

Memorandum

To: Dr. Ima Goody, Curriculum Director, Lake Wobegon School District
 From:
 Date: 29 March 2017
 Subject: *Conspiracy's* Historical Veracity and Classroom Use

Commented [LS1]: This is the first full draft of my Dr. Goody Memo after I revised the assignment guidelines (removing some requirements). This draft needs revision, but I must distance myself in time before doing so.

Introduction

In the decision to use *Conspiracy* as the only film in a Holocaust unit, teachers must consider what their goals are. Are they trying to create an emotional connection between the audience and the subject matter? Are they willing to risk misrepresenting the historical record in order to entertain or offer a visual, dramatized interpretation of the past? Because filmmakers engage in significant amounts of invention, largely through creating dialogue, altering timelines and events, creating composite characters, when does that level of invention become misleading? An additional challenge revolving around films about Holocaust perpetrators: does the portrayal appear didactic or the villains seem like caricatures? In the film *Conspiracy*, the director Frank Pierson and the screenwriter, Loring Mandel, avoid misrepresenting the Wannsee Conference (20 January 1942), where the decision to exterminate European Jews was finalized, yet the film's portrayal of the cold-blooded decision-making will make it nearly impossible for students to make an emotional connection to the characters, though they might be repulsed by their behaviors and shocked at the ease with which they discuss murder. In terms of teaching the Holocaust, and making this the only film, consider a different movie that might help students relate to the experience of victims.

Commented [LS2]: In composing this memo, I wrote the Introduction last.

Commented [LS3]: I will have to review this paragraph to see if it fulfills the expectation of outlining the nature of the task and explains criteria. I chose to do so through a series of rhetorical questions, then ended the introduction with my recommendation. Does it work?

Filmmakers' claims to history and creating an "aura" of historical veracity upon release:

The film makes vast claims to historical veracity in its production and how the Press Release shaped announcements about the release date and reviews of *Conspiracy*.

In its production, the captions in the early minutes of the film offer up the historical context and in the last minutes of the film, we learn about the aftermath.¹

In the Press Release from HBO, the filmmakers emphasize, that the one surviving record of the so-called Wannsee Conference "serves as the basis for *Conspiracy*." Also in the Press Release, HBO leaves us with the impression that research was completed by the screenwriter, Loring Mandel, and that the actors researched their roles presumably by reading biographies about their characters and the Holocaust, though this is not made explicit. For example, "Our scriptwriter, Loring Mandel, tried to do a psychological profile of Heydrich, looking for elements of behavior"² References to Mandel's research is also made by the *Los Angeles Times* reporter, David Gritten.³ What is more, the HBO Press Release provided historical information about the Holocaust and the Wannsee Conference specifically. When *Variety* reported on the forthcoming release of the film, the author, Army Archerd, lent historical veracity to the film by pointing out that the film was being premiered at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, before airing on HBO, and that

Commented [LS4]: Before writing this section and the other body parts of the memo, I had read and made notes from all the news stories, etc that I had discovered. That note-making was a type of **pre-writing** – a crucial stage in the process of creating coherent thoughts!

Commented [LS5]: When I originally developed this assignment, I imagined one paragraph per section, but I think my breaks within this section make it more user-friendly for the busy reader.

Commented [LS6]: Probably need to be more specific here and definitely cite the source.

Commented [LS7]: In this paragraph, notice how I corroborate with multiple examples from different sources.

Commented [LS8]: When I cite this in the footnote below, I just offer his first name followed by his last. In the bibliography, you list in alphabetical order by last name.

¹ **Need to cite this. !!!!!**

² HBO Press Release, 5 April 2001, 2-3

³ David Gritten, "When the Job is Odious; To play the Nazi who directs the Final Solution in an HBO film, Kenneth Branagh learned to focus on the importance of the story," 13 May 2001, 5.

"The Museum's historian, Dr. Michael Berenbaum, was a major contributor to the film's factual background."⁴ When reading the numerous news releases (see bibliography of works consulted) that appeared in *The New York Times* (20 May 2001); *Christian Science Monitor* (18 May 2001); *USA Today* (18 May 2001); *Los Angeles Times* (18 May 2001), many more newspapers repeat historical details and claims to historical accuracy that are clearly influenced by the HBO Press Release. Indeed, the wording is so similar to appear plagiarized. Repeatedly pointing out that outside scenes were filmed at the Wannsee Villa was an additional claim to veracity.

Commented [LS9]: Notice that I do not name the authors but tell the reader that they can retrace my work in the bibliography.

By the way, this film was a joint production between HBO and BBC; when the film was aired in Great Britain, they chose the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Wannsee Conference. In the days leading up to the film's release in the British Isles, much lengthier history lessons about Wannsee, the decision to exterminate European Jewry, and the killing methods were offered to reading audiences.⁵

Commented [LS10]: First notice, that there is a more informal tone in this word choice, and that is acceptable if you remain professional. Because the BBC released the film several months later, I felt the need to indicate that they too made claims to historical veracity. Again, one would then retrace my work in the footnote. I do not write extensively on these examples because I believe my evidence is already convincing.

Film's Message or Lessons:

Conspiracy is not the first time that filmmakers sought to re-create the meeting. The first attempt was a German-language production (1984). Yet, the director of *Conspiracy*, Frank Pierson, was attracted to the topic and thought that an American production and release would reach a larger audience. The screenwriter began composing the script in 1996.⁶ One mission that the director and screenwriter had was to tell the story of the origins of the decision for the "final solution" because of its momentous impact. If there was a message or lesson, it is that evil can sometimes originate in the commonplace, "the banality of evil," and perhaps is found in all of us. The filmmakers sought to show how cold-hearted the desk-murderers were by recreating how they imagined the meeting and the dynamics of group interaction. To emphasize how like-minded the conferees were, two civilians at the meeting Wilhelm Stuckart (Colin Firth) and Friedrich Kritzinger (David Threlfall) are portrayed as being opposed to murder though favor mass, forced sterilization. The moral relativism is striking, but their opposition is short-lived by the demands of conformity and threatening tone from Reinhard Heydrich (Kenneth Branagh).⁷ The lesson of the "banality of evil" will be difficult for high school students to understand, and they might not have the emotional maturity to handle the crude joking.

Commented [LS11]: This will be the second time that I cite Gitten, so notice that in the footnote below, I offer a slightly abbreviated version.

Insight about the film's quality from trade or professional reviews:

The film was reviewed in the United States around its premier including the first airing on HBO on 19 May 2001, and reviewed more when released in Great Britain in January 2002.

A negative review was offered by John Koch, *Boston Globe*, who describe the found fault with the moments of levity as "troubling," when Kenneth Branagh playing Reinhard Heydrich jokingly suggests that they quit offering the Nazi salute or never finish the meeting. On a more substantial note, Koch finds fault with the selection of Stanley Tucci as Adolf Eichmann; Tucci is accused of being too emotionally nervous. The film made no impression, and Koch writes, "In trying to evoke the banality of evil, the filmmakers

Commented [LS12]: I still need to cite these film scenes. I also may want to expand my discussion of them. Right now in the writing stage, I'm still obsessed with pondering what I encountered in all the news stories, film reviews, press release, etc...

⁴ Army Archerd, "Just for Variety," 8 May 2001 accessed on 2/7/2017

⁵ For examples, see Christopher Hudson, "Architects of Genocide," *Daily Mail* (London), 19 January 2002, 44; John Macleod, "The monstrous answer to Hitler's 'Jewish question,'" *The Herald* (Glasgow), 21 January 2002, 12; and Robert Harris, "We're still digesting that most murderous lunch," *The Daily Telegraph* (London): 22 January 2002, 21.

⁶ Gitten, "When the Job is Odious," 3.

⁷ Cite these three film scenes.

haplessly succumb to it." Then suggests that the film is as valuable as Cliffs Notes; it tells us about the event but little else.⁸ Koch's critique is understandable. Can something banal be dramatized to capture the audiences' attention? Howard Rosenberg in announcing that the film was to be released offers a short review, referring to the film as "an uncomfortably real, brilliantly understated reprise" of the meeting. Is he being polite and suggesting that the film was too subdued? Hard to say.

The film was reviewed the following spring, April 2002, in the *American Historical Review* by Alan Steinweis, a Holocaust historian. Steinweis notes that creative liberties brought about a dramatic tension that was overstated, that "the degree of disagreement and dissent at the conference, elevat[ed] what were most likely technical concerns into moral objections." He specifically criticizes how Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger (David Threlfall) was portrayed as having opposed extermination. Steinweis' criticism, acknowledged that Hollywood must dramatize, but in doing so misled the audience into believing that Kritzinger was a "moral dissenter."⁹ Still, Steinweis concludes his review on a positive note: the film "does not stray very far from what is factually plausible. The 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."¹⁰ Steinweis shares the concerns that many historians would have. In one British review, the author Robert Hanks described the film as "sharply understated moments ..., undercutting any two-dimensional caricatures of evil Nazis." The example offered is when Heydrich speaks of the beauty of Schubert's quintet in C.¹¹

By the time the *Conspiracy* aired in Great Britain, Branagh had won Best Actor Daytime Emmy Award. The Golden Globes had awarded Loring Mandel with best screenplay and Stanley Tucci for playing Adolf Eichmann.¹²

Overall, the film receives more positive reviews than negative, especially when we take into account the British reception of the film in January 2002. Yet, in showing the film to high school students, they may have less patience to watch a meeting play out on the screen. Perhaps consider showing clips or only a segment to highlight parts of the document.

Conclusion: Evaluation of the film and its use in the curriculum.

This film is a bit dry (or "understated") for high school students. On the assumption that you will only have time to show one film in the unit, it would not be my first choice for a Holocaust film even though it depicts the origins of the decision. As the meeting progresses in the film portrayal, it becomes obvious to the audience that a decision to kill Europe's Jews had been made, and that the goal was to make leading bureaucrats aware of what their contributions would be. We know from the historical accounts that Jews were being systematically killed since late June-early July 1941 by the Einsatzgruppen. At the least, students will need to understand that Wannsee represented a new stage and not a new policy towards Jews. Yet the film leaves the impression that the decision has just been made.

Commented [SLM13]: Do I need to compare the reviews to my own perception of the film in order to substantiate my claims about finding a different film for students to watch?

Commented [SLM14]: In this evaluation, do I need to incorporate more analysis of the film? Or should I build in more film analysis in the section above at the risk of introducing something new.

⁸ John Koch, "HBO's 'Conspiracy' more banal than evil," 19 May 2001, 12.

⁹ Alan E. Steinweis, Review, *American Historical Review* (April 2002): 674.

¹⁰ Steinweis, Review, 675.

¹¹ Robert Hanks, "Television Review," *The Independent* (London), 28 January 2002, 12.

¹² Kathryn Flett, "Review: ... The art of darkness: Kenneth Branagh is at his best ..." *The Observer*, 27 January 2002, 20.

Annotated Bibliography of Historical Sources

The "Final Solution": The Wannsee Conference (January 20, 1942). Jewish Virtual Library. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-wannsee-conference> accessed 29 March 2017

Offers a historical introduction to the Wannsee Protocol and access to the full text.

Commented [LS15]: Annotations should explain how the source will be useful. In this case, just noting that it offers a historical introduction is sufficient; otherwise you might be tempted to list historical facts.

Grimsley, Mark. "The Meeting from Hell: *Conspiracy.*" *World War II* (May/June 2015): 84-85.

Seems to be a regular column in this trade magazine for World War II buffs. It reports on the film uncritically. Unclear why it took so long for the publication of the article, more than a decade after the film was released. It is informative but other sources like the HBO press release more useful.

House of the Wannsee Conference: Memorial and Educational Site. <http://www.ghwk.de/gb> Accessed 29 March 2017

This website offers a number of primary sources from the weeks leading up to the Wannsee Conference including the English translation of the Wannsee Protocol (20 January 1942). In addition to contemporary documents from 1941-1942, testimony of Adolf Eichmann during his trial in 1961 will offer insight into his post-war recollection. Be aware that some of the sources are not translated into English.

Here is an example of testimony excerpts from the Eichmann trial:

http://www.ghwk.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf-wannsee/texte/eichmanns-testimony.pdf

Commented [LS16]: The links to the documents is the advantage of this website over the others. However, the user has to be aware that not all the documentary evidence is translated into English.

Roseman, Mark. "Next on the Agenda: Genocide. Then Drinks." *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 25 January 2002, 20.

Mark Roseman wrote a historical study about the Wannsee Conference, and in this article he offers a short historical summary. What is more, he briefly compares the German movie, *Wannsee Konferenz* directed by Heinz Schirk to the American version.

Roseman, Mark. *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration*. New York: Picador, 2003.

In this monograph, Roseman explains the history of the origins of the decision for the "final solution." He explains that the conference was originally called for early December 1941 and then postponed. He analyzes the euphemistic language of the Wannsee Protocol, and suggests that Reinhard Heydrich achieved two goals: assert police authority at the expense of civilian on the "Jewish question," and Wilhelm Stuckart gave up protecting *Mischlinge* from forced sterilization.

Commented [LS17]: In building this bibliography, I found that the film had two releases, in the U.S. in May 2001, and then January 2002 in Great Britain. So I did make both releases a part of my studies.

Wannsee Conference and the "Final Solution". United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005477> accessed on 29 March 2017

An encyclopedia article that offers a general history of the conference and its significance in the decision for the final solution.

Commented [LS18]: Consulted means that you read the source but you did not cite in the footnotes (i.e. the source did not influence your ideas or it emerged as common knowledge); cite means that you have cited in the memo because you are quoting verbatim or paraphrasing/summarizing ideas.

Bibliography of Works Consulted and Cited to Complete Memo

Archerd, Army. "Just for Variety." *Variety*, 8 May 2001. Online.

Commented [LS19]: Notice that in Bibliographies, you list the items alphabetically by last name.

Commented [LS20]: I need to get this link yet.

BBC Press Release. "Kenneth Branagh, Stanley Tucci and Colin Firth star in *Conspiracy*, an award-winning HBO films/BBC Films coproduction for BBC TWO." Online: http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2002/01_january/15/conspiracy.shtml accessed on 28 March 2017

Commented [LS21]: Include links and date of access.

Billen, Andrew. "Unseemly Entertainment." *New Statesman* 15, 691 (28 January 2002): 45.

Commented [LS22]: This is a weekly magazine, and so includes a number and volume number. While I got this article by searching the library databases, I cited it as a print article because I got the pdf.

Brennan, Patricia. "Down to the Dirty Details: At Wannsee, Approving Hitler's Secret 'Final Solution.'" *The Washington Post*, 13 May 2001, Y-06.

Commented [LS23]: Many newspaper stories online in the early 2000s began in print source, so I retained the print source approach to citing. Follow this example.

Flett, Kathryn. "Review: ... The art of darkness: Kenneth Branagh is at his best ..." *The Observer*, 27 January 2002, 20.

Commented [LS24]: Page number.

Gritten, David. "When the Job is Odious; To play the Nazi who directs the Final Solution in an HBO film, Kenneth Branagh learned to focus on the importance of the story," 13 May 2001, CAL5.

Hanks, Robert. "Television Review," *The Independent* (London), 28 January 2002, 12.

Harris, Robert. "We're still digesting that most murderous lunch," *The Daily Telegraph* (London): 22 January 2002, 21.

HBO Press Release. "Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci Star in HBO Films' *Conspiracy*, Debating May 19." <http://www.timewarner.com/newsroom/press-releases/2001/04/05/kenneth-branagh-and-stanley-tucci-star-in-hbo-films-conspiracy> accessed on 29 March 2017

Commented [LS25]: Before I got ahold of this press release, I had already noticed that many of the news stories about the movie appeared similar; when I read the press release, I realized that this was the origins of the redundancy in the stories.

Hudson, Christopher. "Architects of Genocide," *Daily Mail* (London), 19 January 2002, 44.

Commented [LS26]: The version that I am citing here was online, but I actually wrote the Press Department at HBO for the press release.

Jicha, Tom. "Conspiracy Theory: A Chilling HBO Drama Delves into How 15 Seemingly Civilized Men could have engineered the Holocaust." *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, 19 May 2001, 1D.

Koch, John. "HBO's 'Conspiracy' more banal than evil," 19 May 2001, G-12.

Macleod, John. "The monstrous answer to Hitler's 'Jewish question,'" *The Herald* (Glasgow), 21 January 2002, 12.

Mason, M. S. "Two Penetrating Views of World War II." *Christian Science Monitor* 93, 122 (18 May 2001): 18.

Mills, Nancy. "Hatred on the Agenda in *Conspiracy*, Kenneth Branagh plays the man who initiated the Holocaust." *Daily News* (New York), 13 May 2001, 6.

Rosenberg, Howard. "The Face of Evil and Its Victims." *Los Angeles Times*, 18 May 2001, f-1.

Starrett, Ian. "Branagh's Hardest Role Yet To Portray Pure Nazi Evil." *Belfast News Letter* (Northern Ireland), 24 January 2002, 18-19.

Steinweis, Alan E. "Review. *Conspiracy*. Produced by Nick Gillott; directed by Frank Pierson; screenplay by Loring Mandel. 2001." *American Historical Review* (April 2002): 674-675.

Virtue, Graeme. "The Evil Men Do." *The Sunday Herald* (20 January 2002): 54.

Wavell, Stuart. "Brandy and Cigars and the Final Solution." *Sunday Times* (London), 20 January 2002: features.

In building a bibliography, I consulted three different library research, subscription databases:

1. Academic Search Complete
2. Lexis-Nexis
3. ProQuest

You are expected to search for news stories, reviews, etc in these three. Make use of the tutorials that I have created using this project as an example.

You should not limit yourself to these sources, for example, I also explored Historical Abstracts and "googled" the subject to locate the press release and to look for the original screenplay.