

***Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage* – Transcript**

Today I am going to talk about the film, *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage* and, in particular, how the director tries to show the main character, Sophie, as an ordinary young woman with whom the audience can identify. I'll start with an introduction to Sophie Scholl and the group she belonged to, the Weiße Rose. I'll then outline the plot of the film and discuss the aims of the director, before examining in closer detail how the filmmakers present Sophie Scholl.

Sophie Scholl and The Weiße Rose

Sophie Scholl was born in 1921. She grew up in a religious household in the state of Baden-Württemberg. When she was twelve, Sophie joined the Bund Deutscher Mädel, a National Socialist youth group for girls, which was quite normal for girls of her age in 1933. However, after the National Socialists introduced the Nuremberg Laws in 1936 which stripped Jewish citizens of their basic rights, she left the organisation. In 1942, she started a degree in biology and philosophy at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. Her older brother, Hans, was studying medicine there and he introduced Sophie to his friends. At first the friends were united by their religious beliefs and their love of outdoor activities. Soon, however, their collective opposition to the National Socialist regime became their core unifying feature and the group became known as the Weiße Rose.

There were around twenty people in the Weiße Rose, of which six were core members including Sophie and her brother, Hans. They opposed the National Socialist regime by distributing leaflets and spreading graffiti in the university and around Munich. The leaflets called for non-violent opposition and urged people to rise up against the National Socialists and included phrases such as:

- Hitler kann den Krieg nicht gewinnen, nur noch verlegen!
- Deutsche! Wollt Ihr und Eure Kinder dasselbe Schicksal erleiden, das den Juden widerfahren ist?

- and

- Jedes Wort, das aus Hitlers Munde kommt, ist Lüge.

The Gestapo, the secret police force in the Third Reich, began trying to track down who was publishing and distributing the leaflets, and on 18 February 1943 Sophie and Hans Scholl were arrested on suspicion of distributing leaflets at their university. They were questioned by the Gestapo officer, Robert Mohr. Although the pair initially denied having anything to do with leaflets, they eventually confessed in an attempt to protect the other members. But the Gestapo traced the other members who were arrested over the course of the following weeks and months. Just four days later, Sophie stood trial for high treason with her brother and another member of the group, Christoph Probst. They were sentenced to death and executed the same day. Other members of the group were later tried and also sentenced to death. One of the greatest achievements of the Weiße Rose possibly came after the group members had been arrested and executed: a copy of the final leaflet was smuggled out of Germany and dropped by the British air force all over Germany.

The Film

As the title of the film suggests, *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage* focuses on Sophie Scholl and the five days leading up to her execution. The film was directed by Marc Rothemund and released in 2005. Early in the film, we see Sophie and her brother, Hans, leaving leaflets outside classrooms in the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. Sophie tells Hans that they still have leaflets left over and they decide to leave some in the gallery of the hall. As

they leave, Sophie pushes a pile of leaflets off the balcony and they fall to the ground, covering the hall below. As the pair tries to leave, they are stopped by the university porter who accuses them of being behind the leaflets and he detains them until the police comes.

These opening fifteen minutes set the scene for the rest of the film which focuses on the interrogation of Sophie by the Gestapo officer, Robert Mohr. In a series of interviews which are based on documents found in the German archives, Sophie explains calmly to Mohr why she wanted to act against the state and, although Mohr vehemently disagrees with her, it's clear that he is impressed by her strength of belief. He even offers her a way out: if she says she had nothing to do with it and instead blames Hans, she will receive a far more lenient sentence. But she rejects this saying:

Ich würde es genauso wieder machen, denn nicht ich, sondern Sie haben die falsche Weltanschauung. Ich bin nach wie vor der Meinung, dass ich das Beste für mein Volk getan habe. Ich bereue das nicht, und ich will die Folgen dafür auf mich nehmen.

The following day, Sophie and the others appear in the so-called *Volksgerichtshof* or People's Court charged with high treason. The judge is the notorious Roland Freisler, who often presided over such cases and was known for his ruthlessness. For example, the *Volksgerichtshof* was in existence from 1934 to 1945, and Freisler was the presiding judge between 1942 and 1945. During these three years, he handed out more death sentences (around 2600) than the other three judges who were in charge put together. Sophie, Hans and Christoph Probst, who was on trial with them, are all sentenced to death and the final scene shows them being executed by guillotine.

What were the director's aims?

The story of Sophie Scholl and the Weiße Rose has already been told on film. There are two such films, both made in 1982: Percy Adlon's *Fünf letzte Tage*, and Michael Verhoeven's *Die Weiße Rose*. Marc Rothemund's film is different from the 1980s films in three important ways:

1. Rothemund concentrates solely on Sophie and he restricts his film to her final five days. Michael Verhoeven's film looks at the whole group and his film actually ends where *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage* begins, i.e. with her arrest.
2. Unlike Percy Adlon's film, which does focus on Sophie and her final days, Rothemund isn't particularly interested in Sophie's political motivations. In fact, in the 2005 film, we learn very little about her political opposition to the state. The screenplay writer Fred Breinersdorfer said he wanted to make 'ein Film mit spannenden, emotionalen Szenen [...], in dem uns Sophie Scholl als Mensch und nicht als "Heldin" ans Herz wachsen sollte'.

And this brings us to the third point

3. Rothemund and Breinersdorfer wanted to make a film which allowed the audience to identify with Sophie. It's this point which I'll be examining in closer detail today.

Resistance in the Third Reich

Without taking away from the fact that Sophie Scholl died at the hands of the National Socialist state, her actions were hardly going to change the course of history. After all, all the group did was distribute leaflets. They weren't going to bring down the state any more than listening to banned music would, which we see Sophie do in the very first scene. Sophie's older sister, Inge Scholl, later said:

They didn't do anything superhuman. They defended something simple, stood up for something simple, for the right and freedom of individuals [...] They did not sacrifice themselves for any extraordinary idea, pursued no great goals; what they wanted was that people like you and I should be able to live in a humane world (cited in Evans 2011:66)

And this is why what happened to Sophie and the other members is particularly important. The fact that all they did was distribute leaflets and that they were punished so harshly certainly makes them a particularly striking example. The director said he didn't want to tell the story of 'Eliten oder Soldaten' like Claus von Stauffenberg, who was an army officer and aristocrat who tried to blow up Hitler in 1944, but rather of an ordinary young person. Rothmund decided to focus specifically on Sophie rather than Hans Scholl because Hans 'ist der politische Kopf von Anfang an, ein Intellektueller, ein Kämpfer'. Sophie, on the other hand, was not only an 'engagierte junge Frau, sondern auch die ganz normale Studentin' (Köhler 2005). We can see several ways how the director stresses Sophie's normality in the film.

Humanising Sophie

Why would a director feel the need to humanise Sophie Scholl? One German academic has called the Weiße Rose the 'cornerstone of West German remembrance and resistance' of the Second World War, and we can see the continued importance of the Scholls in Germany today. In 2003, the German television channel ZDF launched a series called 'Unsere Besten' in which the Scholls were named the fourth most important Germans in history after Konrad Adenauer, Martin Luther and Karl Marx. In the same year, a marble bust of Sophie Scholl was placed in Walhalla, which is a monument dedicated to famous Germans.

To put it bluntly, there weren't many resisters Germans could celebrate and the pool they could choose from was really quite small. The Scholls were young, they weren't Communist (which during the Cold War was important in West Germany) and they had strong moral beliefs. There was something very ordinary about the Scholls and a sense that, whilst what they did was very brave, anyone could have done it so they were able to serve as role models for a post-fascist generation. But it was this ordinariness that led them to becoming extraordinary. The screenplay writer of *Sophie Scholl*, Fred Breinersdorfer, is quoted as saying, 'Sophie Scholl ist die einzige deutsche Heldin, die wir haben', and this reverence certainly appears to be borne out in German society (Berghahn 2009: 119). More schools have been named after them than any other person in Germany, stamps were released with their picture, student halls of residence are named after them, and so are several public spaces. As one historian has argued, the Scholls became 'a heroic image of infallibility' (Hamilton 2013:155). Whilst describing Sophie as Germany's only heroine, the screenplay writer, Breinersdorfer, nevertheless conceded that the figure of Sophie Scholl had become increasingly detached from the actual person. She was, he said, 'jemand der immer auf einem Sockel steht, nach der Schulen benannt sind' (Hamilton 2013: 151). Instead, he wanted to take Sophie off this pedestal and show her as an ordinary young person so people could better relate to her.

How does he do this? As the title tells us, the film is set in the final five days of her life when she is being interrogated by the Gestapo officer, Mohr. However, the most exciting thing that happens in terms of action is that Sophie pushes a pile of leaflets off a balcony. Compare this to films like *Valkyrie* (Singer 2008) where we see Stauffenberg plant a bomb and plot to overthrow the state, or even Verhoeven's film *Die Weiße Rose* where we at least see the group print and distribute leaflets throughout the film. The fact that the film's only example of Sophie doing something which could be called resistance occurs in the first fifteen minutes

of a 120-minute film. The fact that the cause of Sophie's arrest takes up so little screen time tells us that the director is far less interested in questions of 'what', than of 'who' and 'why'.

Presenting Sophie Scholl

The very first time we see Sophie, she is listening to a song by the jazz singer, Billie Holiday called 'Sugar'. Listening to jazz music was actually banned in the Third Reich because it was considered a type of 'degenerate music' or 'entartete Musik', and, in the case of jazz, an example of 'Negermusik' or 'negro music'. The National Socialists promoted traditional German folk songs and classical music, whilst attacking modern music or music made by types of people it considered 'un-German' such as Jews or, in this case, black musicians. This is a really important scene in the film because it introduces two key ideas from the very start. Firstly, Sophie is a normal young woman. We see Sophie singing along to a song with her friend; something really quite normal to which we, the audience, can relate. Throughout the film, Sophie is shown as a friend, a sister, a daughter, a student. She dresses simply and there is a clear sense she really could be anyone. Added to this is the fact that although what Sophie is doing is illegal in the Third Reich, it really is quite insignificant: she is just listening to music.

Our identification with Sophie is facilitated by the way the character is shown on screen. Far more than any other character in the film, we generally see Sophie in medium close-up shots which means when she appears on screen, it's her head and shoulders – not her full body – we see. This is a common technique used by filmmakers to make us feel closer to particular characters because their face appears bigger and closer to us when we watch them. Secondly, Sophie is in nearly every scene in the film. Although we don't see events through her eyes, we only learn about events when she does. In this regard, it is significant that when she is

executed the screen goes black even though two more executions take place: if Sophie can't see the executions, neither can we.

The film makes it quite clear why Sophie does what she does. She decides to act because she believes what the state is doing is wrong. There are no great heroics, no explosions, no chases. She remains calm throughout and never loses her temper. We can't help thinking she might have been naïve, but there is no doubting she was sincere. When explaining why Sophie chose to act against the regime, the directors show us that Sophie's faith played an important role. We see her praying, she emphasises the importance of her faith during her interrogation with Mohr, and she is repeatedly shown looking up to the skies. Again, the director is emphasising the importance of individual faith and, although this is shown as religious faith in the film, we can easily understand this to also mean morals or a belief in doing the right thing.

The filmmakers want their audience, in particular their younger audience members, to draw inspiration from Sophie. It would be quite hard to do this if Sophie were a resister in the mould of Claus von Stauffenberg or even the Communist resisters celebrated in East Germany such as Ernst Thälmann, because these resisters did quite exceptional things: they carried out attempted assassinations or led political movements. Sophie was an ordinary girl who handed out leaflets because National Socialism was diametrically opposed to her morals.

Now, the film isn't without its problems. There are two instances when the film risks contradicting itself by showing Sophie as someone who is quite exceptional which risks distancing her from the audience instead of 'normalising' her. The first example is in the prison cell. We see a crying Sophie with her back against the wall, looking up to the sky for inspiration and strength. This image, or shot as we call it in film studies, is actually a copy of a famous scene in a film called *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Dreyer 1928). It seems no

coincidence that Joan of Arc was also a young woman who died defending her faith, albeit in a very different manner to Sophie, and she is widely considered a martyr. The problem here is that martyrs are singled out for their exceptional action and are put on a pedestal and celebrated. By seeming to compare these two figures by recreating the shot of Joan of Arc in *Sophie Scholl*, is the director suggesting that we see Sophie as a modern-day Joan of Arc and, if he is, does this work against his efforts to 'normalise' Sophie?

The second problem lies in the very last scene of the film. After we learn of the fate of Sophie and the other group members, the director includes a scene of leaflets falling to the ground having been dropped by the RAF. On the one hand, this is a clear reference to Sophie's incidental decision to push a pile of leaflets off the balcony; a decision which, as we have just seen, cost her her life. But, on the other hand, the sight of white paper falling to the ground also reminds us of snow, and image of snow falling to earth after a character has died is actually quite a common technique in films to signal that a happy resolution has been achieved. Does the use of this cinematic technique suggest that Sophie is now at peace and that, in the end, everything will be alright because of Sophie Scholl? History suggests otherwise: many students publically applauded when they heard she had been executed, and no historian has claimed that the Weiße Rose brought about the collapse of fascism. Surely her death is so poignant *because* she was so harshly persecuted *despite* the fact her actions were never going to really endanger the future of the state? Do the filmmakers imply there is a happy ending? As I discussed earlier, we see the rest of the film from Sophie's perspective; i.e. we can only see what Sophie sees. The final sequence also breaks with way this of presenting events. Would it have been better if the film had ended with Sophie's execution?

Conclusion

Of course, the question, ‘Would it have been better if the film had ended with Sophie’s execution?’ depends entirely on what we mean by ‘better’. There is little doubt that *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage* shows us the figure of Sophie Scholl as a young woman motivated by a quite simple belief that National Socialism was wrong. She carries out a minor act of resistance, but is most harshly and disproportionately punished for it. We see why she acted as she did and, as a result, it becomes easier to identify with the character. Distributing leaflets is something anyone could do and it makes us think to what lengths we would go if we believed something was wrong. As I discussed, the film isn’t without its problems. Sometimes the director does seem to glorify Sophie as a type of martyr and the film’s ending could be seen as an attempt to add a happy ending to a film which really didn’t have one.

But, despite the fact that *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage* is based on a real person and a real event, it is also worth asking whether the film is actually first and foremost about Sophie Scholl and what she actually did, or whether the filmmakers are trying to do something else with the figure of Sophie Scholl and her story. Rather than making a film about a historical figure of the past, are the filmmakers actually trying to turn Sophie Scholl into an example for people today?

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