before saving refugees in Europe. Look at the list the Nazis drew up in Wannsee: they were planning to kill thirteen million people and we stopped them halfway by winning the war." Dead silence in the room. I'm sitting there thinking, Great, here's a career-ender for me. The guy who took over from Michael Fuchs shuts down a Holocaust justice movie, clearly an anti-Semite. I'll have to leave the industry by Monday. And then an authoritative voice comes from the corner. "He's right. We're better off not making this argument. Ben-Gurion said as much in 1948." Brian Wapping, professor of history at Oxford. Thank God.¹³⁰

Bewkes's description vastly oversimplifies *Complicity*'s unmade history. Far from a pitch he quickly shot down, the film's (un)production history lasted from 1995 until 2003. A memo from Ani Gasti dated June 22, 1998 discusses Bewke's objections mentioned in the above-quoted interview, making it likely that Bewkes helped quash the double feature in 1998, but the project lingered on for a few more years.¹³¹ The unmade history of *Complicity* shows that HBO's "ruthless pursuit of new frontiers" may not have always pursued as many new frontiers as their marketing claimed.

Even before *Conspiracy*'s premiere, Mandel continued to work on the *Complicity* screenplay. In February 2001, Frank Pierson compiled notes for *Complicity* which contained a number of suggestions, likely taken from a meeting with Mandel and producers. Here, the team clearly agreed that it was necessary to "eliminate Riegner as narrator."¹³² Pierson also made several political arguments in this

¹³⁰ Miller, *Tinderbox*, 376–377. No Oxford historian named Brian Wapping could be found, but the British television producer Brian Lapping held a degree in history from Cambridge.

¹³¹ Ani Gasti to Frank Doelger, June 22, 1998, Box 15 Folder 1, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1. See also the copy in the Frank Pierson Papers: Ani Gasti, "CONSPIRACY [television] – script notes," Folder 6, June 28, 1998, Frank R. Pierson Papers, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, California, 1.

¹³² Frank Pierson, "COMPLICITY: NOTES FEB 9 01 FRP," February 9, 2001, Box 11 Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

document. Pierson was an unabashed countercultural liberal who had made his name as a writer and director critiquing the conservative American cultural consensus which the historian Andrew Hartman has dubbed “normative America.”¹³³ In this document, Pierson offered a vision of 1940s America at odds with rosy descriptions of New Deal unity, emphasizing its conformity and rejection of pluralism – illustrated here by cultural antisemitism:

Against the background of American isolationism and anti-immigration bigotry there is the stark fact of anti-Semitism. Quotas and bars in education and employment. Foreign languages not taught in public schools – labor unions anti-immigrant. And the generation in their working years wanted to forget their foreign heritage. The Jews of Hollywood expunging all Jewishness from their films; what foreignness allowed was the cuteness of the Irish.¹³⁴

Pierson’s notes argued for a fundamental shift in storytelling. Instead of using Gerhart Riegner as a narrator and depicting his struggles to inform the Allies, Pierson argued that the production had to instead depict this history from the point of view of – if not Nazi perpetrators – American bystanders: “[t]he one truly different, shocking and original aspect of *Conspiracy* is presenting (in a sense) the holocaust from the Nazi point of view . . . Up to now we have always attacked *Complicity* from the victims’ point of view. What if [*Complicity*] was essentially told from [Breckinridge] Long’s point of view?”¹³⁵ He proposed exploring “[h]ow [Long] tried to keep American (WASP) values that had fundamentally changed the world over the past two hundred years from being diluted and corrupted by foreign influences,” but he did not want to simply tell a story that placed all the blame on a singular villain.¹³⁶ Instead, Pierson suggested that Long’s attitudes were a product of systemic American flaws:

It was not one man, or even his department but a large sentiment of the public, that took the form of mass deportations of ‘enemy aliens’ in the twenties, by J. Edgar Hoover, and a steady deluge of denunciation of foreign influences and spies, communists, socialists, and Jews, in the press and on the radio, by Catholics on the one side and the Ku Klux Klan and Protestant churches on the other.¹³⁷

133 Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America, Second Edition: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 5. Hartman defines normative America as “a cluster of powerful conservative norms [which] set the parameters of American culture . . . Normative Americans prized hard work, personal responsibility, individual merit, delayed gratification, social mobility, and other values that middle-class whites recognized as their own.”

134 Pierson, “COMPLICITY: NOTES FEB 9 01 FRP,” 1.

135 Pierson, “COMPLICITY: NOTES FEB 9 01 FRP,” 3.

136 Pierson, “COMPLICITY: NOTES FEB 9 01 FRP,” 3.

137 Pierson, “COMPLICITY: NOTES FEB 9 01 FRP,” 3.

Pierson argues that American reluctance to admit Jewish refugees was not just the work of high-ranking government officials like Undersecretary of State Breckinridge Long nor solely the work of faceless State Department bureaucrats (i.e., American *Schreibtischtäter*), but rather the culmination of widespread societal attitudes and practices, an argument quite similar to those prevalent in 1990s Holocaust historiography. His vision of the American establishment was also part of a classic countercultural sensibility which had been incubated throughout the 1960s and 1970s – Pierson’s earlier filmmaking attests to his scathing indictments of American society, whether its incarceration system in *Cool Hand Luke*, the failures of capitalism and straightjacketing sexual prudery in *Dog Day Afternoon*, or McCarthyism in *Citizen Cohn*. Pierson ended his notes by discussing an incident from his own life which, he argued, exemplified the bigoted attitudes of America’s twentieth-century white elites:

I remember an argument with my first Father in Law, a blood and money member of what used to be called “old money,” a third generation stock broker, member of all the most exclusive clubs, drove Fords and Plymouths, regarding Cadillacs as gangster cars, and a Rolls Royce as embarrassing pretension and an irresponsible waste of money. I was talking about the desirability of kids going to schools where they would meet members of all classes, as a desirable aspect of democratic society. “You mean take Negroes at ‘The Hill,’?” he asked[.] The Hill is the name of the prep school to which we both had gone – I on scholarship. I said yes. He though[t] for a moment, and said “My God, I always thought the reason to go [to] a good school was so you wouldn’t have to meet them.”¹³⁸

Here, Pierson also emphasizes the generational and class conflicts between himself and the American establishment. The passage also serves as an example of Pierson’s resentment towards those who, he felt, had unearned privilege and were leading society in the wrong direction. As noted in the previous chapter, Pierson often clashed with authority figures and, even at the pinnacle of his long career, constantly felt embattled and reacted defensively to criticism, something Frank Doelger argued was due to negative experiences during his early Hollywood career.¹³⁹ Pierson was not wrong about the wider cultural forces at work during this period, even if some of his claims about FDR may have been overstated or misplaced. Indeed, historians still debate the issue of American complicity.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Pierson, “COMPLICITY: NOTES FEB 9 01 FRP,” 3–4.

¹³⁹ Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020, 20:17–22:08.

¹⁴⁰ Examples of studies engaging with this debate since David S. Wyman include Michael R. Beschloss, *The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler’s Germany, 1941–1945*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002) and Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2013).

Pierson's February 2001 script notes served as a road map for the final iterations of the *Complicity* screenplay. It retains much of the dialogue found in earlier drafts but has a tighter focus. It focuses on Breckinridge Long and Henry Morgenthau as its two leads, with Long as the film's antagonist. Riegner's presence is greatly reduced, and the film limits itself to depicting his historical efforts. Riegner offers no commentary or narration as in previous versions of the script. He remains one of the screenplay's moral centers. At the end of the film, in a post-war conversation with Paul C. Squire, the American consul in Switzerland he had dealt with during the war, Riegner says "I'm all admiration for you people. All I say is this: for you people, what was happening to the Jews was perhaps tragic, but it did not become unbearable. It did not become unbearable. Paul, it did not."¹⁴¹ Mandel's script depicts the US State Department as filled with nativists and antisemites (a faction headed by Long) and the rest of the US government as slow to act, naïve, or indifferent – including Jewish officials like Henry Morgenthau, who must be pushed into action during the course of the piece. Roosevelt comes across as easily bored, worried about his reelection chances or the wider events of the war. He only agrees to form the War Refugee Board via executive order when Morgenthau forces his hand and gives him no other choice. Until that point, he defends Long from accusations of antisemitism and dishonesty, but snubs him by the end of the film, foreshadowing Long's resignation. The Bermuda Conference is the film's centerpiece, but it remains a shadow of Mandel's depiction of Wannsee. There are simply too many cuts back and forth between Bermuda and the goings-on in Washington – *Conspiracy*, for example, does not cut back and forth between the Wannsee villa and Hitler's headquarters. Instead, it sticks to one location. Additionally, the final *Complicity* script still has too many characters and too many side plots for a ninety-minute television film. The story would have perhaps better fit a dramatic series, but it was still too much information, too much that needed to be explained, and simply too many characters to keep track of. Nevertheless, the story of American immigration policy during this period and its tragic consequences for Jewish refugees was worth attempting to tell. Perhaps one day filmmakers will dramatize it from the American point of view. Recent German-language films, however, likely in response to the 2015 refugee crisis, have thematized the issue from the refugee point of view, with Christian Petzold's dreamlike *Transit* (2018) best depicting the Kafkaesque bureaucracy

¹⁴¹ Loring Mandel, *Complicity*, First Rev Draft, July 10, 2003, in Box 10, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 109.

which the United States placed in the way of refugees trying to leave Europe's shores.¹⁴²

In several interviews, Mandel claimed that HBO canceled *Complicity* because of a fear of offending FDR's descendants and admirers, most chiefly among them the attorney and diplomat William vanden Heuvel, then head of the Roosevelt Institute. Mandel also explicitly named then-HBO Executive Vice President Richard Plepler as the individual responsible for canceling the project, alleging a family connection to the vanden Heuvels, which would have meant that Plepler had a vested interest in protecting FDR's reputation.¹⁴³ Mandel claimed that Colin Callender informed him that the network was moving away from historical films: "When Colin called me to tell me that they were not going to go forward with *Complicity*, he said that HBO had decided to concentrate on contemporary pieces rather than historical pieces. Which was pretty ludicrous."¹⁴⁴ He also hedged, noting that he could not be sure "who pulled the plug," but that his feelings leaned towards Richard Plepler due to a conversation he had had with the executive:

[T]he impression I got from the conversation was that [Plepler] was very concerned about the picture [portrayal] of Roosevelt that appeared in the film *Complicity*. So . . . I have no real way of knowing whether he was the one who pulled the plug on it or someone else. But he was the only one who expressed an attitude toward me that gave me reason to think that he was probably the one.¹⁴⁵

A 2012 *New York Times* profile of Richard Plepler discusses his political connections (the article discusses his friendship with former US Senator Chris Dodd, a dinner with former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, and other relationships with politicians), noting that they proved useful for several HBO projects focusing on political themes, such as the 2008 drama *Recount*, which focuses on the Florida Recount in the Bush v. Gore presidential election.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, a recent study on HBO describes Plepler as well-connected with the Democratic Party and someone who embarked on a "permanent campaign" to court favor with public figures.¹⁴⁷ Colin Callender later expressed his unease with non-creative executives

142 See Christian Petzold, *Transit* (2018), Maria Schrader, *Stefan Zweig: Farewell to Europe* (2016), and Caroline Link, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (2019).

143 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 18:51–23:09.

144 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, March 2, 2019, 05:53–09:54.

145 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, March 2, 2019, 05:53–09:54.

146 Laura M. Holson, "There's Something About Richard," *New York Times*, September 21, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/fashion/richard-plepler-of-hbo-stands-tall-in-new-yorks-cultural-elite.html>.

147 Gillette and Koblin, *It's Not TV*, 67–68.

who had backgrounds in finance and politics taking charge at HBO at the expense of executives with stronger creative backgrounds: “[Plepler and Michael Lombardo] had no background in production or development. All of which Callender found alarming. ‘Programming,’ he says, ‘was now in the hands of a PR person and a business affairs person.’”¹⁴⁸

Surviving documentation in Loring Mandel’s papers proves scarce, but a February 2003 fax from Plepler regarding *Complicity* survives. In this fax, Plepler suggests that Mandel consult William vanden Heuvel about the project: “I think he’d be a wonderful person for you to get in touch with, and I recommend that you do so.”¹⁴⁹ Plepler included a letter from vanden Heuvel with the fax. In this letter, written a week earlier, vanden Heuvel stated “For years I have lectured on various subjects relating to the Holocaust . . . I would greatly appreciate your bringing these efforts to the attention of those who are engaged in the film and would be pleased to meet with them for a general discussion relating to the subject.” The letter also alludes to vanden Heuvel’s comments on Michael Beschloss’s *The Conquerors*, a history about the Roosevelt and Truman administrations and the war effort against Nazi Germany which sharply criticizes US immigration policy and failure to bomb Auschwitz.¹⁵⁰ While vanden Heuvel’s letter at first appears to be a generous offer of help, his mention of *The Conquerors* reveals his true feelings about *Complicity*. Vanden Heuvel negatively reviewed Beschloss’s history, arguing that he joined the ranks of a “discredited group” of historians like David S. Wyman and claiming that it was unfair to accuse the United States of indifference or complicity when it came to the fate of European Jews.¹⁵¹ Plepler and vanden Heuvel were friendly (in this correspondence, they refer to each other on a first-name basis). Vanden Heuvel had a history of vociferously defending any allegation on indifference or antisemitism on the part of the Roosevelt administration. He had previously been part of a publicity campaign against the 1994 PBS *American Experience* documentary *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference*, which largely advances David S. Wyman’s thesis from *The Abandonment of the Jews*. Wyman appears at several points during the documen-

148 Gillette and Koblin, *It’s Not TV*, 217–218.

149 Richard Plepler to Loring Mandel, February 27, 2003, Box 11 Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1.

150 William J. vanden Heuvel to Richard Plepler, February 20, 2003, Box 11 Folder 2, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942–2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, 1; Beschloss, *The Conquerors*.

151 William J. vanden Heuvel, “Comments on Michael Beschloss’ *The Conquerors*,” *Passport* 34, no. 1 (March 2003): 27–38, <https://jewelscholar.mtsu.edu/handle/mtsu/5994>, 27.

tary.¹⁵² In terms of historiographical camps, David S. Wyman can be considered the most mainstream anti-Roosevelt position, with William vanden Heuvel espousing the most pro-Roosevelt line. In his influential study *The Holocaust and American Life*, historian Peter Novick dismissed Wyman for a simplistic moral narrative, somewhat prefiguring Bewkes's remarks quoted earlier.¹⁵³

Recent scholarship, particularly Richard J. Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman's judicious *FDR and the Jews*, manages to split the difference and move beyond the heated debates of the 1990s, arguing that "FDR was neither a hero of the Jews nor a bystander to the Nazis' persecution and then annihilation of the Jews," and that when taking a longer view of American presidents, FDR did the most for Jews and victims of genocide than both his predecessors and successors – it is important to also mention that the authors do not let the US State Department off the hook, correctly depicting their obstruction of immigration during this period.¹⁵⁴ Plepler's correspondence with vanden Heuvel and suggestion that Loring Mandel bring him on board is no smoking gun, but it certainly points to a potential effort to steer the production away from its central thesis. It is hard to argue that Pierson and Mandel would have remained on board if vanden Heuvel's need to protect FDR's legacy was represented at production meetings and gained traction among HBO executives.

Frank Doelger discussed *Complicity* and Mandel's bitterness towards HBO and Richard Plepler, denying Mandel's allegations of some need on HBO's part to protect FDR's reputation, arguing instead that HBO had put too much effort into a project that had no future:

[HBO] were very concerned about making sure the appraisal [of the US government's actions] was fair. Also, there was so much information out there. We had lots of consultants, we read a lot of material, and there were certain things like that meeting which could be interpreted one way or another. But the record was pretty clear, we have Breckinridge Long's memos, we had what Morgenthau was doing, you know. Actually, I would say that Loring [Mandel] may have been told that [the project had been canceled due to pressure from Plepler or vanden Heuvel], but he certainly wasn't told it by me. But I just know that as person trying to develop that project working with Loring, working with Frank [Pierson], that there was no way to tell a satisfying drama as a companion piece to *Conspiracy* at all. Based on the Bermuda Conference and based on this whole question of how this information got out, what was going on . . . You probably could have done that story in 4 or 5 hours,

152 Karen de Witt, "TV Film on Holocaust Is Criticized as Unfair to Roosevelt," *The New York Times*, April 6, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/06/us/tv-film-on-holocaust-is-criticized-as-unfair-to-roosevelt.html>; Marty Ostrow, "America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference," *American Experience*, April 6, 1994.

153 Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 48.

154 Breitman and Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*, 315–329.

but again it's a story that would be better told as a documentary . . . We had spent a lot of time and energy, and I was never convinced we were going to get there¹⁵⁵

Doelger's statement fits with a reading of the final 2003 draft of the *Complicity* script. Although the Riegner narration was eliminated by this point, the script went in too many directions and failed to replicate *Conspiracy*'s tight focus and drama. The script remained meandering, with far too many characters, too many side plots, and too much context for the audience. Mandel's final depiction of FDR is less of a villain than of a very busy wartime president, easily distracted by his schedule and the goings on at the front, as well as reelection. In 2005, HBO released the film *Warm Springs*, starring Kenneth Branagh as FDR. It could not have escaped Mandel's attention. This film focuses on Roosevelt's struggle with disability and his efforts to return to politics after his polio diagnosis – not his wartime record.

In an interview, Michael Berenbaum noted other reasons HBO may have passed on *Complicity*: "I think [HBO] were scared of provoking the American government."¹⁵⁶ Berenbaum suggested that rather than a worry about provoking FDR's promoters, HBO's decision instead was simply a product of the larger post-9/11 political climate: "This is the period of time right after 9/11. So, I think it is less about Roosevelt, more about the ethos of government at that time . . . a terrible time in which America felt itself under besiegement . . . also felt that there was a real enemy out to get us. And we were united in a very particular way behind George W. Bush. And that's before he fucked it up."¹⁵⁷ HBO's feel-good FDR film *Warm Springs* is evidence of this climate. This is a time when Americans were looking for unity, not division – and that meant comforting stories about the past, not pieces overtly critical of one of America's greatest liberal heroes and wartime presidents. In 2022, the pendulum swung the other way. The renowned documentarian Ken Burns, a filmmaker not disposed to radical politics, released the series *The U.S. and the Holocaust* on PBS.¹⁵⁸ While Burns's series does not cover the Bermuda Conference, it argues that the United States was rife with anti-semitism, including at the highest levels of power. Although Burns also made a fawning series about the Roosevelts as a political dynasty, FDR does not escape criticism in *The U.S. and the Holocaust*. The series persistently addresses the rescue question and, although not as damning as Mandel and Pierson would have liked *Complicity* to be, it comes close. Gerhart Riegner is a central figure in the

155 Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020, 15:04–18:24.

156 Interview with Michael Berenbaum, April 13, 2021, 22:09–23:33.

157 Interview with Michael Berenbaum, April 13, 2021, 29:25–30:44.

158 *The U.S. and the Holocaust*, Documentary, History (Florentine Films, 2022).

series and, upon viewing, one wonders what might have been. The United States depicted here has much more in common with that racist and antisemitic society described by Pierson and Mandel; it is a place with dark impulses epitomized by the Ku Klux Klan and Charles Lindbergh. Additionally, in 2023, Netflix released the dramatic miniseries *Transatlantic*, which recounts the efforts of the journalist and activist Varian Fry to rescue persecuted cultural figures, including artists and academics, from wartime Europe. The series condemns U.S. State Department antisemitism and anti-immigrant attitudes in ways quite similar to Wyman and Mandel. Burns's documentary series and Netflix's *Transatlantic* excels at depicting the contingency of U.S. politics in the 1930s and both the apathy and active bigotry at the heart of institutions like the U.S. State Department. By drawing attention to nativist and antisemitic attitudes at the heart of American political power, these two series are characteristic of a changed cultural mood following the election of Donald Trump in 2016. In contrast with the post-9/11 climate of unity and patriotism, these productions contain a critical, warning tone towards American culture and policy. *The U.S. and the Holocaust* and *Transatlantic* show that *Complicity* may have simply been ahead of its time. In his landmark study *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*, television historian Jeffrey Shandler argued that "the primacy of television and other mediations in [American] memory culture has situated Americans in the distinctive posture of *watching* – emotionally, ideologically, and intellectually engaged, yet at a physical, political, and cultural remove."¹⁵⁹ The unmade history of *Complicity* shows that filmmakers – though working within this paradigm of "watching" – have continually attempted to overcome that remove.

5 *Conspiracy's* Legacy

When asked if he considered *Conspiracy* an educational film, Loring Mandel answered:

That's a hard question, because I'm of the opinion that what's become known as the docu-drama form is not fully educational in that you don't know – when you see it – what's true and what isn't true. I think in terms of *Conspiracy*, I think it was as true as we could possibly make it . . . I wasn't just making things out of the air, I was creating words that seemed to me, as far as I could tell, that represented the attitude of the character in almost every case. They were very well researched and what they said, in fact, was – reflected something real in their life, but that didn't mean the language was actual language that they used, and so

159 Shandler, *While America Watches*, 261.

all I could say about whether *Conspiracy* is an educational film – I think it accurately educates the problem that they were dealing with – the need to destroy “Jew-dom” in Europe and the problems related to that, like labor – using Jews for labor, and social consequences, all of those things. It was an educational film in that respect.¹⁶⁰

With his comments on the docudrama here, Mandel unintentionally echoes Stephanie Rauch’s criticism about the form in her reception study on Holocaust films including *Conspiracy*. Rauch notes that the perceived authenticity of the form, as opposed to blatantly fictional films, can lead audiences to be less critical than they otherwise would be.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, Rauch ignores the fact that audiences are less naïve than historians assume them to be; David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig’s landmark survey of Americans’ attitudes towards history pointed out that audiences are already skeptical of historical depictions in mass media and are far from the uncritical, passive, childish impressionable stereotype of them common among academics.¹⁶² Mandel’s answer also illustrates the degree to which he thought about docudrama as a form and its inevitable pitfalls. He was well aware of the exact issues with *Conspiracy* that historians like Steinweis mentioned. For him, these were largely unavoidable due to the nature and requirements of the docudrama form.

In a recent interview, Colin Callender stated that *Conspiracy* “was . . . the most striking example or dramatization of the banality of evil. It’s all about men being bullied into submission and acquiescing and seeking approval of others. And not wanting to step out of line. All the things that we’re watching right now with many of our politicians in American politics right now.”¹⁶³ Frank Doelger also argued that *Conspiracy* remains important today because of recent political events, but moved beyond a critique of the Trump administration and instead adopted a global perspective:

I think what’s important about *Conspiracy* today and unfortunately will always be important is that it is a meeting which is about “us versus them.” A meeting in which anybody who is different becomes a target. That difference can be because of your religion, it can be tribal, it can be sexual orientation. It can be political. It can be racial, it can be ethnic. To be targeted by some group and when that targeting becomes institutionalized, when it becomes accepted, when it becomes backed by official authority, whatever form it may take, whether it’s the President of the United States looking the other way when white supremacists attack Blacks, whether it is when European leaders demonize migrants trying to get into the coun-

160 Interview with Loring Mandel, Somers, NY, April 5, 2018, 31:55–36:20.

161 See Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film.” For a detailed discussion of audience misconceptions and *Conspiracy*, see page 161.

162 Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 97–100.

163 Miller, *Tinderbox*, 378.

try. That's what that meeting was about. To identify who the people were that had been targeted and what was going to be their fate. Unfortunately, I think you can have similar conversations – not about exterminating – but about how [a targeted group] will be victimized or penalized. I imagine those conversations will be going on – have been going on – forever.¹⁶⁴

Here, Doelger and Callender imagine a universal message on the part of *Conspiracy* which echoes the podcasts' more overtly left-wing praises of the film. Directed by an old-school countercultural liberal and written by a screenwriter whose political sympathies, if not left-wing, certainly were left of center, *Conspiracy* fits into Pierson's wider oeuvre. His television films always depicted socio-political issues of importance to progressives, whether transgender rights in *Soldier's Girl* (2003), McCarthyism and homosexuality in *Citizen Cohn* or working-class struggles in his classic *Dog Day Afternoon*. HBO is also a network known for its socially conscious programming, particularly exploring issues of race, class, and sexual orientation. Less beholden to advertisers, the network was able to depict themes that had no place on mainstream American broadcast television. It is possible that the story of *Complicity* illustrates HBO's limits in this regard, but even if that is the case, it still does not account for Doelger's claim of telling HBO to pass on the project and also ignores the fact that Mandel's script was still simply too big and too complex for a ninety-minute television movie. *Conspiracy* captured lightning in a bottle and was ultimately too big of an act to follow.

164 Interview with Frank Doelger, April 2, 2020, 1:02:55–1:04:37.

Chapter 8

The Conference and Portraying Holocaust Perpetrators in the 2020s

One can dramatize everything – Alfred Meyer in *The Conference*

On January 18, 2022, German public television network ZDF premiered *The Conference*,¹ the third docudrama about Wannsee. Intended to coincide with the Wannsee Conference's eightieth anniversary, ZDF released the film via its online streaming platform accompanied by several documentary and educational offerings. It premiered on linear television on January 24, airing at 8:15 pm.² In contrast with its 1984 predecessor, *The Conference* received almost universal praise in the German-speaking press. But this reception was often colored by erroneous claims about the film's supposed originality, frequently ignoring the 1984 and 2001 films, except in cases where pieces acknowledged that *The Conference* was partially based on Paul Mommertz's script or when it was compared to *Conspiracy*. For the latter, German media articles tended to claim that *Conspiracy* was too "Hollywood" compared to this new, homegrown, allegedly more sober production. This chapter will trace the production history of *The Conference* considering these claims, examine the film's historical argument, and assess its place in transnational Holocaust memory in 2022. *The Conference* synthesizes perpetrator historiography since the mid-1990s and is an excellent example of depicting this historiography visually. Departing from its two predecessors, this film depicts a Wannsee where every participant enthusiastically supported the shift to genocide. *The Conference* also differs from its predecessors in its depiction of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) as the driving force behind the conference and in its characterizations of RSHA-affiliated attendees. Furthermore, it manages to avoid problematic depictions of Wilhelm Stuckart and Gerhard Klopfer which color its predecessors. However, this film is not without its faults; its depiction of Eichmann largely adheres to Hannah Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann as an unideological desk-bound murderer, and certain filmmaking decisions, particularly towards the end, seem too self-referential. Nevertheless, *The Conference* remains

1 The film's German-language title is *Die Wannseekonferenz* but will be referred to here by its English-language translation to avoid confusing it with its 1984 predecessor.

2 "Premiere des ZDF-Films 'Die Wannseekonferenz' in Berlin: ZDF Presseportal," accessed June 24, 2022, <https://presseportal.zdf.de/pressemitteilung/mitteilung/premiere-des-zdf-films-die-wannseekonferenz-in-berlin/seite/11/>.

important simply because it is a German-language film about Wannsee which manages to both include recent perpetrator research but also put forth an argument about the dangers of fascism and racism in the wake of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party entering the Bundestag and in the aftermath of far-right extremist mass shootings in Halle and Hanau during 2019 and 2020. This chapter will also discuss more minor artistic depictions of Wannsee since *Conspiracy* aired in 2001. Apart from the 2017 film *The Man with the Iron Heart*, each example uses Wannsee as part of an argument about the resurgence of the far-right around the globe post-2016. Each is an argument about the dangers of far-right politics, prejudice, and unchecked power grabs when both ideologues and criminals gain control.

1 *Conspiracy's* filmic legacy and Wannsee post-2016

Before turning to *The Conference*, it is important to note three film and television productions which addressed *Conspiracy*. The first, Laurence Rees's 2005 BBC documentary *Auschwitz, the Nazis, and the Final Solution*, contains a dramatized re-enactment of Wannsee. The second is the 2017 Heydrich biopic *The Man with the Iron Heart*, which contains a scene depicting Wannsee.³ The third production is the 2019 BBC miniseries *Years and Years*, which portrays a dystopian imagined future in which the United Kingdom is ruled by a genocidal fascist dictatorship. *Years and Years* obliquely references *Conspiracy* through cinematography, set design, and depiction of a genocidal meeting as something disarmingly "normal." It also reproduces the film's political argument about how fascist governments speak when no one else is listening.

The Wannsee Conference villa has also been present in Jewish and Israeli filmmaking, but, as film scholar and film historian Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann has noted, as more of an icon, usually referenced obliquely or with exterior shots of the villa.⁴ It appears menacingly in films like *Walk on Water* (2004) or in the 2020 Netflix miniseries *Unorthodox*, a drama about an Orthodox Jewish woman, Esther Shapiro, who flees her conservative Brooklyn community for a freer life in Berlin and which contains a scene along the same lines, where Esther swims in Wannsee with the villa in the background. Ebbrecht-Hartmann notes that this view of the villa – in the background from across the lake – has been present in

³ In some countries, this film is titled *HHhH*, which is an acronym meaning "Himmlers Hirn heißt Heydrich," or "Heydrich is Himmler's brain."

⁴ Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Symbolort und Ikone." See also, Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Das Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz," 132–136.

Jewish film history since outtakes from Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*; this view "from the water" juxtaposes crime and beauty.⁵

Laurence Rees's 2005 documentary series *Auschwitz, the Nazis, and the Final Solution* contains a reenactment of the Wannsee Conference in its second episode, "Orders and Initiatives," which focuses on "orders from the top and initiatives from below," emphasizing a perspective which synthesizes intentionalist and functionalist historiography. The documentary, a mix of archival footage, interviews, reenactment footage, and CGI reconstructions, is easily the most detailed English-language series on Holocaust history; it is notable for its multiperspectival focus on perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. In Rees's companion book of the same title, he argues that Wannsee does not "[deserve] its place in popular culture," correctly pointing out that "it was a second-tier implementation meeting, part of a process of widening out knowledge of an extermination process that had already been decided upon somewhere else."⁶ *Auschwitz, the Nazis, and the Final Solution* discusses the decision-making process at length, including Hitler's "prophecy," a speech from Hans Frank in late 1941, and Wannsee itself. The brief scene depicting Wannsee contains German dialogue which is not always subtitled. Rees narrates during the scene, noting emphasizing the use of the euphemism "Final Solution" at the meeting – also key because it is in his series' title. The scene begins with Heydrich introducing Lange, saying that he had "gained extensive practical experience" in mass murder; other sections include direct quotes from the Wannsee Protocol. Rees's narration states that the meeting was about coordination and the SS asserting its dominance over the murder program. The scene clearly echoes *Conspiracy*, with cold lighting, close-ups of the participants, and camera angles placed directly at the table (see Figure 8.1). The set decoration also recalls the previous drama, with its opulent table full of glassware and reconstructed winter garden in the background. Although a small part of a much larger docuseries, the sequence in "Orders and Initiatives" is pivotal – through this scene, viewers gain insight into the origins of the Nazi euphemism seen in the series' title.

The Man with the Iron Heart, a French-Belgian co-production shot in Hungary and the Czech Republic, directed by Cédric Jimenez and produced by Harvey Weinstein, is a film split into two parts: The first half focuses on Reinhard Heydrich's life and the second half on Operation Anthropoid, the SOE mission which resulted in his assassination. In a strange bit of serendipity, *The Man with the*

⁵ Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "Das Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz," 113–116.

⁶ Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis & The "Final Solution,"* (London: BBC Books, 2005), 118–119.



Figure 8.1: The Wannsee Conference in. *Auschwitz, The Nazis, and the “Final Solution.”* British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), KCET, 2005.

Iron Heart premiered about a year after *Anthropoid* (2016), a film solely focused on the mission to kill Heydrich and told through the eyes of Czechoslovak commandos Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš. Although *Anthropoid* refrains from depicting Heydrich as anything but a target, the film remains superior to *The Man with the Iron Heart*, which largely retreads old ground covered by films like *Reinhard Heydrich: Manager of Terror*. *The Man with the Iron Heart* is further handicapped by only devoting half of its two-hour runtime to its depiction of Heydrich; it really is two films in one. Curiously, Bleecker Street, *Anthropoid*’s US distributor, published a series of online articles both on Heydrich as a historical and filmic figure. One of these pieces outlines the shifting depictions of Heydrich in film history since the 1940s, tracing the evolution of portrayals from “monster” in *Hitler’s Madman* (1943) and “public enemy” in *Hangmen also Die!* (1943) to *Conspiracy*, which quotes from several promotional articles on that film, placing it alongside earlier Hollywood classics and situating *Anthropoid* in this longer film history.⁷ *The Man with the Iron Heart* – in contrast with its ostensible source text, Laurent Binet’s acclaimed novel *HHhH* – is not nearly as open about its intervention in an existing cultural discourse.

⁷ Peter Bowen, “Reinhard Heydrich in Film,” Bleecker Street, accessed June 24, 2022, <https://bleeckerstreetmedia.com/editorial/Reinhard-Heydrich-in-Film>. Undated.

Indeed, the strangest thing about *The Man with the Iron Heart* is its distance from and apparent disregard for its source material. Laurent Binet's novel *HHhH* is a masterful example of postmodern fiction, focusing on the author's ethical and artistic dilemma caused by trying to write a novelization of Operation Anthropoid. It is much more of a meditation on the complexities of turning history into art than it is a straightforward historical narrative. Composed of short chapters, *HHhH* includes a detailed discussion of the author's impressions of both HBO's *Fatherland* and *Conspiracy*. For his chapter on *Fatherland*, Binet discusses the Wannsee Conference at length:

In this fiction, the Wannsee Conference is in some way *the* crucial moment of the Final Solution. Now, it's true that the decision wasn't made at Wannsee. And it's also true that Heydrich's *Einsatzgruppen* had already killed hundreds of thousands of Jews on the Eastern Front. But it was at Wannsee that the genocide was rubber-stamped . . . As in all meetings, the only decisions that are really made are those decided beforehand.⁸

In an early chapter discussing *Conspiracy*, Binet discusses Kenneth Branagh's performance alongside those in *Hangman Also Die!* and, according to Binet, even in a small scene of *The Great Dictator*:

Kenneth Branagh's portrayal of Heydrich is quite clever: he manages to combine great affability with brusque authoritarianism, which makes his character highly disturbing. I don't know how accurate it is – I have not read anywhere that the real Heydrich knew how to show kindness, whether real or faked.⁹

Binet is credited as the film's screenwriter alongside David Farr and Audrey Diwan. The writers were certainly aware of the novel's discussion of Wannsee, *Conspiracy*, and *Fatherland*. *The Man with the Iron Heart* depicts Heydrich (played by Jason Clarke) as an opportunistic, tortured sociopath in ways that do not seem too far from Dietrich Mattausch's performance in *Manager of Terror*. However, the performance also leans too far into scenery-chewing: If Branagh's Heydrich is supposedly too theatrical, too "Shakespearean," or too much of a Hollywood villain, Jason Clarke's performance is overdone by any measure. The film's depiction of the Wannsee Conference begins with a shot of a snow-covered villa (Figure 8.2), which appears much more monumental than the actual Wannsee villa (more embarrassing: the intertitle misspells Wannsee as "Wansee"), and is intercut with scenes of Heydrich playing the violin or playing with his children in Prague while his wife Lina (Rosamund Pike) stands around looking bored,

⁸ Laurent Binet, *HHhH*, trans. Sam Taylor (London: Vintage, 2013), chap. 160. Binet's novel eschews page numbers, so the chapters are cited here.

⁹ Binet, *HHhH*, chap. 7.

while he puts on his uniform and leaves his castle on the way to his encounter with Gabčík and Kubiš. These scenes are reminiscent of earlier drafts of the *Conspiracy* script, which at one point was supposed to end with Heydrich's assassination (an ending abandoned once HBO officially dropped *Complicity*).



Figure 8.2: The Wannsee villa in *The Man with the Iron Heart*. Location likely on the outskirts of Budapest. HHHH. FilmNation Entertainment, Echo Lake Entertainment, Lantern Entertainment, 2017.

The Wannsee scene opens with Heydrich discussing the “wider issues of methodology and the timescale of the cleansing” while mentioning bureaucratic hurdles. Curiously, the scene shows a fictional cover sheet for the Wannsee Protocol which is then passed around the table (see Figure 8.3). This is a bizarre filmmaking decision since the scene is supposed to depict the meeting that the protocol recorded. Heydrich then mentions exceptions to the deportation plans and his intent to review them, specifically Jewish recipients of the Iron Cross and so-called *Mischlinge*. The mise-en-scène here strongly echoes *Conspiracy*, with the camera pulling back from a close-up shot of Heydrich to reveal the Wannsee attendees sitting around an oval table, shuffling papers, and smoking, although everyone sticks to drinking water here. The participants remain unnamed but appear in several close-up shots. Heydrich states that “the *Einsatzgruppen* are already working at maximum efficiency” and that the coming “Final Solution” requires “a more systematic approach.” According to the film’s IMDb page, the only Wannsee attendees named in the cast are Heinrich Müller and Adolf Eichmann.¹⁰ The rest remain nameless.

¹⁰ HHHH, (FilmNation Entertainment, Echo Lake Entertainment, Lantern Entertainment, 2017). See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3296908/?ref_=nv_sr_srgs_0.

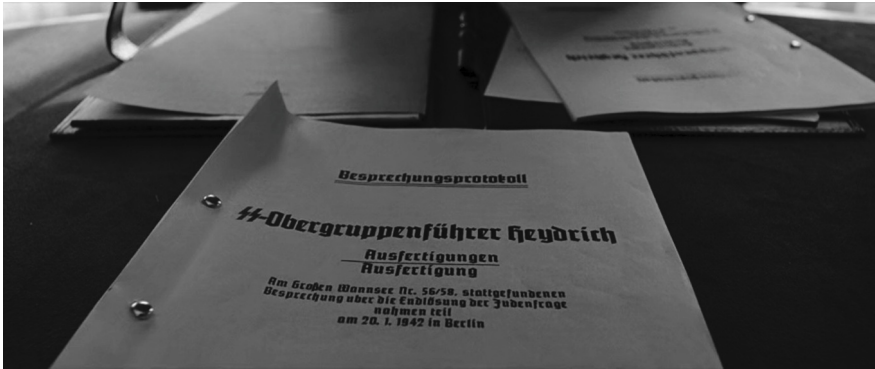


Figure 8.3: The fictionalized Wannsee Protocol in *The Man with the Iron Heart*. HHhH. FilmNation Entertainment, Echo Lake Entertainment, Lantern Entertainment, 2017.

The Man with the Iron Heart simply fails to live up to the standards set by *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy*, and apart from the camerawork and production design, is closer to the portrayal of Wannsee seen in early television depictions of the conference like *Engineer of Death* and *Holocaust*. Unlike Binet's novel, *The Man with the Iron Heart* is unable to portray the conference in a nuanced, thoughtful manner. The film makes the conference a key scene intercut with the attempt on Heydrich's life, the film's halfway point both literally and dramatically. Instead, it manages to exaggerate the villa's size and location, sloppily include shots of Heydrich handing out the protocol before it has even been written, and even manages to misspell Wannsee. In short, *The Man with the Iron Heart*, the only theatrical film considered for this study, manages to fulfill all the negative stereotypes applied to both television and Hollywood films. For a European co-production based on an award-winning French novel, one would have expected the film to aim for a higher standard.

The 2019 BBC/HBO miniseries *Years and Years* references *Conspiracy* and Wannsee in a more immediate, chilling manner. *Years and Years* is a dystopian family drama about a fascist Britain in the 2020s. Created in response to Brexit and the resurgence of right-wing authoritarianism around the globe, *Years and Years* is a frightening window into a reality all too close to home. Penned by Russell T. Davies, best known for his work on *Doctor Who*, the series focuses on one Manchester family and its travails during this period. Stephen Lyons (Roy Kinnear) is the family patriarch and, although he begins the series as a financial advisor, he later becomes part of Vivienne Rook's (Emma Thompson) fascist regime. The series focuses equally on all members of the Lyons family, but for the purposes of this section, Stephen is the most relevant family member. Episode 5 of

the series, which takes place in 2028, contains a scene very reminiscent of Wannsee.¹¹ At a secret meeting, Prime Minister Rook discusses Britain's growing problem with homeless people and climate refugees, ultimately arguing that Britain will need to create concentration camps for them. The script is full of allusions to Wannsee. For example, the stage directions for the conference scene, which is set in a charming villa called the "Wessex House" (see Figure 8.4) begin with "[a] smart room; this whole place is kitted out for conferences so there's a long table, chairs, but still with a country house feel."¹² Additionally, the attendees oscillate between casually discussing mass killing and bureaucratic hurdles with laughter. Much as in *Conspiracy*, these conference attendees are concerned with language and euphemisms for mass killing. For instance, they refer to the concentration camps as "Erstwhile Sites" because they are located in "erstwhile" army bases, and police training centers. As at Wannsee, the Erstwhile Sites are to be kept secret. Jane Bordolino (Emma Fielding), basically playing the role of Eichmann at this conference, shows attendees a map of proposed Erstwhile Sites (Figure 8.5) before Rook interrupts her presentation. Rook discusses the term "concentration camp" and claims that the term has a bad rap:

VIV ROOK (CONT'D)

But let's look at the words. Let's stare them down. The word concentration simply means a concentration of anything. If you filled a camp with oranges, it would be a concentration camp, by dint of the oranges being concentrated, simple as that. I've made it sound rather tasty. And the notion of a concentration camp goes way back. To the nineteenth century. The Boer War. They were British inventions, built in South Africa to house the men, women and children made homeless by the conflict. Refugees! You see? Everything is older than we think. And everything old, happens again.¹³

Rook continues, saying that history forgot the fate of the Boers, so Britain should be fine with "let[ting] nature take its course"—that is, mass death through starvation and disease, as in the Boer War. She says that the Erstwhile Sites must be permanent as migration to Britain will continue for centuries as global warming worsens. This focus on the relationship between euphemism and genocide is

11 The entire scene can be viewed here on YouTube: *Years and Years Episode 5 | The Erstwhile Sites*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUPf5GagKF0>.

12 The BBC made each script for *Years and Years* available on its website. This is now a common practice with historical series. For example, HBO also made Craig Mazin's scripts for the miniseries *Chernobyl* freely available on its website. Russell T. Davies, "Years and Years. Episode 5. Russell T. Davies. Lilac Amendments," accessed June 27, 2022, <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts/Years-and-Years-Ep5.pdf> 52.

13 Russell T Davies, "Years and Years. Episode 5," 56.



Figure 8.4: The Wessex House conference room in *Years and Years*. Red Production Company, Home Box Office (HBO), 2020.



Figure 8.5: Jane Bordolino (Emma Fielding) Shows attendees a map of proposed Erstwhile Sites. *Years and Years*. Red Production Company, Home Box Office (HBO), 2020.

clearly a reference to *Conspiracy* and is underscored by that film's British cast. The references to Wannsee are not confined to the script. Visually, the scene emulates *Conspiracy*, with its focus on papers shuffling, sinister conversations around a fireplace and a conference table, though the atmosphere is much more informal here as attendees are sprawled across sofas and armchairs – and in keeping with a contemporary conference, everyone is wearing nametags. The camera zooms in from over attendees' shoulders and focuses on characters speaking (Figure 8.4).

The conference room is elegantly decorated in the style of the English upper class, with eighteenth and nineteenth-century art hanging around the room. Rook, wearing a striking red dress, interrupts Jane's presentation to make things clear to everyone, much as Heydrich does in *Conspiracy*. While she speaks the camera cuts back to Stephen's shocked expression as he realizes just what they have been asked to do. At the end of the scene, Stephen and his friend Woody (Kieran O'Brien) drive back home, with Woody and his friends celebrating like fraternity members because they will get to be "property management" for two Erstwhile Sites. Much like in *Conspiracy*, some attendees are more concerned with networking than their moral culpability in genocide.

But *Years and Years* is tricking the audience here. Stephen does not resist the plans or even tell anyone about them. Instead, he uses them to his personal advantage and sends Viktor, a Ukrainian refugee whom he blames for the death of his brother Daniel (he is Daniel's former boyfriend), to an Erstwhile Site with a simple mouse click. And he smiles. As James Luckard noted in his review of the episode, Stephen's sadistic smile is "the most profoundly human action imaginable."¹⁴ The creators of television productions like *Years and Years* are not interested in creating simplistic villains who are easy for audiences to root against, but instead are interested in getting audiences to identify with characters like themselves who are then revealed to be morally repugnant. In this self-recognition, the audience should, if the drama lives up to its ambitions, engage in self-reflection. Only then can change be possible.

Two publications have noticed the Wannsee and *Years and Years* connection. In a piece on *Years and Years*, literature scholar Cornelia Wächter noted the scene's "obvious reference to the Wannsee Conference" while the film critic James Luckard called this section "Davies's nightmarish restaging of the Wannsee Conference."¹⁵ Luckard references a section from Davies's script which reads "In the light of the fire, with good coffee, she just gave them permission to murder."¹⁶ This bit of commentary echoes the final sentence of Mark Roseman's study on Wannsee, which reads: "Speaking to one another with great politeness, sipping their cognac, the *Staatssekretäre* really had cleared the way for genocide."¹⁷

¹⁴ James Luckard, "Roarbots Recap: 'Years and Years' Episode 5 – Triumph of the Will," *The Roarbots*, July 23, 2019, accessed June 27, 2022, <https://theroarbots.com/roarbots-recap-years-and-years-episode-5-triumph-of-the-will/>

¹⁵ Cornelia Wächter, "Skin in the Game," *Coils of the Serpent* 10, no. 10 (June 23, 2022): 153–169, 155n1, footnote 1; James Luckard, "Roarbots Recap: 'Years and Years' Episode 5 – Triumph of the Will."

¹⁶ Russell T Davies, "Years and Years. Episode 5," 57.

¹⁷ Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 110.

Years and Years is a political piece designed to portray the dangers of far-right authoritarianism, unchecked climate change, and societal apathy. In this respect, it is representative of the time when it was made – that is, Britain during Brexit, America under Trump. During this period, references to the rise of Hitler, to fascism, and to Wannsee appeared again and again throughout the English-speaking world. Here, Wannsee is not merely a chapter in German history, but a significant warning for the entire planet. For instance, the documentary filmmaker Alison Klayman, who directed the 2019 documentary *The Brink*, which focused on the rise of Trump-consigliere Steve Bannon, filmed a scene where Bannon meets with the heads of several European far-right parties, part of his effort to “unite the Right” in Europe against the EU, immigration, and LGBT rights. In multiple interviews, Klayman described shooting this scene in no uncertain terms:

After filming a chilling dinner sequence later in the documentary, Klayman took a half-bottle of wine to her room and called her husband. “I told him I think I just filmed the Wannsee Conference,” she says, referring to the 1942 Nazi “Final Solution” meeting held in Berlin. The scene is reminiscent of “The Wannsee Conference,” Heinz Schirch’s 1984 dramatization of the event. Asked if the resemblance was intentional, Klayman, who describes her Jewish ethnicity as “foundational” to her personality and work, replies that she has visited the villa where the conference took place and thinks she saw the movie in college.¹⁸

Post-2016 Anglo-American literature also addressed Wannsee.¹⁹ In his novel *Red Pill*, British writer Hari Kunzru depicts an unnamed writer descending into madness after staying at a fictionalized version of the American Academy in Berlin, which is located at Wannsee. His main character is constantly confronted by alt-Right figures at this retreat, first from a Jordan Peterson-like colleague, Edgar, then from a young, Steve Bannon-esque figurehead, Anton. Wannsee constantly looms in the background as a symbol of both the final consequence of far-right ideology and as the site of Heinrich von Kleist’s suicide. For almost two hundred pages, Kunzru leaves the Wannsee Conference unmentioned, although most of the novel takes place at the lake. About two-thirds of the way through the novel,

¹⁸ Maria Garcia, “Documentarian Alison Klayman Takes the Long View on Stephen Bannon in ‘The Brink,’” *Movies*, *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-the-brink-alison-klayman-20190328-story.html>. See also Alison Klayman, “Film-Maker Alison Klayman: ‘Bannon Holds Court and People Come to Him,’” interview by Rachel Cooke, *Film*, *Guardian*, July 6, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/06/alison-klayman-interview-steve-bannon-film-the-brink>.

¹⁹ Hari Kunzru, *Red Pill* (London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2020). Kunzru’s *Red Pill* is part of a global literary reaction to the rise of the far-right. The most prominent and ambitious recent example of a historical novel grappling with this issue is Antonio Scurati’s, *M: Son of the Century*.

Kunzru's protagonist visits the exhibit at the Wannsee villa and is left cold. Having had his political and moral security shaken by Anton's far-right arguments, he travels to the memorial site seeking clarity, "[w]hat would clear my confusion was a baseline, a piece of firm moral ground," a lesson to provide comfort in a world that no longer makes sense. But his quest proves illusory:

To my dismay I found an empty shell, completely without character. I knew at once that I would find nothing to help me. There was little or no furniture, and in the absence of any meaningful connection with the past, the freshly painted rooms had been filled with images and texts narrating the events that led up to the conference and the terrible consequences of the policy that was agreed on there.²⁰

After a short visit, the protagonist leaves the Wannsee villa, disappointed because he could not handle the exhibit's quiet atmosphere of solemnity: "I needed the house to do something immediate, something primal. I wasn't in any condition to follow the whole grim story, from the medieval blood libel to the Eichmann trial. I felt distracted and claustrophobic."²¹ In this section of *Red Pill*, Kunzru depicts a common problem with Germany's memorial and museum culture. So focused on getting the facts right, museums often overwhelm visitors with granular historical detail while neglecting emotion or other facets of history to grab the viewer's attention. For some, especially international, visitors, these exhibits can appear cold, boring, and frankly dry. Holocaust memorial curators and educators often disdain anything that smacks of "emotionalization" out of a fear of reverting to the irrational, something which can quickly be associated with Nazi propaganda or manipulation.²² But these memorial sites often create a feeling of cognitive dissonance, as described by Kunzru. The German-Jewish writer Maxim Biller also criticized the exhibit at Wannsee along the same lines, comparing it negatively with the films.²³ This passage does not mean that the permanent exhibit in the Wannsee villa was a failure (it has since been overhauled), but rather that it was unable to reach all visitors because it solely aimed at the cognitive, not the emotional level. It is within this gap between cognition and emotion that historical films find their place.

²⁰ Kunzru, *Red Pill*, 186–187.

²¹ Kunzru, *Red Pill*, 188.

²² See Jackie Feldman, "Re-Presenting the Shoah and the Nazi Past: A Chronicle of the Project," in *Erinnerungspraxis zwischen gestern und morgen*, ed. Thomas Thiemeyer, Jackie Feldman, and Tanja Seider (Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde e.V., 2018), 21–45; For a history of post-war Germany and its ambivalent attitude towards emotions, see Frank Biess, *Republik der Angst*.

²³ Maxim Biller, "Wannseevilla: Neunzig Minuten Holocaust," *Die Zeit*, October 24, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/2020/44/wannsee-villa-konferenz-nationalsozialismus-juden-holocaust>.

2 Making *The Conference*

Why make another film about the Wannsee Conference? This question was not far from the mind of screenwriter Magnus Vattrodt, the writer chosen to adapt Paul Mommertz's script for ZDF. Global political developments since 2001, and especially since 2016, were not far from the producers' minds. Friedrich Oetker, producer at Constantin Television, stated that he first had the idea for a new film about the Wannsee Conference sometime in 2017 and bought the rights to Paul Mommertz's script for *The Wannsee Conference*. Importantly, Oetker stated that the producers had no intention of remaking the earlier film, but had optioned the script for "an initial orientation." Then he brought director Matti Geschonneck on board.²⁴ Geschonneck, who had previously directed *Das Zeugenhaus* [The house of witnesses] (2014) a television movie about Nuremberg Trial witnesses all living under the same roof, is the son of Erwin Geschonneck, an actor and resistance figure who spent World War II in various concentration camps.²⁵ In an interview, screenwriter Magnus Vattrodt described his long-standing collaboration with Geschonneck – the two have often worked together with Constantin Television producer Oliver Berben.²⁶ Geschonneck and Vattrodt's collaborations range from historical dramas to crime movies (the latter owing to German television's dependence on the genre). Nevertheless, it is clear that the pair have a passion for chamber play pieces, as evidenced by both *Das Zeugenhaus* and the 2015 family drama *Ein großer Aufbruch*, which takes place in a Bavarian lake house.

Das Zeugenhaus is important for the context of Vattrodt and Geschonneck's later collaboration on *The Conference*. The bulk of the film takes place in a Nuremberg villa where Holocaust victims and perpetrators live under the same roof while awaiting their turns to testify at the Nuremberg Trials. Visually, the film could fit into a series with *The Conference*. Geschonneck favors a minimalistic, cold, restrained, and claustrophobic atmosphere which increases tension and underscores the traumatic history depicted here. Although more artistically conventional than *The Conference*, *Das Zeugenhaus* is a satisfying television film about a little-known aspect of the Nuremberg trials.

Vattrodt described the initial idea for *The Conference* stemming from Friedrich Oetker, who had the support of his boss Oliver Berben. Vattrodt mentioned

²⁴ Friedrich Oetker, interview by author, February 7, 2022, 04:43–05:46.

²⁵ Matti Geschonneck, *Das Zeugenhaus*, Drama, History, 2014; Geschonneck, "Matti Geschonneck im Interview über seinen Film 'Die Wannseekonferenz,'" interview by Alexander Gorkow and Joachim Käppner, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/wannseekonferenz-zdf-geschonneck-1.5512329>.

²⁶ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, March 21, 2022, 01:23–02:50.

his initial reservations about a new Wannsee Conference dramatization, citing the earlier television films and wondering whether he would have anything new to add to a story which had already been told numerous times, noting that the project was something he and Geschonneck often discussed while working on other films together.²⁷ During this period, which Vattrodt estimates to be between 2017 and 2018, he grappled with the dilemma of how to tell the story in a new way. One initial idea was to depict the conference participants getting up in the morning and documenting their journeys to Wannsee:

And you don't really need to see how Eichmann gets dressed in the morning with his mistress before he heads off to the Wannsee Conference. Then it would have become so speculative, and I always thought "nah!"— Just introducing fifteen people in this way, when each only has a minute or two, would mean I already wasted half an hour of film and haven't even spread out my entire tableau of characters.²⁸

Vattrodt also noted the difficulty of introducing all of the fifteen participants in an ensemble piece. He claimed that the production team finally reached an agreement during a dinner he had with Geschonneck and Constantin Film producer Reinhold Elschot at an Italian restaurant in Berlin. The trio had decided to back out of the project, but during their dinner, they found a way to make it work. Someone – Vattrodt is not sure who – noted that *The Wannsee Conference*, while a good film for its time, had too much dramatic flair and that they would have to take a different course:

And then it was clear that the only way to really tell this story would be to boil it down even more brutally, to completely throw out all the entertaining stuff, and rely even more on the facts that we have today, and then basically clean the whole thing up, to get rid of all the gimmicks and make a very, very radical film – at least for our television environment. So it was always clear – it is still a movie, it . . . remains fiction out of necessity, but you . . . build a ramp for the viewers so that today's people also have a chance to understand it, but it's not sugar-coated in any way, we don't do much to keep the viewer entertained. We basically present what is possible to say in these ninety minutes, without any fun aspects to the left or the right, without any additional entertainment value, no love story, wartime drama, war movie effects, just an exact focus on a meeting.²⁹

For Vattrodt, Geschonneck, and Elschot, their version of the Wannsee Conference had to avoid all comic relief and dramatic flair found in the earlier two films. It is important to note that, for historical films, *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy* are already very conservative when it comes to dramatic devices. The produc-

²⁷ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 05:33–13:48.

²⁸ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 05:33–13:48.

²⁹ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 05:33–13:48.

tion team of *The Conference*, however, wanted to condense the drama even further than their predecessors. A significant point generally ignored in the press: is it better for German audiences to watch *The Wannsee Conference*, an older film which has little appeal for today's audiences, or a dubbed version of *Conspiracy* (German audiences overwhelmingly prefer dubbing to subtitles)? Why not release a new film shot in German? Vattrodt claimed that he could not take *Conspiracy* seriously as a historical film for this very reason:

Honestly, with the HBO Film [*Conspiracy*], I let that fall under the table anyway because as a German viewer I had trouble taking it very seriously. It was a bit like a Hamlet adaptation and wasn't German at all. I kind of . . . I never felt that those were Germans sitting at that table. It didn't have, I think, this sound either – speaking as a German, with my German visual taste.³⁰

Although Vattrodt's statement about *Conspiracy* being "like a Hamlet adaptation" is a matter of taste (and smacks of Continental reservations or even arrogance towards Hollywood), he is correct when it comes to the point about filming in the original language. For a German audience, something shot in their native language is likely a better experience than something dubbed. But otherwise, this is an odd statement which recalls a type of German protectiveness of their own history against outsiders, something which David Simon called "standing" in a completely different context when defending himself against charges of being unqualified to tell a story set in New Orleans as a Baltimorean.³¹ This attitude is a constant in German writing on *Conspiracy* and stands in a long tradition of uneasiness with Anglo-American depictions of German history, ranging from Edgar Reitz's venomous reaction towards *Holocaust* to moralistic invectives against *Schindler's List*, Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones*, and most recently, *The Zone of Interest*.

Vattrodt's initial thoughts on writing a third Wannsee Conference movie are contained in an Apple Pages word processor file titled "Thoughts on Wannsee, New Film."³² This file, like the other pre-production files provided by Vattrodt, consists of a list of notes, thoughts, quotes, and other fruits of brainstorming. They are collages of historical information, argument, and ideas about how to realize them dramatically. As with production documents for *The Wannsee Confer-*

³⁰ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 15:45–28:27.

³¹ Cook, *Flood of Images*, 303–306.

³² I would like to thank Magnus Vattrodt for providing me with the pre-production material and screenplays cited in this chapter. The pre-production material consists of Apple Pages files and the three script versions are Adobe PDF files. Except for the scripts, all files are undated but stem from 2018 and 2019.

ence and *Conspiracy*, these documents cannot tell the complete production history of *The Conference* but provide historians with valuable clues and insights. Many decisions and conversations are lost to historians, because they either happened over the phone, in meetings, or via text message, email, or voice memos. The historian is usually limited to the remaining production files, which are only capable of providing a fragmentary picture of a production's history. Nevertheless, they are extremely valuable for historical studies about film and television productions.

Vattrodt's initial thoughts began with "What is new to say here? In the language of bureaucracy, the turn towards mass murder is made here."³³ The document notes areas where the previous two films had succeeded and is full of comments asking where the filmmakers can add something new. One area where Vattrodt thought that they could say something new was "the question of compassion. Several times the question of compassion. Again and again, the functionaries appeal to their fellow participants to not let pity keep them from the task at hand."³⁴ But Vattrodt was aware that besides this point, much of what could be said about Wannsee had already been said in the other two films:

One can make such a film again "roughly similar" with a few corrections – clarify the fault lines between the characters, depict some protagonists in a more intimate manner, take everything "diabolical" out of the characters, place Heydrich and Eichmann perhaps in the center, who have the success of the conference at heart (the Brannagh [sic] film does this quite well). Sharp young bureaucrats, successful in the system, sharp. But is that really enough for us? Basically, it's just a retelling, a different pitch – but thematically and substantively, it's kind of all said and done. The banality of evil, how mass murder is translated into a bureaucratic language . . .³⁵

Vattrodt was clearly vexed about this dilemma. One possible theme he teased out was the role of Pearl Harbor in Nazi decision-making.³⁶ Clearly frustrated, Vattrodt noted: "We can't just make some kind of remake of these movies. Totally boring. We need a reason to make this film, something to grapple with, an idea. I need a something to grapple with – a character, a conflict, a feeling, a music."³⁷ In

33 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," Undated, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt, 1.

34 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 1.

35 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 1.

36 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 2. For more on Pearl Harbor and Wannsee, see Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, *Hitler's American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and the German March to Global War* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), 361, 386–387; Longerich, *Wannsee*, 36.

37 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 2.

the document on initial thoughts about a new Wannsee movie, Vattrodt listed possible storytelling avenues, some of which were later abandoned:

A Heydrich talking on the phone with his wife in Prague, after the flight, and telling her about the view of the snow-covered countryside. About beauty. A man with a sense of beauty?

The terrible thing about the Nazis is that they were human. They had compassion, like all human beings, must have had it, but what did they do with it? How could it be possible to eliminate compassion? Train away humanity. Hardness.

. . .

Eichmann with his mistress? Pillow talk, maybe playing the violin, and then putting on the SS uniform. (He's a bit excited about the conference he's organized . . .).

One who was never prosecuted, as an older gentleman in his 80s. Eating an ice cream in Koblenz, sitting by the Rhine. Dealing with grandchildren. Becoming mild.

Maybe Lange, who shows understanding during a shooting for someone who can no longer shoot, no longer likes – maybe after talking to a mother and child (two to be shot). The Nazi who also sometimes shows mercy (but then can be completely merciless again the very next moment). Like Himmler, who, at the request of the father, also sometimes sets one free.³⁸

None of these ideas made it into the script. But Vattrodt's ideas about historiography did. Vattrodt identified shifts in perpetrator historiography thanks to the work of historians like Christopher Browning and Michael Wildt and wanted to make sure these new insights, whether Browning's about group dynamics or Wildt's about the RSHA as a militarized police force imbued with Nazi ideology and staffed by an "uncompromising generation" of ideological soldiers, were included in the script. His notes are full of quotes from the two, especially Wildt.³⁹ The script itself even contains lines clearly inspired by Wildt's research, and compared to the first two films, *The Conference* also strongly emphasizes the role of the RSHA in genocidal policy and as an important institution. This reassessment of the RSHA is one important aspect of Wildt's study, which corrects earlier interpretations deemphasizing its role in the Nazi government and in the Holocaust. Wildt argues that the RSHA

did not represent a police agency in the traditional Prussian-bureaucratic sense of the term; rather, it has to be seen as a new type of specifically National Socialist institution intimately connected to the idea of the people's community, or *Volksgemeinschaft*, and its state organization. The RSHA formed the conceptual and executive core of an ideologically oriented po-

³⁸ Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 12–13.

³⁹ Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 18; Browning, *Ordinary Men*; Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*.

lice force that understood its responsibilities politically and in terms of maintaining the racial purity of the German Volkskörper, or people's body, and exterminating an enemy defined in völkisch terms, unencumbered by the restrictions of the normative state and obligated solely to the worldview expressed in "the will of the Führer."⁴⁰

This conception of the RSHA acts as throughline throughout Vattrodt's script, which – apart from Eichmann, who oddly seems unchanged from Hannah Arendt's depiction in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* – depicts the RSHA as an institution completely fed up with the modern state, with its rules, norms, and slowness. The RSHA-men (Lange, Schöngarth, Heydrich, Müller) constantly refer to their nearness to the front, to action, to mass murder. These are no desk-bound murderers (*Schreibtischtäter*). Additionally, Vattrodt stressed the importance of Harald Welzer's study *Täter* (perpetrators), a study which focuses on social-psychological reasons for mass murder.⁴¹ This collage also contains an array of quotes stemming from the 2014 documentary *Radical Evil*.⁴² This documentary, directed and written by Stefan Ruzowitzky (best known for the 2007 Holocaust drama *The Counterfeiters*), mixes dramatic reenactment and interviews with historians and psychologists. *Radical Evil* focuses on German Police Battalions, particularly on the sociopsychological aspects of Holocaust perpetrators investigated by Christopher Browning.⁴³ The reenactment sections of the film combine footage of actors in uniform with an audio collage of quotes from primary documents written by police battalion members as well as infamous quotes from high-ranking Nazis like *Gauleiter* Franz Sauckel or Heinrich Himmler.⁴⁴ A few of these quotes eventually made their way into Vattrodt's screenplay, particularly in one scene involving Eberhard Schöngarth and a discussion about a subordinate who exclusively shoots children in order to "do them a favor," because they would otherwise have to live as orphans.⁴⁵ Vattrodt's document includes quotes from the documentary about psychology and group dynamics often, including the work of psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, but also references an article on Vanessa Lapa's documentary *The Decent One*, a biographical film about Heinrich Himmler.⁴⁶ His collage also contains some thoughts about directions for the script. For example, Vattrodt argued the fundamental dramatic problem at hand: "The problem: There is a great

40 Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*, 9.

41 Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 15:45–28:27; Harald Welzer and Michaela Christ, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2006).

42 *Das radikal Böse*, Documentary, 2014.

43 Browning, *Ordinary Men*.

44 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 7–8.

45 Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung" October 19, 2020, 68.

46 Magnus Vattrodt, "Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung," 10.

deal of agreement. No open conflict, the conflicts among those present remain speculative . . .”⁴⁷ This fundamental dramatic problem is one Christopher Browning pointed out in a recent *New York Review of Books* article which briefly discusses Wannsee in television and his brief involvement with *Conspiracy*.⁴⁸ Vattrodt stated “we will not be able to reconstruct what happened. We will at best be able to approach it. We can, though, also take great artistic liberties to construct something correct and true against the background of the conference . . .”⁴⁹ Each of the men who wrote the three main Wannsee television films acknowledged this fundamental dramatic problem, with Mandel being the most explicit with his discussions of “informed speculation” and the writing process. None of them claimed to exactly reconstruct the Wannsee Conference; all noted that doing so would have been impossible based on the available sources. Nevertheless, it is shortsighted and frankly no profound insight on the part of historians and journalists who conclude that these films are mere exercises in speculation. They are much more than that and are worthy of investigation as examples of public history types (*Geschichtssorten*); as historical examples of how filmmakers interpreted Wannsee in 1984, 2001, and 2022.⁵⁰

One section of Vattrodt’s notes discusses Rudolf Lange and notes that he “may, in certain respects, be the most interesting out of all those present. He comes from killing. Has seen everything firsthand. You meet him – how? Like a leper? Someone to be admired?”⁵¹ Indeed, Lange’s depiction in *The Conference* ends up as one of the film’s improvements on its predecessors. This takes nothing away from Mandel’s depiction or Barnaby Kay’s performance in *Conspiracy*, but the Lange in *The Conference* clearly reflects more recent research developments.

Vattrodt, unlike Mandel and Mommertz, was able to rely on detailed studies about the Wannsee Conference which only came out after *Conspiracy*. These include the monographs by Mark Roseman and Peter Longerich, as well as the edited volume *The Participants*.⁵² These provide a much more detailed view of The Wannsee Conference, its participants, wider context, origins, and results, as well as the debates about them, than the sources available to Paul Mommertz and

47 Magnus Vattrodt, “Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung,” 3

48 Browning, “When Did They Decide?”

49 Magnus Vattrodt, “Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung,” 8.

50 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/>.

51 Magnus Vattrodt, “Gedanken zu Wannsee, Neuverfilmung,” 3.

52 Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*; Longerich, *Wannsee*; Peter Klein, *Die „Wannsee-Konferenz“ am 20. Januar 1942: Eine Einführung*, (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2017); Jasch and Kreutzmüller, *The Participants*; Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*.

Loring Mandel. Vattrodt noted historiographical differences between these authors but argued that “they agree on a lot of things, even if they don’t like to hear it, but they still . . . of course, they always differ about the question of who gave the orders and where responsibility lies, and so on. But basically, they are all in agreement.”⁵³ This statement is largely true. When these historians differ, it generally centers on the question of when the Nazi government decided to murder all European Jews – a longstanding historiographical debate.⁵⁴

In the summer of 2019, the production team brought historian Peter Klein on board as a historical advisor.⁵⁵ Klein, a professor at Touro College Berlin, had previously published work on the Holocaust and Latvia as well as an edited volume (together with Norbert Kampe) on the Wannsee Conference. He had also written a short introductory volume about the conference and had often worked on projects at the Wannsee Memorial and Educational Site.⁵⁶ Norbert Kampe, former director of the Memorial and Educational Site, also assisted with script development but soon quit the project for personal reasons.⁵⁷ Kampe had introduced Klein to the production team and early on, Vattrodt and Klein watched *The Wannsee Conference* so Klein could provide “line by line” input on which parts of the older film were problematic or in need of updating.⁵⁸ Paul Mommertz and Heinz Schirk were also involved in early discussions, but it seems that their input was mainly there for the Constantin Television team to get their blessing. Oetker, who had purchased the rights to the *The Wannsee Conference* script, seems to have been the production team’s main point of contact with Mommertz.⁵⁹ In an interview, Klein noted how astonished he was during the initial 2019 meeting with Oetker, Vattrodt, and Geschonneck. Klein recalled that the three were extremely well-versed in Holocaust historiography and debates surrounding the Wannsee Conference, and that their preparation and seriousness convinced him to join the project:⁶⁰ “What was really amazing was their good, detailed prior knowledge . . . with Magnus Vattrodt, for example, you expect that a bit from a screenwriter. But that a producer, for example, also has that? I was amazed.”⁶¹ Klein described his

53 Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 15:45–28:27.

54 For a good overview of these historiographical differences, see Browning, “When Did They Decide?”

55 Interview with Peter Klein, January 25, 2022, 03:26–5:00.

56 Klein, *Die „Wannsee-Konferenz“*; Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*; Angrick and Klein, *The Final Solution in Riga*.

57 Norbert Kampe, E-Mail to author, March 7, 2021.

58 Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 38:45–44:34.

59 Paul Mommertz, E-Mail to author, January 26, 2022.

60 Interview with Peter Klein, 03:26–5:00.

61 Interview with Peter Klein, 5:01–05:39.

role as historical advisor not in terms of someone with absolute veto power, but rather as someone who made sure dialogue and plot points were plausible based on historiographical consensus:

The job of a [historical] consultant is not to turn the film that's being made my film, but to give you a . . . so you get a plausible flow, a plausible plot, yes? Something where you say "yeah, it makes sense if you do it that way." So my job was actually to read the emerging screenplay in its . . . dialogues, so to speak, two or three times . . . and to pay close attention to whether and how these dialogues or these interactions meet a plausible historical situation, so to speak. That is, I always looked with one eye: can I refute this sentence or this dialogue sequence from a historian's point of view? So, it was always, so to speak, "Is it a falsification when we say 'well . . . this and this and this is now on the table' as a round of dialogue."⁶²

Klein described his working relationship with Magnus Vattrodt as a reciprocal process, or dialogue:

And you also have to understand that when a script is created, something also comes back. So the screenwriter says "Yes, that's right – I don't want to do away with this dialogue, but I have to create a different pitch," ok? Hesitant questioning, confident questioning, and things like that – and that's where we sort of turned the screws, see? And that was rarely the case. So, when it came to something, it was always about the specific time – so can we assume on January 20 that they're saying that? And there we had to occasionally talk, very often by telephone. And that's how this . . . that's how this existing script was refined, so to speak.⁶³

Here, Klein outlines a collaborative process common to all public history projects. The historian is not simply an expert with veto power over artists or other practitioners who do not know any better. Instead, the historian helps people with different skills – in this case screenwriting – to improve the overall project while preventing it from straying into the realm of historical implausibility or nonsense. Collaborative work is central to public history and the historical advisor is, in an ideal case, neither an ivory tower expert passing harsh judgment on ignorant filmmakers nor simply there to rubber-stamp a script and provide marketers with enough cover to claim their film is historically accurate.

One of Peter Klein's most important insights for this study was his goal to keep the screenplay free of what he termed "over-pedagogization" (*Überpädagogisierung*). This term refers to overly didactic dialogue – for example, the sexist scenes in *The Wannsee Conference* where the female secretary or the switchboard operators ask the men in the room to explain Nazi terms, ranks, and policy as if

⁶² Interview with Peter Klein, 5:45–08:43.

⁶³ Interview with Peter Klein, 9:05–11:41.

they were ignorant little girls – referred to in earlier chapters as “holding the audience’s hand.” According to Klein, this occurs

when, in the course of a film, you are constantly presented with situations, dialogues, or messages through deliberately created situations which are not at all important for the course of the film, which have been created by the director in the desire that you will in any case be able to analytically understand the situation that comes later because you have just learned something beforehand. And if that happens within a short time – and in the first Wannsee film . . . yes, maybe 15 minutes – if you constantly have to put it on the table so that everyone can notice it, then I think Mommertz and Schirk thought that people were so stupid in 1984 that they constantly had to help them along the way. And that’s what I call over-pedagogization. So, there are many messages which are unnecessary, and there are many messages that can be embroidered into the dialogue, and you don’t have to first create situations for conversations that you don’t actually need, right? So that the people are in a bad way with the deportations, and that the deportations are going to Riga, you don’t need to show a phone call beforehand for that. And it’s not important at all whether people are told exactly what a *Obersturmbannführer* is, but you can incorporate that into the dialogues, like when Stuckart looks out of the window and says “that one down there looks like a *Obersturm* – no – like a *Sturm*bannführer” and then someone says something, a little number like that, and then the next one says “Heydrich’s fighting administration!”, right? And poof, the subject is settled, right?⁶⁴

It is in this respect where *The Conference* avoids many of its West German predecessor’s dramatic pitfalls. Now, as discussed earlier in this study, this method of historical filmmaking was common in many productions, including HBO cable dramas, around the turn of the millennium and is not some invention of Klein’s. More likely, Klein simply had been exposed to such productions throughout his life and had become used to doing a bit of work as an audience member – and therefore he had come to expect more out of the film he was advising. But is also important to keep in mind that Klein had also worked as an educator both inside and outside academia as a public historian for decades – he knew when to let his “audience” think and feel for themselves and when they would be overwhelmed by information overload. This experience is likely crucial for a historical advisor – otherwise productions run the risk of hiring someone who has little feel for the needs of television productions and refuses to think outside of the academic box. Historians should keep in mind that, at the end of the day, dramatic historical film and television is not just made for them, but for everyone. Vattrodt summed up this tension:

We don’t make the film only for the community of historians so that they are happy and say “oh cool, you’ve done a great job!” It’s more like we say that we’re making a film for the

64 Interview with Peter Klein, 24:03–26:22.

audience first, as we always do, and if it goes well, many people in the field or historians will say at the end “it turned out well. It’s . . . really been valuable. It’s not bullshit.” (laughs). And for that, of course, Klein was great.⁶⁵

3 Script Development, 2019–2020

In a document titled “Master Brainstorming File,” Magnus Vattrodt assembled a collage of quotes, notes, and ideas for his script.⁶⁶ Vattrodt also outlined the structure of Mommertz’s script in a separate file.⁶⁷ This outline not only identifies instances where Mommertz simply got the facts wrong but also includes ideas for how to improve the new script. For example, Vattrodt discussed the scene in *The Wannsee Conference* where Heydrich meets in a separate room with Lange, Eichmann, and Müller, and argued that this scene’s discussion of poison gas should be moved to the end of his script.⁶⁸ This decision was likely intended to build dramatic tension. Another document dated May 2019 outlines the Wannsee Protocol.⁶⁹ Vattrodt drafted this document, together with the outline of Mommertz’s script, in collaboration with Peter Klein and likely in close collaboration with Matti Geschonneck.

Paul Mommertz is co-credited as screenwriter but had little input on the screenplay. Instead, Vattrodt used Mommertz’s script as a starting point to write his own. *The Conference* is not a straight remake of its 1984 predecessor, but some traces remain. Although it has a much darker tone and clearer plotline than *The Wannsee Conference*, *The Conference* still contains lines originally penned by Mommertz. In these instances, Vattrodt remixed the script – the 1984 lines may appear in different parts of the film and different characters speak them. The two films only overlap in a few areas, and usually only when the dialogue primarily serves to transmit historical information or when someone utters a particularly cutting or pithy line. Comparing the two screenplays makes it clear that *The Conference* is no mere reiteration of Mommertz’s work.

Magnus Vattrodt delivered his first draft of *The Conference* in mid-November 2019. Like early drafts of *Conspiracy*, this draft includes detailed descriptions of

⁶⁵ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 38:45–44:34.

⁶⁶ Magnus Vattrodt, “Wannseekonferenz – Master Brainstorming File,” Undated, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt.

⁶⁷ Magnus Vattrodt, “Strukturskizze Drehbuch Mommertz,” Undated, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt.

⁶⁸ Magnus Vattrodt, “Strukturskizze Drehbuch Mommertz,” 2.

⁶⁹ Magnus Vattrodt, “Struktureller und inhaltlicher Ablauf der Konferenz laut Protokoll,” May 24, 2019, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt.

each historical figure. These shed light on the filmmaker's historiographic arguments and ideas.⁷⁰ For example, Heydrich is a "cool, intelligent, tactically adept manager at the highest level," while Eichmann is a "hardworking, detail-obsessed, somewhat pedantic doer in the background, a leader of lists and ruler of numbers."⁷¹ This section also describes Stuckart as "an experienced political leader with an aptitude for higher things. Possibly the man at the table with the most conference experience and an equal counterpart for Heydrich."⁷² This list also includes one person who is absent from the previous two Wannsee films: Ingeburg Werlemann, Eichmann's secretary.

The Conference is an example of public-private co-production. Although airing on public television network ZDF and with funds from the public broadcasting organizations Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg and FilmFernsehFonds Bayern (FFF Bayern), actual filming and production was helmed by Munich-based Constantin Television (a subsidiary of Constantin Film). Constantin Film is one of Germany's largest production companies and historical films have consistently been part of its repertoire, including *Downfall* (2004), *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* (2008), the Weimar-era miniseries *KaDeWe* (2021), and, most importantly for this study, *Das Zeugenhause*. Friedrich Oetker has stated that many members of Constantin Film, including its management, have Jewish backgrounds and therefore topics relating to the Holocaust are not taboo:

We are a company that is well acquainted with Jewish culture and beliefs. We simply have links to the culture and religion, and that's why we have no fear of . . . facing up to it, facing up to this memory. And as far as the Third Reich per se is concerned: we haven't really turned it into an industry, it's often the case that [productions about it] are also brought to you from the outside. So, a film from the US which is to be produced in Germany will often be about the Third Reich. And if they want a co-producer, then . . . we are the biggest independent [studio], and they approach us . . . the Third Reich in all its murderousness and inhumanity was unfortunately, at the end of the day, also a world-historical event.⁷³

Here, Oetker mentions several important themes for Holocaust remembrance in film and television. First, he notes that film productions often have a familial connection to the subject matter. This was the case for *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy*, with Manfred Korytowski and Peter Zinner both having direct con-

⁷⁰ Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Drehbuch von Magnus Vattrodt nach Motiven des gleichnamigen Drehbuchs von Paul Mommertz," First Draft, November 19, 2019.

⁷¹ Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz," First Draft, unnumbered page 2 of script PDF front matter.

⁷² Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz," First Draft, unnumbered page 3 of script PDF front matter.

⁷³ Interview with Friedrich Oetker, February 7, 2022, 50:52.

nections to the Holocaust and firsthand experience of exile. Second, he stresses how common international productions about the Nazi era are and how this means Constantin Film is often a production partner for international productions filmed in Germany. Both examples here complicate conventional understandings of film or television productions as belonging exclusively to one nationality. Is a film purely a Hollywood import if it is produced in concert with a German company? The fact that Jewish Germans helped produce *The Wannsee Conference* and *The Conference* also underscores the fact that these films about Wannsee are neither productions the German government or film machine impose upon an innocent population (in a tendentious understanding of the term “culture industry”), nor are they examples of a disingenuous and overly pious *Versöhnungstheater* (theater of atonement) focused on reconciliation and forgiveness, which the German-Jewish writer Max Czollek has justifiably criticized as an effort by gentile Germans to instrumentalize Jewish people in order to cast Germany as a modern, progressive nation which has moved beyond its dark past.⁷⁴ Lastly, Oetker notes that the Nazi regime (and the Holocaust) were “world-historical events,” that is, they do not exclusively belong to Germany – even if Germany bears responsibility. This is an important counterpoint in an era where the memory of World War II and the Holocaust is becoming renationalized (or, as Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg argue, an ever-present right-wing counternarrative is gaining traction), with public commemoration and education increasingly turning away from the idea of “cosmopolitan memory” espoused in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁷⁵ In this respect, international historical film production can act as a

74 See Max Czollek, “Versöhnungstheater. Anmerkungen zur deutschen Erinnerungskultur | bpb,” bpb.de, May 11, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte/juedischesleben/332617/versoehnungstheater-anmerkungen-zur-deutschen-erinnerungskultur>. Czollek uses the term “theater of memory” (*Gedächtnistheater*) as understood by Y. Michal Bodemann. For more, see Max Czollek, *Desintegriert euch!*, (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 2018); Y. Michal Bodemann, *Gedächtnistheater: die jüdische Gemeinschaft und ihre deutsche Erfindung*, (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1996). Although many critical scholars and journalists, including Bodemann, indict Holocaust films for contributing to *Gedächtnistheater*, this study argues that the three main Wannsee Conference movies stand outside of this paradigm, as do other more difficult Holocaust films which avoid the possibility of reconciliation or forgiveness. Note that the German government’s commemorative activities on January 20, 2022, however, particularly fit with Czollek and Bodemann’s ideas about theater of memory, especially German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s speech at the film’s premiere, which, with its “never again” pathos, fell particularly flat in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine several weeks later.

75 In the past decade, many genocide scholars have expressed alarm at this growing trend. See Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, “Memory Studies in a Moment of Danger: Fascism, Postfascism, and the Contemporary Political Imaginary,” *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (July 1, 2018): 355–367; Valentina Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right*, trans. Alastair

counterweight to the populist right, which seeks to reassert national narratives. Rich Brownstein's recent compendium of Holocaust film underscores this point by mainly listing non-English films in its list of the fifty best Holocaust films.⁷⁶

Filming *The Conference* took place during November and December 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as with the previous two films, exterior scenes were filmed on location at the Wannsee villa while interiors were shot at the Berlin Unionfilm Studios near the former Tempelhof airport. In a Constantin Film press release, executive producer Oliver Berben argued that *The Conference* was an important film for today's audiences because it "reminds [us] of what can happen when we do not watch out for our precious democracy," and that this political impetus was the project's "driving force."⁷⁷ In an interview, producer Friedrich Oetker praised the cast for their patience and expressed relief that all showed not only a professional, but also a political commitment to the project:

You have to find people who already have political integrity, and who are conscientious, and . . . so serious people make serious movies – without patting yourself on the back, but you have to think about the fact that . . . in Germany there are now so many [extreme, conspiracy-minded Corona skeptics, (*Querdenker*), literally "lateral thinkers"] etc., and that alone has been such a blessing to have a cast of sixteen people who stuck it out. To do that during the worst of Corona, so that's not so easy.⁷⁸

In interviews released around the premiere, several cast members spoke about the difficulties of working with the film's tough subject matter compounded by the effects of production-imposed isolation measures. For example, Philipp Hochmair (Heydrich), mentioned that the cast was "completely isolated. A single COVID-19 infection would have stopped the production. In those two months [of filming], I was exclusively around my colleagues in Nazi uniforms."⁷⁹ Similarly, Fabian Busch (Klopfer) recalled the shoot as extremely taxing:

McEwen (New York: CPL Editions, 2021); Tamara P. Trošt and Lea David, "Renationalizing Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Region," *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 228–240. For cosmopolitan memory, see Levy and Sznajder, "Memory Unbound,"; Levy and Sznajder, *Human Rights and Memory* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2015).

⁷⁶ Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete*.

⁷⁷ "DIE WANNSEEKONFERENZ – Drehstart im November," Constantin Film, October 8, 2020, <https://www.constantin-film.de/news/die-wannseekonferenz-matti-geschonneck-fuehrt-regie-drehstart-im-november/>.

⁷⁸ Interview with Friedrich Oetker, 14:28–16:52.

⁷⁹ Philipp Hochmair, "Hochmair als SS-Scherge Heydrich in 'Wannseekonferenz': 'Ich war auf einem ganz finsternen Planeten,'" interview by Birgit Baumann, *Der Standard*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000132736865/philipp-hochmair-als-ss-scherge-heydrich-in-wannseekonferenz-ich-war>.

Of course, you can't completely escape this madness that was negotiated there [at Wannsee] day after day. You inevitably take some of it into your everyday life. In this case, it was especially difficult because I had to be in quarantine in a hotel room for the whole six weeks. There was simply no distraction. We shot until shortly before Christmas. After this long time, returning to the family was almost liberating for me, and I realized what a privilege it is to live today.⁸⁰

4 *The Conference* (2022)

The Conference distinguishes itself from its two predecessors primarily by its portrayal of consensus at Wannsee. While *The Wannsee Conference* and *Conspiracy* do portray figures who express doubts, most notably Stuckart and Kritzinger, *The Conference* dispenses with this idea and instead portrays an atmosphere of unanimity. To be sure, Stuckart expresses reservations about dissolving mixed marriages or reclassifying so-called *Mischlinge*. A disquieted Kritzinger also appears hesitant and repulsed by mass shootings but comes around when it comes to discussing the “more humane” method of gassing. *The Conference* is not fundamentally different in style or argument from its predecessors, but rather in detailed historiographic aspects. It borrows and remixes aspects of both earlier films, while still managing to offer something new.

The film opens with a wide shot of the Wannsee lake as the camera zooms in on the villa and the narrator, renowned actor Matthias Brandt, provides background information on the geopolitical situation in January 1942. We are quickly introduced to Eichmann (Johannes Allmayer) and his secretary Ingeburg Werlemann (Lilli Fichtner) arranging place cards around the table, similarly as in *Conspiracy*. This opening sequence is not a rehashed version of the beginning of *Conspiracy*, which focuses much more on the staff preparing for the conference, with shots of the kitchen, maids, and orderlies frantically getting things ready. In contrast, *The Conference* is much more restrained, at times feeling more like a stage production than a lived-in guesthouse. Like his predecessors, Geschonneck sticks to long takes, allowing the tension to build.

The conference room itself is much more spartan than in the other two films (see Figure 8.7). *Conspiracy*, for example, has a conference room full of plants, furniture, glassware, the table itself is more cluttered with papers and ashtrays, and overall, it seems much less orderly and stage-like than Geschonneck's version. The table is arranged differently, this time in a U-shape (Figure 8.6) with

⁸⁰ This quote stems from the now-offline ZDF presskit: <https://presseportal.zdf.de/pm/die-wannseekonferenz/>

Heydrich, Müller, and Hofmann at the head, with SS and occupation ministers (Bühler, Leibbrandt, and Meyer) to Heydrich's right and Berlin-based civilian ministers to his left. Eichmann and Werleemann sit at a small table to the right of Heydrich, at what Eichmann called the “side table” [*Katzentisch*].⁸¹

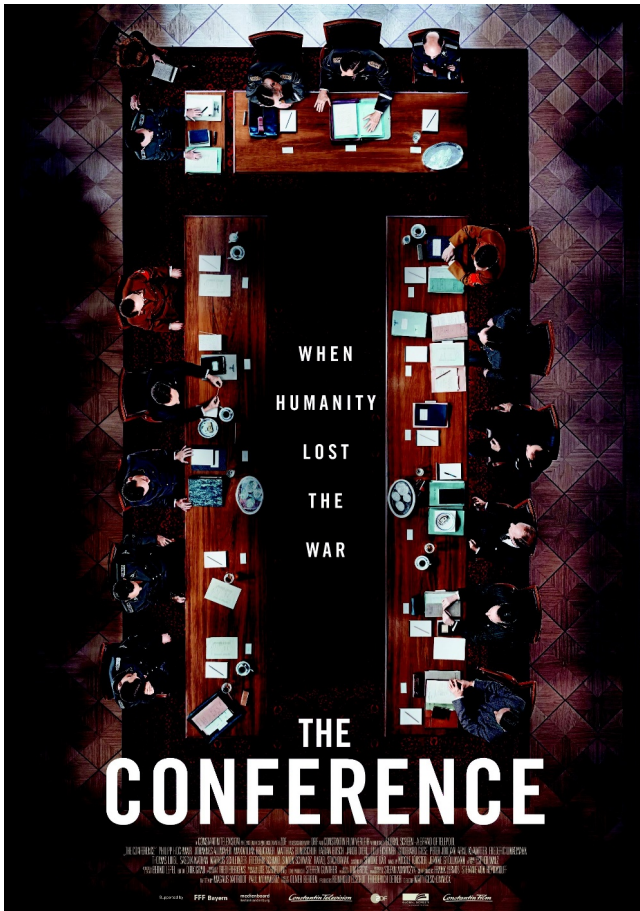


Figure 8.6: Overhead shot of the conference table, © Constantin Television. This publicity image served as the poster for *The Conference. Die Wannseekonferenz*. Constantin Television, Zweites deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, 2022.

⁸¹ Adolf Eichmann, “Auch hier angesichts des Galgens, Jahreswende 1961/1962,” Dokument 15 in Kampe and Klein, *Die Wannsee-Konferenz*, 112–113, 112.



Figure 8.7: Reinhard Heydrich (Philipp Hochmair) speaks to the conference attendees. Here, the spartan atmosphere and cold visuals are apparent. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Constantin Television, Zweites deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, 2022.

The Wannsee Conference is neatly divided into three thematic sections, while *The Conference* script breaks free from Mommertz's structure, instead shifting themes around and leaving room for those quiet moments between people which are missing from its West German predecessor (but are present in *Conspiracy*). This difference in pacing is perhaps the strongest stylistic difference between the two German-language productions. Additionally, the film is devoid of music, something often mentioned in German-language reviews as something daring and original which *The Conference* brings to the small screen. As previous chapters have shown, this decision to air the film without a score is not unique to *The Conference* and in fact common to all three Wannsee films, except for a single piano tone at the end of *The Wannsee Conference* and the diegetic music playing out *Conspiracy*.

The SS in *The Conference*

The first group of participants mentioned in Vattrodt's research material is the the SS, and it is here where we can most clearly see how this new film benefits from recent perpetrator historiography. *The Conference* depicts Reinhard Heydrich (Philipp Hochmair) as something between Dietrich Mattausch's womanizing circus ringmaster and Kenneth Branagh's alternation between charming boy scout and frightening death stares. In this film, Heydrich is much more of a managerial figure, afraid that something could go wrong and eager to placate those with misgivings.

Friedrich Oetker described this version as more “conciliatory” and noted that the production team had also watched *Manager of Terror* during pre-production.⁸² Peter Klein noted that the two Mommertz films portrayed Heydrich in a much more “demonized” manner and that he felt the new film should do something different. He recounted a conversation with Vattrodt where they both discussed portraying Heydrich as someone whose goal was to “convince” the other participants, not intimidate them.⁸³ Klein justified this decision by mentioning the only inter-ministerial conference Heydrich had previously chaired a year previously (January 8, 1941), arguing that everything discussed at that conference fell apart afterwards, so Heydrich should be portrayed as someone with a lot riding on this conference, as someone with something to lose.⁸⁴ Additionally, the filmmakers decided to cut long sections from the Wannsee Protocol (both present in the other two films) where Heydrich speaks at length. Vattrodt justified this decision by stating that it “of course does not function at all filmicly” and noted that he and Klein had decided that they had to: “[F]ind a path between seriousness and historical correctness, but also always keep ‘imparting [history]’ in mind.”⁸⁵

Vattrodt’s first script draft describes Heydrich as “cool, intelligent”, tactically adept manager at the highest level, determined to consequently expand the scope of his agency’s power.”⁸⁶ An extensive document containing source material for each historical figure lists the most important sources for the script. These were: Paul Mommertz’s archival material, Peter Longerich’s *Wannsee*, Hans-Christian Jasch and Christoph Kreutzmüller’s edited volume *The Participants*, and material collected for the Historikerlabor Berlin’s Wannsee Conference documentary theater project. This seventy-page collection contains outlines and descriptions of each historical figure and summarizes recent research on them, consisting of quotes from the abovementioned sources, primary documents, and recent biographies.⁸⁷ For example, in the section on Heydrich, Vattrodt describes him as “an efficient manager, strict and hard, ambitious, goal-oriented, with a great talent for organization. In the practical realization of party and racial-ideological goals, he is characterized by unscrupulous efficiency. He is a collector of information, astute and determined, with arrogant tendencies (which cost him his naval ca-

⁸² Interview with Friedrich Oetker, 08:45–10:25.

⁸³ Interview with Peter Klein, 31:11–35:23.

⁸⁴ Interview with Peter Klein, 31:11–35:23.

⁸⁵ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, March 21, 2022, 38:45–44:34.

⁸⁶ Magnus Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*” First Draft, unnumbered page 2 of script PDF front matter.

⁸⁷ Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” Undated, Apple Pages File courtesy Magnus Vattrodt.

reer).⁸⁸ Philipp Hochmair's portrayal of Heydrich as a diplomatic manager with a lot to lose – he needs to convince the others of his proposal – is complicated by the way other characters react to him. Several attendees are clearly intimidated by him, and the film plays with that expectation. This is most apparently in a scene after Stuckart (Godehard Giese) and Heydrich argue about mixed marriages. Heydrich excuses himself and invites Stuckart into a side room, where the two look out at the lake. The way their path to the side room is filmed, it seems like Heydrich is about to intimidate Stuckart into acquiescence, much like in *Conspiracy*. Instead, this film offers us something arguably more chilling. The script notes that Stuckart “follows Heydrich with some distance –unsure about what could happen.”⁸⁹ Heydrich and Stuckart then discuss their various viewpoints, with some tension, which is then resolved when the two glance out the window at the lake and move on to small talk. Vattrodt makes it clear that Stuckart is just as much of a committed Nazi as Heydrich but has more concerns for laws and norms than his counterpart. The pair discuss their families and, in one of the most chilling lines of the screenplay, Stuckart suggests that after the war, when Heydrich has moved into the Wannsee villa, “our children can swim together in the Wannsee.”⁹⁰

One strong difference between *The Conference* and its predecessors is the complete absence of a scene at the end where a relaxed Heydrich drinks a cognac with Müller and Eichmann after the other participants have left. In an interview with the Dutch Nazi journalist Willem Sassen, Eichmann spoke about Heydrich's relief at length:

I remember that at the end of this Wannsee Conference Heydrich, Müller and my humble self settled down comfortably by the fireplace and that then for the first time I saw Heydrich smoke a cigar or a cigarette, and I was thinking: Today Heydrich is smoking, something I have not seen before. And he drinks cognac – since I had not seen Heydrich take any alcoholic drink in years . . . And after this Wannsee Conference we were sitting together peacefully, and not in order to talk shop, but in order to relax after the long hours of strain. I cannot say any more about this.⁹¹

The filmmakers mentioned various reasons for refraining from this scene. Oetker argued that the amount of alcohol consumed in the other two films “did not feel completely authentic” and that Heydrich “had a lot more to do” that day and

⁸⁸ Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” 7.

⁸⁹ Magnus Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 88.

⁹⁰ Magnus Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 91.

⁹¹ So-called Sassen interviews, cited in the Eichmann trial, session 75, June 20, 1961, quoted in Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*, 103.

probably would have refrained from alcohol.⁹² A scene depicting this interaction is contained in Vattrodt's first draft but was later cut. In this cut scene, Heydrich says he is "very satisfied" with the conference's outcome.⁹³ The rest of the conversation here is contained in the final version of the script but instead of drinking a cognac, Heydrich busily gathers his things and talks to Müller and Eichmann as he heads out the door. This is one artistic decision that falls flat and does not really fall in line with scholarship on Wannsee, though the only evidence we have for Heydrich pausing for a drink after Wannsee comes from Eichmann's postwar statements. Because Eichmann told this story both at his trial and in the Sassen interviews, when he was still a free man, it is likely plausible.

The portrayal of Adolf Eichmann (Johannes Allmayer) in *The Conference* is more problematic. Vattrodt's Eichmann is a pedantic, rather wooden figure whose attitude is in keeping with Hannah Arendt's portrayal in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which tends to uncritically accept Eichmann's self-depiction as an unideological order-follower during his trial. Later scholarship, particularly that from Bettina Stangneth and David Cesarani, is skeptical of this attempt on Eichmann's part to downplay his role at Wannsee and focuses more on his ideological motivations, proving that he was a committed Nazi and not an unthinking functionary.⁹⁴ Vattrodt's description of Eichmann in the screenplay is devoid of ideology.⁹⁵ His small biographical collage on Eichmann contains a more up-to-date depiction of Eichmann, often citing passages from Bettina Stangneth's article on Eichmann in *The Participants* and cites other passages which argue that the Wannsee Conference was a key event for his career.⁹⁶ Vattrodt discussed his version of Eichmann at length in an interview. First, Eichmann's placement at the small table, separate from the other participants, was meant to be "a nod to everyone who saw [Eichmann's] performance in Jerusalem" and a way to solve the problem of where to sit Eichmann at the table while surrounded by people who outranked him.⁹⁷ Vattrodt described Eichmann as a perfectionist who "simply conducts his work in a completely proper and dry fashion, someone who is unbelievably fussy and pedantic."⁹⁸

92 Interview with Friedrich Oetker, 26:20–27:23.

93 Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz," First Draft, 128–129.

94 Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*; Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 114.

95 Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Drehbuch von Magnus Vattrodt nach Motiven des gleichnamigen Drehbuchs von Paul Mommertz," November 19, 2019, unnumbered page 2 of script PDF front matter.

96 Magnus Vattrodt, "Handelnde Personen, 'Wannseekonferenz' Materialsammlung," 44.

97 Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 54:50–1:00:51.

98 Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 54:50–1:00:51.

Vattrodt was fully aware of other depictions of Eichmann, particularly those focusing on his fanatical zeal during this time deporting Viennese Jews, but decided to leave these aspects out in order to focus on what he thought was most important for the ninety minutes he had to depict Wannsee: “I left all of that out, I thought ‘no, we shall reduce him to his . . . this is a guy obsessed with numbers, he’s the guy who always has the latest figures and he is the one that allows the others to make a great show thanks to his bureaucratic work in the background.’”⁹⁹ This argument makes sense when one notes that *The Conference* is more of an ensemble piece than its two predecessors, and there simply was not enough time to depict everyone in full detail, though it casts earlier critiques of Stanley Tucci’s portrayal of Eichmann in *Conspiracy* in new light. In an article on *Conspiracy*, Alex J. Kay argued that the film’s characterization of Eichmann adhered closely to Arendt, noting its “absence of ideology.”¹⁰⁰ Kay’s observation here also applies to this film. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to accuse Vattrodt of simply falling back on an older depiction of Eichmann. Especially in its climactic scene, *The Conference* depicts Eichmann as someone who was much more than a desk-bound murderer, someone who had visited places like Chełmno, Belzec, Treblinka, and Auschwitz – not a bureaucrat sheltered from the results of his signature and stamp. As Mark Roseman has noted, “[t]he oft-cited gap between the ‘desk murderers’ and the men in the field barely applies at Wannsee.”¹⁰¹ In a recent collection of biographies about both leading and ordinary Nazis, Richard J. Evans defends Arendt against David Cesarani, arguing that “[m]any of his objections to [Arendt’s] book, however persuasive, were beside the point, or rested on a misrepresentation, or misunderstanding, of her concept of ‘the banality of evil.’”¹⁰² So, as with earlier depictions, Vattrodt adhering more to Arendt’s portrayal may simply be another fair interpretation.

Peter Klein notes that in contrast with the previous films, these high-level bureaucrats and officials do not stand at attention and shout “Heil Hitler!” at each other, but instead interact at a more informal level because they all know each other through work or other conferences. This informal atmosphere (compared to the earlier films) is illustrated by the film’s opening scene where Müller comes into the conference room as Eichmann is preparing: “they say ‘good morning’ to each other and shake each other’s hands.”¹⁰³ Klein also pointed out that the small scene where Eichmann brings Werleemann a sandwich is the only time we get to

⁹⁹ Interview with Magnus Vattrodt, 54:50–1:00:51.

¹⁰⁰ Alex J. Kay, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” 193.

¹⁰¹ Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference*, 96.

¹⁰² Evans, *Hitler’s People*,

¹⁰³ Interview with Peter Klein, January 25, 2022, 16:12–23:11.

see an “undisguised,” more normal Eichmann, who otherwise acts in a very straight-laced, official capacity in the film – this section is the only part where the audience can see a different facet of Eichmann, which is important because it complicates our conventional view of him. In this scene, Werleemann talks about how fun it is to work in Eichmann’s office, how people laugh a lot, and how they played music together.¹⁰⁴

Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller (Jakob Diehl) is portrayed as an enigmatic “sphinx,” in keeping with the earlier portrayals. However, Diehl’s chilling performance makes this version of Müller’s presence more prominent than in the two previous films. It is clearer that he is Eichmann’s direct superior and that the two have a strong working relationship. Vattrodt’s research material describes Müller as someone who kept out of the public eye, a powerful figure in the background.¹⁰⁵ Diehl makes Müller memorable simply by his facial expressions and unflinching gaze.

The Conference’s portrayal of Otto Hofmann (Markus Schleinzer), head of the SS Race and Settlement Main Office (*Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS*, RuSHA) is a clear example of more recent perpetrator research appearing in film. Previous depictions of Hofmann and Wannsee may allude to Germany’s war of racial conquest in the Soviet Union, but none do so as explicitly as *The Conference*. The film’s depiction of Hofmann is largely owed to the work of Isabel Heinemann, a historian specializing in the history of reproductive politics and the SS Race and Settlement Main Office.¹⁰⁶ Whenever Hofmann, who clearly has a one-track mind, discusses race and colonization, the camera turns to Müller and Heydrich, whose expressions clearly betray annoyance with their colleague.¹⁰⁷ In one scene cut from the script, Hofmann discusses a Polish woman his family has acquired for domestic force labor and his goal of Germanizing her:

HOFMANN

. . . My wife really wanted household help, what can I say? So I got her a Polish girl capable of being re-Germanized who is now helping her out.

MEYER

That exists?

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Peter Klein, 16:12–23:11.

¹⁰⁵ Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” 14.

¹⁰⁶ See Isabel Heinemann, “Otto Hofmann, SS Race and Settlement Main Office: A Pragmatic Enforcer of Racial Policy?” in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 75–94, and Heinemann, *Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut: Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ Magnus Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 28.

HOFMANN

A young girl which our qualified examiner has rated as highly racially valuable.
And now we have to reeducate the young thing to be a German.

MEYER

And how do you do that?

HOFMANN

Simply imagine a somewhat feral, but all in all decent dog – it requires patience
and a strict hand at times.¹⁰⁸

Markus Schleinzner's performance is undeniably creepy. His wide-eyed stare and the almost sexual thrill he exudes about population transfer and genocide only underscore the horror of what he says. In one aside, he rhetorically asks why Germany should be concerned with eleven million Jews when, because of *Generalplan Ost*, tens of millions of Slavs will inevitably die from war, slavery, and starvation:

HOFMANN

We need to look at these numbers in the larger context – the Final Solution of the Jewish Question is only one building block of the planned reorganization of Europe. In the long term, we are talking about the removal of all low-raced ethnic groups from our sphere of influence. The stew of peoples we have encountered in the eastern territories must completely yield to create space for the for the Germanization of the won living space in the East through German settlement. At the end, there will be a Europe on which we have left the stamp of our Germanic cultural morals and in which non-Germanic peoples will be at most tolerated as slaves – reading and writing at the elementary school level, counting up to one hundred, we do not need them for more. This reorganization and racial restoration [*Aufrassung*] of Europe requires an ethnic replacement [*Umvolkung*] in the three-digit million range – in contrast, the implementation of a final solution for eleven million Jews seems pretty straightforward.¹⁰⁹

The film's emphasis on the imperialist nature of Nazi Germany's war is a key difference from earlier portrayals of Wannsee. In the past decades, Holocaust studies have increasingly focused on the colonial and imperialist aspects of the Nazi war in the East.¹¹⁰ *The Conference* tackling this aspect, albeit in a short aside, helps it stand apart from other German productions on the Nazi era.

¹⁰⁸ Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz," First Draft, 20.

¹⁰⁹ Magnus Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung," 47.

¹¹⁰ This is not uncontroversial, as many German commentators find this emphasis problematic or even dangerously close to right-wing arguments, although it is established consensus in international scholarship. For more on this debate, see "The Catechism Debate Archives," *The New Fascism Syllabus* (blog), accessed August 5, 2022, <http://newfascismsyllabus.com/category/opinions/the-catechism-debate/> and "Forum: Timothy Snyder's Bloodlands," *Contemporary European History* 21, no. 2 (May 2012): 115–168. Key studies on the Eastern Front, the Holocaust, and colo-

The two lower-ranking SS officers representing “practical experience” at Wannsee, Eberhard Schöngarth (Maximilian Brückner) and Rudolf Lange (Frederic Linkemann), allow Peter Klein’s past work as a historian to truly come through in this film. Klein had previously written several articles and chapters on Lange, which clearly influenced Lange’s characterization in the script. At one point, the civilian ministers refer to Lange as part of Heydrich’s “fighting administration,” a key reference to Michael Wildt’s study of the RSHA.¹¹¹ Schöngarth has a much larger role than in the previous two films, and he acts as a mentor of sorts to Lange, taking him under his wing and encouraging his younger colleague as he introduces him to the world of political conferences and the circles of power. Schöngarth uses the most brutal language out of any of the characters and his lines, as mentioned above, often stem from primary sources written by Holocaust perpetrators. The screenplay refers to him as a hard man who looks down on civilians, as a man who “hides his complete disinterestedness behind a smile that says nothing.”¹¹² Schöngarth and Lange – in contrast with the other two films, where they barely interact – form a frightening team here.¹¹³ Here, they have a shared understanding as comrades, as mass murderers. In their first scene together, Lange, who is staying in a room at the villa, refers to Jews as “figures,” [Figuren] a common euphemism the SS used for its victims.¹¹⁴

Although Schöngarth is an intimidating, swaggering figure in *Conspiracy*, in *The Conference*, he is terrifying – he stares people down, he has no qualms about ruffling feathers, and acts as if the future belongs to him, as if the civilian ministers are simply relics of the past, soft fellows that modernity has passed by. He is an example of Wildt’s “Uncompromising Generation” par excellence. Whenever a civilian expresses discomfort, he cuts them down with statements like “Jewish suicides don’t bother me,” “if I don’t like someone’s nose, that’s Jewish enough for me,” or he describes “actions” in detail. The script notes that Schöngarth does this to toy with people; for example, in a scene on the patio with Lange and Krit-

nialism include Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2010), Moses, *The Problems of Genocide*, Kay, *Empire of Destruction*, and Kay, “Germany’s Staatssekretäre, Mass Starvation and the Meeting of 2 May, 1941,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 4 (October 2006): 685–700.

111 Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*.

112 Magnus Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 6.

113 As the script notes, they nod and “understand each other.” Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 8.

114 Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) contains several instances of survivors referring to this language while having to exhume *Einsatzgruppen* victims in the Baltic, and Andrej Angrick’s recent study of *Aktion 1005* describes this language and practice in detail: Angrick, »Aktion 1005«.

zinger, he stresses the “necessity” of mass shootings, alcohol as a reward for his men, and, echoing the quote in *Radical Evil*, describes a man who “prefers to shoot kids because they can’t survive without their parents. He thinks he’s doing them a favor. Has its logic, don’t you think?” The horrified Kritzinger leaves without a word and Schöngarth derides civilian officials as “weak-kneed people who fart in armchairs” that treat the boots on the ground like him as “scum.”¹¹⁵

For Rudolf Lange, *The Conference* avoids both Paul Mommertz’s characterization of the man as a bumbling drunk and *Conspiracy*’s traumatized soldier. Largely drawing on Peter Klein’s work, this film emphasizes Lange’s “special role” at Wannsee as a practitioner of mass murder. The other attendees underestimate him, with Stuckart expressing surprise that such a low-ranking officer is present at this high-level meeting. Here, the film also clearly sides with one historiographical interpretation of Lange’s presence at the meeting – no surprise considering Klein was the film’s historical advisor. Klein and Andrej Angrick repeatedly argued that a lower-ranking officer like Lange’s presence at Wannsee is only understandable in the context of his experience conducting mass executions in Latvia.¹¹⁶ Klein’s latest article on Lange notes that “he also effectively stood for the practical enforcement of Heydrich’s unilateral control of the ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ when necessary and against all previous resistance on the part of the Occupation’s civilian administration, as represented by Meyer and Georg Leibbrandt.”¹¹⁷ Peter Longerich, however, calls Klein’s interpretation of Lange’s role at Wannsee into question, arguing that there is no evidence that Lange would have spoken about mass killings at the conference and that any interpretation along these lines amounts to “pure speculation.”¹¹⁸ Vattrodt was aware of these differing interpretations.¹¹⁹ The screenplay describes Lange as someone skilled at improvisation but new to political meetings.¹²⁰ In the film, Lange partially functions as an audience stand-in, like the secretary in *The Wannsee Conference*. Schöngarth explains how a high-level meeting functions and, while standing on the patio with him, points out different attendees through the window, introducing both Lange and the audience to civilian and occupation authorities present at Wannsee. The

115 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 67–68.

116 Angrick and Klein, *The Final Solution in Riga*, 260–262.

117 Peter Klein, “Rudolf Lange, Reich Main Security Office: Academic, Ideological Warrior and Mass Murderer” in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 95–110, 100.

118 Longerich, *Wannsee*, 55–56.

119 Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” 40–41.

120 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” unnumbered page 3 of script front matter.

camera even shows us these figures in a shot from Lange's point of view (this is also described as such in the script; see Figure 8.8).¹²¹



Figure 8.8: Wilhelm Stuckart (Godehard Giese) from Rudolf Lange's point-of-view. *Die Wannseekonferenz*. Constantin Television, Zweites deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, 2022.

This is the first explicit instance in any of the three scripts where we know that in this scene, the camera eye is meant to represent the view of a Nazi perpetrator, thereby making the audience complicit. Through Lange, the audience also learns a bit more about the villa's function as RSHA guesthouse – he has a room here, and later, Eichmann tells the attendees how much an overnight stay at the villa costs.¹²²

As in *The Wannsee Conference*, Heydrich calls Eichmann, Luther, and Lange into a side room to discuss strategy for the meeting. In this film, Lange also shows Heydrich the map of *Einsatzgruppen* killings, but compared to the previous film, he is shyer, a bit unsure of himself, not stumbling around or shouting. Here, they discuss gas vans and the problems with disposing of bodies and Müller alludes to the upcoming *Aktion 1005*, devoted to exhuming mass graves and burning all bodies and other forms of evidence.¹²³ Although speculative, this scene contains a veiled reference to *Conspiracy*, with Lange and Heydrich saying that the civilian attendees are on a need-to-know basis, a “question of dosage [*eine Frage der Dos-*

¹²¹ Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 8.

¹²² For more on the Wannsee villa's role as a guesthouse, see Tuchel, *Am Grossen Wannsee* 56–58, 105.

¹²³ Angrick, »*Aktion 1005*«.

ierung].” This alludes to a line in *Conspiracy* where Eichmann refers to issues with sterilization as “a problem of dosage.” Additionally, *The Conference* references *Conspiracy* when, in the abovementioned scene with Kritzinger, Lange’s education becomes a topic of discussion. Kritzinger is surprised that Lange knows about Max Liebermann, the Jewish painter whose villa was next door to the Wannsee villa – though here, instead of using Lange’s educational background to discuss language and euphemism, *The Conference* uses it to illustrate the resentment of frontline men like Lange towards bureaucrats back in Berlin. Throughout the rest of the film, Lange and Schöngarth interject whenever someone expresses concern about whether German soldiers and policemen can handle the stress of mass killings, considering their competence and honor insulted. Here is another key difference between *The Conference* and its predecessors. In this film, no one is really concerned about what happens to Jewish people, but about what a psychological burden the killing must be for the German killers. At the end of the day, Schöngarth steals a half-opened bottle of cognac and takes Lange into town, saying that he “know[s] a few quite dignified Berlin establishments where one can relax in the most pleasant manner.” After discussing mass murder for a day, they go for a night out on the town – like it’s any other workday.

The final SS member present in *The Conference* is someone absent from all other filmic, and for that matter, book-length treatments on Wannsee: Ingeburg Werlemann, Eichmann’s secretary. Historians were always unsure about who took the notes at Wannsee which Eichmann later used for the protocol. The 1984 film contains a sexist portrayal of a female secretary who serves more as an audience stand-in and as an ignorant, good-looking blonde for Heydrich to flirt with. *Conspiracy* has a nameless male SD stenographer working for Eichmann’s office. *The Conference* goes further and names this person. In the years immediately preceding production, a historian affiliated with the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Education Center, Marcus Gryglewski, uncovered the sixteenth Wannsee participant’s identity.¹²⁴ Ingeburg Werlemann (played by Lilli Fichtner) was a secretary and Eichmann’s *Referat* IV B 4, and in a 1962 testimony before a Frankfurt Court, Werlemann, the most senior secretary in Eichmann’s *Referat*, claimed to have taken down meeting minutes at a meeting in the RSHA guest house at Wannsee, but that it wasn’t for the January 1942 Wannsee Conference. In 1967, she mentioned that Heydrich had been present, and Gryglewski notes that there is no record of Heydrich having been present at any other meeting taking place at

¹²⁴ Marcus Gryglewski, “NS-Täterin auf der Wannseekonferenz: Eichmanns Sekretärin,” *taz, die tageszeitung*, January 17, 2020, <https://taz.de/!5654203/>.

Wannsee.¹²⁵ The historian Rachel Century has also revealed that Werlemann was a key member of Eichmann's staff, that she "was efficient, and her work was impeccable," that she was one of many women working for the RSHA who "were highly committed and dedicated to their tasks, demonstrating qualities admired by the Nazis."¹²⁶ Werlemann was a committed Nazi Party member, and Century also pointed out her possible attendance at Wannsee but did not make a claim as to whether this was likely or not.¹²⁷ In a final twist to her story, Werlemann, who had married a colleague during the war, spent her postwar life in a life partnership with another woman, further complicating conventional understandings of Nazi women.¹²⁸

In a series of overwhelmingly male films, the inclusion of Werlemann in *The Conference*, which portrays her as complicit and as a figure with agency, is laudable. The film does not relegate her to the status of sex object or audience stand-in. In this respect, *The Conference* complicates conventional, male-only filmic depictions of Nazi perpetrators by also showing that women also participated in genocide from behind their desks, not just as concentration camp guards or as passive bystanders. This depiction is not for the sake of gender representation, but for the sake of depicting history more accurately. Previous depictions of female Nazi perpetrators have usually leaned towards the sensationalist, focusing on female concentration camp guards such as in the pornographic *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*, or the apologist *The Reader*. In this area, *The Conference* joins a handful of smaller productions, most notably *Son of Saul* director László Nemes' short film *With a Little Patience*, in depicting desk murderers who also happen to be women. As Rachel Century concludes in her study, "Each of the female administrators may have been drops in the ocean, but it is the drops themselves that make up the ocean. The Nazis needed these women as administrators and as supporters of the regime. The vast majority of the women knew about the Holocaust, contributed towards its outcome, and took no action to prevent it occurring."¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Gryglewski, "NS-Täterin auf der Wannseekonferenz."

¹²⁶ Rachel Century, *Female Administrators of the Third Reich*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 88.

¹²⁷ Century, *Female Administrators of the Third Reich*, 89, 94.

¹²⁸ Gryglewski, "NS-Täterin auf der Wannseekonferenz." See also the work of Anna Hájková for more on sexuality and the Holocaust: Anna Hájková, *Menschen ohne Geschichte sind Staub: Homophobie und Holocaust*, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021); "Sexuality and the Holocaust," OUPblog, March 11, 2018, <https://blog.oup.com/2018/03/sexuality-holocaust/>.

¹²⁹ Century, *Female Administrators of the Third Reich*, 221.

By including Werleemann, *The Conference* helps bridge what historian Atina Grossmann has dubbed the “gender gap” in Holocaust studies.¹³⁰

Civilian Ministers and *Staatssekretäre*

The Conference largely avoids the dramatic mischaracterizations of Wilhelm Stuckart present in the other two Wannsee docudramas. In keeping with Vattrodt’s emphasis on unanimity, in this film Stuckart (Godehard Giese), while protective of the Nuremberg Laws and the definition of *Mischlinge*, does not vehemently protest genocide and he does not require reining in, as in *Conspiracy*. He is a committed Nazi, but – unlike the RSHA – still sees a need for rules, norms, and the rule of law. The film tensions between the Nazi Party (represented by Gerhard Klopfer) versus the Ministry of the Interior (represented by Stuckart) by having Klopfer (Fabian Busch), after an argument with Stuckart, apologize and say he was merely acting in the interests of the Party and his office and meant nothing personal. *Conspiracy*, for example, makes it seem like the two are bitter enemies who had first met at Wannsee, when historically, the two had known each other since they were students and had worked together on legal publications.¹³¹ The script even describes Klopfer as “a bit between the chairs” because he feels personal loyalty to Stuckart and Kritzinger, but at work, his “official loyalty” is to the SS.¹³² Just like its predecessors, *The Conference* discusses the issue of mixed marriages and the definition of *Mischlinge* at length and lampoons the ridiculousness of the definitions, with attendees like Schöngarth expressing complete exasperation and confusion at the dizzying number of exemptions and terms.

Godehard Giese portrays Stuckart as a sharp legal mind with a gift for persuasion, as well as a sly, confident man convinced of his own political acumen – in sharp contrast to the other two films, which portray him as a master jurist but also as someone a bit uneasy in a room full of SS men. Vattrodt’s script instead describes Stuckart as “mature, smart, and self-assured.”¹³³ Stuckart often has a bemused, catlike expression when others are speaking. Schöngarth even tells Lange that Stuckart is a person to watch out for, someone who will become the Interior Minister one day. Vattrodt’s research notes describe Heydrich and Stuckart as

¹³⁰ Atina Grossmann, “Holocaust Studies in Our Age of Catastrophe,” *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 150–152.

¹³¹ Heckmann, “Gerhard Klopfer,” –190, 193.

¹³² Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 16.

¹³³ Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 12.

“two alpha males facing each other!”, a curious remark that nevertheless bears out in the film, with the two sizing each other up as equals and agreeing to put aside petty differences.¹³⁴ Vattrodt’s character profile describes Stuckart as a dedicated Nazi whose goal was always to provide legal cover for the regime’s racist actions.¹³⁵ In *The Conference*, Stuckart, much like in the other two films, constantly parries attempts to sweep aside legislation in the name of solving the “Jewish Problem” or sweeping bureaucracy aside – one of Heydrich’s constant prerogatives. At one point in the film when Meyer and Leibbrandt argue that distinguishing between *Mischlinge* is too difficult in the occupied East, Stuckart says “We aren’t in the East, but in the German Reich, and laws still apply here.”¹³⁶ *The Conference* succeeds at depicting Stuckart as a competent rival to Heydrich and avoids the problematic aspects of earlier portrayals – though, for example, his holding rank in the SS goes unmentioned. In portraying Stuckart as a man with many personal connections throughout the German government, the film helps underscore the unanimity at Wannsee – which was only disturbed by the question of mixed marriages, which was addressed but never resolved in a series of further inter-ministerial conferences chaired by Eichmann.¹³⁷

The Conference stands out from its predecessors by managing to clearly delineate between civilian ministers based in Berlin and occupational authorities in the General Government and the occupied Baltic, as well as their respective importance for genocidal policy, while still refraining from overly pedagogical narrative devices. Alfred Meyer (Peter Jordan) and Georg Leibbrandt (Rafael Stachowiak) represent the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories while Josef Bühler (Sascha Nathan) represents Hans Frank, head of the General Government in occupied Poland. The film portrays Meyer as a *Gauleiter* with a big ego, wishing to be flattered. A cut scene has Meyer engaging in a bit of public relations work for his *Gau* of North Westphalia, inviting attendees to attend a Wagner festival in Münster.¹³⁸ Meyer is fussy about his seating arrangement, immediately switching places with Bühler to sit closer to Heydrich and put Bühler in his literal and metaphorical place. *The Conference* portrays these two as bureaucrats that the SS wants out of their way. Meyer and Leibbrandt are protective of their territory and are annoyed at the RSHA, particularly Lange, making decisions about Jews without their input. Meyer tends to stick to arrogant pronouncements and shows off his status, while Leibbrandt comes across as a convinced ideologue.

134 Magnus Vattrodt, “Wannseekonferenz – Master Brainstorming File,” 19.

135 Magnus Vattrodt, “Handelnde Personen, ‘Wannseekonferenz’ Materialsammlung,” 65.

136 Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 81.

137 Longerich, *Wannsee*, 89–90.

138 Vattrodt, “*Die Wannseekonferenz*,” First Draft, 21.

The latter speaks at length about the dangers of “Judeo-Bolshevism” and feels that Berlin-based officials are out of touch with the “realities” of life in the occupied East. In this film, it is much more apparent that Heydrich needs to pacify these people to get his way and assume central control of the “Jewish Question.” Without their approval, his plan will fail.

Josef Bühler’s role at Wannsee is much greater in this film. The filmmakers present Bühler as a man who made a “deal” with Himmler and Hitler just before the conference.¹³⁹ This deal ensured that the “Final Solution” would begin in the General Government.¹⁴⁰ Throughout the film, Bühler impatiently insists that the General Government be given priority. He is at the conference with a specific mission (from Hans Frank) and is distrustful of the other attendees, especially Meyer and Schöngarth.¹⁴¹ This is one of the aspects where *The Conference* outshines its predecessors. The motivations and power of those representing the occupied East are much clearer in this film. The political gamesmanship, one-upping each other, and backroom intrigue are of course present in the other films, but *The Conference* succeeds at portraying the colonial nature of German authorities in occupied Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, it is important to note that while “the Holocaust formed one part of a larger, murderous German design,” Nazis considered Jews “as a danger of a unique kind” who were to be eradicated completely, unlike their Polish or Russian subjects. This drive to kill every single Jewish person in Europe “is why the paperwork for the Wannsee Conference listed even tiny Jewish communities in Ireland and Portugal.”¹⁴²

Martin Luther (Simon Schwarz), *Unterstaatssekretär* for the Foreign Office, is mostly portrayed as a confidant of Eichmann’s and as one of those opportunistic people who would have had a mediocre career in normal times but quickly ascended in the Nazi hierarchy. Vattrodt describes him as an individual with “an exact instinct for power relationships and deeply decided to align himself with winners.”¹⁴³ He is Heydrich’s man on the inside and the film mainly portrays him as such – Stuckart quickly recognizes this and cannot take Luther seriously.¹⁴⁴ As in the other films, Luther mainly serves to report on how willingly Germany’s al-

139 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 49, 91.

140 Ingo Loose, “Josef Bühler, State Secretary for the General Government: A Behind-the-Scenes Perpetrator,” in *The Participants*, ed. Jasch and Kreutzmüller, 1. 157–159.

141 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 12.

142 David Blackbourn, *Germany in the World: A Global History, 1500–2000* (New York, NY: Norton & Company, 2023), 516.

143 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” unnumbered page 5 of script front matter.

144 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 25.

lies will give up their Jewish citizens. In this respect, *The Conference* does not stray too far from standard historiographical depictions of Luther and the Foreign Office stemming from Christopher Browning and Raul Hilberg.¹⁴⁵ The section of the film where Luther reports at length about foreign relations is much shorter than in *The Wannsee Conference* but still occupies about eight minutes of screen time. One key difference is a scene where Luther, Eichmann, Heydrich, and Müller leave the table during Luther's report and meet in the adjacent sunroom, making Luther's closeness to the RSHA even more apparent. In this short scene, the group discusses measures for purging Serbia of its Jewish population, and they decide to take a gas van off of Lange's hands and send it to Serbia.¹⁴⁶ This short scene also recalls David Albahari's novel *Götz and Meyer*, a postmodern autobiographical work which discusses a Serbian historian's descent into madness as he learns and speculates about the two men, Götz and Meyer, who drove the gas van which killed his entire family.¹⁴⁷

Erich Neumann (Matthias Bundschuh) of the Office of the Four-Year Plan and Roland Freisler (Arnd Klawitter) of the Ministry of Justice have more muted roles in *The Conference*, which is not that different from earlier portrayals. They mostly exist in the film to ask questions to or for clarification from more important characters. Neumann speaks a few times to plea for Jewish armaments workers and other labor-related issues, but otherwise remains a minor figure in this film outside of references to the war effort and his superior, Hermann Göring. Freisler is a fanatical Nazi here, but only shows shades of what he would later become as the chair of the *Volksgerichtshof*, where he became infamous for his fanaticism and shrill tirades. Like Neumann's role in *Conspiracy*, Freisler uses the conference mainly as a networking opportunity, even asking Meyer to help him get a personal audience with Hitler, since he has yet to meet him. Meyer of course politely lies to him and promises to do so.¹⁴⁸ He also pipes up one more time to defend Heydrich against Stuckart, ostensibly in the neutral interests of the Ministry of Justice, but Stuckart sees through this charade. The script notes that Stuckart "considers Freisler an opportunistic idiot."¹⁴⁹

Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger (Thomas Loibl) of the Reich Chancellery is the most hesitant out of all the participants in this film – in keeping with his postwar regret – but is neither the doddering old man of *The Wannsee Conference* nor the reluctant stickler with moral qualms of *Conspiracy*. Here, he is a representative

145 See Christopher R. Browning, *Final Solution and the German Foreign Office*.

146 Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung," 75–76.

147 David Albahari, *Götz and Meyer* (San Diego: Harcourt, 2006).

148 Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung," 64.

149 Vattrodt, "Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung," 77, 81.

of the old Prussian bureaucracy but nevertheless recognizes that his time has passed and that the war requires new approaches.¹⁵⁰ Unique to all filmic depictions of Wannsee, Kritzinger emphasizes the importance of World War I to German decision-making and considerations about the psychological well-being of German perpetrators. Unlike Kritzinger in the previous two films, this version only expresses concern for the Germans, not their victims. Like in the previous two films, he annoys Heydrich with seemingly pedantic questions, but his moral scruples are not as prominent here. He instead has problems with “irregularities” like the transport of Berlin Jews mistakenly sent to Riga in November 1941 or the issue of Jewish World War I veterans. In a key scene, Werlemann offers to bring him a coffee, and he sharply rebukes her while looking at a pile of documents including the *Einsatzgruppen* report and map which Lange had previously shown Heydrich.¹⁵¹ As the rest of the attendees gather in the foyer, Kritzinger remains behind, studying the evidence. After Eichmann’s orderly brings Kritzinger into the foyer, Kritzinger asks the other attendees if they have thought about just how they will accomplish the “Final Solution,” based on the numbers he has just read about, as well as other *Einsatzgruppen* reports circulating in the past several weeks. He expresses reservations, but before he can finish, Schöngarth interrupts him, accusing him of “humanitarian stupidity (*Humanitätsduselei*).” Kritzinger continues, and then, to the surprise of all present – as well as the viewer – says that that aspect is not what bothers him:

KRITZINGER

Please, gentlemen. I’m not worried about the Jews. I, too, know that the history of the Jewish race is coming to an end. My worry is exclusively about our men and the mental burden which the Final Solution represents for them
For a moment, there is a surprised silence.

KLOPFER

You mean – for the Wehrmacht, SS, and Order Police?

KRITZINGER

We are speaking here about young, not fully matured people. We were also these people! And these – experiences – during the special actions, like in Kiev – over 33 thousand, corpses piled into mountains – something like that inevitably leads to – roughness. Sadism. To mental illnesses and alcoholism.

150 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 8A.

151 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 92.

LANGE

At least for my men, I can say that we understand our craft. We shoot with a fixed bayonet from behind, kneeling, there are barely any misses – you can imagine throughout organized processes . . .

KRITZINGER

That may very well be the case – but we want these men to return to us as healthy German men, as husbands of German wives, fathers of German children.¹⁵²

This section continues, and Eichmann reveals that the SS have found a way to prevent this problem: gas chambers. Kritzinger continues, saying that as a First World War veteran, he finds the idea frightening, but that it is a “great relief” because it “spares us the bloodbaths of mass shootings.” In this scene, Eichmann reports at length about gassing victims using carbon monoxide in the General Government at the extermination camps Belżec and Chełmno, as well as new experiments with Zyklon B in Auschwitz. Based on the Wannsee protocol, historians are still unsure as to what extent killing methods were discussed at Wannsee, even though Eichmann later testified that they addressed it explicitly and in very unadorned language. Nevertheless, it is likely inevitable that a film depicting Wannsee will show participants talking in detail about places like Auschwitz and Treblinka – places the audience is well aware of. Otherwise, the audience may not comprehend exactly what the point of the meeting or film was. In this sense, the filmmakers are clearly following the historiographical trend represented by Mark Roseman, Peter Klein, and Norbert Kampe – who all follow consensus and argue that killing methods were discussed in detail. Other, more skeptical historians like Peter Longerich, are less sure and argue instead that Heydrich probably would have avoided being so explicit. This climactic scene is also notable from a filmmaking perspective. Here, Geschonneck best demonstrates his craft. Although the script describes this scene as a “more relaxed group,” the scene has a Brechtian feel, with many participants standing around awkwardly sipping coffee as if they knew the audience were there.¹⁵³

As Eichmann discusses gassing techniques in detail, the camera rapidly cuts to a close-up shot of each participant as they comprehend what this development means. In this interplay between extreme close-up, almost theatrical standing around the room, and Eichmann’s words, the viewer is placed in an uncanny, alienating, and frightening nightmare as it becomes clear that none of these people have problems with what is being discussed. It is here where *The Conference* offers a rejoinder to Christopher Browning’s claim that “[t]he significance of the

152 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 98.

153 Vattrodt, “Die Wannseekonferenz, Gelbe-Seiten Fassung,” 92.

Wannsee Conference is precisely that there was overwhelming consensus and no dissent about the projected murder of 11 million Jews, even if there was one minor squabble about the fate of German half Jews, but one could not make a commercial film about consensus.”¹⁵⁴ In this climatic scene, the filmmakers proved that one can indeed make a film about genocidal consensus and still maintain drama and suspense without losing any potential educational value.

Was it necessary to make a third docudrama about Wannsee? Does *The Conference* tell us anything new? From a public history perspective, it was necessary. First, most German audiences will watch *Conspiracy* dubbed into German. A film about Wannsee shot in the original German is arguably a much better cinematic experience than a dubbed version of *Conspiracy*, which retains most of its power due to Loring Mandel’s dialogue and its performances. *The Conference* is also both a filmic and historiographic improvement over its pathbreaking predecessor, even if that film was its initial inspiration. It refrains from Mommertz’s use of comic relief and “over-pedagogization” while portraying the event with the gravity that it deserves.¹⁵⁵

Yet, claims from the filmmakers and the German press about *The Conference* being vastly superior, historically speaking, to *Conspiracy*, which is supposedly a flashy Hollywood production without substance, are wildly exaggerated. In several instances, the filmmakers certainly borrowed from *Conspiracy*, particularly its “prestige horror” atmosphere.¹⁵⁶ In this sense, *Conspiracy* remains the superior viewing experience and will probably remain more prominent in film history and scholarship, but *The Conference* is an admirable and necessary corrective to its predecessors’ historical flaws. This is no slight on *The Conference*. German writers often ignore the artistic pedigrees of Frank Pierson, Peter Zinner, and Loring Mandel; it should be no surprise that they made an excellent film. *The Conference* differs from its predecessors as well by deemphasizing alcohol consumption at Wannsee. Compared to its two predecessors, it is literally a more sober film. Additionally, it further underscores the importance of the “Final Solution” to the German war effort, breaking with past cultural depictions which often treat the two as separate, unrelated policies.

Lastly, *The Conference* is an important political project in the wake of the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. Prominent AfD politicians have argued against the country’s culture of remembrance and brought Nazi terms back into political discourse, including several which the characters use in

¹⁵⁴ Browning, “When Did They Decide?”

¹⁵⁵ See Interview with Peter Klein, 24:03–26:22.

¹⁵⁶ Hantke, “Horror and the Holocaust.”

The Conference. Their use of these terms is no accident but is clearly meant to remind viewers of the politicians and activists bringing such racist and antisemitic terminology back into mainstream discourse (*Umvolkung*, or “ethnic replacement,” being the most prominent example, today it is used to fearmonger about immigration). In this sense, *The Conference* serves as a warning. However, this political potential is somewhat undercut by the film’s credit sequence, which simply says that 6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. There is no mention of what happened to the Wannsee participants after the war, as in *Conspiracy*. The audience learns about how West German society protected many of these men and how those who survived the war or escaped execution led quiet lives in peace. This aspect of *The Conference* is its biggest missed opportunity. In the filmmakers’ efforts to reduce the narrative to those 90 minutes at Wannsee, they skipped over some of the most important parts of Wannsee’s postwar legacy.

5 Premiere and Reception

The Conference premiered on ZDF’s streaming platform on January 18, 2022 and then aired on linear television on January 24 to fit with the Wannsee Conference’s eightieth anniversary on January 20, 2022. Compared with its 1984 predecessor, *The Conference* enjoyed a massive promotional campaign and ZDF drew attention to its place in the network’s educational mission (*Bildungsauftrag*). The official red-carpet premiere also took place on January 8 with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in attendance.¹⁵⁷ Steinmeier gave a speech at the premiere on the meaning of Wannsee today:

We are about to see an outstandingly good film – one that is also difficult to watch and disturbing. What begins with a sense of unease later becomes shock. That, at least, is how I felt – a feeling of shock that lingers for some time after the credits have rolled and the screen has turned black.

Whoever – as we will do today – steps out of the cinema onto the street afterwards or turns on the TV news at home will notice how, for an irritatingly long moment, one’s own language has taken on an unfamiliar sound. One mistrusts it. It is unsettling to hear that the administrative German spoken in the film employs the same words that are used in the here and now, in the street and on TV.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ “Premiere des ZDF-Films ‘Die Wannseekonferenz’ in Berlin : ZDF Presseportal,” January 18, 2022, <https://presseportal.zdf.de/pressemitteilung/mitteilung/premiere-des-zdf-films-die-wannseekonferenz-in-berlin/seite/11/>.

¹⁵⁸ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, “Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the premiere of the film ‘The Conference’ on January 18, 2022 in Berlin,” Bundespräsidialamt, January 18, 2022,

Steinmeier remains one of the most prominent political figures to speak on any of the Wannsee films. His speech recounts the history of the conference, cites several historians, and ends with a discussion of Hannah Arendt, the banality of evil, and pleas for vigilance:

Ensuring that this never happens again is what every remembrance of the crimes committed by the National Socialist state aims to do. In our democratic state, each individual bears responsibility. This includes civil servants who work in the hierarchical structure of an administration. Let us not be nobody. Let us not abdicate our responsibility. Including the responsibility to say no where the law and our humanity bid us do so.¹⁵⁹

Steinmeier's speech, while well-meaning and true, appears naïve in hindsight considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine a little over a month later. Several writers directly criticized Steinmeier for his use of the phrase "never again" at Holocaust remembrance ceremonies in a manner that seemed hollow in the wake of the war's outbreak, especially considering Steinmeier's reputation in Ukraine as a politician overly friendly towards Russia. These articles unfortunately blame Germany's remembrance culture for its reluctance to send weapons to Ukraine, essentially blaming the country's historical community and grassroots activism for geopolitical and economic decisions.¹⁶⁰

If viewers wanted to learn more about the background to the conference and the fates of the participants, ZDF made a companion documentary available as well as a wide range of digital short-form documentaries from Mirko Drotschmann.¹⁶¹ Additionally, ZDF provided teaching material for educators wishing to show *The Conference* in class.¹⁶² This material is of varying quality, with the documentary exhibiting all of the artistic decisions Geschonneck refrained from: suspenseful music, dramatic edits and close-ups, flashy graphics, and a self-serious narrator. The supplementary educational material is more promising: Around fifty pages in length, the document includes lesson plans, a series of questions

https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2022/01/220118-Filmpremiere-Wannseekonferenz-Englisch.pdf?__blob=publicationFile,1.

159 Frank-Walter Steinmeier, "Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the premiere of the film" *The Conference* 4.

160 Viktor Pinchuk, "Nie Wieder?," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 14, 2022, p. 10; William Noah Glucroft, "Germany's Culture of Remembrance and Its Ukraine Blindspot," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, May 10, 2022, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-culture-remembrance-and-its-ukraine-blindspot>.

161 "Die Wannseekonferenz," accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.zdf.de/filme/die-wannseekonferenz>.

162 "Unterrichtsmaterial zur Wannsee-Konferenz," accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/terra-x/wannsee-konferenz-unterrichtsmaterialien-schule-100.html>.

and possible assignments, and provides context on the Holocaust and the Second World War. Assignments are paired with small clips of the film for students to analyze.¹⁶³

The Conference enjoyed almost universal acclaim in German-speaking countries. *The Conference* received many awards in the German-speaking world, including the 2022 German Television Prizes for best television movie and best screenplay.¹⁶⁴ In stark contrast with the West German reception of *The Wannsee Conference*, the German press usually mentioned the film's depiction of Nazi language, its spartan, cold atmosphere, and praised its acting. Critical pieces tended to focus more on the by now clichéd (and lazy) debate over whether it is morally appropriate to make a film about the Holocaust or, in some cases, lost themselves in overly pedantic questions, with one article expressing outrage that the film premiered on January 24 instead of on January 20.¹⁶⁵ In a review for *Die Zeit*, Peter Kümmel strongly praised *The Conference*, comparing it with Peter Weiss' classic documentary play *The Investigation*, noting that a disturbing similarity in both productions is that the perpetrators laugh a lot. He noted that "[t]here is no cathartic element in *The Conference* . . . we live in the world that they administered . . . television cannot get any better."¹⁶⁶ More critically, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* reviewer Andreas Kilb expressed reservations about the very idea of portraying history on television, arguing that none of the television depictions of Heydrich came close to portraying the real man, both in terms of outward appearance and his voice. Kilb argues that the film distorts history but he does not really provide evidence and instead mentions lines of dialogue which he found unconvincing, then he concludes with a paragraph about how we should "relearn to distrust images in order to comprehend the truth of history."¹⁶⁷ Such a review could have been written in the 1970s about *Holocaust* or in the 1990s

¹⁶³ Ralph Erbar and Niko Lamprecht, "Die Wannsee-Konferenz Unterrichtsmaterialien erarbeitet im Auftrag des Zweiten Deutschen Fernsehens (ZDF) und des Verbandes der Geschichtslehrerinnen und -Lehrer Deutschlands (VGD)," <https://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/terra-x/wannsee-konferenz-unterrichtsmaterialien-schule-100.html>, 2022.

¹⁶⁴ Der Deutsche Fernsehpreis, "Preisträger:innen 2022," *Deutscher Fernsehpreis 2022*, accessed November 9, 2022, https://www.deutscher-fernsehpreis.de/preistraeger_innen/.

¹⁶⁵ Joachim Huber, "Das falsche Datum der 'Wannseekonferenz' im Zweiten," *Der Tagesspiegel Online*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/medien/zdf-wird-zdfchen-das-falsche-datum-der-wannseekonferenz-im-zweiten/27989132.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Peter Kümmel, "Die Wannseekonferenz: Es wird gelacht. Es ist zum Fürchten," *Die Zeit*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/2022/04/die-wannseekonferenz-film-ns-regime>.

¹⁶⁷ Andreas Kilb, "Die Wannseekonferenz' im ZDF: Die Massenmörder bitten zu Tisch," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/die-wannseekonferenz-film-von-matti-geschonneck-im-zdf-17744723.html>.

about *Schindler's List* and tells us nothing new. Arguably, no historical film would pass Kilb's muster, except, predictably, an experimental documentary along the lines of *Shoah*. *Der Spiegel* reviewed *The Conference* alongside the Netflix drama *Munich: The Edge of War*, arguing along similar lines.¹⁶⁸ In general though, the film's critical reception was very positive, even if the German-language press was often overzealous with their praise, sometimes giving the impression that this was the first film about Wannsee – if they acknowledged its predecessors, it was only to claim that this new version was better. Reviews often spoke of the idea to make a film about Wannsee, the lack of music, the focus on language, and the film's overall atmosphere as if Geschonneck invented it instead of following in the footsteps of two other productions. Reviews often mentioned the film's political implications, with Peter Kümmel calling it a warning for the future.¹⁶⁹

After 2016 in the US and the UK and after the resurgence of the German far-right in the wake of the 2015 wave of Syrian refugees, or after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 or the 2023 Israel and Gaza war, filmmakers, writers, and artists have all grappled with the realization that history is not over. Ideologies which liberal consensus believed part of a traumatic yet distant past have re-emerged with unexpected vigor in this era. Television productions like *Years and Years* and *The Conference*, as well as novels like Kunzru's *Red Pill*, serve as warnings to their audiences about the consequences of these ideologies. In 2023, Jonathan Glazer's Auschwitz drama *The Zone of Interest* inspired renewed debate about the appropriateness of depicting Auschwitz on film and on centering perpetrators instead of victims.¹⁷⁰ Similar to the three Wannsee docudramas, *The Zone of Interest* does not depict violence on screen (though, contrary to claims made in negative reviews, Jewish victims are present on screen), but rather through sound and through the words and attitudes of its Nazi protagonists. A seeming family drama about Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel) and his wife Hedwig (Sandra Hüller), *The Zone of Interest* is a deeply unsettling film which focuses on people who have no shred of empathy except for themselves.

One thread of *The Zone of Interest* concerns Höss' transfer to Oranienburg, near Berlin, to take over the Concentration Camps Inspectorate (IKL). One of the

168 Wolfgang Höbel, "Wie sympathisch darf man Massenmörder zeigen?" *Der Spiegel*, January 16, 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/tv/wannseekonferenz-und-muenchen-zdf-und-netflix-widmen-sich-dem-schrecken-der-nazi-herrschaft-a-247893bf-fd29-46c2-b54e-bb4cde533062>

169 Kümmel, "Die Wannseekonferenz."

170 Fatma Aydemir, "The Zone of Interest Is a Portrait of Guilt. No Wonder It Has Divided Opinion in Germany," *The Guardian*, Opinion, March 27, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/mar/27/the-zone-of-interest-guilt-germany-germans-nazis-jonathan-glazer>.

scenes taking place at the IKL depicts a meeting about the deportation of Hungarian Jews, and its aesthetic, its matter-of-fact dialogue, and its chilling atmosphere echo *Conspiracy* and *The Conference* (based on when production took place, it is most likely that Glazer had only seen the earlier two Wannsee docudramas). Loudspeaker announcements mention day-to-day happenings at the base, such as a concert, and Glazer's screenplay notes the conference table's note cards, coffee, and glassware arranged for its participants.¹⁷¹ Höss's adjutant lists the participants and the concentration and extermination camps they represent, and the screenplay describes a map of the vast concentration camp network, which denotes camps with black dots, as "plague-like."¹⁷² Noteworthy is one aspect of the scene which, to German eyes, just depicts a standard feature of German meetings, but in the context of Holocaust cinema, directly references *Conspiracy*: "The men knock the table as an expression of appreciation."¹⁷³ The camera largely remains at the table, oval-shaped like in *Conspiracy*; the men discuss logistics of genocide in a detached manner. The cold lighting, oblique and overhead camera angles, combined with distorted focus (see Figures 8.9 and 8.10) and matter-of-fact, bureaucratic language contribute to the sustained sense of unease throughout Glazer's film.



Figure 8.9: The Oranienburg IKL Conference in *The Zone of Interest*. A24 Films, 2023.

¹⁷¹ Jonathan Glazer, Shooting Script for *The Zone of Interest*, 2023, <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/The-Zone-Of-Interest-Read-The-Screenplay.pdf>, 57.

¹⁷² Glazer, *The Zone of Interest*, 58.

¹⁷³ Glazer, *The Zone of Interest*, 59.



Figure 8.10: Höss (Christian Friedel) conducts a briefing on deporting Hungarian Jews to Death Camps. *The Zone of Interest*. A24 Films, 2023.

On November 25, 2023, members of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), business leaders, and other far-right activists met in a Potsdam villa to discuss plans for the deportation of millions of immigrants and German citizens.¹⁷⁴ After journalists revealed this secret meeting, it quickly became dubbed “Wannsee Conference 2.0.” In January 2024, millions of Germans took to the streets to protest against the AfD. By dubbing the Potsdam meeting “Wannsee 2.0,” Germans were participating in a cultural discourse where Wannsee has long been shorthand for mass murder rubber-stamped by bureaucrats, and the January 2024 protests are just the latest iteration of the Wannsee Conference entering public discourse.¹⁷⁵ Korrektiv, the publication which broke the story about the Potsdam meeting, even wrote and performed a stage adaptation of the meeting, echoing artistic depictions

¹⁷⁴ Maximilian Bornmann, “Geheimplan gegen Deutschland,” *correctiv.org* (blog), January 10, 2024, <https://correctiv.org/aktuelles/neue-rechte/2024/01/10/geheimplan-remigration-vertreibung-afd-rechtsextreme-november-treffen/>.

¹⁷⁵ See “More than 100,000 Protest across Germany over Far-Right AfD’s Mass Deportation Meetings,” *The Guardian*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/21/more-than-100000-protest-across-germany-over-far-right-afds-mass-deportation-meetings>; SPDde, “Kevin Kühnert: Diese Wannseekonferenz 2.0 betrifft uns Alle,” accessed September 2, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/2ZrKmFgcd08>.

of Wannsee. The play discusses the Wannsee Conference and, more concretely, Eichmann's Madagascar Plan, as possible inspirations for the Potsdam meeting.¹⁷⁶

In the post-2016 Western world, the Wannsee Conference occupies an iconic cultural space where it is more than a meeting which happened on January 20, 1942 and which is only relevant to Germans attempting to work through their past. It has long been an international symbol of modern, industrial killing and of the language of cynicism, brutality, and exclusion. It has become shorthand for what our societies are capable of when they abandon all pretenses of democratic pluralism, constitutional procedure, and the rule of law. The television productions discussed in this chapter are one example of a cultural and intellectual reaction to Donald Trump's presidency, Brexit, and the rise of the AfD. They will not be the last.

In several essays on historical memory in Germany, the Jewish writer Max Czollek argues that contemporary Germany's focus on middle class, "normal" resistance figures like Stauffenberg and Sophie Scholl helps perpetuate the myth of the moderate, well-off, educated center as a bulwark against fascism. For Czollek, this idea is both dangerous and historically false because Nazi perpetrators mostly came from exactly this part of society.¹⁷⁷ All three Wannsee films make this same argument – especially when they mention how Wannsee participants lived normal lives after the war. Their cultivated manners, their doctoral titles, their elegant language, their very normality is what made the unthinkable thinkable. As Omer Bartov puts it, studying the Holocaust leads to disturbing implications for our own society: "What they tell us about the bureaucratic state, about lawyers, doctors, soldiers, technocrats, and so forth, is so frightening that we tend to ignore their relevance for our current civilization."¹⁷⁸ Education and normality did not save Germany from Nazism, and Czollek predicts that they will not save Germany in the future – and that mainstream German Holocaust commemoration ignores this aspect of Holocaust perpetrators at its own peril. For him,

The pluralistic Germany of the present is a post-national socialist and post-colonial society. In such a present, normality is not available. Nor do I believe that it would be desirable, certainly not as part of a culture of remembrance. Because a culture of remembrance means setting up society in such a way so that history does not repeat itself. It also means

176 Lolita Lax, Jean Peters, and Kay Voges, *Geheimplan Gegen Deutschland: Das Stück* (Essen: Correctiv, 2024), 30–32. <https://correctiv.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Geheimplan-gegen-Deutschland-Das-Stu%C3%88ck.pdf>

177 Max Czollek, "Erinnerungskultur: «Bürgerliche Mitte bedeutet auch heute meistens eine Legitimierung rechter Diskurse, die als Meinung einer vermeintlich schweigenden Mehrheit beworben wird», " *Die Wochenzeitung*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.woz.ch/b8c8>.

178 Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, 92–93.

that there is a need for spaces of inconsolability in which what should be self-evident applies: it will never be okay again.¹⁷⁹

In the end, this is the fundamental message of all three Wannsee television movies. Educated, normal, and highly ideologically-driven people made this happen and can make it happen again. The films provide no comfort. Echoing Czollek, they provide “spaces of inconsolability.” There is no room for consolation, self-pity, or reconciliation at the end of these films. Only silence by the lake.

179 Max Czollek, “Versöhnungstheater.”

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 – 1 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.

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