



Film Review: Telling it and passing it on, rendering and remembering: On turning suffering into history—*Conspiracy*

Donald B. Moss

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Telling it and passing it on, rendering and remembering:

On turning suffering into history—*Conspiracy*

Director: Kenneth Branagh

Reviewed by

Donald B. Moss, 80 University Place, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10003, USA —
donaldmoss@mindspring.com

Introduction

Kenneth Branagh's film *Conspiracy* dramatizes the infamous Wannsee Conference where the Nazis formulated their final solution to the Jewish question. The film raises important and complex issues about the place of cultural products in the ongoing work of constructing historical narratives—the tasks of solidifying both private and public memory. Before addressing the film directly, I mean to sketch out some tactics and strategies through which psychoanalysis might be put to use in illuminating some of these complex issues.

Psychoanalysis has greatly expanded its original focus on the relations binding adult subjectivity to repression and memory. Freud's still apt conclusion that hysterics suffer from reminiscences has undergone a conceptual explosion. It is now all of us who both suffer and benefit from reminiscences—suffering and benefit so thickly woven together that we may no longer even possess a reliable measure by which to distinguish them. This intermingling grows particularly thick when the reminiscences in question have us suffering at the hands of others. When such memories press upon us in the form of an imperative to tell and retell what has happened, they often yield narratives with a stable, and familiar form: a past shaped by suffering, a present shaped by the pursuit of justice, and a future shaped by the promise of redemption. The recollection of suffering, retold in the present tense, provides structure and form to certain important aspects of the narrators' contemporary lives, contributing mightily to an ongoing sense of the necessary, the possible, and the moral—given that we have suffered, these are our limits; these are our rights; these are our hopes.

For many people—and peoples—recollected suffering can serve to sanction and license access to practices and desires that might otherwise remain forbidden and unavailable. As these people tell, write or in any way offer us their histories, then, we, their recipients, bear the obligation to keep in mind the complex relations that might bind past suffering and any implicit or explicit exercise of or application for contemporary and future license. We want to do with recollections of suffering something like what Freud meant to do, in 'A child is being beaten' (1920), with fantasies of suffering. We want to ask what special sanctions, or covert identifications, might be enabled by any particular narrated recollection of past sufferings. These potential enabling relations between recollected suffering

and contemporary practices—when operative—will both form and deform the content and structure of the histories we hear. In trying to identify the pertinent deformations, we—and our informants—share a common problem: the histories—the memorials—that perform this enabling work might have to conform to certain dynamic requirements. Both as interpreters, and as informants, we might not be able to identify all of those requirements since, as likely as not, some of them correspond to narrative requirements of our own.

When compliance with these enabling narrative requirements assumes highest priority, then the histories that conform to them can be called orthodox. In the sense I am meaning it here, the notion of orthodoxy would refer to any structured form of memory—any memorial—whose organization offered covert facilitating service to the realization of otherwise inaccessible contemporary/future interests. By implication, then, all coherent, structured forms of memory would, given this definition, include an orthodox dimension. All narrated memory, because it partially functions to foster contemporary and future interests, is thus susceptible to the demands of at least some narrative orthodoxies.

In orthodox narratives of suffering, contemporarily recollected pain—recollected in particular, and even prescribed, ways—loses its presumptive oppositional relationship to pleasure. Recollected pain may become the precondition for—and therefore an integral element of—access to both contemporary and future satisfactions. Orthodoxy of this sort functions at both clinical and social levels of articulation, when, say, a suffering past accounts for an exceptionally ruthless pursuit of justice now or, congruently, an ecstatic, and well-deserved, moment of redemption in the future.

Told and retold, recollected pain can also function to confer exceptional rights—we are all, I think, at least tempted to grant priority to the pursuit of redress. At all levels of historical narrative, memories of suffering can come to possess an aura, giving off a sense that they, like certain canonical works of art, are invaluable elements of a cherished identity, and ought, therefore, to remain undisturbed. This aura makes itself particularly evident in historical narratives that seed the future with the past's demands for retributive justice.

In historical narratives like this, recollected pain can function as coin in a covert and inaccessible economy. It circulates. When, later, it turns up as a key element in a historical narrative, at first we—the listeners, or readers, or viewers—have no reliable method by which to trace its path and the meanings it has accrued along the way. It is no wonder, then, that for more than a century we have disciplined ourselves to treat the memories and histories available to us—our own, our patients', our culture's—with what Paul Ricoeur has felicitously called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (1970, p. 88).

Where Freud's hysterics suffered from reminiscences, we can be said to suffer from representations. From the most private, idiosyncratic shred of recollection to the most public canonical cultural productions—from screen memory to the story of Moses, from family photographs to the history of Rome—whatever representations form, we want to know whom, or what, it is working for. None of us, I think, has actually encountered a cigar—its ostensibly empirical presence, or any of its

representations—that turned out, after consideration, to be just a cigar. What makes any cigar inevitably more than a cigar is its ineradicable function as record, as emblem. The cigar I hold in my hand bears within it the history of all cigars—a history of power, pleasure, dominion, satisfaction, masculinity etc. The story I tell you about my cigar—no matter how honest—temporarily effaces all the other stories lurking in that same cigar, and can only arbitrarily be segregated from the stories I do not and cannot tell.

Conspiracy offers us an opportunity to think over the competing interests that operate as the still volatile past of ‘Wannsee’ continues to press forward—and demand—its own solution: fixation and representation, once and for all. We can all now download the Conference protocol. We seem to have representational dominion over the Nazis. We can construct ‘Wannsee’ with fewer overt obligations and therefore with more apparent freedom than could our predecessors. I think an optimal psychoanalytic focus on the film would concentrate here, at the point where our memory of ‘Wannsee’ remains in-formation, where, roughly put, the felt obligation to preserve the unfinished vitality of our lost objects seems in direct competition with the felt obligation to encrypt and to be done with them.

Conspiracy begins with the participants’ arrivals. We are immediately presented with the familiar and—to a democratic audience—the contemptible swagger of power. We see an evil gathering of evil, gluttonous men. We see the chauffeurs and private airplanes, the ornate mansion, the frightened service staff, the fine food, the wine, the disdain and contempt for working people. The terrified service staff scrambles for its life as the meeting convenes.

From these opening shots, we know immediately that these men will be defeated. We know this not only because, in fact, they were defeated, but also—and here operates the orthodoxy I have in mind—because in movies like this men like this never win—never. The narrative orthodoxy I have in mind remembers and repeats and finally celebrates that ‘never’. Within the terms of this narrative, not only did the men of Wannsee not win but also, in principle, men like them, and conspiracies like theirs, will, in the end, never win. The film, then, ostensibly dramatizing the Nazi ‘conspiracy’ at Wannsee, more pointedly commemorates the ancient, and orthodox, historical narrative that foretells, via recollection, the Nazis’ eventual, and inevitable, defeat.

Nazi policy toward Jews—in both its development and in its final articulation at Wannsee—cannot reasonably be thought of as the product of ‘conspiracy’. Conspirators, and conspiracies, arise only when legitimate structures effectively interdict the conspirators’ intended activities. But, from 1933 on, the unlimited force and the unique particularity of the Nazi policy toward Jews derived from its malignant combination of explicit legal codification and open, public enactment. Banaugh’s film, in immediately, and directly, inviting us to think of Wannsee as the product of individuals linked by ‘conspiracy’, just as immediately, and indirectly, invites us away from thinking of Wannsee as a legitimate product of modern Europe, the same modern Europe whose orthodox narrative structures of recollection would render Wannsee’s legitimacy impossible. Structured as it is, the film cannot help but be blind to this crucial contradiction. The film employs an orthodox narrative

strategy to tell a story whose full telling might be impossible within the terms of that structure. In order to potentially consider Wannsee a legitimate product, rather than as a conspiratorial one, one might have to abandon orthodox—legitimate—narrative strategies.

In another reassuring gesture toward the familiar, Branauh casts himself in the role of Heydrich. We watch him as the ruthless chairman manipulating a cast of stock characters: the gluttonous acolyte, the deadly technocrats, the banal and obsequious Eichmann and, finally, the morally anguished bureaucrat who offers useless resistance. Hewing closely to a narrative line shaped by interpersonal and group dynamics, Branauh presents his 15 ‘conspirators’ as a cluster of familiar types—men contending, as these types always do, with the eternally thorny issues associated with power shorn of its limits. These were men who could do anything they wanted. In spite of the meeting’s historical singularity, the film’s narrative structure provides us with an uncanny, yet reassuring, sense that we have, indeed, seen, and survived, all of this before.

The interpretive problem presented by Branauh’s film is analogous to ones faced by psychoanalysts in clinical work. Patients employ particular narrative strategies to tell their stories. These strategies, repeated and protected to the point of orthodoxy, effectively prevent the consideration of certain alternative renderings of those stories. The psychoanalytic situation is designed to both expose the limits of these strategies of recollection and, when called for, to disrupt them. Theodor Adorno catches the cultural dimension of this clinical problem when he writes,

When society ... is presented as if good-will were enough to remove its faults ... it is very agreeable to be able thus to prove one’s capacities ... he who sets about cleaning up the house he lives in energetically enough, forgets the foundation it is built on (1950, p. 607).

Branauh’s film reminds us of the enormous range of possibilities that confronts us when we try to think and remember Wannsee. Our problem now, when facing this task, takes appropriate shape when, for instance, we read, recently, that Simon Wiesenthal has finished his work. ‘I found the mass murderers I was looking for, and I have outlived all of them. If there is a few I didn’t look for, they are now too old and fragile to stand trial. My work is done’ (*NY Times*, 18 April 2003). Wiesenthal’s work—finding and capturing Nazis—represents a literal, material version of our own work. Like Wiesenthal, we want the Nazis identified and found; we want none of them loose. Wiesenthal’s work is done. But what about ours? When are we finished? How do we tell? What can we use as measure? At any level, questions such as these, addressed to the problems of memory and history, representation and reconstruction, pose enormous difficulties. Perhaps we cannot reasonably hope to establish ideal standards against which historical narratives can be measured. What we can do, though, is to recognize the strictures that emerge whenever such narratives take on orthodox form. In cultural interpretation, as in clinical interpretation, psychoanalysis offers particularly sensitive means of detecting both the presence of such strictures and the formative and deforming force of such orthodoxies.

In clinical work, only the evidence of alternative possible histories validates our interpretive efforts to treat the presented history as an orthodox one. Transference

offers us a rich source for this kind of alternative evidence. In cultural work also, only the presence of alternatives can forcefully disturb the authority of a given narrative. For me, in viewing *Conspiracy*, the pertinent alternative narrative—the one I found useful in detecting the narrative orthodoxies of the film—came from the downloaded Protocol of the Wannsee Conference.

On the document

The Protocol (minutes) of the Wannsee Conference functions as *Conspiracy*'s founding document. Discovered during the investigatory phase of the Nuremberg trials, it provides us with our most direct information about the Conference.

The eight-page Protocol begins like this:

Stamp: Top Secret

30 copies

16th copy

Minutes of discussion.

I.

The following persons took part in the discussion about the final solution of the Jewish question which took place in Berlin, am Grossen Wannsee No. 56/58 on 20 January 1942.

The Protocol ends like this:

The meeting was closed with the request of the Chief of the Security Police and the SD to the participants that they afford him appropriate support during the carrying out of the tasks involved in the solution

(Wannsee Protocol, 20 January 1942).

Here, I think, is historical narrative shorn of familiar narrative orthodoxy. Nothing we have ever encountered prepares us for reading this—the flat, functional, open, direct tone, the roster of ‘the following persons’, the grotesque use of the words ‘discussion’ and ‘task’.

While Branaugh's *Conspiracy* seems to take us away from the historical particularity of Wannsee, the reading of the Protocol seems to drive us in to that particularity. The shadow of the Protocol necessarily falls over the film. As such, a consideration of the Protocol, as an alternative historical narrative, seems a necessary element of a proper consideration of the film.

On 31 July 1941, Reichsmarschall Hermann Goring sent the following order to Reinhardt Heydrich, head of the Nazi Security Service (SD), chief of the German security police,

Complementing the task that was assigned to you on 24 January 1939, which dealt with carrying out emigration and evacuation, I hereby charge you with making all necessary preparation with regard to organizational and financial matters for bringing about a complete solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe.

Wherever other governmental agencies are involved, they are to co-operate with you.

I request, furthermore, that you send me before long an over-all plan concerning the organizational, factual, and material measures necessary for the accomplishment of the Jewish question (quoted in Hilberg, 1979 [1960], p. 262).

Raul Hilberg writes in his definitive *The destruction of the European Jews*, that this order from Goring to Heydrich forms the conceptual foundation for the Wannsee Conference. This conceptual foundation is new. With it, Hilberg writes, ‘Europe’s centuries-old policy of expulsion was terminated and a new policy of annihilation was inaugurated’.

On 29 November 1941, Heydrich invited 15 ‘Staatssekretare and chiefs of SS main offices’ to Wannsee. In the invitation, Heydrich wrote that

considering the extraordinary importance which has to be conceded to these questions, and in the interest of achieving the same viewpoint by all central agencies concerned with the remaining work in connection with this final solution, I suggest that these problems be discussed in a conference (p. 263).

The conference convened at noon on 20 January 1942. It lasted only 85 minutes and was followed by a luncheon. At his trial, Adolf Eichmann, the conference’s recording secretary, recalled that Wannsee was the ‘first time in my life’, that

I had taken part in such a conference in which ... senior officials participated. It was conducted quietly and with much courtesy, with much friendliness. There was not much speaking and it did not last a long time. The waiters served cognac, and in this way it ended (quoted in Roseman, 2002).

Thirty copies of the Conference Protocol—minutes—were circulated throughout SS main offices. We know of only one copy that survived, discovered by the Allies in March 1947, during preparations for the Nuremberg trials. Used in the trial, and long in the public domain, the Conference Protocol is now infamous. In spite of having to contend with the thorny and still unsettled question of how to define ‘Jew’, the conference participants seem to have managed an orderly and efficient discussion. The Protocol seems consistent with Eichmann’s recollection—it records a meeting whose movement from start to finish was straightforward, precise and economical.

In important contrast to Branaugh’s film, it records a meeting in which personality plays no part. Reading this text, we find no persons; we find only function. It is here, in its total obliteration of personality—of drama—that the Protocol most pointedly contrasts with the rhythms and forms of orthodox historical reminiscence. There seems instead, perhaps to our horror, no story to tell.

The wish of the Reich Marshal to have a draft sent to him concerning organizational, factual and material interests in relation to the final solution of the Jewish question in Europe makes necessary an initial common action of all central offices immediately concerned with these questions in order to bring their general activities into line.

In carrying out these efforts, an increased and planned acceleration of the emigration of the Jews from the Reich was started, as the only possible present solution. The aim of all this was to cleanse German living space of Jews *in a legal manner* (transcript of the Wannsee Conference, my italics).

Measured and meticulous, the Protocol conveys a steady and stable pairing of violence and legality. Cool and restrained, it reads as the language of record

whenever we—all of us—meet to address our common problems. The participants at Wannsee are engaged in activities that can be described in familiar ways. They are ‘clarifying fundamental questions’; they aim to proceed ‘without great difficulty’; they move from an introductory phase to ‘a discussion of the following points, at first theoretically’... etc. Again, in stark contrast to *Conspiracy*, the Protocol’s quotidian form effectively blocks our urgent wish to entirely disidentify from its malevolent content. Anything but orthodox, the Wannsee Protocol is, in some sense, incomprehensible. Reading ‘Wannsee’, we brush up against what civilization, and so many of its memorializing orthodoxies, are organized to exclude.

Concluding remarks

Not least of what ‘Wannsee’ ought to have destroyed is our reflexive confidence in the structures of thought supporting Western civilization. That confidence—itself a cardinal element of much modern historical reminiscence—would have us feel that we in the West are safe from malignant regression as we move inexorably toward an enlightened future.

In employing a traditional set of narrative tropes to tell a traditional kind of story, Branaugh seems to be casting a vote of confidence in a tradition whose volatile underpinnings are brutally exposed by reading the Protocol. From its inception, psychoanalysis has offered a particularly acute set of perspectives on the volatile contingencies that yoke force to structure, violence to tradition. *Conspiracy*, like many an orthodox history warranting sustained psychoanalytic attention, seems to have blinded itself to such contingencies.

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