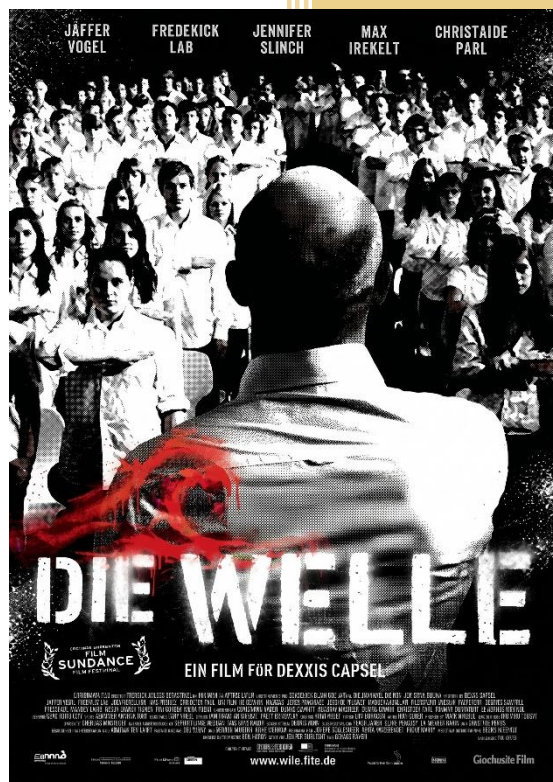


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Teaching Die Welle: 100 Discussion Questions



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World Cinema with Anna

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Teaching Die Welle: 100 Discussion Questions on Conformity, Leadership and Responsibility

World Cinema with Anna | Film Club Discussion Guide

Spoiler and content note: These questions are for use after watching *Die Welle* (*The Wave*, 2008), directed by Dennis Gansel. They discuss the whole film, including its ending.

The film contains themes of authoritarianism, bullying, violence and a tragic conclusion, and it is rated 15 in the UK, so please check age suitability before using it with younger groups.

Part 5 refers to *The Counterfeiters* (*Die Fälscher*, 2007), our November film club pick, which depicts Nazi persecution and a concentration camp. Please watch it before discussing Part 5.

How to use this guide

- Choose five to eight questions per session rather than working through all 100. Start with Part 1, then pick one or two themes.
- Ask people to jot down an answer first, then talk in pairs, then share with the group.
- Agree ground rules at the start: listen respectfully, nobody has to share personal experiences, and disagree with ideas rather than people.
- Remember that *Die Welle* is a fictional dramatisation inspired by a real classroom experiment run by teacher Ron Jones in California in the late 1960s. The events in the film are not a documented account.
- Keep the comparison in Part 5 respectful. A classroom experiment is not the same as genocide, and the questions are designed to explore differences as well as similarities.

Part 1: First reactions and context (Questions 1-10)

1. What was your strongest reaction as the film ended, and which scene is still with you?
2. Which character did you relate to most at the start of the project week? Did that change as the film went on?
3. Rainer is assigned autocracy when he would rather teach anarchy. How does this shape his attitude at the start of the week?
4. Early in the film the class debates whether an autocracy could rise again in Germany. Why do most students feel confident it could not, and how does the film challenge that confidence?
5. The film is inspired by a real experiment in a California classroom in the late 1960s. Why might the filmmakers have moved the story to a modern German school?

6. Director Dennis Gansel has said he wanted younger Germans, who may feel distant from this history, to connect with it emotionally. Did the film achieve that for you?
7. The movement grows from a classroom exercise into something far bigger in just one week. Did the speed feel believable, and does that affect how seriously you take its message?
8. Some critics feel the characters mainly serve the film's ideas. Do you agree, or did they feel like real people?
9. The film begins with ordinary school life. What does this everyday setting suggest about where harmful movements can begin?
10. Before we begin, which of the three themes (conformity, leadership or responsibility) do you think the film is most about, and why?

Part 2: Conformity (Questions 11-35)

11. Why do the students first join the project? What does each seem to gain: belonging, status, structure or excitement?
12. Which small steps (seating, posture, rules, a name) turn a class into a group? Which step was the turning point for you?
13. The students adopt a uniform of white shirts. What does uniformity give those who wear it, and what does it do to those who do not?
14. The group creates a name, a logo and a gesture. Why are symbols so powerful for group identity?
15. Karo refuses to join and eventually leaves the class. What does her resistance cost her socially, and what does that say about the price of dissent?
16. Have you ever felt pressure to join something simply because everyone else did? What helped or hindered you in deciding?
17. Which students seem to join out of belief, and which out of fear of being left out? Does the difference matter?
18. How does the group treat people who do not conform? How does exclusion work as a tool for keeping members in line?
19. Tim seems to find a sense of belonging he has never had. What does his story suggest about loneliness and the need to belong?
20. The group's behaviour spreads beyond the classroom. How does belonging to the group change the way members treat people outside it?
21. At what point did the group's behaviour cross from harmless to harmful? Was there a moment when it could easily have stopped?

22. The students say they value discipline and community. Are these bad in themselves? When do they become dangerous?
23. How do the students' attitudes towards individuality change over the week?
24. What role do jokes, nicknames and teasing play in building loyalty and in excluding others?
25. Where do you see similar group dynamics today, for example in online communities, fan groups, sports teams or workplaces?
26. How might the story have unfolded if the project had happened mainly online rather than in a classroom?
27. What is the difference between agreeing with a group and simply going along with it? Which do you think the students are doing?
28. The group dismisses Karo's concerns. What reasons do people have for brushing aside dissenting voices?
29. Think of a group you have belonged to. Which positive effects of belonging does the film help you recognise, and which warning signs?
30. Would the students have behaved differently if they had been alone rather than in a group? Why?
31. What happens to friendships and relationships, such as Karo and Marco's, when one person questions the group and another does not?
32. Other teachers and parents barely notice the movement at first. What allows a group like this to grow unnoticed?
33. Why is it easier to see conformity in others than in ourselves? Did any moment in the film make you question your own assumptions?
34. If you had been in the class in the first week, what do you honestly think you would have done? What does your answer reveal?
35. Karo's refusal does not stop the group. What would have to happen for one person's refusal to change a group's direction?

Part 3: Leadership (Questions 36-60)

36. Rainer begins as a popular, informal teacher. How does his style make students receptive to his authority?
37. When does Rainer move from being a teacher to being the leader of a movement? Can you name the moment?

- 38.** Rainer demands formality and discipline in his classroom. What does this teach the students about authority?
- 39.** Does Rainer believe he is in control? Compare what he believes with what actually happens.
- 40.** What is the difference between charisma and legitimate authority? Which does Rainer have?
- 41.** How do praise and recognition help Rainer win loyalty, especially from students who feel overlooked?
- 42.** Rainer enjoys his new status. What does the film suggest about the temptations of power, even for well-meaning leaders?
- 43.** Is Rainer a villain? Explain your view and how it affects the lessons you take from the film.
- 44.** Rainer's wife, Anke, challenges him. What does her role show about the value of people who question a leader?
- 45.** Which warning signs does Rainer ignore, and why do you think he does?
- 46.** Do leaders have a duty to step back when a group becomes too attached to them? At what point should Rainer have ended the experiment?
- 47.** Teachers, coaches and managers hold special authority over others. How can organisations guard against its misuse?
- 48.** What qualities make a leader trustworthy? Which of them are missing in the film?
- 49.** How do slogans, rules and rituals help a leader keep control of a group?
- 50.** What is the difference between inspiring people and manipulating them?
- 51.** How can leaders, intentionally or not, take advantage of people's insecurities?
- 52.** By the end, does the group still need Rainer, or has it outgrown him? What does that suggest about how movements develop?
- 53.** How does Rainer respond when students question the experiment? What does his response reveal?
- 54.** If you could advise Rainer at the end of the second day, what would you say?
- 55.** Which is more dangerous: a leader who seeks power, or a group that hands it over? Why?
- 56.** What lessons about leadership can you take into your own roles, such as team captain, manager, parent or teacher?

57. What would healthier leadership have looked like in this story, and which character comes closest to showing it?
58. How do institutions, such as the school and its staff, shape or limit a leader's power?
59. Is it ever justifiable to use manipulation to teach a lesson? What ethical limits should apply to teachers and experimenters?
60. After the events of the film, how might the students see Rainer? Can he regain their trust?

Part 4: Responsibility (Questions 61-85)

61. Who is responsible for what happens in the film: Rainer, the students, the school, or everyone? Defend your view.
62. At what point does Rainer become responsible for what the group does? Does the film allow for shared responsibility?
63. Tim's actions have serious consequences. How much responsibility lies with Tim, how much with the group, and how much with the leader?
64. Karo tries to warn others. What responsibility do we have when we see something wrong that others do not?
65. What stops people from speaking up inside a group?
66. Marco eventually questions what is happening. What does his journey show about the courage needed to change course?
67. How do you respond to the justification, 'I was just following the group'?
68. Are there actions in the film you consider irreversible? How does that affect responsibility for what comes later?
69. What responsibilities do teachers have when running an experiment that affects real students' emotions?
70. Does the school share responsibility through its supervision? What systems could have caught the problem earlier?
71. How should bystanders, such as other teachers and students outside the group, have responded?
72. Is it possible to stay neutral when a group is behaving harmfully?
73. What responsibilities do students have towards one another in a classroom or school community?
74. What forms of resistance appear in the film, and which seem most effective?

75. How would you define moral courage? Which character shows it, and at what cost?
76. How does the film show responsibility being spread so thinly that no one feels responsible?
77. Is it fair to judge teenagers by the standards we apply to adults? Why or why not?
78. After the film's events, what should each person do to take responsibility: Rainer, Marco, Karo and the school?
79. How do we balance personal responsibility against the pressure of circumstances and the group?
80. Many people say 'it could never happen here.' Whose responsibility is it to keep that belief from becoming complacency?
81. What role should education play in preventing extremism? Does the film's approach teach more than a lecture would?
82. Rainer wants students to feel how autocracy works. Does learning by experience carry more risk or more value than reading about history?
83. What responsibilities do filmmakers have when dramatising dangerous ideas? How does *Die Welle* try to avoid making the group look glamorous?
84. Where in your own life could you speak up sooner, even in small ways?
85. If you had to give one piece of advice to someone about to join a very enthusiastic group, what would it be?

Part 5: Connecting with The Counterfeiters (Questions 86-100)

The Counterfeiters (*Die Fälscher*, 2007) is an Austrian-German drama based on Adolf Burger's memoir. It follows prisoners in a concentration camp who are forced to forge British pounds and American dollars in Operation Bernhard, a Nazi scheme. *Die Welle* is a fictional experiment; *The Counterfeiters* depicts real persecution. Please keep that difference in mind as you compare them.

86. Both films ask how people behave under pressure from an authoritarian system. How are the pressures similar, and how are they profoundly different?
87. In *The Counterfeiters*, prisoners must choose between cooperating to survive and resisting at great risk. How does this compare with the students' choice to join the Wave, and where does the comparison break down?
88. Salomon 'Sally' Sorowitsch adapts to survive, while Adolf Burger pushes towards sabotage. What does each approach say about responsibility under coercion?

89. The students in *Die Welle* choose to join, while the prisoners in *The Counterfeiters* have no real choice. How does freedom of choice change moral responsibility?
90. The SS officer Herzog holds absolute power over the forgers, while Rainer holds informal power over his class. What do these two kinds of authority share, and how do they differ?
91. Both films show small steps and compromises adding up. Where in each film do small compromises become something much larger?
92. In *The Counterfeiters*, survival means cooperating with the regime's aims. Does this change how we judge those who cooperate, compared with those who conform by choice?
93. Karo resists by leaving the group, while Burger resists through sabotage. Compare the risks and costs of each form of resistance.
94. How does each film portray group solidarity and its limits? How do the groups handle disagreement?
95. What does each film suggest about bystanders and the people outside the group?
96. Gansel wanted a story that would make younger Germans feel history. *The Counterfeiters* draws on a survivor's memoir. How does each film approach remembrance, and which approach moved you more?
97. One film is based on a survivor's memoir and the other on a classroom experiment. Does a true-story basis change how you respond to each?
98. Both stories end with consequences that cannot be undone, in very different ways. What do the endings suggest about responsibility, memory and survival?
99. Holocaust Memorial Day asks us to remember and to learn. After watching both films, what does it mean to learn from history, and what actions might follow?
100. If you were introducing a screening of both films to a school or community group, what question would you ask the audience before they watch, and what question afterwards?

Related posts on World Cinema with Anna

- *Die Welle* (The Wave, 2008) review
- Is *Die Welle* Based on a True Story? The Real Third Wave Experiment
- 10 Best Films About Fascism, Propaganda and Group Pressure
- *The Counterfeiters* (2007) review and film club discussion
- Adolf Burger: The Real Survivor Behind *The Counterfeiters*