

Enacting Evil: An Analysis of Cinematic Representations of the Perpetrators of the "Final Solution" in Dramatizations of the Wannsee Conference

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In 2022, Constantin Television Productions released *The Conference*, a German telefilm dramatizing the events of the Wannsee Conference; the film premiered on 18 January 2022, just two days before the 80th anniversary of the historical event. In marketing the film, the production company used the tagline, "When humanity lost the war." This dramatic slogan was featured prominently on the film's poster and in the trailer, to the point that it functioned almost like a subtitle: "The Wannsee Conference: When Humanity Lost the War." Framing the conference as a critical turning point for both the Second World War and for humanity in general reinforces the misconception that the Nazi officials present at this meeting decided to enact the "final solution" that led to the murder of six million Jews. The actual purpose of the Wannsee Conference, as convened by SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich and as organized by SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Adolf Eichmann, revolved around coordination rather than decision-making.¹ The absence of top Nazi leaders like Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, and Heinrich Himmler underscores this fact.² The essential goal of the Wannsee Conference was to coordinate the mass executions that were already taking place in the east (and, more generally, to consolidate all of the assorted efforts to eliminate Europe's Jews) under the SS, specifically, under Heydrich. Heydrich's authorization came from Göring,

¹ "The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference." Museum of Jewish Heritage. November 21, 2017. Video, 0:00:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSNHb6BSzTg>.

² "The Wannsee Conference: Understanding the Origins of the "Final Solution," with Dr. Matthias Hass." HMTTC. January 21, 2021. Video, 0:45:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsUcUPv5hXg>.

who had sent him a letter on 31 July of the previous year, instructing him to bring about a “definitive resolution of the Jewish Question in the German sphere of influence in Europe.”³ The effects of this centralization were swift and catastrophic; in a lecture on the Wannsee Conference, Dr. Mathias Hass noted that, at the time of the conference, 75% of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust were still alive, but by November of the following year, that same 75% would be dead.⁴ Though framing the Wannsee Conference as the moment when the final solution was agreed upon is inaccurate, this inaccuracy does not invalidate the claim that the meeting signified the general horrors of both the Nazi ideology and the ability of the Nazi government to enact a genocide through the coordinated efforts of the different administrative agencies comprising that government.

The misreading of the Wannsee Conference as a decision-making conference highlights the historical challenge of trying to pinpoint when the “final solution” began, though perhaps the more significant challenge posed by the conference relates to comprehension, specifically, trying to comprehend humanity’s potential for evil. Is the conference a symbol of how bureaucracies can be exploited and directed toward the most evil ends imaginable, or is it symbolic of the evils of racial prejudice and the human capacity to hate? Any dramatization of the Wannsee Conference must consider both the representation of the historical event and the representation of the larger thematic and philosophical issues symbolized by the event, though the question of how to balance these components is a creative decision. While factors such as the cinematography, editing, mise en scène, and the overall cinematic narrative contribute heavily to these issues of emphasis/representation, the performances of the actors are another

³ qtd in Hans-Christian Jasch, and Christoph Kreutzmüller. *The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017, 4. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1491086&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁴ HMTTC 2017, 0:41:41.

critical factor. As implied by the subtitle, the overall mood of the 2022 telefilm is bleak, lifeless, and desolate; the performances are subdued and several of the actors adopt and maintain a vacant countenance or a perpetual grimace that prevents their characters from coming across as fully human. Jakob Diehl's portrayal of Heinrich Müller epitomizes this, and the film draws much of its tone from Diehl, who is presented as the first main actor to speak and who appears in frame continuously even when his character is not speaking. Throughout the entire narrative, the actor's expression almost never changes, though his lifelessness goes beyond a cold, bureaucratic detachment and hints at the total lack of empathy that is necessary for "humanity" to "lose the war" (much as Diehl's Müller seems to have lost his humanity). Diehl's performance underscores that any dramatization of the Wannsee Conference will invariably address the question of evil and how actors represent it onscreen, and his portrayal is the foremost example of the restrained and almost sepulchral tone of the 2022 film. This performance style underscores the film's essential emphasis on how evil can manifest itself as a sort of numbness: lack of feeling (in performance) indicates lack of empathy as a key theme for understanding the evils of Nazism.

The Conference's emphasis on lack of empathy, as epitomized by its stark cinematography, its low-key lighting, and, most notably, its cast members' performances, distinguishes this interpretation from its two predecessors: the German telefilm *The Wannsee Conference* (1984) and the HBO telefilm *Conspiracy* (2001).⁵ Each of these two films takes a

⁵ Though it is less stylized than its 2022 successor, the 1984 film provides something of a template for the most recent dramatization, not only in terms of the more grounded performance style but also on a narrative basis. The similarities are so numerous that one could legitimately argue that the 2022 film is a remake of the 1984 film: the sequence of discussions (and arguments) that constitute the conference follow the same general trajectory in the two films (from Heydrich's initial assertion of authority, through the arguments over the situation in the East, and concluding with the impassioned debate over mixed-race Jews and sterilization). Moreover, both films begin with Heydrich meeting privately with Müller, Eichmann, Lange, and Luther (before Luther steps out to give the SS time to confer). *Conspiracy* takes the narrative in a different direction by addressing the mixed-race issue much earlier and by not having Heydrich

unique approach to dramatizing the Wannsee Conference and to exploring the question of evil, and the most noteworthy point of comparison between the two earlier films relates to the portrayal of the main characters. *Conspiracy* presents evil in an almost Shakespearean way (both performatively and thematically) given that the motive behind the evil that we see onscreen is secondary to an innate and malignant villainy that is most obvious in Kenneth Branagh's imperious portrayal of Reinhard Heydrich. Branagh, most known for his Shakespearean roles on stage and on film, embraces both the dominance of a Shakespearean villain and the notion that evil can exist as an essential character trait. Conversely, the earlier film is more subtle in its representation of evil; while Dietrich Mattausch's Heydrich is still the central character, his dominance is framed largely in relation to the hierarchy (i.e., Heydrich as the representative of the SS, and the SS being granted centralized power regarding the Jewish question), and his performance is thus less theatrical and more grounded in a sense of historical context. More generally, only a few of the characters in the 1984 film are given distinct personalities. The colorlessness and interchangeability of the SS officers and the various Nazi officials seems a deliberate way of highlighting the bureaucratic evil of the Nazi power structure.

The earlier film thus underscores an earlier scholarly/philosophical view of the Wannsee Conference as a symbol of the horrors of the Nazi bureaucracy (i.e., how government secretaries could sit at their desks casually signing papers that facilitated the deaths of millions of people).⁶ That view has been challenged by more contemporary historians who feel that the emphasis on "bureaucracy" implies dispassion whereas many of the men who attended the Wannsee

confer privately with anyone until the end of the film (his side conversations with Stuckard and Kritizinger are aimed at threatening them and cowing them into submission to his authority).

⁶ "The Wannsee Conference with Historian Professor Sir Richard Evans." The Association of Jewish Refugees. January 20, 2022. Video, 0:09:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mth7sAomKdl>.

Conference were passionate in their support of the Nazi regime/philosophy and in their hatred of Jews. The British historian Richard Evans is one of many scholars who has objected to the notion of the “impersonal” nature of killing during the Holocaust, stressing instead that the perpetrators of the genocide were deeply invested in the “final solution.”⁷ In emphasizing the individual personalities and highlighting both the educational backgrounds and the zeal of the participants in the conference, *Conspiracy* attempts to emphasize this more contemporary take on the men who attended (and on the evils of the Nazi regime): that most of the men associated with the Nazi Party were enthusiastic perpetrators of Nazi ideology based on their already possessing the racial hatred and nationalism that were the bedrock of Nazism. Still, the stagey, Shakespearean evil that is essential to the acting and the characterization of the perpetrators in *Conspiracy*—most especially, to Branagh’s characterization of Heydrich—ultimately hinders the film’s message. The idea of evil arising gradually and naturally within ordinary people who adopt a perverse worldview is undermined by the link between evil and theatricality, and most notably by the emphasis on the innate, theatrical evil of Branagh’s Heydrich.

As noted, both *Conspiracy* and *The Wannsee Conference* present Heydrich as the central character, for the historical conference was called by Heydrich to affirm his authority in aligning the different offices of the government toward the resolution of the “Jewish Question.” Nevertheless, the films also place significant emphasis on the character of Eichmann, and the popular memory of the Wannsee Conference revolves heavily around Eichmann since the conference was organized by Eichmann and discussed during his televised trial in Israel decades later. Any talk of Eichmann and his trial naturally brings up Hannah Arendt’s enduring,

⁷ The Association of Jewish Refugees 2022, 37:30.

controversial, and frequently misrepresented argument about the “banality of evil.” All three films emphasize the banality of some of Eichmann’s duties in organizing the conference: from his trying to figure out how best to arrange the seating (and thus, the place-cards) in the 2022 film, to his tyrannical bullying of the household staff in the 2001 film, to his juggling the duties of hosting the conference while taking annoying phone calls from his office in the 1984 film. Nevertheless, the actors’ performances vary widely, which is in keeping with the different theses/tones of the films: in the 2022 film, Johannes Allmayer adopts the same blankness as August Diehl. Notably, the 2022 interpretation places more emphasis on Müller and Eichmann’s interactions than on Heydrich and Eichmann’s interactions, though Eichmann’s role as the conference coordinator and one of the primary briefers means that Allmayer necessarily has more lines than Diehl; the combination of Allmayer’s blank expression and his formal, rigid delivery of Eichmann’s briefings reinforces how officialism can fuel the lack of empathy that defines the evil present in the film. The 1984 telefilm also places emphasis on Eichmann’s role as unremarkable “bureaucrat,” though he is presented as more harried, more emotional, and thus more human than in the 2022 film. He repeatedly has to put up with bothersome phone calls from incompetent subordinates, and he allows himself to get angry with them over the phone; he likewise allows himself to laugh and to express vulnerability when talking with his fellow SS officers.

Though *Conspiracy* deliberately contrasts the banal evil of Eichmann with the Shakespearean evil of Heydrich, Stanley Tucci’s Eichmann—like Branagh’s Heydrich—has a stage presence that his counterparts in the other films lack, and it is skillfully presented through the character’s interactions with the household staff. Tucci’s Eichmann is clearly the bane of the staff’s existence due to his peevishness and condescension. Eichmann is personally offended

when a clumsy and seemingly simple-minded waiter breaks a few plates in the opening scene, and his preoccupation with making sure things are in perfect order for the meeting stands in contrast to his nonchalance regarding the purpose of the meeting: planning the murder of 11 million people. He immediately comes across as a pettish bully who enjoys belittling the servants. Eichmann's obvious contempt for the butler, the orderlies, and the kitchen staff directly mirrors Heydrich's condescension toward the majority of the men attending the conference. Thus, while Tucci's petty, spiteful, and bullying bureaucrat is leagues removed from Branagh's a swaggering, malevolent, and threatening monster, they are essentially two sides of the same coin and the performances of the two actors are similarly embellished.

The key difference is that Tucci's Eichmann, like the other Eichmanns presented in the other films, has a clear motivation: a successful conference and a desire to satisfy Heydrich. The utter lack of motivation that defines Branagh's performance is noteworthy. In a key scene between Branagh and David Threlfall (who plays the uncertain Friedrich Kritzing) Heydrich rejects any sort of philosophical debate about the final solution, and mocks "philosophy" as the realm of the hypocritical civilian bureaucrats attending the meeting.⁸ The film is noteworthy in comparison to both its predecessor and its successor for the lack of emphasis on the biopolitical/nationalistic philosophy that formed the bedrock of Nazism. In the 1984 telefilm, Mattausch's Heydrich parrots Hitler in blaming the Jews for the outbreak of the two world wars and frames the final solution as the elimination of bacteria to save an organism.⁹ Similarly, in the 2022 telefilm Philipp Hochmair's Heydrich argues that the survival of Germany depends on the

⁸ Frank Pierson, dir. *Conspiracy*, HBO, 2001, Digital Film, 1:08:14.

⁹ Heinz Schirk, dir. *Die Wannseekonferenz*, Bayerischer Rundfunk, 1984, Digital Film, 29:29.

elimination of the Jews and uses the metaphor of amputation to save a dying patient.¹⁰ Apart from some casual and fleeting references (some of which are quoted below), Branagh's Heydrich never frames the extermination of Jews in the context of racial purity or hyper-nationalism, nor does he feel the need to justify the final solution based on the view that Jews are subhuman or that Germany is a tainted organism in need of purging.¹¹ In the aforementioned scene between Heydrich and Kritzinger, Heydrich half-heartedly conveys his anger at having to "countenance the suffocating glut of this parasitic people: consuming our food, contaminating our professions, controlling our currency,"¹² though Kritzinger immediately points out that none of those things are true and Heydrich essentially concedes, thus demonstrating that he is not invested in finding a justification or even a motive for the "final solution" beyond his innate hatred of Jews. Throughout the entire film, Heydrich's hatred is explicit and spiteful, but it exists as part of a more general evil that defines Heydrich's character.

The lack of any conceptual discussion/justification on the part of Branagh's Heydrich, when combined with Branagh's grand and swaggering performance, draws attention away from the evils of Nazi philosophy and prompts the viewer to perceive Heydrich as innately malevolent and thus as a more general representation of evil. This is the same Shakespearean evil that defines some of Branagh's most memorable performances as Shakespeare villains: it is the sort of evil we see from Iago (whom Branagh played in the 1995 film version of *Othello* directed by Oliver Parker), or Richard III (whom Branagh played onstage in 2002), the truly great

¹⁰ Matti Geschonneck, dir. *The Conference*, Constantin Television Productions, 2022, Digital Film, 1:38:37.

Throughout the 2022 film, Otto Hoffman is presented as the SS officer who believes most adamantly in the racial elements of Nazi philosophy, to the point that even Müller seems a bit put off by Hoffman's near fanaticism, though Heydrich's justification of the "final solution" is always contextualized in the same biopolitical philosophy espoused by Hoffman.

¹¹ In his theatrical monologue to conclude the meeting, Branagh's Heydrich does invoke Darwin (thus alluding to the biological basis for the Nazis' race-hatred), but, as discussed in the body of the paper, the line is given so glibly that the focus remains on the evilness of Heydrich rather than any sort of philosophy (Darwinian or otherwise) that is guiding him. Frank Pierson, 1:15:31.

¹² Frank Pierson, dir. *Conspiracy*, HBO, 2001, Digital Film, 1:08:19.

Shakespeare villains whose villainy stems from their inherent wickedness. Samuel Coleridge famously referred to Iago's evil as "motiveless malignity" and for Elizabethan audiences, there would not have been any need to ask why characters like Iago and Richard do such horrible things: "We are told that, by Elizabethan audiences, villains were accepted with or without motivation. They were accepted as types because they were black like Aaron, deformed like Richard III, Italian like Iago, or illegitimate like Edmund. This convention is offered to explain what, to some modern critics, appears to be insufficient motivation in Shakespeare's villains."¹³ Branagh's Heydrich is less of a "type"; certainly, he is a Nazi, but so is every other character in the film. However, like these Shakespearean characters, he seems to exist purely to enact evil, regardless of the specific circumstances; the swaggering villainy of Branagh's Heydrich is less a representation of the evils of Nazism and more a representation of a transcendent concept of malice.

Ironically, Arendt actually cites the two aforementioned characters in the epilogue to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* when she wraps up her argument that Eichmann was a thoughtless bureaucrat rather than a monstrous Shakespearean villain: "Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain.' Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all."¹⁴ It is ironic that Arendt attempts to contrast Eichmann with Shakespeare villains when she might inadvertently be linking them based on that lack of sufficient motivation, though, the most relevant aspects of Arendt's arguments relate to the contrast between the motiveless, existential, brilliant evil of an Iago versus the self-serving,

¹³ Charles Norton Coe, *Shakespeare's Villains*. New York: Bookman Associates, 1957, 5.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* New York: Penguin Books, 2006, 287.

bureaucratic, banal evil of an Eichmann. This contrast is reflected in the presentation of Tucci's Eichmann as a petulant henchman and Branagh's Heydrich as an omniscient demon, and the swagger and theatricality that define Branagh's performance completely distinguish him from both Mattausch and Hochmair's more grounded portrayals of the character.

The theatricality of Branagh's Heydrich is not simply an artistic decision on the part of the actor; the script is written in such a way as to highlight the superhuman evil of the character. Mattausch and Hochmair speak passionately at times, but they rarely "monologue": that is, they do not give grand speeches befitting theatrical or cinematic villains. When they give long speeches, their talking points are grounded in historical matters and exposition, and their explanation of the final solution is always steeped in biopolitics and chauvinism. Branagh's final monologue to close out the conference has the rhetorical embellishments of a monologuing supervillain. Moreover, despite a few references to the historical circumstances (e.g., the deportation trains and the "machinery" of the camps), his speech lacks substantive context: "This is my command to you here. Link arms, your units, your ministries. Apply your intelligence, apply your energies. The machinery is waiting: feed it. Get them on the trains. Keep the trains rolling. And history will honor us for having the will and the vision to advance the human race to greater purity in a space of time so short Charles Darwin would be astonished."¹⁵ The lack of specific references to Germany and to the Nazi ideology, the rhetorical flourishes, and the self-aggrandizement are all in keeping with the transcendent malevolence of the interpretation. Two of the leading scholars of the Wannsee Conference, Christoph Kreutzmüller and Hans-Christian Jasch, have both expressed dubiousness (and outright criticism) regarding the

¹⁵ Frank Pierson, 1:15:10.

Shakespearean flourishes that define Branagh's performance; they write that "Kenneth Branagh's Heydrich, [...] seems to have stepped out of a Shakespeare play,"¹⁶ and in his YouTube lecture on the Wannsee Conference, Kreutzmüller gets a laugh from the audience when he says, "when you see Kenneth Branagh, I mean, he's Heydrich, yes, but I always think he's Richard III. He's really doing – yeah, he's doing the Shakespeare [sic] really."¹⁷ While Heydrich is the dominant character in all three films, Branagh dominates the screen in the way that Richard or Iago dominate the stage, and the result is a brilliant performance that, in spite of its brilliance, ironically limits the scope and understanding of the evils of Heydrich and his ilk.

It is useful to juxtapose two essentially identical scenes from the 1984 telefilm and *Conspiracy*. In keeping with the Shakespearean evil of Branagh's Heydrich, *Conspiracy* ends with a scene that feels so artificial (i.e., theatrical) that the historical framework nearly evaporates and the film becomes a celebration of Branagh's horrifically captivating representation of human evil. Having retreated to a separate room following the conference's conclusion, Heydrich and Müller revel in their own wickedness as only Shakespearean villains can; Branagh sits casually in a chair like Richard III upon his bloody throne, with Brendan Coyle's Müller playing Buckingham to Branagh's Richard. During this scene, Heydrich needles Eichmann to "tell us again about the pink bodies...the sounds, the screams."¹⁸ This is a reference to the physical effects of the carbon monoxide on Jewish victims of the gas trucks, which Eichmann was uncomfortable describing in an earlier scene. Müller joins in both the reveling and the taunting, and he mocks Eichmann for allegedly having fainted while witnessing a mass execution. This reveling in wickedness sets up an even more contrived moment when Müller prompts Heydrich to recount a story that

¹⁶ Hans-Christian Jasch, and Christoph Kreutzmüller, 2.

¹⁷ Museum of Jewish Heritage, 19:30.

¹⁸ Frank Pierson, 1:22:02.

Kritzinger shared with Heydrich in private; Branagh subsequently gives a lengthy, memorable monologue that seems to have been written and incorporated into the final scene purely to serve as the “exclamation point” at the end of Branagh’s performance (and to cement the odds that he would be nominated for the major acting prizes come award season). Kritzinger’s story, which is framed as a parable about the danger of the Nazis allowing their hatred of the Jews to become their sole reason for existing, is rejected by Heydrich who casually and enigmatically states “I will not miss them [the Jews],”¹⁹ though the question of the basis for Heydrich’s hatred (be it philosophical, biological, political, or personal) remains unanswered. Branagh delivers the line in the enigmatic vein of Iago’s “I am not what I am”; indeed, the delivery is remarkably similar to his delivery of the aforementioned line in the Parker film. Like Iago, Branagh’s Heydrich dominates the stage, controls the action, belittles every other character, represents a diabolical evil, and essentially “wins” (despite the coda of Iago’s exposure, arrest, and presumable torture/execution, and the analogous coda of Heydrich’s assassination a few months later in Prague, alluded to in a summative narration at the end of *Conspiracy*).

Whereas *Conspiracy* concludes with these exchanges between Heydrich, Eichmann, and Müller, and “stages” these exchanges in such a way as to underscore the theatrical representation of evil, the 1984 film *begins* with this scene: Heydrich, Eichmann, Müller, and Rudolf Lange meet privately and discuss the technical problems with gassing Jewish prisoners. Müller tries to lighten the mood, mildly teasing Eichmann for supposedly having vomited after witnessing a botched gassing, but he immediately realizes the joke was in poor taste given Eichmann’s discomposure and Heydrich’s concerns with getting the Nazi death machine to run

¹⁹ Frank Pierson, 1:24:10.

efficiently.²⁰ Even Lange, who is portrayed as the most brutal character, expresses his discomfort with the gassings based on a report that the gassings are supposedly “messier” than the mass shootings. Mattausch’s Heydrich is portrayed as utterly ruthless and commanding, but aside from some exaggerated body language there is no flamboyance. His domineering presence and his strutting movements seem to stem from his rank and his sense of ownership of the meeting (and of the Jewish question); Mattausch essentially contextualizes his interpretation of Heydrich (and the evils of Heydrich) within the meeting, the Nazi hierarchies, and the historical moment. Conversely, Branagh’s Heydrich transcends these boundaries. In the same scene, Mattausch’s Heydrich firmly reminds everyone of their duty, but also casually informs them that Reichsführer Himmler fainted at a mass execution and that there is no shame in it, glibly observing, “It proves we Germans are human.”²¹ As noted, during the full conference meeting, this version of Heydrich offers a philosophical argument in defense of the mass killings based on the nationalism and racism that were the bedrock of Nazi ideology. He does so confidently and brutally, but without any self-aggrandizing Shakespearean malevolence.

The subtlety of the performance keeps the focus on the evil philosophy rather than the evil character, which reinforces the historical focus of the film. Moreover, while Mattausch’s Heydrich (and all of the other characters in the 1984 film) are not rendered more “sympathetic” than their counterparts in *Conspiracy*, the contrast between the two performance styles underscores why Kreutzmüller was so critical of Branagh’s performance: Kreutzmüller argues that the men of the Wannsee Conference were remarkably “normal” as opposed to their being sociopathic evil geniuses like Iago or Richard III, so he seems to prefer the earlier film in which

²⁰ Heinz Schirk, 15:04.

²¹ Heinz Schirk, 16:02.

the “normality” of the characters is more evident, though this necessarily results in less memorable characters and performances. It is important to reiterate that the characters in the 1984 film, with a few minor exceptions, lack the individuality that *Conspiracy* gives to each role. In *Conspiracy*, there is more emphasis on the backgrounds and educations of the participants (e.g., *Conspiracy* incorporates a scene where it is revealed that more than half the group are professional lawyers).²² Clearly, this emphasis helps counteract the comforting but inaccurate notion that the Nazis (and, more specifically, the SS) were stupid thugs. The behavior of the characters in *Conspiracy* is horrifying (and frequently, base and vulgar), but the film deliberately emphasizes the basic intelligence of the characters; even banal and bureaucratic characters like Eichmann are presented as strong-willed, capable, and articulate.

This is where more contemporary scholars like Mark Roseman deviate from Arendt, for Arendt framed Eichmann and his ilk as mindless, thoughtless bureaucrats who were eager to reap the rewards of Hitler’s favor, and who embraced killing Jews as a sort of credentialing. Roseman points out that this viewpoint assumes that anyone with any sense would perceive Nazism for the pseudoscientific rubbish it was. Yet, over the past 30 years, the scholarly view of the subject has changed significantly: “Scholarship began to take the [...] racial policy seriously, and to assume that the [Nazi perpetrators] were driven not merely by irrational orders, or by a lust for power, but rather saw meaning in what they were doing.”²³ There has been new consideration of the fact that the professional class and the expert class – lawyers, doctors, et

²² Frank Pierson, 41:47.

²³ Mark Roseman, “Biographical Approaches and the Wannsee Conference,” in *The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference*, edited by Hans-Christian Jasch, and Christoph Kreutzmüller (pp. 21-40). New York: Berghahn Books, 2017, 29.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1491086&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

cetera – “anticipated, legitimized, or staffed”²⁴ the Nazi killing machine. Clearly, education did not shield one from Nazism (in fact, the educated class found their educations astonishingly compatible with Nazism). As Roseman observes, “...a distinctive set of racist-nationalist ideas [...] gained hold in sections of German society in the interwar period. In other words, contrary to the older view of the protagonists as merely dutiful, subordinate or ambitious careerists, the energy behind Nazi racial policies was now traced back to a large body of intelligent young men whose worldview coincided with that of Nazism well before 1933.”²⁵ Many of the men at the Wannsee Conference and in the general professional class were true believers in what Hitler was saying because they had adopted the same warped beliefs as Hitler even before he built an entire government around these beliefs. If the well-educated and professional classes enthusiastically embraced nationalism, pseudoscience, racism, and anti-Semitism, is it any wonder that the general populace embraced these policies and viewpoints?

Conspiracy strives to capture this notion in a variety of ways, including emphasizing the educational background of the characters and giving them memorable and unique personalities; from a performance perspective, it is helpful that the film includes so many outstanding English character actors in the supporting roles, for great character actors invariably bring unique, individualized personality to supporting parts. Ultimately, it does not seem surprising that a film that was produced at a time when the “banality of evil” theory was being reassessed might lean more toward the contemporary thesis about how to comprehend the evils of Nazism; in spite of Branagh’s theatricality, one could argue that *Conspiracy* demonstrates how an intelligent professional (or, at the very least, an ordinary man) can embrace and enact genocide. The

²⁴ Mark Roseman, 29.

²⁵ Mark Roseman, 30.

ultimate failure of *Conspiracy* to achieve this goal lies not with Branagh but with the actor who gives the second most memorable performance in the film: Ian McNeice. McNeice plays Gerhard Klopfer, who attended the Wannsee Conference as a representative of the Nazi Chancellery. Klopfer is the most loathsome character in the film: he speaks openly and casually about the genocide, and he throws out the most vulgar comments, incessantly making sexual remarks about Jews (to the point that even Heydrich warns him to control himself.) Branagh's Heydrich – like an Iago or a Richard – is both terrifying and captivating, whereas McNiece's Klopfer is deliberately repulsive. It is important to note that McNiece is obese (almost morbidly so) and thus stands out from all of the other characters in the film. Klopfer is seen wolfing down food for the entire film; later, he is shown to be the last Nazi to leave the Conference because he's still stuffing himself at the buffet table after everyone else has departed. He is even given the final word: as he leaves, he un-ironically tells Eichmann, "You certainly know how to throw a party."²⁶ There is nothing subtle about this characterization, and, unsurprisingly, McNiece's performance contributed to Kreutzmüller's disregard for the film. In his critique of *Conspiracy*, Kreutzmüller compares a screenshot of McNeice with a picture of the real-life Klopfer, who was an average looking man with an average build and who was supposedly a remarkably normal individual, leagues removed from the obnoxious, gluttonous, and tasteless grotesque presented by McNiece.²⁷

As Kreutzmüller complains about these creative and artistic liberties, he casually refers to McNiece's Klopfer as a "fat blob,"²⁸ though he immediately regrets his tactlessness and thus downplays the point he is trying to make. In spite of this insensitivity, Kreutzmüller's assertion

²⁶ Frank Pierson, 1:25:12.

²⁷ Fabian Busch's portrayal of the character in the 2022 film seems to have been much more in keeping with the real-life Klopfer.

²⁸ Museum of Jewish Heritage, 19:58.

connects back to the point about Shakespeare's use of "types" for his villains. Shakespeare's Richard III is not evil because he is deformed; he is deformed because he is evil: his hideous body is a manifestation of his hideous soul. Klopfer is depicted as the most physically repugnant character in the film because he is meant to embody the repulsiveness, intemperance, and excess of Nazi philosophy. However, this same representation completely undermines the "ordinary men" argument for McNeice's Klopfer is extraordinary (in the most revolting way possible). Of course, McNeice's Klopfer lacks the brilliant Shakespearean malice of Branagh's Heydrich and is instead presented as both fat and fatuous. Kreutzmüller errs in putting McNeice's representation of Klopfer in the "evil genius" category of Branagh's Heydrich as part of his overarching critique of the representation of the historical figures (and of evil) in *Conspiracy*. "It's evil genius or nothing in between."²⁹ Kreutzmüller seems to be using "evil genius" as a synonym for "theatrical villain" (neither Branagh's Heydrich and McNeice's Kreutzmüller would be out of place on the stage, specifically, in a Shakespearean drama) but McNeice's Klopfer ultimately embodies a less cerebral and more basely villainous/theatrical space, one that could perhaps be embodied by a Dickensian villain. Notably, McNeice has played several Dickensian villains on stage and screen, including Young Wackford Squeers in the Royal Shakespeare Company's celebrated production of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1980) and Mr. Limbkins in Roman Polanski's film version of *Oliver Twist* (2005). Dickens is rarely subtle in the representation of villainy, and there is absolutely nothing subtle about McNeice's Klopfer. Since Klopfer and Heydrich are the characters who stand out the most, and since Branagh and McNeice are deliberately excessive in their representations of their

²⁹ Museum of Jewish Heritage, 20:21.

characters, the notion that *anyone* could become one of these men is severely weakened. Ultimately, even though the older film embraces an older view regarding our understanding of the evils of Nazism, adopting many of Arendt's outmoded arguments about bureaucrats, hierarchies, and the banality of evil, the 1984 telefilm is still much more effective in underscoring the key warning about ordinary people becoming swept up in a murderous philosophy. The larger-than-life theatrical, Shakespearean, and Dickensian touches of the latter film severely hinder the notion that the men of Wannsee were ordinary men; has there ever been an ordinary Shakespearean or Dickensian character?

Marc Napolitano studied at Villanova and completed his doctorate at UNC Chapel Hill. His research focuses primarily on the adaptation theory, specifically, the adaptation of nineteenth-century novels for the stage. He has published on stage adaptations of the works of Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, and other novelists of the long nineteenth century; he has also written several articles on the connections between adaptation studies and neo-Victorian bio-fiction. Dr. Napolitano serves as the Officer in Charge of the theatre program at the United States Air Force Academy.

Appendix

SS Leadership				
Name	* PhD	Office/Mil Rank	Age	Actor
Heydrich, Reinhard		Reich Main Security Office Lieutenant General	37	Dietrich Mattausch
				Kenneth Branagh (2001)
				Philipp Hochmair (2022)
Eichmann, Otto Adolf		Reich Main Security Office Lieutenant Colonel	35	Gerd Böckmann (1984)
				Stanley Tucci (2001)
				Johannes Allmayer
Müller, Heinrich		Reich Main Security Office Major General	41	Friedrich G. Beckhaus
				Brendan Coyle (2001)
				Jakob Diehl (2022)
Lange, Rudolf *		Reich Main Security Office Major	31	Martin Lüttge (1984)
				Barnaby Kay (2001)
				Frederic Linkemann
Schöngarth, Karl Eberhard *		Reich Main Security Office Senior Colonel	38	Gerd Rigauer (1984)
				Peter Sullivan (2001)
				Maximilian Brückner
Reich Ministry & Nazi Party Leadership				
Meyer, Alfred *		Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories Gauleiter	50	Harald Dietl (1984)
				Brian Pettifer (2001)
				Peter Jordan (2022)
Stuckart, Wilhelm *		Reich Interior Ministry Brigadier General	39	Peter Fitz (1984)
				Colin Firth (2001)
				Godehard Giese (2022)
Neumann, Erich		Plenipotentiary for the 4 Yr Plan Senior Colonel	49	Dieter Groest (1984)
				Jonathan Coy (2001)
				Matthias Bundschuh
Freisler, Roland *		Reich Ministry of Justice	48	Rainer Steffen (1984)
				Owen Teale (2001)
				Arnd Klawitter (2022)
Bühler, Josef		State Secretary for the General Government	37	Reinhard Glemnitz
				Ben Daniels (2001)
				Sascha Nathan (2022)
Luther, Martin		Undersecretary of the Foreign Office	46	Hans-Werner Bussinger (1984)
				Kevin McNally (2001)
				Simon Schwarz (2022)
Klopfer, Gerhard *		Nazi Party Chancellery Senior Colonel	36	Günter Spörrle (1984)
				Ian McNeice (2001)
				Fabian Busch (2022)
Kritzinger, Friedrich *		Reich-Chancellery	51	Franz Rudnick (1984)
				David Threlfall (2001)
				Thomas Loibl (2022)
<i>CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE</i>				

Reich Ministry & Nazi Party Leadership (continued)				
Name	* PhD	Office/Mil Rank	Age	Actor
Hoffman, Otto		SS Race and Settlement Office Major General	45	Robert Atzorn (1984)
				Nicholas Woodeson
				Markus Schleinzer
Leibbrandt, Georg *		Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories	42	Jochen Busse (1984)
				Ewan Stewart (2001)
				Rafael Stachowiak

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