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The Reality of Evil in *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*

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Jake Johnson

Jake is a political science student from Colorado Springs, Colorado who enjoys reading, writing, and having deep conversations with friends and family. When I am not studying, I spend most of my time with people, whether it is playing sports, serving through campus involvement, or engaging in residence life.

The Reality of Evil in *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*

The golden rays of the sun illuminate Sophie's face as she looks upward. Two men march her briskly through a brightly lit courtyard and open a small, gray door for her to enter. A government official sits at a table and delivers her sentence without emotion. Sophie, with a stoic yet content countenance, listens to the man and proceeds to walk into an adjacent room. In the middle of the simple, white walled room stands a razor-sharp guillotine, anxious to administer the judgement of the German government. The two men lay her on the table and swiftly move her into position. Her face remains unchanged. Accepting her fate, Sophie lies in wait of the punishment given to free thinkers. The guillotine plummets. The screen goes black. Loud thuds echo in the darkness. This thought-provoking final scene to *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* attempts to cause moviegoers to search introspectively and ask themselves if they have the same courage that Sophie displays in her final minutes. Movie critics Chris Campbell and Stephen Holden were among the thousands to view this historically based,

award winning depiction of Sophie's final stand. Although Chris Campbell and Stephen Holden both acclaim the acting and directing in *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, Campbell's review provides a more comprehensive analysis of evil's nature within the film.

Both Campbell and Holden laud the production of the film. Writing for *Laissez Faire Today*, Chris Campbell praises director Marc Rothemund's work, saying that, "this brilliantly crafted film deserves every syllable of praise. It is confirmation that German filmmaking, which has been in decline since the 1970s, is reestablishing its reputation for innovation and excellence." He supports his claim by citing numerous awards that the film has received from the Berlin Film Festival, the German Film Awards, and the European Film Awards. Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* echoes Campbell's praise in his review of the film. Holden holds a high view of the film's production, saying that, "This gripping true story, directed in cool, semi-documentary style by the German filmmaker Marc Rothemund... challenges you to gauge your own courage and strength of character should you find yourself in similar circumstances." Both critics recognize Rothemund's incredibly skillfully use of cinematography to create an awe-inspiring, challenging film that rises above mere entertainment.

In addition to the film's directing and execution, the two critics mutually commend the phenomenal acting of Julia Jentsch—the actress who plays Sophie Scholl. Campbell points to her accolades and awards as a testament to her work, and Holden describes her portrayal of Sophie as all "the more impressive for its

complete lack of histrionics.” Jentsch’s restrained, fiery passion—displayed in her every word, act, and prayer—powerfully portrays the real Sophie Scholl in a way never done before in German filmmaking.

Although Campbell and Holden agree on the film’s impressive cinematography, their views begin to diverge concerning the nature of the film’s plotline. Campbell views *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* as “one of those rare movies that maintain tension and suspense even though the outcome is known from the beginning shot.” In contrast, Holden believes that the film “pointedly steers away from unnecessary melodrama and sentimentality to deliver a crisp chronology of events told entirely from Sophie’s perspective.” While Campbell identifies substantial amounts of emotional tension and suspense within the film, Holden does not perceive the obvious melodrama. In response to the scene where Sophie distributes seditious leaflets on the University of Munich’s campus, Holden fails to recognize any exaggeration of intrigue and says that, “the movie refuses to underline the built-in suspense.” This is entirely untrue. While Sophie and her brother Hans hurriedly spread out the leaflets, action packed, suspenseful music plays in the background. At this point in the story, Sophie’s life escapes from the realm of safe sedition; her opposition, freedom, and life depend on escaping capture. This creates a substantial amount of tension in the film. Campbell elucidates on this point saying “suspenseful music sometimes sounds like a beating heart, sometimes like a ticking clock. It is Sophie’s life that is ticking.” Even though the movie’s

title makes the ending obvious, suspense and intrigue still permeate *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*.

While both critics give the film favorable reviews, Campbell's analysis presents a fuller, deeper examination of evil within the film. Holden's analysis gives a cheap, shallow evaluation of the film's theme by saying, "An optimistic, life-loving student with a boyfriend and a rich future ahead of her, [Sophie] is the kind of decent, principled person we would all like to be." Instead of analyzing Sophie's layered, complex character along with her moral convictions and emotions, Holden settles for an extremely oversimplified review of her 'decency' and fails to address the theme of evil that pervades the film. Campbell, on the other hand, examines the film with more intention and recognizes that Rothmund's thematic depiction of Sophie's fight with evil is extremely moving and scarily accurate. He contrasts the film's accuracy with modern-day Hollywood's explicitly evil depiction of Nazis, saying that it "loses the subtlety that allowed Nazism to become a part of everyday life in a modern, educated nation." Despite Hollywood's error, *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* accurately illustrates how Nazism became commonplace in Germany's government and the country at large. Sophie lives in a country where government officials fulfill their duties without thought to an ultimate moral law and, instead, view the German law as supreme. Campbell substantiates this point by describing Sophie's prosecutors as "morally dead—that is, they have become true bureaucrats who are just doing a job—or they are shaken by the simple truth and bravery of her being." He argues that—as a result of this mindless obedience to the law—markedly repugnant

evil becomes banal. Unlike Holden, Campbell truly understands and appreciates the film's accurate depiction of how evil slowly worked its way into the common citizenry of Germany and its powerful effect on Sophie's life.

Even though both Campbell and Holden believe that *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* contains remarkable acting and directing, Campbell provides a deeper understanding of evil's nature within the film. Holden gives an excellent review of the movie's production but falls short when he analyzes the film's theme. As recognized by Campbell, the common acceptance—or banality of evil—provides another level of depth and accuracy within the film. While Holden settles for a shallow review of the film's theme, Campbell dives into the movie and gives his readers a comprehensive analysis of evil in *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*.

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