

Johnson, Nicholas K.

"A classroom history lesson is not going to work". HBO's Conspiracy and depicting Holocaust perpetrators on film

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German-American Educational History**



**Tim Zumhof
Nicholas K. Johnson
(eds.)**

Show, Don't Tell

**Education and Historical Representations
on Stage and Screen in Germany and the USA**

Zumhof/Johnson
Show, Don't Tell

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General Editor Jürgen Overhoff

Tim Zumhof
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“A classroom history lesson is not going to work”: HBO’s *Conspiracy* and Depicting Holocaust Perpetrators on Film

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.

Frank Pierson, 1998¹

In 2001, HBO and the BBC aired *Conspiracy*, a dramatization of the infamous Wannsee Conference.² The conference, organized by Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann, took place in Berlin on 20 January 1942 and was intended to bring various strands of the Third Reich government under the leadership of the SS in order to coordinate the so-called Final Solution. The surviving Wannsee Protocol³ stands as one of the most compelling pieces of evidence for the Third Reich’s genocidal intent and is emblematic of the shift from mass shootings in the occupied East to industrial-scale murder.⁴ The conference was not the event where “the decision” about the Holocaust was made, contrary to popular imagination.⁵ *Conspiracy*, written by Loring Mandel and directed by Frank Pierson, is an unusual historical film because it reenacts the Wannsee Conference in real time and is devoid of the clichés prevalent throughout Holocaust films. It also engages

1 Frank Pierson. Letter to Stanley Scheinbaum, 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.

2 This piece is based on my 2016 MA thesis: Nicholas K. Johnson. “HBO and the Holocaust: *Conspiracy*, the Historical Film, and Public History at Wannsee” (Master’s Thesis, Indiana University, Indianapolis, 2016).

3 The protocol is not a verbatim transcript of the meeting, but rather a summary written in a euphemistic, bureaucratic language in order to mask the meeting’s true purpose.

4 Mark Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 106-107.

5 *Conspiracy* is not innocent of spreading 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,” URL: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0266425/taglines> (accessed November 12, 2019). For more on misconceptions reinforced by *Conspiracy*, see Stefanie Rauch. “Understanding the Holocaust through Film: Audience Reception between Preconceptions and Media Effects,” *History & Memory* 30.1 (2018): 151-188.

with historiographical arguments and makes a few of its own. *Conspiracy* is part of a subset of Holocaust films which have an “explicitly educative or consciousness-raising agenda, or which consciously engage with academic historical interpretation of the Holocaust.”⁶ This essay uses the production history of *Conspiracy* as a case study for how filmmakers can make difficult histories accessible to wide audiences. Due to the nature of film distribution, particularly in the digital age, filmmakers can reach much larger audiences than historians or museum curators (with very few exceptions).

Grounded in archival sources from the Loring Mandel Collection such as script drafts, production notes, HBO meeting minutes, and correspondence, this essay analyzes *Conspiracy* on all three levels introduced by Robert Toplin.⁷ In his article “Cinematic History: Where Do We Go From Here?,” Toplin argues that most historians only engage with individual films as texts; that is, they watch the film and then write about it. Some historians go further and will touch on a film’s historical context and the background of its creators. However, Toplin’s third level of analysis is much rarer and guides my own research into *Conspiracy*:

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.⁸

6 Barry Langford. “Mass Culture/Mass Media/Mass Death: Teaching Film, Television, and the Holocaust.” in *Teaching Holocaust Literature and Film*, ed. by Robert Eaglestone and Barry Langford (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). 64.

7 The Loring Mandel Collection at the Wisconsin Center for Theater and Film Research mostly contains Mandel’s personal files spanning his entire career in radio, film, and television. The section devoted to *Conspiracy* contains correspondence, his own personal notes, scans of primary and secondary sources, and script drafts. The bulk of these script drafts are for *Conspiracy*, but the collection also includes multiple drafts for *Complicity* as well as drafts that combine both films into a three-hour epic. Some drafts are fresh printouts from Mandel’s word processor, others contain copious handwritten notes and emendations. Almost all drafts contain footnotes and bibliographies – with the exception of the shooting scripts.

8 See Robert Brent Toplin. “Cinematic History: Where Do We Go From Here?,” *The Public Historian* 25.3 (2003): 86-87. – In this piece, Toplin categorizes three levels of historical film analysis: 1. A film as a primary source. 2. The film’s historical context, background, and reception. 3. A production history of the film in question, based on archival research (scripts, memos, correspondence) and interviews.

Furthermore, my focus on the Loring Mandel collection and the *Conspiracy* screenplay furthers Bruno Ramirez's argument for the screenwriting process as the most important step in creating historical films.⁹ It is through the script archive that one can see how *Conspiracy* was conceived, its source base, what sorts of historiographical arguments it referred and responded to, and how the film serves as an example of responsibly "doing history" in a way that largely – no film, book, or exhibit is flawless – fulfills the goals of public history. One of the advantages of this approach is that it allows us to see what the filmmakers' intent was, what their particular viewpoint on history was, and how they conducted research and factchecking. It is one thing for a historian to view a historical drama and speculate about what the filmmakers meant to say. It is quite another to have documentary evidence of intent, bibliographies about the depicted historical events, and detailed examples of primary sources, fact checking, and argument between the consulted historians and the filmmakers – without the usual spin, simplification, and advertising language bound up in a particular film's promotional material like trailers, press kits, and pre-air interviews.¹⁰ It is important to note that this type of source material is exceedingly rare as scripts usually belong to film studios and correspondence and production memos usually do not survive long enough to make it into archival collections. However, several recent studies have fruitfully utilized screenplay archives.¹¹ Before analyzing this production material, it is important to discuss the particular problems associated with depicting the Holocaust on film.

The Holocaust and Film

How can one explain the "unexplainable?" This is the central challenge for filmmakers depicting the Holocaust. Holocaust films at their best make the crime immediate, unsettle audiences, and go beyond mere costume drama. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has argued that film's range of expressive possibilities exceeds that of the written text, but cautions us about the dangers of misrepresentation and exploitation that can only be amplified by film, a more accessible medium.¹² Other survivors have suggested film as a means of communicating the experience of the Holocaust to future generations. In his memoir, *Literature or Life*, the Buch-

9 See Bruno Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).

10 Note the misleading language in *Conspiracy's* promotional material.

11 Two recent examples are Nicholas Evan Sarantakes. *Making Patton: A Classic War Film's Epic Journey to the Silver Screen* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), and Earl J. Hess and Pratibha A. Dabholkar. *Singin' in the Rain: The Making of an American Masterpiece* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

12 Elie Wiesel. "Foreword," in Anette Insdorf. *Indelible Shadows. Film and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xi.

enwald survivor Jorge Semprún discussed the potential of film for communicating the experience of the camps to the rest of humanity. He recounts one survivor, a professor, discussing how to depict the Holocaust in art:

‘The cinema would seem to be the most appropriate art form,’ he adds. ‘But there certainly won’t be many film documents. And the most significant events of camp life have surely never been filmed.... In any case, the documentary has its limitations, insuperable ones.... A work of fiction, then – but who would dare? The best thing would be to produce a film right now, in the still visible truth of Buchenwald...with death still clearly present. Not a documentary, a work of fiction – I really mean that. It’s unthinkable....’¹³

Others, most notably the French documentarian Claude Lanzmann, famous for *Shoah* (1985), have argued against the fictional representation of the Holocaust. Lanzmann’s most visible critique occurred in 1994, when he argued that *Schindler’s List* was beyond the pale due to “trivializing the Holocaust” and that dramatically portraying the Holocaust was a “betrayal.”¹⁴ Many scholars and commentators associate Lanzmann with a “prohibition on representation” (*Darstellungsverbot*) that places all fictionalized (or re-created) filmic depictions of the Holocaust beyond the acceptable boundaries of appropriateness or taste, as doing so would harm the “uniqueness of the Holocaust.”¹⁵ Some critics have alleged that Lanzmann was engaging in self-promotion by arguing that *his* documentary style was the only acceptable method of portraying the Holocaust.¹⁶ Most studies of the Holocaust and film tend to hold up Lanzmann as advocating an extreme position, vehemently rejecting any attempts at portraying the Holocaust dramatically. However, Lanzmann has recently amended his position, praising the 2015 Hungarian Auschwitz drama *Son of Saul*, as well as by collaborating with Steven Spielberg.¹⁷ In critical literature, Lanzmann has often served as an avatar for one side of what film historian Catrin Corell has identified as a debate between “mimesis and prohibition of images” that has existed since the end of the Second World War.¹⁸ This debate over film echoes Theodor Adorno’s oft-misquoted aphorism “To write a

13 Jorge Semprun. *Literature or Life* (New York: Viking Adult, 1997), 126-127.

14 Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, 259.

15 Waltraud Wende. “Medienbilder und Geschichte – Zur Medialisierung des Holocaust,” in *Geschichte im Film: mediale Inszenierungen des Holocaust und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, ed. by Waltraud Wende (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002), 12-13.

16 Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, 259.

17 Jordan Cronk. “‘Shoah’ Filmmaker Claude Lanzmann Talks Spielberg, ‘Son of Saul,’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2 May 2016, URL: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/shoah-filmmaker-claude-lanzmann-talks-869931> (accessed November 12, 2019).

18 Catrin Corell. *Der Holocaust als Herausforderung für den Film: Formen des filmischen Umgangs mit der Shoah seit 1945: eine Wirkungstypologie* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), 15.

poem after Auschwitz is barbaric.”¹⁹ Historian Waltraud Wende has characterized both Wiesel and Lanzmann as embodying the “prohibition on representation” school of thought, which is complicated by the fact that Wiesel contributed the foreword to Annette Insdorf’s *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*. Wende however has astutely pointed out that any sort of standard that bans the representation of the Holocaust on film is logically inconsistent unless one advocates banning the depiction of all sorts of historical periods including the American West.²⁰ Other scholars have critiqued Holocaust film from the opposite stance. Aaron Kerner has argued against an “authenticity” fetish on the part of both filmmakers and historians. For Kerner, “authenticity is a red herring” due to the inherently constructed nature of film.²¹ Furthermore, historians’ evaluations and critiques of films based solely on “authenticity” quickly become predictable and of little use for further analysis. The debate is important because it is the context in which *Conspiracy* was produced. The film succeeds in examining the Holocaust from a detached point of view that avoids depicting physical violence in any form. In doing so, it evades controversy by instead drawing attention to how the Holocaust unfolded – from the Nazi point of view. In this way, *Conspiracy* acts as “translator” of history, or an “intermediary between the past and present.”²²

There is an imperative on the part of filmmakers and historians specializing in the Holocaust to make this difficult history accessible and understandable. In a 1994 article for *Die Zeit*, discussing *Schindler’s List*, in which he called for “images instead of footnotes,” the German historian Wolfgang Benz powerfully articulated this imperative:

Documentaries cannot depict the destruction of human beings through fear of death, the perpetrators’ lust for murder, the moral ambivalence in a chaotic time and under existential threat. In order to make what happened comprehensible, the literary and dramatic form is needed.²³

Similarly, Catrin Corell has argued that *Erfahrbarmachung*, or “experienceable-making” is the “central difficulty” of depicting the “unrepresentable” reality

19 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, 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.

20 Wende, “Medienbilder und Geschichte – Zur Medialisierung des Holocaust,” 12, 14.

21 Aaron Kerner. *Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 15.

22 Wende, “Medienbilder und Geschichte - Zur Medialisierung des Holocaust,” 9.

23 Wolfgang Benz. “Wie authentisch muß der Bericht über ein geschichtliches Ereignis sein? Anmerkungen eines Historikers zu „Schindlers Liste“: Bilder statt Fußnoten,” *Die Zeit*, March 4, 1994, URL: <http://www.zeit.de/1994/10/bilder-statt-fussnoten> (accessed November 12, 2019).

of the Holocaust. For her, film is the “central form of the memory of the Holocaust.”²⁴ Annette Insdorf echoes this sentiment – and the arguments of film historians like Robert Rosenstone and Anton Kaes, as well as Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s landmark study *The Presence of the Past* – when she notes that Holocaust films are the primary means by which the public learns about the Holocaust; they make this historical event more accessible.²⁵ It is important to restate here that none of these authors or filmmakers are naïve about the inherent problems associated with film as a commercial enterprise. All of the above-mentioned authors discuss financial concerns and take them seriously. For example, Aaron Kerner notes the difficulties in reconciling the need for commercial breaks in NBC’s 1978 miniseries *Holocaust* with the subject matter, but his argument falters with his claim that all of television is hampered by this intimate connection between production and corporate sponsorship.²⁶ This outdated critique, or stereotype, of television is a common trope among scholars and critics who fundamentally ignore the (initially American, but now global) cultural shift towards difficult, complex dramas on cable (or streaming) networks that rely on subscriptions instead of advertising revenue.²⁷ *Conspiracy* is also a historical artifact, a snapshot of HBO programming during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. HBO continues to produce historical dramas, but has recently shifted towards more blockbuster-style, special effects-driven series.

Television has fundamentally changed the landscape of the historical film. Television is more accessible than theatrical film; its lower budgets also permitted a wider range of possible productions, especially on networks like HBO that do not rely on advertising. The Second World War has been a staple since the early days of television. Dramatic or comedic series like ABC’s *Combat!* or CBS’ *Hogan’s Heroes*²⁸ were popular during the 1960s, and the 1970s saw groundbreaking documentaries like ITV’s *The World at War* and serious dramas like NBC’s *Holocaust*. The West German television landscape saw an upswing in both dramas and documentaries about the Second World War and the Holocaust during the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, television “popularized the task of [coming to terms with the past].”²⁹ With the advent of long-form cable dramas on HBO like *Oz*

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

25 Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, xvii.

26 Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 29.

27 For HBO’s role in the changing television landscape, see *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 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).

28 Known as *Ein Käfig voller Helden* in Germany.

29 Wulf Kansteiner. *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics After Auschwitz* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), 111.

and *The Sopranos* during the 1990s, networks like HBO became able to attract larger audiences. In other words, this new style of cable drama primed audiences for more “difficult” productions, including thought-provoking historical dramas. These are not “TV movies” in the traditional – and sometimes pejorative – sense of the term, which means something inferior to theatrical releases due to lower budgets, network restrictions, and the like.³⁰ Historians have analyzed historical cable television dramas like *Deadwood* and argued for them as works of historical interpretation that can compete or stand alongside traditional, physical public history sites such as museums.³¹ Historian Alison Landsberg has analyzed series like *Mad Men*, *Rome*, and *Deadwood* and dubbed them “historically conscious television dramas,” arguing that long-form television has distinct advantages over theatrical films for depicting history.³² While *Conspiracy* is a 90-minute movie, it also benefits from some of the same factors that give long-form cable drama a distinct advantage over the theatrically-released film.

This focus on accessibility and on making a difficult history comprehensible for international publics that did not experience the Second World War firsthand places trends in Holocaust film directly in line with trends in the public history movement. Public history is similarly invested in making difficult histories accessible to wide audiences. Both Anton Kaes and Annette Insdorf have borrowed a metaphor for film from film theorist Siegfried Kracauer. This metaphor sees film as Athena’s polished shield in the face of Medusa: it allows one to see a “reflection” of pure horror without being destroyed by it (as one would by witnessing it firsthand).³³ Kracauer’s view of the utility and possibility of film in the wake of the Holocaust is well-worth repeating for this study; it articulates Kracauer’s reasoning for confronting the difficult and terrifying past on film. Furthermore, it serves as an important capstone on the discussion of the Holocaust, public history, and 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

30 Emphasizing this difference is especially important when discussing cable and streaming provider-produced productions with Germans, who are often unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the German television landscape compared to Anglophone or other European countries. German television, while publicly funded, often suffers due to an overwhelming amount of formulaic programs geared towards older audiences. So-called “quality TV” is slowly but surely starting to return to the German small screen. See *Babylon Berlin* (2017) and *Hindafing* (2017), to name a few.

31 Andrew Urban. “Review of Legends of Deadwood.” *The Journal of American History* 94.1 (2007): 224-231.

32 Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 61-62.

33 Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, xvii.

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 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?³⁴

In light of high-quality television productions like *Conspiracy*, among others, it is worth reiterating Anton Kaes’ reapplication of Kracauer’s quote to this era: Perseus’ shield is no longer a cinematic canvas. It is a television (or tablet, laptop) screen.³⁵ Films are significant for public historians because they attract large audiences, spawn public debates, especially in the press, and often serve as a “gateway” to history for their audiences. By seeing film as mere entertainment or a purely profit-driven enterprise, historians and educators can miss out on how film can enter into historiographical conversations and ignore how it influences mass audiences. After all, audiences will watch historical films and television series regardless of whether or not they have the historians’ seal of approval. The following sections will now turn to a production history of *Conspiracy* and the archival material mentioned earlier in order to analyze how filmmakers create historical films. Using this material illustrates the film’s conception, writing process, and the work of several historical consultants and advisers. It also permits analysis of *Conspiracy* on all three levels of historical film analysis outlined by Toplin.³⁶

A Production History of *Conspiracy*

Conspiracy dramatizes The Wannsee Conference by recreating it in real time; the conference lasted ninety minutes, so does the film. The plot is grounded in the surviving meeting minutes, but most of the dialogue is invented. *Conspiracy* focuses on how educated men in the prime of their lives met in a charming villa to discuss the logistics of mass murder. The camera rarely leaves the meeting table, and its documentary-style techniques, including eye-level placement and the use of long takes and close-ups, place the audience at the meeting rather than at a more distanced vantage point. Unlike most other Holocaust films, it portrays no victims, it tugs at no heartstrings. The men joke about the effects of gassing Jews to death, they get drunk, they allow petty jealousies and institutional rivalries to

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

35 Anton Kaes. “History and Film: Public Memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination.” *History and Memory* 2.1 (1990): 117.

36 Toplin, “Cinematic History: Where Do We Go From Here?,” 86-87.

surface. Additionally, the film explicitly references the Wannsee Protocol and its constructed nature, ranging from scenes mentioning the Protocol itself to instances of Eichmann ordering his stenographer to stop transcribing the meeting at key moments. One such moment occurs when SS Major Rudolf Lange implores the attendees to drop the veneer of “evacuation,” a euphemism for mass murder.³⁷ There are no heroes in this film for the audience to identify with; there is no uplifting message or happy ending. It is a film utterly devoid of sentimentality. The film portrays key personalities of the Third Reich, most notably those of Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann, but it also explores the power struggles between different institutions. In doing so, the film raises questions about the Wannsee Conference and the Holocaust as well as the dangers and final consequences of far-right politics.

Conspiracy is not the first filmic adaptation of the Wannsee Conference. It follows in the footsteps of a 1984 West German/Austrian film, *Die Wannseekonferenz*, which stood out among a wave of historical television productions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although *Conspiracy* initially began as an idea for an English-language remake of *Die Wannseekonferenz*, the two films are similar on only a surface level. They both reflect historiographical trends during the decades in which they were produced and are attempts to make that historiography and history accessible to wide audiences. In 1984, *Die Wannseekonferenz* premiered on the West German network ARD. Written by the trained-historian-turned-screenwriter Paul Mommertz and directed by Heinz Schirk, *Die Wannseekonferenz* stood out for its uncompromising depiction of Nazi perpetrators from a German point of view. This earlier film is characterized by its astounding level of detail, intricate German dialogue, and recreation of the Wannsee Conference in real time. Although it suffers from the low budgets of West German public television in the early 1980s, the film still holds up today, particularly for German speakers. After a scathing review by the *Der Spiegel* journalist Heinz Höhne, Mommertz responded with a spirited defense of his film.³⁸ In contrast with *Conspiracy*, the earlier film

37 Simone Gigliotti. “Commissioning Mass Murder: Conspiracy and History at the Wannsee Conference,” in *Repicturing the Second World War: Representations in Film and Television*, ed. by Michael Paris (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 129.

38 See Mommertz’s account of the dispute and his bibliography on “Paul Mommertz | Wannseekonferenz,” URL: <http://www.paul-mommertz.de/wannseekonferenz01.html> (accessed August 15, 2019). Heinz Höhne is best known in the Anglophone world for his history of the SS, *The Order of the Death’s Head: The Story of Hitler’s SS*, 1967. Contemporary historians have criticized Höhne for uncritically accepting the statements of former SS members that he had befriended in the course of his research. See Karsten Wilke. *Die “Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit” (HIAG) 1950 - 1990. Veteranen der Waffen-SS in der Bundesrepublik* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2011), 388.

focuses strongly on Hitler’s role in the Holocaust, reflecting the so-called “intentionalist” historiographic trend popular in the 1970s and early 1980s.³⁹

The Director: Frank Pierson

At the behest of Peter Zinner, Austrian exile and later editor of *Conspiracy*, director Frank Pierson first watched *Die Wannseekonferenz* in the mid-1990s and, according to screenwriter Loring Mandel, it “didn’t move [Pierson] to tears, but moved him to anger.” Recreating the Wannsee Conference quickly became a passion project.⁴⁰ That same year, Pierson met with HBO executives Bob Cooper and Michael Fuchs, who agreed to produce an English-language version for “a new generation.” At this time, the project was simply titled *Wannsee*.⁴¹ According to Loring Mandel, Pierson approached him after viewing *Die Wannseekonferenz* and asked him to draft a screenplay for HBO.⁴² Mandel and Pierson had worked together on *Citizen Cohn*, an HBO movie about the McCarthy era. Shortly after signing on to *Wannsee*, Mandel and Pierson became attached to *Complicity*, another historical drama set during WWII. *Complicity* was a pet project of Colin Callender, then head of HBO NYC Productions, which managed the *Wannsee* project. *Complicity* explored Allied indifference towards the fate of European Jewry in the face of overwhelming evidence. Callender decided to combine the two projects into companion films.⁴³ As film and television critic Alan Sepinwall has noted, the 1990s and early 2000s were a time when “If you wanted thoughtful drama for adults, you didn’t go to the multiplex; you went to your living room couch.”⁴⁴ HBO had further invested in original film by forming HBO NYC Productions, a company

39 At the end of *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Kritzinger and Stuckart discuss which pages of *Mein Kampf* argue that Jews should be killed with poison gas. Furthermore, a bust of Hitler lingers in the background of the conference room throughout the film. Note that the debate between “intentionalism” and “functionalism” has largely fallen by the wayside, but during the 1980s and 1990s, it was the subject of fierce debate among historians of the Holocaust and twentieth-century Germany. Most historians today tend to combine a mixture of both viewpoints. For a discussion of intentionalism, see Charles S. Maier. *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988). Chapter 3, “A Holocaust like the Others? Problems of Comparative History.”

40 Alexander Tang. “A Conversation with Loring Mandel.” *The Harvard Crimson*. November 12, 2013, URL: <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/11/12/interview-loringmandel/> (accessed November 12, 2019).

41 Frank Pierson, Letter to Stanley Scheinbaum, 1.

42 Tang, “A Conversation with Loring Mandel.”

43 Pierson, Letter to Stanley Scheinbaum, 1.

44 Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers, and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 7-9, 102.

whose goal was to “[produce] ‘edgier and more diverse’” programming.⁴⁵ HBO NYC Productions produced *Conspiracy* and *Complicity*⁴⁶ during the early stages of the writing process and continued to do so until it eventually merged with HBO Films. HBO Films made a name for itself by producing quality original programming that simultaneously embodied and subverted established genres; it actively sought to be the “auteur studio of the nineties.”⁴⁷ HBO Films sought to “make us nervous” with “fearless” and “provocative” programming by examining controversial issues that traditional broadcast networks actively avoided. According to *The Essential HBO Reader*, a scholarly examination of HBO’s history, HBO’s “most notable” productions “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.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, these productions usually avoid the clichéd uplifting moral lessons and happy endings common to programming on other networks.⁴⁹ Instead, HBO’s historical productions often use history to impart “lessons” to the audience.⁵⁰ *Conspiracy* certainly fits this description and is a typical example of HBO’s output during the turn of the millennium. Additionally, *Conspiracy* was part of a wave of television and film productions during this period produced with the fiftieth anniversary of World War II in mind, including HBO’s miniseries *Band of Brothers*, which also aired in 2001.

In a preface to *Conspiracy*, director Frank Pierson outlined the film’s key features:

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 moments when the subtext is utterly revealed, and much self-protective game-playing. I want, too, to show how,

45 Dana Heller, “Films,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. by Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffery P. Jones (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 42-51. 43.

46 Note that HBO eventually dropped the *Complicity* project, possibly for political reasons. For a detailed discussion of this project’s cancellation, see Nicholas K. Johnson, “HBO and the Holocaust: Conspiracy, the Historical Film, and Public History at Wannsee,” 37-42.

47 Heller, “Films,” 44-45.

48 Heller, “Films,” 46.

49 Heller, “Films,” 46.

50 Heller, “Films,” 50.

in any individual, cruelty and sociopathology can coexist with the sappiest sentimentality.⁵¹

In Pierson’s preface, which functions as a sort of outline of the film and its unproduced sequel, *Complicity*, he touches on several overarching themes. The most prominent is the incongruity of the Wannsee Conference’s purpose with that of its location and manner – a charming lakeside villa where Nazi functionaries, as Mark Roseman has noted, “[spoke] to one another with great politeness, sipping their cognac, [they] really had cleared the way for genocide.”⁵² The sheer banality of what Pierson describes as “a corporate board meeting” does not fit with our preconceived notions of how the Holocaust unfolded and confronts us with our own ideas about what evil truly is. Indeed, the image of the Nazi as the quintessential “desk murderer” (*Schreibtischtäter*) is a trope that the filmmakers were keenly aware of, utilized, and responded to in the film, with Stanley Tucci’s portrayal of Adolf Eichmann being the most notable and important example. An early comment from Pierson on Eichmann’s character argued that Eichmann should fool the audience into underestimating him, because “Heydrich may be the architect, but Eichmann as the carpenter and plasterer is the man who will do it.”⁵³ As evidenced by earlier discussion, and the final film, the filmmakers honed in on this subtext and made it one of the film’s two major historiographical arguments. For them, Wannsee was the moment where Eichmann became a major player, even if he later denied it, and even if other, higher-ranking conference attendees underestimated him. This choice is further revealed by Eichmann’s introductory scenes focusing on a meticulous and ruthless figure obsessed with numbers, especially a scene in which Eichmann instructs butlers to “itemize the costs” for broken china and ensure that the butler who had broken said china pay for all of it.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the film does not only portray the conference participants as “desk murderers.” Eberhard Schöngarth and Rudolf Lange, both highly educated leaders of *Einsatzgruppen*, exemplify what Heydrich dubbed his “fighting administration” (*kämpfende Verwaltung*), those SD functionaries who combined bureau-

51 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.

52 Mark Roseman, *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 107.

53 Loring Mandel and Frank Pierson. “Commented Version of Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft” December 18, 1996, Box 2, Folder 9, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 6.

54 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. 3.

cratic expertise with what the Wannsee Protocol ominously refers to as “practical experience.”⁵⁵ In this respect, the film plays to – and then subverts – preconceived notions about Holocaust perpetrators. The characters in *Conspiracy*, with the exception of the inexplicably obese Gerhard Klopfer, are no “diabolical-psychopathic beasts,” contrary to claims still advanced by historians.⁵⁶

Pierson’s preface also focuses on the rivalries between institutions and individuals within the Nazi state, which counters the stereotypical image of an efficient, top-down bureaucracy carrying out Hitler’s orders to the letter. Later in the preface, Pierson characterizes the conference as “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...”⁵⁷ This characterization of various ministries jockeying for position fits with the *functionalist* historiographical school first made popular in the 1980s and 1990s.

It is important to note that this preface also contains a factually incorrect statement that the filmmakers removed from later script drafts (at the behest of historical advisor Andrea Axelrod and Norbert Kampe, then-director of the Wannsee Conference Memorial): the villa did not belong to a Jewish family, but instead to the industrialist Ernst Malier and later, the fraudulent businessman Friedrich Minoux. As a consequence of his imprisonment and financial difficulties, Minoux sold the villa to an SS front group (*Stiftung Nordhav*), which is how it became SS and SD property.⁵⁸

One key point made by Pierson that sums up the view he and Mandel had of film as history as well as their goal with *Conspiracy* appears in a 1997 letter that he wrote to producer Frank Doelger. The production team had been arguing back and forth over whether to make the historical narrative clearer to the audience, in other words, to spell it out for them. In response, Pierson argued that such tactics would reduce the project to “dry documentary” and that this defeated the purpose of the film.⁵⁹ For Pierson, the audience’s emotional response to the film

55 Mark Roseman. “Appendix A: Translation of the Protocol,” in *The Villa, The Lake, The Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 111.

56 Hans-Christian Jasch and Christoph Kreutzmüller. “Die Teilnehmer: Die Männer der Wannsee-Konferenz”, ed. by Hans-Christian Jasch and Christoph Kreutzmüller (Berlin: Metropol, 2017), 13-14.

57 Pierson, “Preface,” 1.

58 For the history of the Villa itself, see Johannes Tuchel. *Am Grossen Wannsee 56-58: Von der Villa Minoux zum Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1992), and Michael Haupt. *Das Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz: Von der Industriellenvilla zur Gedenkstätte* (Berlin: Haus der Wannseekonferenz, 2009).

59 Frank Pierson. “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.

was paramount: the audience should be “getting angry and it should be emotional.”⁶⁰ Showing a historical event was more important than exposition via voiceover narration: “We are almost always up against the tendency to move the subtext into text – which is the exact opposite of drama.”⁶¹ This tension between the needs of drama and the imparting of historical truths cuts to the heart of the dilemma faced by filmmakers or historians trying to produce historical films. Many ideas that sound good at first, especially to educators and historians, such as an overabundance of expository narration or dialogue that provides background information throughout the film or on-screen text as characters are introduced, can hamper a film’s quality. Pierson’s commitment to showing rather than telling also places *Conspiracy* firmly in the camp of HBO’s “difficult” dramas of the early 2000s like *The Wire* and *Deadwood* – series notorious for eschewing exposition and dropping the viewer in an unfamiliar world and storyline. Furthermore, *Conspiracy* makes villains the main characters – an uncommon practice in 2001. HBO’s *The Sopranos* is a notable example of television succeeding at this, albeit in a much different way than *Conspiracy*. Indeed, Frank Pierson argued that “[t]he one truly different, shocking and original aspect of *Conspiracy* is presenting (in a sense) the Holocaust from the Nazi point of view.”⁶²

Loring Mandel’s Screenplay

Loring Mandel’s first script draft, titled *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee* shows that Mandel spent a large amount of time researching material related to the Wannsee Conference and its participants. The Wannsee Protocol itself is the most important source Mandel consulted, and a few lines of dialogue illustrate that. However, it is important to remember that the Protocol is not a verbatim transcript of the meeting, but a heavily edited summary that depends on bureaucratic euphemisms and evasions in order to get its true meaning across. No participant would actually have spoken like the Protocol. Although the bibliography itself is sparse, the script contains forty-seven footnotes; no small number when one realizes that screenplays are much smaller in both page length and word count compared to a book, with the overwhelming majority of text devoted to dialogue. Most of the footnotes provide context to particular statements made by conference participants or serve to provide evidence for opinions held by certain partic-

60 Pierson, “Pierson to Doelger.”

61 Pierson, “Pierson to Doelger.”

62 Frank Pierson. “Notes for Complicity,” 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. 3.

ipants that are not recorded in the Wannsee Protocol itself. Mandel has referred to this process of including participants' historical opinions in invented dialogue as "informed speculation."⁶³ The historian Simone Gigliotti has written at length on Mandel's use of "informed speculation" as a way to fill in gaps in the narrative that is "not entirely dissimilar from historians investigating Wannsee."⁶⁴ In his book *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*, historian Robert Toplin uses the same term: "fictional scenes offer informed speculation – educated guesses about how the ideas and behavior found expression in those unrecorded settings."⁶⁵ Mandel's "informed speculation" is largely successful, but not without its problems. While the first draft contains many instances of "informed speculation" and points to specific research that Mandel conducted, more rigorous historical research was yet to come; this took place after HBO renewed its agreement to produce *Conspiracy* after previously cancelling both it and *Complicity*.

In April 2000, Mandel re-submitted his second draft of *Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee* to HBO. By this time, HBO had agreed to produce *Conspiracy* and had relegated *Complicity* to the back burner. This version of the script is mostly unchanged from the first draft; it is the version most commented on by historians serving as consultants, HBO executives, and others involved with the production, but it is important to keep in mind that the producers and various historians provided extensive comments on the scripts since the project's beginning. The earliest comments on this script (as evidenced by the archive) indicate that the production team was well-aware of script's potential shortcomings and sought to make a particular historiographical argument. One version of this script, which contains comments in red from an unknown author (presumably Frank Pierson), contains several passages that indicate the production team's intent. One passage emphasizes the need to avoid caricatures of Nazis that could push the film into B-movie camp:

[W]e have to avoid demonizing these people who are so damned by their very presence [at Wannsee]... We have to watch out for overkill; the most interesting thing about the whole conference is the dispassionate rationality of it all.⁶⁶

The second point regarding the "dispassionate rationality" of the Wannsee Conference being its most interesting feature is a theme that the production team hit on repeatedly during the writing process. *Conspiracy* is not a standard WWII or Holocaust film; there is no on-screen violence; no action (outside of Heydrich's as-

63 Gigliotti, "Commissioning Mass Murder," 125.

64 Gigliotti, "Commissioning Mass Murder," 127.

65 Robert Brent Toplin. *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 201.

66 Mandel and Pierson, "Commented Version of Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft." 6.

sassination, which does not appear in the final screenplay) takes place. One of the main hurdles the filmmakers had to overcome was how to make a ninety-minute meeting capture and hold an audience’s attention. For Pierson, one of the goals was to dramatize Arendt’s banality of evil concept itself.⁶⁷

Early comments on the scripts chiefly came from HBO officials like Ani Gasti, Colin Callender, Frank Doelger, and Frank Pierson. The earliest set of available comments (from December 1996, less than one month after the first draft was submitted to HBO), from Colin Callender, then head of HBO NYC Productions (and soon-to-be president of HBO Films), identify *Conspiracy*’s two historiographical arguments: 1) The Wannsee Conference was a way to consolidate Reinhard Heydrich’s power and, by extension, the leadership of the SS in carrying out the so-called Final Solution; and 2) Wannsee was a turning point in the career of Adolf Eichmann.⁶⁸ Callender continues by asking for a more clear explanation of the competition between agencies over the Jewish Question; he emphasizes the fact that there was no clear and “centralized” policy before Wannsee. Callender’s comments follow what Holocaust historians broadly refer to as a “functionalist” interpretation of the Holocaust. Callender also wonders if the rise of Eichmann after Wannsee is Heydrich’s intention and whether this was decided at the conference.⁶⁹ Later versions of the script emphasize Eichmann’s ascent in importance as more of an accident of history – for the filmmakers, his position at the conference placed him in the perfect position to carry out the Final Solution. The final draft also emphasizes Heydrich’s viewing Eichmann as a sort of awkward and sometimes embarrassing, albeit extremely competent, subordinate; Heydrich becomes irritated with or dismisses Eichmann on occasion. For example, there is a brief scene towards the end of the film when Heydrich asks the attendees to “astonish Charles Darwin” by agreeing to provide him and the SS with their utmost support in carrying out mass murder. The final version of the script notes that Heydrich resents Colonel Eberhard Schöngarth’s “deference” toward Eichmann and subsequently “passes over” him when asking for each attendee’s agreement to the decisions made at the meeting.⁷⁰

Later comments by Callender and producer Frank Doelger show that the production team was aware of historical invention and sought to avoid it whenever possible. Early character descriptions provided by Mandel included statements that could not be confirmed historically, the most egregious of which being “I’ve given him some heart” in reference to Major Rudolf Lange, Commander of the

67 Pierson, “Preface,” 1.

68 Colin Callender. “Notes/Wannsee,” December 6, 1996, 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.

69 Callender, “Notes/Wannsee,” 1.

70 Mandel, “*Conspiracy*, by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01.” 96.

SD (Security Service) and SiPo (Security Police) in Riga.⁷¹ Callender and Doelger rejected the “I’ve given him some heart” statement on the grounds that it “suggest[s] a degree of invention that undermines the factual basis of the script.”⁷² This criticism holds up upon viewing the final film; certain characters, most notably Klopfer, are portrayed in ways that are not supported by the historical record. Not all early comments by the producers were sound. In many instances, they desired unnecessary exposition or wanted to tone down coarser language that they felt sounded “contemporary,” including one of Heydrich’s most chilling 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.⁷³

In almost every instance of coarse language or harsh vocabulary that emphasizes the gravity of the issues being discussed, the vulgarity of the participants, or shocks the audience in some way, HBO executives tended to err on the side of caution. However, Mandel and Pierson fought for the inclusion of this type of language and it ultimately remained in the final film. In the instance of harsher language producers found “contemporary,” the decision to leave it in arguably made the film more accessible. Expunging the dialogue of profanity or explicit statements would bowdlerize the film and lend it a *Masterpiece Theater* aesthetic that would do a disservice to the subject matter.

Historical Advisors

Three historians, including a full-time researcher hired by HBO, provided extensive commentary on the script and offered a myriad of suggestions for improving its historical accuracy and historical argument. Michael Berenbaum of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was the film’s credited historical consultant, and the amount of comments he submitted attests to that. However, Andrea Axelrod, credited as the film’s historical advisor, clearly conducted much more research and put forth a much larger effort than has been previously acknowledged in the press or in various publications which reference Berenbaum as if he were the project’s sole historical advisor. The production team also consulted Holocaust

71 Mandel, “Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, 1st Draft.” ii.

72 Colin Callender and Frank Doelger. “Notes Conspiracy - Complicity,” June 28, 1997, 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.

73 Mandel, “*Conspiracy*, by Loring Mandel, with Scene Numbers, 5/19/01.” 59.

historian Christopher Browning, who provided brief comments on an early script draft.⁷⁴

The earliest commentary from a historian came in the form of a letter from Michael Berenbaum in 1998. Berenbaum bluntly opened with: “The script doesn’t make it. The Wannsee Conference is inherently undramatic.” He was more partial to *Complicity* and offered extended commentary on it in this document.⁷⁵ Berenbaum then commented on various things that he thought needed correcting in the *Conspiracy* screenplay. Notably, he emphasized the importance of the age of the respective characters, who were all relatively young men.⁷⁶ By July 2000, Berenbaum was mostly satisfied with the script. However, he advocated several changes in a somewhat rambling document that HBO executives, Frank Pierson, and Loring Mandel were clearly unhappy with. In a few instances, he argued for changes to make the film easier, in his opinion, for the audience to comprehend. However, one of these changes involved removing Heydrich’s following line: “[H]istory will mark us for having 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.”⁷⁷ For Berenbaum, this statement was too much for an audience to handle, and he thought that the reference to Darwin should be removed or contextualized with a scene depicting a private conversation between Heydrich, Müller, and Eichmann referencing “survival of the fittest.”⁷⁸ Needless to say, this “creative comment”⁷⁹ as Pierson put it, did not go over well. In a large internal memo detailing how the production team was responding to comments, criticism, and suggestions from all three historians involved with the project, the producers answered Berenbaum’s suggestion by stating: “The Darwin reference remains in script. Poor practice to assume that the audience is insufficiently educated.”⁸⁰ This

74 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.

75 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.

76 Berenbaum, April 1998 Letter to Frank Doelger, 2.

77 Loring Mandel. “Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee, an Original Drama” April 19, 2000, Box 3, Folder 4, Loring Mandel Papers, 1942-2006, M2006-124, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin. 90.

78 Michael Berenbaum. Letter 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. 1-2.

79 Berenbaum, July 2000 Letter to Frank Doelger, 2. Note inserted and signed by Pierson directly under Berenbaum’s text.

80 Ani Gasti. “Conspiracy: The Meeting at Wannsee - 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. 11.

refusal to assume that their audience would be “insufficiently educated” is one of *Conspiracy’s* strengths. As with other HBO dramas, little is spelled out for the viewer, and much of the plot is conveyed through subtle turns of phrase or facial expressions. In this sense, the film treats its audience like adults. The idea that historians should “dumb down” history for non-specialist audiences in order to make it palatable or inoffensive is one that most history educators and public historians are familiar with. Rather than “dumbing down” complicated histories for wider audiences, public history is partially an exercise in translation – one is able to tell exceedingly complicated histories by employing language appropriate to the audience. In this respect, both historians and filmmakers face similar challenges when writing narratives.

After HBO renewed its commitment to the *Conspiracy* project, it hired Andrea Axelrod to conduct full-time research and fact check Mandel’s script. She provided the most extensive amount of commentary and additional research for *Conspiracy*. The majority of Axelrod’s input took place after April 2000. She was very familiar with the historiography of the Third Reich and the Wannsee Conference. Around a month before shooting commenced, Axelrod provided a document that managed to provide citations for most scenes, lines, or other statements within the script. In total, the document provides almost 170 citations for a script totaling a little over one hundred pages, a much larger figure than the number of footnotes visible in the earlier drafts of the script itself. The citations include sources, comments, questions, and notes if a particular line or scene has no basis in the historical record. Axelrod cites a plethora of sources, the most important of course being the Wannsee Protocol and Eichmann’s trial transcripts, evidence gathered for the Nuremberg Trials, biographies of conference participants, conversations with members of the Wannsee Memorial Museum staff, and works by German and Anglophone historians like Claudia Koonz, Christopher Browning, Raul Hillberg, Günther Deschner, Hans Mommsen, and others.⁸¹ With few exceptions, the cited works are all academic – rather than popular – histories. Axelrod’s efforts show that historical films are not uniformly “entertainment” vehicles that ignore historical “facts.” It is also important to keep in mind that these are internal documents – the audience, including critics, did not have access to them; there was no need for HBO to conduct this level of research and fact-checking if it were just about them being able to slap the boilerplate “this film is based on a true story” phrase onto a title card. It is also hard to argue that making their sources and bibliographies available would have been possible in an era before the Internet’s ubiquity.⁸²

81 Andrea Axelrod. “Sources for September 13, 2000 Script,” September 13, 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.

82 Contrast the early 2000s with our current era, in which screenwriter Craig Mazin (of HBO’s 2019 miniseries *Chernobyl*) listed all of his sources on Twitter, made his screenplays available on

Furthermore, footnoting and fact-checking scripts to this degree is not a standard practice in the film industry.

In an earlier document, Axelrod provided the production team with a script review. In this document, she vastly expanded the number and depth of citations that Mandel himself had provided. She even contacted the German Weather Service to find out if snow blanketed the Wannsee area on 20 January 1942. The script review also confirms that Axelrod collaborated with Gaby M. Oelrichs, then head librarian at the Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannseekonferenz.⁸³ The script review references then-recent developments in historiography, including whether or not the SS had confiscated the Wannsee Villa from a wealthy Jew.⁸⁴ It would be impossible to exhaustively list every aspect of the script that Axelrod found evidence for, but it includes tidbits like whether Heydrich would have shuffled his note cards (yes, he liked to adlib) or to which attendees Stuckart would be likely to complain about the large SS presence at the meeting.⁸⁵ Axelrod cites a range of what was then cutting-edge Holocaust scholarship from both the Anglosphere and Germany, most notably Hans Mommsen’s work on the Civil Service and the Holocaust, which emphasizes a weakened Civil Service that took a backseat to SS domination.⁸⁶ It is important to note that not all of Axelrod’s objections were taken into account, notably one she had to the conflict between Wilhelm Stuckart and Gerhard Klopfer, a conflict which has no basis in reality and instead seems to use the two as avatars of the Civil Service and the Party, respectively, in order to give the audience insight into the tangled rivalries among agencies and power-holders during the Third Reich.⁸⁷ This hypothesis is the only way the film’s heated conflict between Stuckart and Klopfer makes even a bit of sense, as both men not only knew each other, but had collaborated on a journal that dealt with “ethnically based constitution and administration.” In other words, on a project that was clearly grounded in a shared understanding of race.⁸⁸ Although the production team ignored a few of Axelrod’s critiques – most notably the one

his website, and produced a companion podcast in which he discussed exactly which aspects of his scripts were fictionalized and if so, why. See HBO, “Chernobyl,” URL: <https://www.hbo.com/chernobyl> (accessed November 12, 2019) for the scripts and podcast. See <https://twitter.com/clmazin/status/1135766541843066880> for a partial bibliography.

83 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.

84 Axelrod, “Conspiracy: Script Review,” 7.

85 Axelrod, “Conspiracy: Script Review,” 13.

86 Andrea Axelrod, “Overall Issues Part II,” 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. 1.

87 Axelrod, “Overall Issues Part II,” 4.

88 Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*, 90.

about the invented conflict between Klopfer and Stuckart – the majority of her criticisms and suggestions made their way into the final film. A few months after Axelrod wrote this document, *Conspiracy* completed filming in London and Berlin and would air in the US the following spring.

Conclusions

Conspiracy is by no means the only historical film that public historians can find valuable. Nevertheless, it serves as an important case study for “doing history” on film. This article has engaged with *Conspiracy* on all three levels of Toplin’s rubric for film analysis. In contrast to most other explorations of history and film, this study has investigated a film archive in order to see what the filmmakers actually thought; one now has evidence of their intent and how they constructed their historiographical arguments. Although not a replacement for a historical monograph, *Conspiracy* is more than a dramatic movie with the Wannsee Conference as window dressing. The film engages with historiography, argues that the conference represented a turning point in the direction of the Final Solution, challenges the stereotypical image of Adolf Eichmann, and manages to do so in real time. As Mark Roseman has noted, Wannsee is a “kind of keyhole, through which we can glimpse the emerging Final Solution.”⁸⁹ *Conspiracy* views Wannsee in a similar manner, with its “you-are-there” cinematography and reliance on the nuances of language to tell its story. *Conspiracy*, although flawed, serves as an excellent example of the possibilities of historical film and if more filmmakers and historians looked to it for inspiration, the landscape of historical filmmaking would be richer. Until *Son of Saul*, *Conspiracy* was one of the most notable Holocaust dramas utterly devoid of sentimentality and schmaltz, one of the typical charges faced by the genre. *Conspiracy* (and its German predecessor) is unique because it manages to convey the horror and scale of the Holocaust without showing a single violent act. It portrays the “unexplainable” by showing the audience a group of middle-aged and young men meeting over lunch – and it does so without holding the audience’s hand by using title cards (except for the final scene) or exposition. Andrea Axelrod summed up the central tenets of the film in one of her many comments on the script review process:

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

89 Roseman, *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*, 79.

[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: everything 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.⁹⁰

In short, the filmmakers did not seek to create a didactic film in order to simply “teach” the history of the Wannsee Conference to an ignorant, passive audience. If we are to teach or engage with difficult subject matter, it is important that the films we use to do so be just as difficult. Difficult history requires difficult art.

Most importantly, this essay has demonstrated that dramatic film can be a public history and educative method and should be treated as such; films are not mere entertainment or money-making vehicles. Film is one of the most powerful and accessible methods available to historians and should thus be taken seriously as both an art form and as a historical method. Historians need to expand their methodological toolkits to include film analysis, and yes, even filmmaking, if they hope to remain relevant to twenty-first century audiences used to a primarily video-based method of learning. YouTube now hosts excellent historical content that would have been unthinkable a decade ago.⁹¹ Online streaming services like Netflix have bypassed the television broadcast model and use their subscription revenue to create dramas of their own; several critically-acclaimed historical dramas have already premiered online. The future of the historical film – outside of the Hollywood studio system, which has largely retreated into escapist superhero blockbusters and endless sequels – seems bright.

Finally, *Conspiracy* takes ninety minutes to explore a very difficult history in a largely uncompromising fashion. Little is spelled out for the audience, the film requires one’s full attention, much like other HBO fare at the turn of the millenium. The history presented by *Conspiracy* is profoundly unsettling and disturbing. As public historians, it is imperative that we confront difficult pasts and make them known and comprehensible to wider audiences. Whether through German efforts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or recent efforts to explore America’s often-ignored slaveholding past, it is up to historians and yes, filmmakers, to ensure that the

90 Andrea Axelrod, “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.

91 See “The Great War,” URL: <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheGreatWar> (accessed November 12, 2019).

darker aspects of history are not forgotten and replaced with whitewashed, comforting tales often encountered in the public sphere and advocated by the current crop of extreme right-wing movements around the world. If “never again” was the watchword post-1945, films like *Conspiracy*, which illustrate the sheer ordinariness of the people and events that shaped some of the worst crimes in history, serve as valuable warnings from a not-so-distant past about our own “ordinary” time. The past can be unsettling – and our depictions of such pasts should be as well.

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