

Peer Pressure in The Wave

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Purpose

The Wave is a short television film created to explain how authoritarian movements can emerge through ordinary social pressures rather than through the sudden appearance of obviously evil people. Directed by Alexander Grasshoff and based on a classroom experiment conducted by teacher Ron Jones, the film connects the history of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust with the behavior of American high-school students. Its purpose is not to suggest that a brief school exercise is equivalent to the Holocaust. Instead, it demonstrates how discipline, belonging, fear of exclusion, emotional excitement, and obedience to a respected leader can weaken independent judgment. The film asks viewers to consider why many people participate in or remain silent before injustice even when they do not initially intend to harm anyone (Grasshoff, 1981; Jones, 1976).

The original essay correctly identifies dictatorship and peer pressure as the film's principal concerns. The story shows that authoritarianism can attract people by promising order, equality, strength, and community. Students do not join *The Wave* because they openly support cruelty. Many join because the group offers identity, attention, friendship, and relief from uncertainty. This makes the lesson more disturbing than a simple story about bad individuals. The film warns that any generation can become vulnerable when conformity is rewarded and dissent is treated as betrayal (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

This topic is examined further in [the positive and negative effects of Peer Pressure](#).

Main Theme and Message

The central theme is the relationship among fascism, conformity, peer pressure, and autocratic leadership. At the beginning, Mr. Ross shows his history class documentary material about Nazi Germany. His students struggle to understand how so many citizens could obey Hitler, tolerate persecution, or claim ignorance of wrongdoing. Their questions expose a common assumption: people living in the present imagine that they would recognize dictatorship immediately and resist it. Mr. Ross attempts to answer through experience rather than another lecture, but the classroom exercise develops faster and becomes more powerful than he expected (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

The group begins with apparently harmless rules concerning posture, punctuality, concise answers, and disciplined behavior. These practices improve classroom energy and create a sense of achievement. The danger does not lie in organization itself. Schools, teams, and communities require rules and cooperation. The danger arises when discipline becomes unquestioning obedience, unity

becomes hostility toward outsiders, and a leader's authority becomes more important than evidence or conscience. The students learn to experience compliance as virtue before they are asked to perform more troubling actions (Jones, 1976; Grasshoff, 1981).

The Wave's slogan and salute provide members with a visible identity. Repetition turns the gesture into a ritual, while shared language reduces individual difference. Students who previously felt ignored suddenly possess membership in something larger. The group appears to make status differences disappear because everyone wears similar clothing and follows the same rules. However, this equality is conditional. A student receives acceptance only by conforming, while critics are isolated. The film therefore shows how a movement can promise equality among insiders while creating aggressive inequality between insiders and outsiders (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

Review

I had not seen *The Wave* before, although it is widely discussed for its unusual classroom plot and its warning about authoritarian behavior. The film is effective because its transformation is gradual. At first, Mr. Ross's experiment resembles an energetic teaching method. Students sit more attentively, answer questions efficiently, and appear proud of improved performance. Viewers can understand why both teacher and class find the method exciting. The story becomes frightening only when the same techniques begin controlling friendships, speech, and moral choice (Grasshoff, 1981).

The students' obedience is one of the most shocking elements. Their behavior cannot be explained merely by youth or lack of intelligence. They respond to several forces operating together: respect for the teacher, desire for group membership, fear of being left out, emotional excitement, and belief that the movement has a larger purpose. The film suggests that intelligent people can participate in harmful systems when social rewards make conformity feel rational (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

Mr. Ross and the Growth of Authority

Mr. Ross begins the experiment because ordinary historical material does not satisfy his students' questions. His intention is educational, and this makes his later behavior more complex. He does not start as a dictator planning to dominate the school. He discovers that students respond enthusiastically to command, and their response gives him a new sense of influence. The teacher's authority grows because he controls the rules, symbols, membership, and explanation of the movement. Students look to him to define what The Wave means and what action should follow (Grasshoff, 1981; Jones, 1976).

This development demonstrates that authority can alter the leader as well as the followers. Mr. Ross becomes invested in the experiment's success and delays ending it even when warning signs appear. He enjoys the students' attention and may interpret rapid participation as proof that the lesson is working. His professional role makes students less likely to question him because teachers are

expected to provide guidance. The film therefore warns educators and other leaders that good intention does not prevent misuse of authority. Ethical leadership requires limits, accountability, and willingness to stop when participants are being harmed (Grasshoff, 1981).

Peer Pressure and Fear of Exclusion

The concept of conformity is shown through the pressure placed on students to participate. Some join willingly, while others comply because membership has become socially necessary. Once *The Wave* spreads beyond one class, refusing the salute or questioning the rules can cost friendship and safety. Students do not want to be labelled weak, disloyal, or different. The group converts an individual decision into a public test of identity (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

Peer pressure becomes powerful because it is enforced horizontally. Mr. Ross establishes the movement, but students monitor one another. Members report disobedience, recruit classmates, and challenge critics. This reduces the leader's need to control every person directly. When followers enforce the rules themselves, authoritarian power becomes part of everyday social interaction. A student may participate not because Mr. Ross is present but because classmates are watching (Jones, 1976; Grasshoff, 1981).

The film's lesson applies to bullying and discrimination. Students may witness a classmate being mocked yet remain silent because defending the person could make them the next target. Silence can appear neutral, but it strengthens the aggressor by demonstrating that opposition is unlikely. *The Wave* shows how the wish to avoid isolation can become cooperation with wrongdoing (Grasshoff, 1981).

Discipline, Unity, and Pride

The Wave attracts members through discipline, unity, and pride. These values are not inherently fascist. Discipline can support learning, unity can produce mutual aid, and pride can strengthen confidence. The film demonstrates how positive concepts become dangerous when separated from freedom and accountability. Discipline becomes the suppression of questions, unity becomes enforced sameness, and pride becomes contempt for people outside the group (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

The members' improved organization also creates a misleading impression that the movement is beneficial. They respond faster in class and feel part of a successful community. Measurable efficiency can hide ethical deterioration. A group may complete tasks effectively while discouraging thought and harming nonmembers. The film asks viewers to judge organizations not only by productivity but by how they treat disagreement, minority rights, and individual conscience.

Symbols and Emotional Communication

The Wave uses a name, slogan, salute, membership cards, and coordinated behavior. These symbols make the movement easy to recognize and emotionally satisfying. A complex set of ideas is condensed into a gesture. Members can identify one another immediately and feel connected without discussing the movement's actual goals. Symbolic communication is efficient, but it can replace reasoning. Repeating a slogan may produce certainty without requiring evidence (Grasshoff, 1981; Jones, 1976).

The original essay observes that the movement uses effective communication. This effectiveness should be separated from ethical communication. Propaganda can be highly effective while being manipulative. The Wave communicates through repetition, emotional intensity, social reward, and the suggestion of a secret national organization. It does not encourage members to evaluate claims independently. Communication becomes a method of mobilization rather than a process of shared inquiry (Grasshoff, 1981).

The Role of the Outsider

The film becomes ethically meaningful through students who recognize the danger and resist. Their opposition shows that conformity is strong but not irresistible. Critics observe that classmates are losing individuality and that group pressure has become threatening. They face hostility precisely because dissent reveals that membership is a choice. An authoritarian group must portray critics as enemies so that members do not consider their arguments seriously (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

Resistance requires more than privately disagreeing. The outsider must speak, seek allies, document behavior, and sometimes accept social cost. The film does not romanticize this position because resisting friends and a respected teacher is difficult. It nevertheless shows that moral responsibility begins when a person recognizes harm and refuses to let belonging determine every action.

The Final Assembly

The experiment reaches its climax when students gather for what they believe will be a national Wave rally. They expect to see a leader and confirmation that their movement is expanding. Mr. Ross instead reveals an image of Adolf Hitler and explains that their obedience, superiority, and exclusion resemble the mechanisms they had believed they could never accept. The revelation is emotionally severe because students must confront their own behavior rather than discuss the actions of distant historical people (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

The ending is powerful, but it also raises questions about the ethics of Mr. Ross's teaching. Students were deceived, pressured, and exposed to conflict. A lesson about manipulation was delivered

through manipulation. The film encourages viewers to ask whether the educational result justified the risks. Mr. Ross accepts responsibility, but apology does not remove the possibility of harm. Contemporary teachers would need clear ethical boundaries and safer methods for exploring conformity.

Connection With Nazi Germany

The film outlines mechanisms associated with fascist culture: obedience to a charismatic leader, ritual, surveillance, group superiority, hostility toward outsiders, and the surrender of individual responsibility. It helps explain how participation can grow through ordinary needs rather than through complete agreement with every act of violence. People may first support economic order, national pride, or social belonging and later find themselves within a system that punishes dissent (Grasshoff, 1981; Jones, 1976).

However, the classroom experiment must not be treated as a complete explanation of Nazi Germany. The Holocaust involved antisemitism, racial ideology, state bureaucracy, war, propaganda, law, dispossession, imprisonment, and industrialized mass murder. The Wave illustrates social psychology, but historical understanding requires attention to these political and institutional forces. The film is most responsible when used as an introduction to questions about conformity, not as a substitute for detailed Holocaust history.

Modern Application

The film remains relevant because peer pressure and authoritarian communication have not disappeared. Online communities can produce rapid belonging through hashtags, symbols, shared enemies, and repeated claims. Algorithms may expose users to increasingly uniform views, while fear of public attack discourages disagreement. A movement can create loyalty by telling members that outside information is corrupt and that criticism proves hostility. These patterns resemble The Wave's effort to make the group the primary source of identity and truth (Grasshoff, 1981).

The lesson also applies to racism, harassment, and terrorism, as the original essay argues, but the comparison should be precise. Not every strong group or shared campaign is authoritarian. The warning signs include punishment of questions, dehumanization of outsiders, demand for personal loyalty, unaccountable leadership, and the belief that group goals justify harm. Healthy solidarity permits criticism and protects the dignity of nonmembers.

Cinematography and Narrative Effect

The film's visual style supports its gradual transformation. Repeated classroom formations, salutes, uniforms, and crowded assemblies make the movement appear increasingly organized. The camera often shows students as a collective body rather than as separate individuals. This visual pattern

reinforces the theme that identity is being absorbed into the group. Close attention to faces also reveals excitement, fear, doubt, and shame beneath the synchronized behavior (Grasshoff, 1981).

The narrative resembles a thriller because ordinary school life becomes threatening without a conventional villain entering from outside. The danger grows from familiar relationships. The teacher is trusted, the students are recognizable, and the first rules seem reasonable. This structure makes the message effective: authoritarianism may develop through small accepted steps before its full consequences are visible.

Conclusion

The Wave teaches a powerful lesson about peer pressure, conformity, dictatorship, and autocratic leadership. Mr. Ross begins with the educational goal of helping students understand why people complied with Nazism. Through discipline, unity, ritual, and pride, the class develops a movement that rewards obedience and threatens dissent. Students who once believed they would resist fascism discover how quickly social belonging can influence judgment (Grasshoff, 1981; Jones, 1976).

The film's strongest message is that authoritarianism does not depend only on one cruel leader. It also depends on followers who monitor one another, people who remain silent, and institutions that allow power to expand without review. The students are not inherently evil, but they become capable of exclusion because conformity is made emotionally rewarding. Their experience demonstrates why moral courage requires questioning one's own group rather than criticizing only historical outsiders (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

The story remains applicable to bullying, racism, discrimination, harassment, political extremism, and online group behavior. Unity and communication can achieve valuable goals, but they become dangerous when they demand obedience and deny individual conscience. *The Wave* therefore asks every viewer to examine not only whether they would join an authoritarian movement, but whether they would notice its early stages and accept the cost of saying no.

References

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