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A Hidden Life

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Abstract

This is a film review of *A Hidden Life* (2019), directed by Terrence Malick.

Keywords

Franz Jägerstätter, Nazism, Austria, Conscientious Objection

Author Notes

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A Hidden Life (2019), dir. Terrence Malick

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJXmdY4lVR0>

“If our leaders... are evil, what does one do?”
- Franz Jägerstätter in *A Hidden Life*

In Terrence Malick’s *A Hidden Life*, the camera sweeps across the landscape, caressing the mountainous hillsides and rolling meadow landscapes of upper Austria in a wild embrace. Often we find at the end of such a shot, the smallest of subjects, working on the land. Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter are introduced to us in such a way, as deeply embedded in the world they come from as the Alps themselves. By contrast, most of the rest of the film is shot in a short lens widescreen, which tends to slightly distort anything other than that which is in the center of the frame. The result is a visual experience of the Theology of the Cross, in which we are both taken up by the

breath of creation — the sweeping spirit brooding and hovering over the earth — and also set down claustrophobically inside one man's righteous journey toward death for what he believes.

Malick's preoccupation in his late work with themes of faith, Christianity, self-reflection and accountability have never been more vivid than in this work, which adapts the true story of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian physician and farmer who resisted Hitler and died for his beliefs. Originally a non-religious man, he was evangelized by his wife Franziska (known in the film as Fani) in their early married years. Living in the small Alpine farming community of St. Radegund, and in scenes reminiscent of the first hour of Malick's *The Tree of Life*, the director shows us an almost idyllic existence in which love, family, community and faith all blend in an agrarian harmony. The rising tides of antisemitism and fear begin to seep in and before long Franz knows he is in trouble. When his entire village goes unaffected by a pastor's antisemitic sermon, he glimpses what is ahead. Unable to embrace Hitler, the Anschluss, and the overwhelming implications of fascism, his quiet resistance wreaks havoc on his life and that of his family, which includes three young girls and his own mother.

Although it unfolds over three hours, making it Malick's longest film to date, *A Hidden Life* is so vested in the interiority of its characters that we never for a moment feel the pinch of length. The war rages in a far-off background: the closest we come to it is the sound of planes overhead the prison where Franz eventually is sent. As Franz, August Diehl carries every scene of the film with him as he makes his way along his own *Via Dolorosa*. Simple in structure and divided roughly into three acts, Malick's most narratively-told story in years spends the first hour with family, the second in a succession of prisons, and the short third act in the harrowing journey to the guillotine. Along the way, a host of senior European veteran actors offer brief cameo roles as men in authority who are willing to offer him a way out. A bishop, his lawyer, and a judge suggest

options for Franz to find a ‘workaround’ for his conscience, with varying degrees of disinterest and compassion. At every stage Franz’s response is the same: “will I have to swear allegiance to Hitler”? The question is often met with its opposite: Franz is told that no one will benefit, and nothing will be different, as the result of his action.

This consistent warning to Franz that his actions will go unnoticed raises the central moral dilemma of the film, which is not whether or not one should make decisions of conscience, but who those decisions are for. Although both Franz and Fani write of their experience in their letters, they both abstain from describing the full grim reality they are enduring. Franz omits the details of his torture and beatings, his solitary confinement, and Fani leaves out the horrors of being shunned in a small village. And yet both are deeply aware of the suffering of the other. When Franz is condemned, they are given one last chance to see each other, surrounded by those who do not really want it. The brief embrace and called exchanges of devotion as he is taken away make clear Fani’s steadfast loyalty and her husband’s love and gratitude. Malick holds them in single wide shots to emphasize that union even when they are at opposite ends of the same room. In these moments, we are a whole world away from the fragmented and very separated shots of Brad Pitt and Jessica Chastain in *A Tree of Life*, when they first hear of their son’s death. In that film, their very different responses are emphasized by ellipsis editing, despite the fact that they too are in the same room. In *A Hidden Life*, the scene of reunion and knowledge of death is one of a few in the movie that does *not* rely on that ellipsis editing, allowing instead for us to dwell with the characters in almost visceral and agonizing real time.

In writing about *The Tree of Life* elsewhere,¹ I have positioned Malick’s camera in that film as a “God-camera of theology and memory.” In his three dramatic feature films since then, *To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups*, and *Song to Song*, the camera has been more subjective: still often

a God-camera, Malick uses it instead as a tool of confession, a means of reflecting deeply on his own spiritual and professional journey. With *A Hidden Life*, the God-camera has returned to a more universal and objective position. Like *The Tree of Life*, we hear the secret thoughts of several characters, unspoken or unspeakable to those they love. As often happens in Malick movies, the fourth wall is broken as these characters look into the camera fleetingly. Malick is not positioning himself as that God-camera, but God as the God-camera: a very important distinction in a professional milieu that often refers to him as an ‘auteur.’ In a Q & A session after a screening of the film at TIFF, actors Valerie Pachner and August Diehl said that they were taught to farm, and then filmed as they did farming activities. Shots were often a half hour long, to create the sense of realism.² It seems possible, given his unreserved expression of faith as a filmmaker, that Malick was also using his camera and indulging his actors this way as a spiritual exercise, in which he hoped God would be present.

Malick closes his film with a quotation from George Eliot which extols the lives of those whose quiet acts of courage and conscience go uncelebrated but whose actions affect us all.³ Indeed, Jägerstätter’s story remained largely unknown before the 1960s when the first biography appeared (*In Solitary Witness* by Gordon Zahn) and before Thomas Merton wrote about him in *Faith and Violence*. Pope Benedict XVI — himself, the subject of another TIFF movie *The Two Popes* — beatified Franz Jägerstätter in 2007, perhaps feeling keenly as he did so his own challenging history with Nazism. In *A Hidden Life*, Jägerstätter is never depicted as seeking some kind of moral limelight. His quiet, reserved manner is the opposite of what we might expect of a hero. By creating such a long, loving and beautifully rendered portrait, Terrence Malick allows us to occupy Franz’s soul as much as his story. Having spent three movies reflecting on himself, in *A Hidden Life* he seems happy to raise someone else from the shadows to shimmer for us in the light.

¹ Sherry Coman, (2016) "The God-Camera of Theology and Memory in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*," *Consensus*: 37:2, Article 5. <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol37/iss2/5>

² "A Hidden Life Cast Q & A", published by TIFF Talks on 11 September, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDK_9kJjMY

³ The full quotation from *Middlemarch*, slightly abridged by Malick, reads: "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." See George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1994), 688.