

# Follow the leader

Based on a real-life experiment, *The Wave* is a film that shows how easily a society can turn into a dictatorship. Johnny Dee won't get fooled again

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**Johnny Dee**

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The white shirts ... scene from *The Wave*

In the past you had to go to all the trouble of becoming a university student to witness first-hand the sick games psychologists dreamed up in order to demonstrate how predictably shallow human beings could be. Today we can watch the same dastardly social experiments almost every night of the week on our television sets.

From *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here*, which replicates the rival conflict and eventual harmony of the Robber's Cave experiment of 1961 to *Love Island*'s use of false consensus bias all reality TV is based on psychological conflict. Although it's hardly Abu Ghraib, future generations may wonder why we enjoyed watching strangers torture one another so much. Mind violence? We bloody love it.

The infamous Stanford prison experiment in 1971 - which divided students into prison

guards and prisoners in a mock prison and got out of hand when the guards started enjoying it too much - has been used several times by Big Brother. But one infamous psychological test is yet to make it to reality TV. Palo Alto, California high school teacher Ron Jones's 1967 experiment, known as The Third Wave, has quite possibly not made it into a cunning gameshow format because the one time it was attempted it successfully turned an average class of middle-class students into the living embodiment of Hitler youth.

Based on Jones's experiment but poignantly transferred to present-day Germany, a brilliant new movie *Die Welle* (The Wave) serves as a warning of how simple psychological mind tricks can transform disaffected people into fascists. Director Dennis Gansel, whose acclaimed *Before The Fall* was about the nazification of young Germans in the 1930s, felt compelled to make the film for several reasons. He was interested in the fundamental psychology of group pressure and he felt that Germans, especially young Germans, were becoming too blasé about the past.

"I am part of the so-called third generation," he says. "We grew up with grandparents who'd been in the war; my Grandfather always caused family arguments by saying life under Hitler wasn't so bad. Researching the film we sat in on the history lessons of 16- and 17-year-olds. We realised how remote the second world war was to them and how bored they were by it."

The Wave begins with a class grumbling about a project week studying autocracy and the inevitability that it's likely to go over the familiar ground of the Third Reich and Hitler. "The Nazis sucked," one pupil says. "We get it. We can't feel guilty forever."

Faced with such indifference, the teacher - a left-leaning ex-punk who still listens to the Ramones as he drives to work - devises a plan to practically demonstrate the subject to his class. After getting them to agree to take part in a fun experiment he elects himself leader and tells them that for the week ahead they must address him as Mr Wegner and stand up whenever they speak. It begins innocently enough. He teaches them correct posture, how to breathe correctly and to answer questions succinctly; he encourages the stronger students to help the weak and demonstrates unity by getting them to march in time. Rather than rebelling, the class ends the day feeling empowered by the message of "strength through discipline".

Wegner, like the real-life Ron Jones, is excited too and feels as if he's stumbled upon a new method of reaching his students. Next they're giving their movement a name - The Wave - deciding on white shirts as a uniform, inventing a salute that looks a bit like a dance move from a Steps video, designing a logo and - because this is 2008 - uploading a

MySpace page. It's the best fun any of them have ever had at school.

At this point *The Wave* not only starts spreading among people outside of the fictional class but looks like a movement that would appeal to anyone watching it. Articulating a common disillusionment, Marco one of the students complains that there is nothing to rebel against. "Nothing means anything any more," he says. "We all just want to have fun. What our generation lacks is a common goal to unite us."

"That's based on me when I was 17," says Gansel. "I really wanted to be part of something that made a change. My father was always telling me, 'We changed society in Berlin '68.' And I was like, 'Yeah, yeah, fantastic but I want my moment.' This is something I saw a lot of in the teenagers we interviewed. Everybody's looking for something and it's as if there's nothing left for them. The film is exactly that: the danger of what happens when there is nothing to fulfil that desire."

*The Wave* mirrors what happened in California where the group swelled to huge numbers before becoming violent and out of control. Ron Jones's solution was a radical one. He told his disciples that there were organisations like theirs simultaneously springing up throughout America and that they were to gather around a TV in the dining hall where they would see a live broadcast announcing their own presidential candidate. Instead, Jones jarred them to their senses by projecting a film of Nazi atrocities. *The Wave*'s climax is different but similarly extreme, especially for a film that despite its far-fetched premise succeeds in getting natural and believable performances from its cast.

"We had to do it," says Gansel. "A large part of *The Wave* seems very appealing - the togetherness and community. That was the reason for this very hard and harsh ending because we knew it would be very seductive for a young audience. But my point is that if you want to make a movie about seduction, and how dangerous it is, then you have to be seductive as a film-maker."

In Germany, patriotism is rare and in recent times only resurfaced during the 2006 World Cup. "Where I grew up, in Hanover, if you had a German flag in your neighbourhood those people would belong to a new Nazi movement or something like that," remembers Gansel. "This rapidly changed in the summer of 2006; from one day to another there was something like a new courage and people were suddenly proud of Germany which never happened before."

Although the national pride of 2006 has continued and the German flag is no longer seen as the sole preserve of the right-wing, *The Wave* has prompted a national debate about the country's identity and whether or not Nazism could happen again.

"We consider ourselves very liberal right now; our chancellor is a woman and we consider 60 years ago will never happen again on German soil. Everyone speaks like that but I think, and in a lot of discussions I heard it, that people are not so sure any more."

For Ron Jones the aftermath from the account of his experiment being published was a call from religious leader and future mass cyanide poisoner Jim Jones looking for ideas for his Peoples Temple. Indeed it's not hard to imagine a wannabe dictator or cult leader gleaning knowledge from the experiment which is possibly why, until he was persuaded by The Wave's producers, he held on to the rights of his story for over 30 years - including resisting the overtures of TV companies wanting to make reality shows based on it.

Like all great psychological TV shows and movies The Wave makes you think what you would do in the same situation. "Before shooting I was convinced that if it was me I'd be a member of the resistance like Sophie Scholl in the second world war," Gansel says. "Now, I'm not so sure." Go and see it and make up your own mind. Unless, that is, you've got plans on becoming a dictator with a fancy logo and a cool website .

- The Wave is out on Friday

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**Finding:** Morals don't make you smarter than a psychopath without any.

- Enron: The Smartest Guys In The Room

**Finding:** Clever people do as they're told even when they know it's wrong.

- Lost

**Finding:** We fear the unknown more than what we know to be real.

- Lord Of The Flies

**Finding:** Group pressure can be deadly for those caught on the outside.

- The Truman Show

**Finding:** Every single thing you know could be a lie.

- The Sopranos

**Finding:** Structure and discipline help people to do terrible things.

- I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here

**Finding:** Withholding privileges can lead to immature behaviour.



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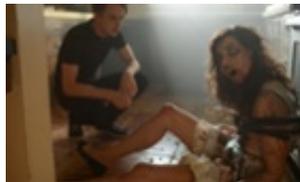
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