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Teaching Dystopia: *The Wave* (1981) A Classroom Experiment

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the 1981 film adaptation, *The Wave*, of a real-life classroom experiment, in which a history teacher and his pupils reenact a totalitarian society, on the model of Nazi Germany. Moreover, the article shows how dystopia can be linked to didactical experiments, while exploring current issues in education studies. In order to explain the manner in which the students and the teacher alike reacted to the newly created setting, I will first attempt to depict current debates on teaching about the Nazi past and explore their meanings. My analysis describes all the stages of the didactical experiment, as portrayed in the film, by using concepts found in social identity theory and education studies, in order to explain how strong situational events created in the classroom can lead to dystopia. Furthermore, in this particular case, education leads to dystopia, as it becomes an innate part of the individuals involved in this classroom experiment.

KEYWORDS

The Wave; Didactic Experiment; Dystopia; Totalitarian Societies; Social Identity Theory.

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We find dystopia everywhere: in movies, books, history, politics and philosophy. We conceive dystopia as an innate part of utopia or see how utopian thinking, put into practice, ignites disasters. Moreover, we use utopian/dystopian thinking to explain our past and anticipate our future, as our outmost fears reside in dystopia. What if we were to find dystopia in a classroom? What if classroom experiments and teaching actually lead to reveal our innate dystopian traits? What if education does not enlighten and turn individuals into better and more tolerant human beings, but actually creates and fuels differences?

Upon engaging with current issues in educational studies, one can find numerous and crucial examples of how class experiments have the tendency to override the initial purpose of the person teaching. In other words, planning an experiment in class will also include measurable and visible results, but this does not mean that, at the end of a lesson, learning outcomes will coincide with the expected ones. It is not forced to say that this type of reasoning points to how planned activities, like planned societies, can go wrong or work for just one segment of a society. At the same time, what has puzzled researchers of both utopia and dystopia is a symptomatic relationship between the two terms, as



The opposite of dystopia seems to be utopia, but the converse does not hold.

There is rather a triangle here—a nexus between the perfectly planned and beneficial, the perfectly planned and unjust, and the perfectly unplanned.¹

How can a didactical experiment be linked to dystopia? Probably best fitted for what experiments in didactics really are would be the term “the perfectly unplanned.” A didactic experiment integrates and consolidates the theoretical knowledge of students. Moreover, they aim at allowing students to formulate hypotheses and link these to prior knowledge, extract, select and search (independently) for information and, of course, put everything into practice. This would be a very simple definition of an experiment orchestrated in a classroom. But, as the entire educational process can be an experiment, what seems to be more relevant is the way in which class (didactic) experiments seem to turn into communicative events, as

someone (a teacher) introduces a child (a learner) to certain domain-relevant distinctions and/or categories and attempts to help the child appropriate these distinctions and categories (concepts), and, hence, to potentially transform the learner’s understanding (knowing).²

Again, educational sciences have gradually shifted away from engaging with the process of teaching and learning, in order to focus on learning products that can actually be measured and evaluated. Without further exploring didactic issues, I would like to return to analyzing one of the most famous class (didactic) experiments and the way in which one can better define and understand the emergence of dystopian structures in our society.

The Wave, written by Todd Strasser, under the pen name Morton Rhue, is based on a real experiment, led by a history professor, Ron Jones, at a Palo Alto (California) high school in 1967. The book is a novelization based on the teleplay by Johnny Dawkins. It starts with a debate led by Ben Ross, the history professor, with his pupils on German nationalism and the rise of the Nazi party, led by Adolf Hitler. At first, the young teacher decides to show pictures of post-war disasters (camps, ruins, graves) and the young learners do not seem to grasp history’s catastrophes as something with great potential to unfold anytime. On the other hand, the students tend to dismiss the fact the crimes against humanity have been done without the knowledge of the German population. As the discussion comes close to the end, Professor Ross and his students seem to be unable to come to a conclusion. Most of the students’ arguments refer to how it would be impossible not to see such hideous crimes. It is at this point that Ben Ross decides to place his students, without planning outcomes or reflecting on the process, in a communicative event. On the next day of class, after not being able to answer questions regarding the German people and their apparent lack of knowledge of Nazi crimes, Ross begins his lesson with a motto: “Strength through discipline.” This is the beginning of the experiment and the reconstruction of an empowered and successful micro-society in the history class with the main purpose to reenact dictatorial societies and expose their main instruments.

Strasser’s book is still used in various class activities in schools around the world. The movie focused largely on the characters and explored their relationships. The second feature film inspired by Strasser’s book and Ben Jones’ (the real-life history teacher) account was *Die Welle*, directed by Dennis Gansel. Released in 2008, the film had a German production team and was filmed in



Germany, mainly in Brandenburg and Berlin. Keeping some elements from Strasser's book, *Die Welle* explores, next to the experience of how fragile individuality really is, the potential violent nature of groups with self-proclaimed values. In Germany, the film received mixed reviews, as the director opted to clearly depict the chronology of events through highly powerful images and, at the same time, prepare the termination of the experiment and its violent outcomes.

Before exploring key issues found both in the initial movie and in its novelization, it would be necessary to point out relevant aspects that deal with the nationalistic past of Germany and the current debates. One possible way of interpreting experiments like Jones's would be to understand them as anti-monuments. We are dealing, on the one hand, with clear images of a past but, at the same time, also with the perception of a past, mainly as a communicative event (being reenacted in a classroom). Similar to this line of arguments, Horst Hoheisel, one of the most celebrated German artists, decided to project the entry gate to Auschwitz on the Brandenburger Tor in Berlin on the Memorial Day for the Victims of National socialism (1997). Moreover, Hoheisel reinterpreted a fountain in the Kassel city center, the Aschrottbrunnen. Built at the beginning of the 20th century by a Jewish industrialist, the fountain was completely destroyed by the new political order of the 1930s and the 1940s in Germany. Hoheisel rebuilt the fountain, as found in the original building plans, but put it into the ground and reversed it, hence cancelling any uplifting effect. Visitors can only see the bottom of the fountain and, through a glass, also how water flows down the inside of the fountain.³ The artist invites visitors to exactly understand why the fountain is upside down and contemplate on the reasons for its initial destruction. Nevertheless, Hoheisel's work of art is more than an anti-monument,

because Neo-Nazi groups use this place for demonstrations, turning it into a contested place of memory, even *in absentia*, as, through its initial destruction, it ceased to exist.⁴

**Teaching on Nazi Germany:
“Es ist schwer aus einem Ende zu
stammen und der Anfang zu sein“ / “It is
Difficult to Come from the End and be
the Beginning of Something”**

Without being able to describe, at full length, the rise and fall of the Nazi Party in Germany, as this is not the main interest at hand and it exceeds the purpose of my paper (and my main research areas), I would like to focus on how teaching about the period 1933-1945 has met very interesting outcomes, especially in Western Germany. There has been an intense dialogue among researchers in the 1950 and the 1960s on culpability and remembrance (from establishing commemorating sights and how the past should be remembered).⁵ The generation that had the mission to teach on the atrocities of a totalitarian regime was the last generation of warrior-children (Flakhelfer) that had no possibility to properly cure or speak about their traumas. In an attempt to give voice to the Flakhelfer, *Anfang aus dem Ende: Die Flakhelfergeneration*,⁶ a documentary directed by Aleida Assmann, reframes and narrates personal histories of those 15, 16 and even 14 year-old children, drafted for the sole purpose to insure the maintenance and, later, to even use the FLAK (German antiaircraft artillery). Returning from the war, either after being captured or fleeing, in the last days of the war, this generation did not have the chance to publicly speak about their traumas. Some of the people interviewed are well-known scientists and writers belonging



to a generation that has, for instance, established the University in Konstanz, Germany, and influenced German culture in numerous ways. The voices found in the documentary depict, chronologically, their drafting, their involvement in combat and their manipulation at the hands of the leading party. Moreover, as the documentary unfolds, the viewer faces witnesses that have never narrated, prior to their interviews, the events of 1944-1945 (the mobilization years of the young Flakhelfer). It is at this point that the teacher becomes the main content of his or her lesson. On going beyond the trauma of war, on both sides – winners and losers – the teachings are left to those who, coming from the end, need to be the beginning of something. What strikes the viewer, in Aleida Assmann's documentary, is the ultimate questioning of how one, with all good intentions, could have caused so much tragedy and evil. How can dystopia be staged through a mere planned lesson? My intent, in describing Assmann's documentary, was to reveal a small part of what is being done in classrooms around the world. *The Wave* and its first TV version expose some of the most relevant mechanisms of building micro-societies, while Die Flakhelfer reinterprets memory and confers it a rather mobile status, as it searches especially for what has been forgotten.⁷ The didactic experiment, conducted in the US and not on German soil, showcases the mechanisms that trigger individuals to build elements of a totalitarian micro-state. Hence, I would like to focus exactly on how the class reacted to a newly established environment, in which individuality and self-determination are to be voluntarily abandoned.

Discipline and Power / Rules and Rituals

The debut of Ross's experiment, as depicted in the movie, is marked by the motto "Strength through discipline." Moreover, the teacher initiates a highly important ritual to converse and reinterpret the role of his pupils in the classroom. He asks his class to practice a proper sitting position: hands stretched on the desk, knees bent at ninety degrees, the spine in a perfect upright position, chin tucked in and head up. As the class loser, Robert Billings, is the first to get the teacher's appraisal, the entire class imitates this sitting position. After practicing the proper position, the pupils are asked to stand up, walk around the room and, when given a sign, they have to resume their seat, but also the proper sitting position, as previously assumed. Next, the ritual linked to the motto of the class, is being reinforced with rules of discipline and order: first, all pupils will have pen and paper, secondly, all pupils, when asked a question, will stand up at the side of their desk and answer the question and last, all answers must begin with "Mr. Ross." As questions on the lesson begin, the pupils practice a unified pattern of answering: addressing the teacher first and keeping their answer short and concise:

Ben was perspiring as he shouted each question out and another student rose sharply beside his or her desk to shout back a terse reply.

Peter, who proposed the Lend-Lease Act?

Mr. Ross, Roosevelt.

Right. Eric, who died in the death camps?

Mr. Ross, the Jews.

Anyone else, Brad?

Mr. Ross, gypsies, homosexuals, and the feeble-minded.⁸



Rules, in a didactical framework, can only operate when they are a product of the entire learning group, including the teacher. They need to be transparent, as the followers of these rules need to be informed about the function and sense of implementing such rules. Moreover, a rule proposed to a class must necessarily contain the sanctions for those disobeying. On the other hand, rituals in a classroom induce a sense of the group's identity. Rituals, through their symbolic and repetitive status are unique and easily identifiable for the entire group, but not to other groups. In order to better understand the difference between rules and rituals in classrooms, I would like to give two practical examples. A good example for a rule is that students first address a question to the entire class and only if there is no answer is the teacher allowed to speak and give an answer. A ritual would be the one some of us experienced in kindergarten: the morning circle. At the beginning of the day, children sit on the ground in a circle and speak about the past day.⁹ Rules and rituals represent, in this particular context, the culture of a classroom, as they properly set up the learning environment and create a group's identity.

What were the consequences of Ross's introduction of rules and rituals in his class? We are dealing, on the one hand, with a redefinition of personal identity, in a social and psychological manner. Being in a classroom, the personal identity of the student/pupil is asserted through his belonging to a group, hence, to a community. The personal identity of the pupils in Ross's history class evolves rapidly into a shared and commune (social) identity:

by living in a context, following certain rules, using a certain language, adopting norms established by the communities to which he or she belongs to, the social actor will act and react following

a certain code, assessing people and situations by applying already known models of assessing and action. Socialization and the adjacent learning process bear the mark of a normative reality.¹⁰

The first step Ross took in establishing a classroom culture was the introduction of a set of rules and rituals that actually enabled his pupils to act and react in a rather precise context, limited their actions, without questioning or even knowing the purpose of these rituals and rules. Moreover, disciplined into repeatedly answering questions, all students adapted to a new social context.

Sense of Community/ Symbols of Ideology, Identity and Being Different

Despite being overwhelmed by the obedience and efficiency of his students, Ben Ross decides to put an end to his experiment the next day. Being late, he finds his class not in mayhem, but in the sitting position they repeated the day before. Hence, he decides to add to their first motto the word *community*: "Strength through discipline/ Strength through community." After rehearsing their motto out loud, while standing up next to their desk, Ben Ross shows the symbol of the newly created community: a wave. To the symbol of the wave and the narration of its meaning, Ross adds a new rule: a hand salute (tapping on the left shoulder and bringing the hand in an upright position to the right) and the obligation to greet any Wave member by saying the motto. The film depicts Laurie, as the brightest pupil in class and the one who seems to struggle, in the next stage of the experiment, to understand the Wave, while everyone seems to be totally taken by it.



The next day, the class is filled with symbols of the Wave and new directives are given: there will be members that will supervise other Wave members and their compliance to the rules and, from now on, members of the Wave will have to actively recruit new members. In the real-life experiment, there were three x marked cards handed out, determining the supervisors. However, by the end of the experiment, there were more than three pupils acting as informers.¹¹ These new directives introduce the third motto of the Wave: "Strength through action." All reports on the activities of the members go to Mr. Ross or to any other member. Once this is set into motion, a series of incidents occur at the Gordon High school. In order to expose this new reality, Laurie submits an article to the school paper criticizing the movement. Becoming a target for her ideas, labeled as an enemy, Laurie finds herself brutalized by her own boyfriend, who attempts to convince her to stop speaking her mind about the Wave. After this incident, both Laurie and David visit Professor Ross and ask him to put an end to the Wave. Despite being pressured by the school's principal and his students, Ross decides to put the termination of his project on hold until the next day, as the most valuable and durable lesson still needs to be learned.

The creation of symbols and distinct features that mark a community and set it apart from all others is more than an attempt to reconstruct totalitarian societies in a classroom. Rebellion, being different, experimental teaching, experimenting with drugs, the Sexual Revolution marked the end of the 1960s. It also made room for the emergence of the consumerist society, despite being the era of tremendous violence brought by the Vietnam War. The movie does not depict the story's background, as it was adapted for the screen in 1981. There was no

intention of contextualizing the experiment in the movie, due mostly to the fact that it had to address the present and the experiment's potential to unfold at any given time. Hence, this part of the experiment that builds on the sense of community is linked, in sociological terms, to Henri Tajfel's social identity theory, in short SIT. Tajfel defines social identity as a part of an individual, which derives from his or her attachment to a group and the emotional significance that derives from this attachment.¹² In a broader sense, social identity theories still consider personal identity as a solid and unitary construct, but Tajfel's approach opened the discussion for new ways to analyze identity levels and how these become salient. The content of identity levels, identification and categorizations of the self and others, is subject to change, so do situational events. Moreover, theories that take a closer look at the relationship between social and personal identity suggest that a person cannot "simultaneously countenance more than one identity, seemingly ruling out dual or compound identities."¹³ Identity shifts in strong situational events, hence will override one identity in favor of another, as it is the case in Professor Ross' class.



Entering / Exiting Dystopia

Wave members act for themselves: they spy on each other, convince or force others into joining the Wave and ultimately believe in the Wave. The real question that arises from this is whether dystopia can be initiated through a simple educational experiment. Moreover, did the students believe that what they were doing was good or evil? To answer the last question, one must attempt to explain the educational act and the emergence of dystopia in Jones's real-life experiment.

One first idea that could explain the human behavior depicted both by the movie and by Jones's experiment derives from the term social belonging and group identity. Classrooms (found, in current times, not only in traditional educational settings) are proper places where group identities are formed. Nevertheless, due to extensive researches in neuroscience, individuality and the personal learning abilities and strategies of pupils tend to take center stage. A group's identity seems to take shape when students engage in activities. As stated before, an educational experiment has to have clear learning outcomes, the rules and tasks need to be openly discussed, transparent and assumed and, at the end of such an experiment, the assessment of results has to take place. In the Wave experiment there was nothing planned, because Mr. Ross had no clear vision of the final ends of his experiment. This is why the power of the context and events/actions seems to erase the simple good/evil dichotomy. Moreover, resorting solely to human interaction and assuming the leading figure of the Wave, the history teacher sets into motion, in his pupils and himself, the "character transformations when faced [...] with powerful situational forces."¹⁴ Philip Zimbardo gave an interview on Jones's experiment in 2008

and underlined one very important aspect: as the mind is capable of great creativity, it is also capable of justifying evil. By the time assaults on pupils not willing to enter the Wave occur, Mr. Ross has also become a Guinea pig in this entire experience. The charismatic history teacher is fascinated by the reaction of his pupils and the behavioral changes he believes he has caused and justifies in an argument with his wife, a music teacher at the same high school, that the newly created equality is the key of the experiment.

While I attempted to describe mechanisms that triggered a series of events in the classroom, the figure of the leader undergoes a gradual resetting and reconfiguration. Mr. Ross changes not only his behavior in class – disciplining, recreating hierarchies and giving orders – but also his appearance. Action and interaction in classroom is staged and controlled through the symbols of the Wave, as pupils begin to be instruments of change and seeing themselves as different in comparison to non-Wave members. Moreover, the history teacher engages with his pupils from the position of the leader: Mr. Ross quits his casual look in class and chooses a blue suit and tie. The Wave and its members are all part of something special and next to the establishing of distinctive signs and symbols, the young adults will dress like their leader, in blue shirts and dark blue pants. The history class stops communicative and task-based teaching, as rituals reflect the new religion of the Wave. At the height of the experiment, Mr. Ross promises Laurie and David he will stop the project and asks for their trust. The film does not depict how the history teacher plans his final and most important lesson, but the end of the experiment comes as a shock to all the people involved. On the final day of the experiment, Mr. Ross announces a rally for all



Wave members, in which they will come into contact with all Wave communities

across the country and meet the real Wave leader. As the teacher explains that the Wave is a national movement, Laurie and David protest, which leads to their being banned from attending the class and the rally.

The participants in the Wave rally gather in the school gym and no one who is not a member has access. All entrances and exits are guarded and will be sealed off. Mr. Ross addresses the crowd of young Wave members and announces that they will meet the real leader of their movement. Pointing to a TV set, Mr. Ross explains the national Wave movement that has gripped the entire country. As the TV screen still remains blank, the pupils gathered in the gym realize that there is no leader and speak against Mr. Ross. At this moment the history teacher reveals, on the gigantic movie screen behind the curtain, the figure of Adolf Hitler and his adoring crowds. The young adults are in shock and in tears, as Mr. Ross points out that following blindly a leader destroys any sign of individuality and will make them blind to evil. Difference is not superiority and the images of the Hitler youth, in uniforms and saluting their leader are more than a parallel to the Wave community. The teacher's attempt to explain genocide in World War II has had a totally opposite effect. By reenacting totalitarian societies on a classroom level, Ben Ross (Ron Jones in the real-life experiment) has shown how dystopia is an innate part of communities and humans.

In Lieu of Conclusion

The dystopian qualities of Ross's (Ron Jones's) classroom and experiment reside in the total eradication of a setting. The classroom stops being a classroom, pupils stop being pupils and the school stops being a mere school, as it is engulfed by a society that offers alternative through discipline, power and community. The question remains: an alternative to what? Probably one term that would best describe Ben Jones's real-life experiment would be the term *artifice*. In the introduction to their collective volume, Gordin, Tilley and Prakash point out how utopian/dystopian thinking put into practice depended on a highly specific conjuncture¹⁵ and, hence, turned out to be artificial. *The Wave* is a classroom experiment that makes dystopia an actual state of existence. Pupils do not stage their behavior or play a part and the young history teacher actually believes he has found a way to eradicate difference and competition in class. In this case, dystopia is played out and escaped from, as it turns into an object of contemplation and observation. One last crucial aspect of the Wave and teaching dystopia resides in the idea that education, through its rituals, rules and specific settings, can lead to dystopia and that it is not its lack that causes disasters. The gradual implementation of the experiment was based on creating rites and rituals, inserting distinctive signs and encouraging a certain type of behavior. What did the pupils learn? What did the teacher learn? Why did the Wave silence the participants for three years? Such questions should open up more discussions and not pin down answers, as education seems to hold tools of shaping, reshaping and testing the boundaries of reality, as it becomes a tool of creating intense situational events.



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Notes

¹ Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, Gyan Prakash (eds.), *Utopia/Dystopia: Condition of Historical Possibility*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 2.

² Niklas Pramling, Lisa Pramling Samuelsson (eds.), *Educational Encounters: Nordic Studies in Early Childhood Didactics*, Heidelberg, Springer, 2011, p. 6.

³ Corinna Tomberger gives a significant account of Hoheisel's works and defines the term *Gegendenkmal* (anti-monument). See Corinna Tomberger, *Das Gegendenkmal. Avantgardekunst, Geschichtspolitik und Geschlecht in der bundesdeutschen Erinnerungskultur*, transcript, Bielefeld, 2007, p. 150.

⁴ <http://chgs.umn.edu/museum/memorials/hoheisel/fountain.html>, Center for Holocaust Studies and Genocide studies, University of Minnesota (last access: 1.10. 2015).

⁵ Volkhard Knigge; Norbert Frei (eds.), *Verbrechern erinnern: Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, München, 2002; Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, C.H. Beck, München, 2006.

⁶ <http://anfang-aus-dem-ende.de/> (last access: 1.09.2015).

⁷ Assmann and the film crew chose for the



narration of the final days of war and the escape of these young children to film, in parallel, spaces and places they evoke, while fleeing the front. Most of the descriptions are apocalyptic and tragic, but the filmmakers decided to show the viewer what they really look like at present.

⁸ Todd Strasser, *The Wave*, New York, Dell Publishing, 1981, p. 42.

⁹ On rituals, rules and modern teaching strategies, see Michael Schart, Michale Legutke, *Lehrkompetenz und Unterrichtsgestaltung*, Berlin, Langenscheidt, 2012, p. 100.

¹⁰ Adrian Neculau (ed.), *Viața cotidiană în comunism*, Iași: Polirom, 2004, p. 13: “obișnuit să se miște într-un anumit context, după anumite reguli, utilizând un anumit limbaj, însușindu-și sistemul normativ al organizației sau organizațiilor pe care o/le frecventează, actorul social se deprinde să reacționeze într-un anumit registru, judecând situațiile și oamenii după modelul în

care s-a obișnuit să judece și să acționeze. Socializarea și întregul proces de învățare socială pe care îl parcurge ulterior poartă amprenta realității normative cu care s-a obișnuit.”

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Psp3-dGDGNgk>, *Lesson Plan: The Story of the Third Wave*, documentary, directed by Philipp Jeffery and Philip Carr Neel, 2011 (last access: 15.08.2015)

¹² Tajfel, Henri; Turner, J.C, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior,” in Worchel, Stephen; Austin, William G. (eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Chicago, Nelson Hall, 1979, p. 63.

¹³ Horowitz Cline, Mryanne (ed.), *The New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, New York, Charles Scribner’s & Sons, 2005, p. 1087.

¹⁴ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect. Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, New York, Random House, 2007, p. 7.

¹⁵ Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, Gyan Prakash (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 10.