

Painting a True Christ

A review of Terrence Malik's film "A Hidden Life"

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There's an early scene in Terrence Malik's masterful new film – what I would call a moving painting – where the central character Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian peasant farmer from an isolated small mountainous village who refuses to take an oath to Hitler and fight in the German army, is talking to an older man who is restoring paintings in the local Catholic church. Franz, a devout Roman Catholic, is deeply disturbed by the rise of Hitler and the thought of participating in his immoral killing machine. The older man tells Franz – who has already been admonished that he has a duty to defend the fatherland (homeland) – that he makes his living painting pretty holy pictures for the culturally conditioned parishioners for whom God and country are synonymous. He says.

I paint their comfortable Christ with a halo over his head. We love him, that's enough. Someday I'll paint a true Christ.

Malik's "someday" has arrived with "A Hidden Life," where the older Malik shows the younger Malik – and us – a moving picture of what experience has taught him is the complex essence of a true and simple Christ: out of love of God and all human beings to refuse to kill.

To watch this film is to undergo a profound experience, an experiment with truth and non-violence, a three-hour trial (Latin: *experimentum*– trial). While Franz is eventually put on trial by the German government, it is we as viewers who must judge ourselves and ask how guilty or innocent are we for supporting or resisting the immoral killing machine of our own country now. Hitler and his Nazis were then, but we are faced with what Martin Luther King called "the fierce urgency of now." Many Americans surely ask with Franz, "What has happened to the country that we love?" But how many look in the mirror and ask, "Am I a guilty bystander or an active supporter of the United States' immoral and illegal wars all around the world that have been going on for so many years under presidents of both parties and have no end? Do I support the new cold war with its push for nuclear war with its first strike policy? Do I support, by my silence, a nuclear holocaust?"

I say that "A Hidden Life" is a moving painting because its form and content cannot be separated. A true artist, Malik realizes that what non-artists call form or style is the content; they are one. The essence of the story is in the telling; in a film in the showing. The cinematography by Jörge Widmer, a longtime Malick collaborator, is therefore key. It is exquisitely beautiful as he paints with swiftly moving light the mountains and streams of the Austrian countryside, even as the storm clouds with their thunder and lightning roll in across the mountains. The ever-recurring dramatic scenes of numinous nature and the focus on the sustaining earth from which our food comes and to which we all return and in which Franz, his wife Fani, and their young daughters romp and roll and plant and harvest and dirty their

hands is the ground beneath our feet, and when we look, we see its marriage to the sky, the clouds, the light, the shadows, which in their iridescent interplay of light and darkness beseech us to interrogate our existence and ask with Franz what is right and what is wrong and what is our purpose on this beautiful earth.

That question is especially focused when between the beauty comes the terror in the form of interspersed documentary footage of Hitler, his fanatical followers, and horrifying scenes of war and violence.

Like the movie, I think you would agree that we are always moving, asking, wondering, if we are not the living dead. All is now, and now is nevermore, as it disappears into the darkness behind us. The light is always pointing into the future, so we can see where we are going. We don't look at the light but by the light, as the great South African preacher, Alan Storey, puts it. But what is our light?

Where, asked Nietzsche, was the lightning before it flashed? To which the answer comes: it wasn't. It is its flashing. Only a doing, an act, just like love, not a thing but action. Just like the word God, *theós* in Greek, which has no vocative sense, as Roberto Calasso has pointed out in *Literature and the Gods*. "*Theós* has a predictive function: it describes *something that happens*." God is a verb; God is happening. God is happening when humans are happening, acting. Only then. "What you do (or don't) speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say," was the way Emerson phrased it.

The filmic interplay between Franz's agonized moral dilemma, his action, and the embodiment of Christ in the natural world, the body of Christ (*Corpus Christi*, not the erstwhile American nuclear submarine by that name), is its genius, one that might be lost on one impatient for action and garrulous dialogue. "A Hidden Life" is far from Hollywood. Silence and natural beauty permeate it, as if to say the only way to grasp the mechanized and conscienceless brutality of Hitler or today's killers and grasp why some resist it, is to enter a contemplative space where the love of the incarnated world awakens our consciences to our responsibility to our sisters and brothers everywhere. For in the silences one can also hear the screams of the millions of innocent victims beseeching us to heed their cries and intercede.

Malik shows us that the "true Christ" must be experienced as all of creation. No divisions. We must feel this in our flesh and blood, as does the rather inarticulate Franz, who speaks very little. His silence, however, and the marvelous acting of August Diehl, speak volumes. Valerie Pachner, as his supportive wife Fani, is gripping in every sense of the word, as Franz and Fani grip and grasp and hold each other in a fierce struggle to stay united in the face of the evil forces that threaten to separate them. It tore me apart to watch their struggle, and I left the theater shaking.

In one of his marvelous essays, "A Kind of Sharing," John Berger, writing about painting, said,

The act of faith consisted of believing that the visible contained hidden secrets, that to study the visible was to learn something more than could be seen in a glance. Thus paintings were there to reveal a presence behind an appearance.

This could be Malik's motto, his faith. Or perhaps "to reveal a presence that is the

appearance." The body is the soul. We are the world.

When I was young and in the U.S. Marines, seeking release as a conscientious objector, I read a book by Gordon Zahn, a sociologist and Catholic peace activist, called *In Solitary Witness*. It was the book that first brought Franz Jägerstätter to the world's attention. I found it deeply inspiring to learn about someone else who felt alone in his spiritual decision to refuse to fight in war. Unlike Franz, who had been a wild motorcycle-riding young man prone to fighting, I had tried to be an upstanding, Jesuit-educated, patriotic, Irish-Catholic boy. Tried but didn't completely succeed. I prided myself on my toughness and sensitivity. Don't laugh. It's not that uncommon. We are often strangers to ourselves, complicated creatures, even the worst among us open to redemptive change. But as I said then and say now, war is another matter. I felt it in my soul, as Franz clearly did, even if all he could say was, "I have this feeling inside me that I can't do what I believe is wrong."

War is a racket, as Marine Major General Smedley Butler put it. It is waged for the tyrannical oligarchs and always kills mostly civilians. Over ninety percent now, probably more. Innocent people. War is immoral. It is not complex. It is simple. Like the gospel message. Jägerstätter grasped that long ago and paid the price. I paid no price since I was released from the Marines to "take final vows in a religious order," which was a complete lie, something I had never mentioned or considered but which allowed them to get rid of me. But I vividly remember the spiritual sustenance I got from Franz's witness as I awaited the ruling, for I was unequivocally determined to go to prison before ever donning the uniform again. I got off easy and still feel guilty that I pocketed their lie and went my merry way. Watching "A Hidden Life" reminded me of my cowardice.

Despite feeling "he had no one to turn to," despite being urged "to say the oath and think what you want," despite the advice of family and Bishop to compromise, despite the animosity of the villagers toward him and his family, despite being alone with his conscience, Franz remained faithful to his soul's promptings. He lived forward by the light.

Malik shows us the anguish that was involved in his decision, the agony for him and his wife, who, ironically, seems to have been instrumental when they married in his spiritual awakening and whose suffering is palpable as she supports his decision to the end. It is not easy to watch. Aside from Franz, who remains steadfast throughout all the abuse and suffering that he undergoes when jailed by the Nazis, the viewer is not fed a simple story of good against evil but instead is invited to examine one's own life, to ask what would one have done, to wonder whether Franz was right or wrong to subject his family to such suffering. Even the humanity of the Nazi judge is shown when he privately tries to dissuade Franz from not signing the oath, telling him that no one will ever know of his sacrifice, that "the world will go on as before" and "someone else will take your place." We see the torment on this man's face and in his harrowed hands when he is left alone after Franz tells him simply that "I don't know everything" but "I can't do what I believe is wrong," despite knowing the consequences, and Franz is taken off to his solitary witness and his death.

The viewer is left to interpret the meaning of it all. Afterwards, we hear Fani says that "the time will come when we'll know what all this means."

Has that time come?

In 2007 the Catholic Church declared Jägerstätter a martyr and beatified him. The irony of making a saint out of a man whose spiritual witness was opposed by the institutional church

authorities cannot be lost on a thinking person. Long dead, safely in his grave, a monument can be erected to his memory. Or is it a monument erected to the church itself, the church whose silence was in those days deafening?

When I was leaving the theater with the seven other attendees, a man engaged me in conversation. I asked him what he thought of the movie. He said only that “it was beautiful.” I was startled and had no response, but I thought of Rilke’s words about beauty from the *Duino Elegies*:

For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.

“A Hidden Life” is like that.

Near the end we see Franz and a group of prisoners sitting on a bench awaiting their turns to be beheaded by the executioner in a black coat and bowler hat. A man just doing his job, a bored look on his face, loping off heads one by one, anxious to get the mornings work done and get to lunch. The terror on the victims’ faces is palpable. I felt sick. While some prisoners struggled as they were led into the shed that housed the guillotine, Franz walked calmly in. Malik spares the viewer the details. All we are shown is the aftermath – a floor awash in blood. And as I recall, the light streaming in a high-up window.

Always the light to show us the way.

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