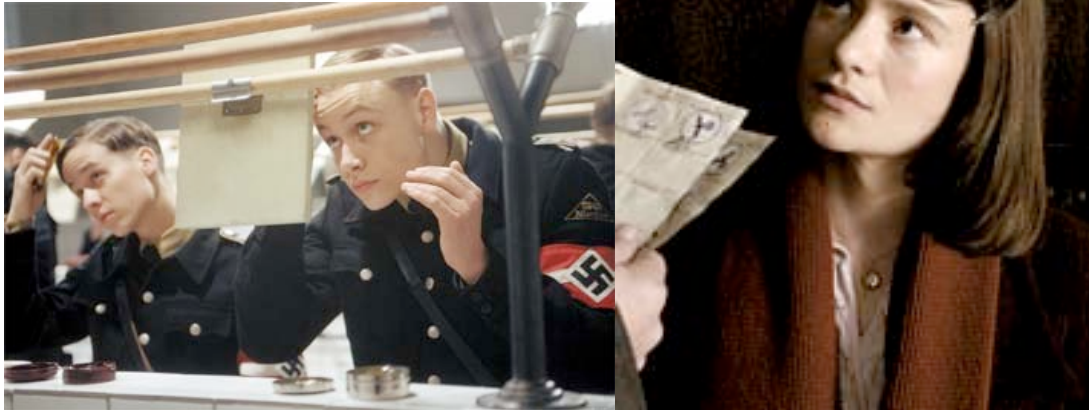


Screen studies: History lessons

Yenni Kwok in Hamburg



Stills from *Napola*, left, and *Sophie Scholl*.

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once warned that the "lessons well learnt in youth are never forgotten".

For Germans, that lesson is taught through their Nazi history. The crimes of the Third Reich fill history books, and schools organise trips to Holocaust museums and former concentration camps.

Adolf Hitler and the Nazis have always been portrayed as the ultimate evil. But, 60 years after the second world war, young German filmmakers are confronting the complexity of their country's Nazi past.

Reflecting this trend is the award-winning *Sophie Scholl - The Final Days* and *Napola*. They're among four Nazi-themed films selected by the Goethe-Institut for this month's MAX! film festival's History Revisited section.

Sophie Scholl, directed by Marc Rothemund, examines the title character's gruelling interrogation by the Gestapo for her role in a resistance group. Dennis Gansel's *Napola* focuses on two men who attend the Nazis' elite National Political Academy (Napola).

"In recent years, there has been renewed interest among young German filmmakers in revisiting that dark chapter of our history," says Michael Mueller-Verweyen, director of the Goethe-Institut Hong Kong. "They have no first-hand experience of the war, yet they're interested in looking back to

what happened some 60 years ago."

The movies have a different approach to Nazi history from that of their predecessors. "Previous films tended to be political and intellectual," says Rothmund, 37. He takes as an example *The White Rose*, a 1982 movie depicts the heroism of the resistance movement. "In that film, Sophie Scholl is portrayed as a strong character, and she's not allowed to cry."

In contrast, "the new generation of filmmakers shoot emotional movies", he says.

"The recent films have lost a bit of political correctness," says Gansel, 32. "Not every Nazi is portrayed as a very bad person. My parents' generation tried to discuss the war with my grandparents, but they ended up yelling at each other. I guess it takes another generation to listen to the stories."

In *Sophie Scholl* and *Napola*, the Nazi sympathisers aren't portrayed as devils, and the anti-Nazis aren't saints.

A landmark film of this recent movement is *The Downfall*. Directed by 48-year-old Oliver Hirschbiegel, it shows the human side of Hitler in his Berlin bunker during his last 12 days. "For the first time, he is shown as a person," Mueller-Verweyen says.

The movie generated media interest when it premiered in Germany last year, but it sparked little moral indignation.

Gansel, who won best director at the Bavarian Film Festival last year for *Napola*, says he wanted to tell a story about how the Nazi regime attracted so many members. "It's about psychology and seduction," he says. "And how the Nazis got 80 million people on their path."

Although his characters are fictional, Gansel conducted extensive research, studying archives, visiting six Napolas and interviewing 15 ex-students, to make his film as accurate as possible.

But the inspiration came from his family. "My grandfather studied and later taught at the National War Academy, another Nazi elite school. He told me a lot about the system, and I think he was a bit seduced by it."

Napola is the story of 17-year-old Friedrich (Max Riemelt), who enthusiastically embraces Nazi principles, but befriends pacifist student Albrecht (Tom Schilling), who slowly changes him.

Sophie Scholl, based on a true story, paints a psychological duel between the 21-year-old heroine and her Gestapo interrogator. Sophie (Julia Jentsch) swings between fear and courage, lies and idealism. Moved by her bravery, interrogator Robert Mohr (Alexander Held) even tries to save her life.

"It's an interesting journey of two different characters' hearts and minds," Rothemund says. "Sophie Scholl wasn't born a heroine, and the interrogator was not a cruel person."

Like *Napola*, *Sophie Scholl* (which won the best actress and best director awards at the Berlin International Film Festival this year) has been praised for its mixture of art and history.

Rothemund did his homework, visiting museums, and studying interrogation transcripts and execution documents. He also interviewed the relatives of Mohr, Scholl and her prison cellmate.

Isn't there a risk in portraying the Nazis as sympathetic figures that their crimes will be considered less monstrous? The director of *Napola* doesn't think so. "If you show people who did evil things as merely evil, you won't be honest," Gansel says. "Evil is often done by good-looking, sympathetic and sometimes charming people. That is human."

Rothemund says it's important for German filmmakers to continue making films about Nazism. "The young people don't watch the older movies, so each generation needs its own films. Don't let history repeat itself, don't let people forget."

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