

Dennis Gansel's Before the Fall

# Training schools for Hitler's "Thousand-Year Reich"

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Before the Fall (Napola—Elite für den Führer), *directed by Dennis Gansel, written by Gansel and Maggie Peren; Thank You for Smoking, written and directed by Jason Reitman, based on the novel by Christopher Buckley*

The National-Political Institutes of Learning ("Napolas") were established to train the elite of Hitler's "Thousand-Year Reich." A Napola secondary school education was the prototypical grooming for the Nazi political hierarchy. Creating this elite involved indoctrination to break down mental and physical resistance and produce a core of unscrupulous men and women blindly devoted to the Führer and the new German "master race."

Set in 1942, during a major German offensive in World War II, *Before the Fall (Napola —Elite für den Führer)* by German director Dennis Gansel, centers on a Napola in Prague. A working class adolescent, Friedrich Weimer, with an aptitude for boxing is spotted by a Napola recruiter who sees in Friedrich the solution to the school's lagging reputation in the sport. Friedrich has the makings of a champion boxer.

Against the wishes of his anti-Nazi father, Friedrich joins the school's student body, attempting to escape poverty and lack of opportunity. In the Napola, Friedrich, forced to fight until his opponents are rendered unconscious, is being trained to become a merciless killer.

The struggle to survive the sadistic military discipline and debased ideology yields casualties among the most sensitive of the youth. Any sign of independent thought or humanity is eradicated, like some lethal contagion. ("Aesthetes are not needed in this hour.")

Friedrich befriends Albrecht Stein, the son of a local governor connected to the Napola. Governor Stein despises his "weak" son's artistic aspirations and sensitivity. The governor seizes upon any opportunity to create a more virile and tough-minded boy. His first meeting with Friedrich ("A couple more like you on the Eastern Front and we could wrap things up") leads to a unpleasant boxing match in which the older man encourages the young fighter to decimate his son.

Albrecht's hatred of life in the Napola reaches the breaking point during an excursion ordered by his father in which the institution's students are sent to slaughter a group of escaped Russian POWs, who prove to be unarmed and as young as their killers. The tormented Albrecht, stricken with guilt and horror, publicly denounces the murders. A confrontation with his enraged father ends tragically. Lyrically composed, this scene disturbs in the extreme as the film shifts gears, allowing for a deeply psychological moment.

The impact of this event on Friedrich leads to a rebellion whose

consequences are irrevocable in terms of his relationship with the school and his loss of naïveté and political illusions. Friedrich has delivered a blow to the Napola and its cause. To great effect, Gansel visually links Friedrich's act of defiance to the hungry-for-blood faces of the governor and his Napola cronies in the audience of the film's final boxing match.

Gansel's darkly rich film is serious and honest. Meticulously constructed, it pays attention to a variety of responses and modes of resistance among the Napola students. Siegfried, a chronic bed-wetter persecuted beyond endurance, is proclaimed a hero for the manner in which he carries out his suicide. Albrecht, whom Gansel describes in an interview with *Salon* as the embodiment of the "19th-century heritage of German philosophy and poetry," pits his cultural proclivities against Nazi brutishness. The physical Friedrich draws great courage from his disciplined working class background.

In the film's production notes, we discover that Gansel learned about the Napolas—a scantily recorded feature of Nazi Germany—from his grandfather's accounts and those of other former students. To his surprise, he discovered that the former head of the Deutsche Bank, Alfred Herrhausen, had been an Adolf Hitler student at the Reichsschule Feldafing.

"There was a terrorist group called the Red Army Faction that killed Alfred Herrhausen, the CEO of Deutsche Bank, in 1989," Gansel told *Salon*. "He was a very powerful industrial manager and he was a former Napola student. I thought this was pretty interesting: The most powerful man in European finance was once trained [to be a Nazi governor]. That was the first time I had heard about that, and it turned out that a lot of the German power structure in the '60s, '70s and '80s came out of the Napolas. There were a lot of journalists, a lot of lawyers, a lot of CEOs. Many of them are still alive. There is still an active old boys' network. It's not a Nazi network, as far as I can tell. But it's an old boys' network. And the story of the Napolas is totally unknown in Germany today."

The Napolas were a taboo subject in Germany because, once having attained careers within the political, financial and media establishment after the fall of the Nazis, the training schools' alumni were reluctant to reveal their high-level connections to the fascist regime. The film's production notes quote from Guido Knopp's *Hitler's Kinder (Hitler's Children)*, which states that these youth were "swallowed up by the state like no generation before or after it." *Before the Fall* establishes the tragic dimension of this occurrence.

The Napolas trained more than 15,000 boys, as well as a smaller number of girls, and comprised 40 institutions by the end of the war.

“The students were called ‘Jungmänner’ and had Hitler Youth service ranks,” write the film’s creators. “Next to drills, military discipline and physical training, the school’s main focus was to pass on Nazi ideology. All had to march in equal step, all had to submit to the commando mentality that reflected the growing influence of Himmler’s SS on the schools. According to Hitler’s plans, the breeding of the ‘new man’ was to take two generations, yet it did not last even one. After twelve years, the ‘Thousand-year Reich’ was over.”

The motto of the Napola student was: “To be more than what seems to be.” (The American military’s former recruitment slogan was: “Be All You Can Be.”)

The film is not without its limitations. Gansel told *Salon* that *Before the Fall* concerns itself with the Nazis’ seduction of youth. “You have to ask yourselves, why did they follow? Why did someone like my grandfather follow these people? [The character of Vogel—the most ‘decent’ of the school’s officers was modeled on his grandfather.] Nazis in films are always bad, evil people. But that’s not the way it worked at the time. They were intelligent, sometimes eloquent, charming, good-looking. Vogler can understand Friedrich in a way: He tells him, ‘It’s bad what happened in the woods [when the Napola students shot down the young Russian soldiers]—but think of yourself and continue.’ That’s what millions and millions of Germans did. They knew something. They knew it was wrong. But they continued.”

This is the rather conventional liberal view of German fascism. That the director resorts to it uncritically may help account for the fact that film, while intelligent and honest, does not break any new ground. A more profound view of Hitler’s rise would not blame the German population for simply accommodating itself to monsters, but probe the objective, historical background to the triumph of fascism in 1933—or at least contain that understanding in some fashion in the artistic effort.

Above all, attention would have to be paid to the defeat of the German working class, resulting from the catastrophic policies of its two leading parties, the SPD and the Communist Party. The socialist aspirations of the German working class expressed themselves for decades; these aspirations were shamefully betrayed. The result: a demoralized and atomized population, which was then susceptible to be deluded or intimidated.

Nevertheless, in diligently creating this cautionary tale about an important but little-known aspect of Nazism, Gansel deserves credit. His *Before the Fall* leaves its mark along with other unflinching and honest recent films about German fascism, such as last year’s *Downfall* and Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist*.

An adaptation of Christopher Buckley’s satirical 1994 novel, *Thank You for Smoking* is the first feature film directed by Jason Reitman (son of director/producer Ivan Reitman). Set in the 1990s, before major lawsuits started besieging the tobacco industry, the film stars the talented Aaron Eckhart as Nick Naylor, chief spin artist for the tobacco conglomerates. He confidently hops around the talk show circuit—and finally into a Senate hearing—battling the arguments of anti-smoking advocates, particularly the ineffective Senator Ortolan Finistierre (William H. Macy), who is campaigning to put a skull-and-crossbones on cigarette packaging.

Nick meets regularly with his counterparts in other industries targeted by the promoters of clean living. Dubbing themselves the MOD squad (Merchants of Death), the trio includes Nick for tobacco, Polly (Maria Bello) for alcohol and Bobby Jay (David Koechner) for firearms. In the contest to see who is the most lethal, Nick trumps the

others, with smoking responsible for 1,200 deaths per day.

As the public begins to turn against tobacco, Nick seeks to put sex back into cigarettes with the help of movie royalty. He sets out to have images of stars glamorously puffing away reinserted into films. An entertainment industry executive (Rob Lowe), who specializes in Zenlike pronouncements to make Western-size profits, and his fast-talking, Hollywood-speak assistant (Adam Brody)—“Do you need Vitamin B shots after your flight?”—float the idea of Brad Pitt and Catherine Zeta-Jones lighting up after sex in a science fiction epic.

Eventually, the irrepressible tobacco shill gets brought down by an opportunist reporter (Katie Holmes), who makes use of pillow talk to write an exposé of Nick’s unsavory methods. In the doldrums for a while, Nick manages to rally his verve, dodge the bullets for tobacco and get out just before the industry becomes discredited. His services are now for hire to any outfit in need of turning the truth on its head.

Notwithstanding a few comic moments, *Thank You for Smoking* is essentially weak and unfunny. (The attempt to expand the emotional horizons and give Nick some humanity by introducing a quasi-moralistic father-son relationship is particularly weak and unfunny.)

The film lacks sufficient genuine commitment and understanding of the social dimensions of its subject matter. To be successful a satire requires passion, even some degree of ferocity. Here there is a little too much complacency and too much admiration for the spin doctors, along with a disdain for the population that allows itself to be manipulated. And because it admires as much as it lampoons its erstwhile target, many of its jokes border on poor taste. Much of the dialogue between the merchants of death as well as lines such as “In 1952, I was in Korea shooting the Chinese—now they are our biggest customers” fall into this category.

Why is the film so limp despite such a tempting target? (One might ask, why is American film satire in general so limp, in a country whose corporate and political elite *cry out* for ridicule?) Reitman may suffer from a certain cynicism and superficiality bred in the entertainment industry of the 1990s.

What is his point, in the end? On the one hand, Reitman, a self-proclaimed Libertarian, goes on about smokers becoming second-class citizens as bans on smoking in public places increase. He believes, like a Nick Naylor, that all owners of establishments have the right to poison their employees and clientele, or not. On the other hand, he appears mesmerized by those who are never proved wrong because they know how to baffle with a flashy argument, however false.

With such limited and confused ideas, it is difficult to land solid punches against society’s most egregious manipulators.



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