H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage. Marc Rothemund.

Reviewed by Christelle Le Faucheur (Department of History, University of Texas at Austin)

Published on H-German (March, 2006)

The World According to Sophie

February 17, 1943: two young women listen carefully to Billie Holliday's "Sugar" on the forbidden BBC station. They laugh and try, unsuccessfully, to sing with the lyrics. Then the face of Sophie Scholl (Julia Jentsch) turns serious: "I have to go" ("Ich mu gehen"). She leaves the apartment without further explanation and walks through the streets of Munich, "blacked out" because of the bombing. In a painter's atelier she meets her brother Hans (Fabian Hinrichs) and their friends Alexander Schmorell and Willi Graf. The members of the Weie Rose, an anti-Nazi resistance group, spend the night printing and mailing hundreds of copies of their sixth flyer, entitled "Kommilitoninnen! Kommilitonen!" <p> While distributing flyers at the university the next day, the siblings are caught by the superintendent, who calls the Gestapo. During four days of interrogation, the 21-year-old student, Sophie, manages at first to evade the questioning official Robert Mohr and to convince him of her innocence. When the incriminating evidence accumulates and Hans finally confesses everything, Sophie, while trying to protect the other group members, vindicates her ideals: "I am proud of it" ("Ich bin stolz darauf"). She argues with Mohr about the differences between bureaucracy and democracy, arbitrariness and freedom, laws and conscience. On February 22, 1943, the Scholls and their aide Christoph Probst are accused of high treason and sentenced to death in a show trial. In the following weeks, more members of the Weie Rose are either executed or imprisoned. <p> Despite Thomas Mann's radio announcement in 1943 and Bundesprsident Theodor Heuss's speech in 1953, the story of the Weie Rose underwent a long and uneasy process toward official acknowledgement. In 1982 two films played an important part in this process. While Percy Adlon's <cite>Fnf letzte Tage</cite> depicted an almost mystical, holy Sophie Scholl through the eyes of her cellmate Else Gebel, Michael Verhoeven's <cite>Die Weie Rose</cite> reconstituted the system and organization of the group, stressing the importance of environment, network and education. Verhoeven consciously participated in the difficult process of German <cite>Vergangenheitsbewltigung</cite> (coming to terms with the past). At a time when the sentences of the Nazi judges were still valid, he asked in a preview of his film for their sentences to be vacated. His film was banned from Goethe Institutes and school screenings, but the issue reached the Bundestag, which, in 1985, finally acknowledged the criminal qualities of the <cite>Volksgerichtshof</cite> that pronounced these sentences. The Weie Rose members were no longer officially criminals and their story became a mandatory topic in schools. Twenty years later, the story's institutionalization is testified to by the numerous schools and streets named after the Scholl siblings. <p> These disputes are long forgotten. When film director Marc Rothemund expressed his interest in the story to his screen writer and producer Fred Breinersdorf, the latter's reaction illustrates his boredom about the topic: "Schulfunk" ("school material") was his answer. But for the director, born in 1968, this story was not reminiscent of a marble plaque but instead evoked a strongly unique and inspiring story. Like the directors of recent German films about the National Socialist period (Oliver Hirschbiegel with <cite>Der Untergang</cite>

(2005, <cite>The Downfall</cite>) and Dennis Gansel with <cite>Napola, Elite fr den Fhrer</cite> (2005, which just opened in the United States as <cite>Before the Fall</cite>), these thirty-something directors and their works seem to exemplify a shift in the treatment of the topic based on generational differences. Unlike <cite>Der Untergang</cite>, which prided itself on the historical facts drawn from the life of Traudl Junge, the project of <cite>Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage</cite> was born out of new access to materials following the opening of the GDR archives. Fascinating documents such as the transcripts of the interrogations had been hidden in the archives, largely because the Weie Rose's story–that of a middle- and upper-class group–did not fit with the official discourse of working-class, communist-based and organized resistance.[1] Similarly, such communist resistance activities found no acknowledgement in West Germany, nor have they yet in reunified Germany. <p> Based on these archival materials, the film is a depiction of the last day of the main character and aims at detailed, almost fastidious historical reconstructions, in a manner that critics have commented upon as the hallmark of a new neo-realistic trend in German cinema. Andr Hennicke's performance as the screaming, hysterical People's Court President Freisler, which many viewers judged exaggerated, is based on contemporary film recordings and is actually a subdued representation of his fanaticism. <p> Although the film is mainly based on the interrogation transcript, this problematic source, with its official and biased language, has been supplemented by additional materials: Sophie's letters; Else Gebel's and Robert Mohr's testimonies; and quotes from the flyers. The filmmaker also interviewed Willi Mohr, son of Robert Mohr, and Else Gebel's nephew, Walter. As director Marc Rothemund explains, focus is placed on actual words and their expression. The direction is minimal: shot, counter shot. No opulent set, no explosions. The film takes mainly place in the dark and oppressive interrogation room, interspersed with scenes from the cell Sophie Scholl shared with Else Gebel. Reminiscent of Romuald Karmakar's <cite>Der Totmacher</cite> (1995) and Vlker Schlndorff's <cite>Der neunte Tag</cite> (2004), <cite>Sophie Scholl</cite> is a "Kammerspiel," a chamber play with an aesthetic that has been rightfully criticized as too reminiscent of TV shows. <p> Disappointing also are some questionable musical choices and the heavy-handed use of religious symbols. Sophie prays three times in the film and looks anxiously at crucifixes, while Gestapo-man Mohr washes his hand like Pontius Pilate after Sophie's execution. The film depicts Sophie's civil courage as an implacable fight against the abstract system of the National Socialist state and tends to present her as a modern martyr. She refuses Mohr's "golden bridge"–his offer to allow her to distance herself from the group and its actions and thus save her life. The awe she produces among the audience might inhibit identification, an obvious goal of the filmmaker. <p> Although the material and the story itself require it, this focus solely on the character of Sophie is problematic. By reducing the story to very few characters, the movie follows the broader trend towards individualization in recent German movies about the National Socialist period. Although it offers interesting perspectives, such a focus continues the cinematographic tradition of non-engagement on the part of the German population as a whole. The film thus presents us with the familiar division between Nazis and Germans and Nazis and Wehrmacht officers, especially in the trial scene. Giving an emotional speech, Hans Scholl denounces the situation on the eastern front, provoking some officers to bend their heads in tacit acknowledgment and shame. The figure of Mohr offers the viewer a nuanced character–not the typical sadistic, violent National Socialist officer, but on the contrary a thoughtful and articulate Gestapo agent whose background explains some of his beliefs and convictions. This almost sympathetic character prevents the delineation of the brutality of the National Socialist regime, which is "only" exemplified in the trial scene. This moving scene is impressive but too short to correct the image of a sensitive Nazi personality. <p> Considering the wave of National Socialist-theme films during 2004-05 and the danger of an overdose of the topic, <cite>Sophie Scholl</cite> has been surprisingly successful in Germany. The film offers neither big stunts nor action, nor was it accompanied and promoted by critical debates, such as the ones surrounding <cite>Der Untergang</cite>. The story and especially its end are well known. The canonical status of Sophie Scholl has probably attracted many viewers, especially young people, who might have had previous knowledge of the story through school and might have found identification with her possible. This factor might explain the stark difference in audience numbers to <cite>Der neunte Tag</cite>, which (despite many topical similarities with <cite>Sophie Scholl</cite>), was a flop at the German box office. Additionally, the reason for this film's greater success might also be rooted in the marketing done by its producers, especially in their focus on the actress Julia Jentsch. Since her performance in <cite>Die fetten Jahren sind vorbei</cite> (2004, which just opened in the United States as <cite>The Edukators</cite>), di-

rected by Hans Weingartner, which was the first German film in eighteen years to be nominated at the Cannes film festival and was a box office success, Julia Jentsch has been acclaimed as the new (female) face of German cinema. She indeed "carries" the movie and her well-deserved award as best actress at the Deutsche Film Preise confirmed the <cite>Silberner Br</cite> she received at the Berlin Film Festival in 2004. Jentsch represents for many a welcome change from the controversial Sibel Kekilli, the German-Turkish actress who won the previous prize for her role in <cite>Head On</cite> (2004) and was subsequently lambasted for her turbulent past as a porn star. The tabloids praised the 26-year-old Jentsch, who embodies many values that the audience (not only young men and women between 15 and 28, but the broad German population as well) can identify with. Public accounts often stress her theatrical background, which is connected with industriousness and seriousness; her engagement; and her maturity. The roles she plays are of strong women who fight, and often lose, but never forfeit their convictions. It is open to question whether Jensch will be able to continue her judicious choice of roles and capitalize on her current success, or if she will disappear into cinematographic oblivion the way the star of <cite>Run Lola Run</cite> (1998), Franka Potente, did. <p> By allowing us a glance into the main character's thoughts and feelings, <cite>Sophie Scholl</cite> is an important political film, an example of debates about and confrontations with repressive political regimes. If the few available German viewers' comments are representative, the film has already achieved its goal of increasing awareness of such issues. The planned released of the film in the United States this year will offer American audiences a good introduction to a topic largely unknown to them.[2] <p> Notes <p> [1]. These documents as well as the screenplay and further materials have been published. See Fred Breinersdorfer, ed., <cite>Sophie Scholl: Die letzen Tage </cite> (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005). <p> [2]. In addition to the above-mentioned book, the film company offers (in cooperation with the <cite>Bundeszentrale fr politische Bildung</cite>) a <cite>Filmheft</cite>, which can be downloaded at www.sophiescholl-derfilm.de or www.bpb.de/sophiescholl . For sources in English, see Inge Jens, ed., <cite>At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl</cite>, trans. J. Maxwell Brownjohn (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

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Citation: Christelle Le Faucheur. Review of , *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15461

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