

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

hermitage nestled deep in the woods of Kentucky and audio recordings he made, to evoke the atmosphere of Merton's essay as offering a sometimes mischievous insight into his novel approach to his hermit vocation as well as providing a literal look at a typical day in Merton's life. Transience is communicated in the film by the close-ups of the reel-to-reel audio recording machine that captures Merton's voice. This is the film's only narration underscored by an original soundtrack by Alex Kozobolis and Ed Hamilton. Merton stresses the importance of silence, of listening, of being centred. This is visually communicated in the film by shots that linger on details such as condensation on a window, the creeping shadows on the floor of the hermitage, the flecks of dust in a beam of sunlight, and vapour from a boiling kettle. All these incidental moments in time echo the intention of Merton's Zen photography that was characterised by his attention to details in his immediate environment. This practice of close looking was, to quote William Blake, 'to see a world in a grain of sand'. Becoming attuned to moments that make up a day is to be aware that these comprise part of the much larger 'DAY' that is spiritual because it is never the same.

Merton's essay, 'Day of a Stranger', embraces in a modern context the medieval idea that people are not so much defined by what they do, but by who they are. Merton was famous, and the modern cult of personality wants to know as much as it can about the private lives of its heroes. One hears the words 'monk' or 'hermit' and makes certain assumptions based on stereotypes; Merton takes pleasure in overturning those preconceptions. The film recreates Merton's jazz-meditation recordings at the hermitage in April 1967. He made an extraordinary recording of himself doing what he called a 'jazz meditation' while he listened to Jimmy Smith's 'Hoochie Coochie Man' and 'Got My Mojo Workin' interjecting a spoken word commentary from Jeremiah 31 in the Bible: 'Your work will be rewarded. ... There is hope for your future.' Merton's meditation invoked the black-power spirit of the time. The film amplifies the continuation of the racial struggle through stills from Black Lives Matter protests. The subject of his meditation, Merton says, is who we identify with. This underscores Merton's monastic way of being which is that we need time to become attuned to the world around us because it matters how we listen and who we listen to.

Day of the Stranger is a film that succeeds in communicating the essence of Merton's essay that leaves it to the reader to determine that, despite Merton's own protestations about the 'institution' of the monastery, his monastic way of being teaches lessons in becoming

attuned to the world around us by first grounding ourselves. Merton suggests that the essence of being is to see the extraordinary within the ordinary, and he implies that we can do the same, no matter our own calling in life.

James Cronin is an academic at University College Cork. He is an international advisor to the International Thomas Merton Society, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

from The Crooked Game by Franz Jägerstätter

When and how is one dishonest? First, when one presents himself to his fellow men as being something other than what he really is; second, when one constantly acts in a manner different from what he really thinks, says, or writes. But is it at all possible today to speak or act as one thinks? Granted, there are times when one acts differently from the way he thinks for reasons of obedience, but this obedience should never go so far as to oblige one to perform acts that are actually evil. We know God does not demand the impossible of us, even considering the times in which we live today. We need not always act, then, exactly as we think. We need not always speak our mind; one can and may keep silent—up to a certain point. For it would certainly lead to trouble if one always told his neighbor just what he thought of him, so it is sometimes better to hold one's tongue and maintain silence. One need not always speak out—indeed, many find it unpleasant to listen when someone talks too much while they themselves have to keep silent for the time being.

True, it is doubly hard not to be dishonest when one lives in a country where freedom of belief is restricted. If dishonesty were not harmful to our efforts to attain eternal blessedness, what difference would it make whether or not one has freedom of belief? Or is dishonesty wrung even if we injure no one by it? Most certainly yes—if only because we generally, in fact always, injure ourselves. For though we cannot hurt God by our falseness (we can only offend Him), we can hurt His Church.

from In Solitary Witness by Gordon Zahn