

Film Reviews

A Hidden Life

A drama documentary written and directed by Terrence Malick
Released May 2019 at the Cannes Film Festival
174 mins. Available on Amazon Prime with English subtitles.

This film tells the story of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian farmer who was imprisoned and executed in 1943 for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to Hitler during World War Two.

Merton mentions him twice in his journals. The first occasion is on 26 March 1962:

Again moved by a little bit of information on Jägerstätter — the Austrian peasant beheaded by Hitler as a conscientious objector — though advised by priest and bishop to conform and obey. In a child's notebook he wrote a precise essay on 'Irresponsibility' which exactly hits the point everybody is missing. Two Germans both perform the same services for the Nazis — one believes in Nazism, the other condemns it — and thinks himself better. Actually he is the more guilty of the two (*Turning towards the world* p 213).

The second is on 10 November 1964: 'It was certainly profitable to read ... Gordon Zahn's little book on the objector Jägerstätter which is surprisingly good (*Dancing in the water of life* p 164). Merton, in the retreat held at Gethsemani that month, 'Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest', highlighted the importance of Jägerstätter's life and witness; he subsequently devoted a whole essay, 'An Enemy of the State', to Jägerstätter. It is included in *Faith and Violence*.

The film *A Hidden Life* was made by the visionary director Terrence Malick. Malick had been a professor of philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a translator of Heidegger before he turned to

film-making. He knows therefore of what he films. And he takes almost three hours to tell this story. It is filled with the music of Bach, Beethoven, Handel, Dvorak and contemporary composers including Gorecki and Part.

Jägerstätter was happily married with three small children and did not suspect that the Nazi's tentacles would extend to his home in the municipality of Sankt Radegund, high in the Austrian Alps. He did basic military training but then, as a farmer, was released back to his village. Especially after the fall of France in 1940 it was believed the war would soon end.

The first hour of the film is a meditation on political evil. As the war goes on voices in the village harden. The family is ostracised by fellow villagers. Merton noted that Jägerstätter was not supported by his parish priest who was, however, sympathetic to his plight. An interview with the bishop proved no more helpful.

He was not, of course, alone. There was German resistance. A priest he knew had been executed for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to Hitler. But conscientious objectors were few and far between amidst the conformity that made Nazism possible. The villagers mostly kept quiet. For evil to prevail it is enough that good people do nothing.

The second hour switches between the prison and his wife with her sister working the land without a man. Jägerstätter cannot explain his own feelings of revulsion at Nazi evil. He didn't argue with his inquisitors. Merton was born in the South of France, and his life was disrupted by both World Wars, so his antennae were fully extended against fascism. As a monk in America he believed that the Vietnam War was evil and spoke out against it. He was quick to recognise the faith, hope and charity of Jägerstätter. The Austrian farmer was beatified by the German Pope Benedict XVI in 2007.

The script of the film was written by Malick from letters between Franz (August Diehl) and his wife Fani (Valerie Pachner). She proved to be even more of an anti-Nazi than her husband. At the Cannes Film Festival it received the *François Chalais Prize* which is awarded to the film that best reflects the reality of our world, and the values of life affirmation and journalism. It raises questions that are not dealt with often enough in film. It did not get a mention from the British Academy. That it was difficult to find in a UK cinema tells much about the state of the movie industry here.

In the UK at the moment there is a review of conscientious objection in the First World War when very few resisted what is now seen as a battle of empires. The churches offered no support. Currently the failure

of church leaders in the question of paedophilia is being examined. Where bishops and priests fail to speak out then the ordinary person has to bear witness.

The last hour of the film centres around the sentence of death, and especially a visit from Fani, accompanied by the parish priest, to the condemned Franz. The film ends with a quote from *Middlemarch* by George Eliot: '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 live fearfully a hidden life.'

Willy Slavin is a priest of the Archdiocese of Glasgow who has retired to a hermitage with an iPad.

Day of a Stranger,

Directed by Cassidy Hall; Produced by Patrick Shen

Distributed by Transcendental Media, 2021, 31mins.

Available to purchase at <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/dayofastranger>

Original Soundtrack by Alex Kozobolis and Ed Hamilton available to purchase at <https://alexkozobolis.bandcamp.com/album/day-of-a-stranger-ost>

Day of a Stranger, a film by Cassidy Hall and Patrick Shen, is a visual meditation on the value of taking time to observe in order to become attuned to the world around us. Its narrative structure follows Merton's essay by the same name. In 1965, shortly after Merton had been allowed to live as a hermit in a small hermitage built in the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, the Venezuelan poet, Ludovico Silva, invited Merton to contribute a short essay on a typical day in his life. Merton obliged, and the essay, 'Day of a Stranger', was published in the Venezuelan journal *Papeles* in 1966. It was subsequently published in *The Hudson Review* in 1967 for U.S. readers. The continuing popularity of this short essay is due in part to Merton as a writer expressing the essence of his vocation as a monk. Merton's ultimate question is: what are we living for? A day, Merton assures readers, is important. The typical worker, regardless of the job, is, on an ordinary day, gone from home longer than being in it. Home becomes merely a place to sleep. What many of us have come to experience during the coronavirus pandemic is that home is a world within itself similar to what Merton's hermitage was to him.

The film, *Day of a Stranger*, interweaves meditative images of his