

The Unexceptional Hero in 'A Hidden Life'

What does it mean to be heroic? What is the cost? At the very beginning of our lives, we're imparted with a belief in heroism. We are told stories of brave people who defied expectations and fought for a common good, stories of knights defeating dragons, of police catching criminals, of exceptional people taking a stand and defeating villainy. The takeaway message is that we, the average Joe sitting by the campfire listening to such stories, may one day have to step up and assume the role we've heard about all our lives. That we might undergo similar tests of character and emerge victoriously as exceptional individuals.

Terrence Malick's latest film *A Hidden Life* challenges this notion. The title is taken from a George Eliot quote, which sums up the film's basic assumption.

"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."

The good are often anonymous. Rarely celebrated, they are far more ordinary than we expect.

The protagonist of the film, Franz Jägerstätter (August Diehl), is an Austrian peasant farmer turned conscientious objector against the Nazi regime during the Second World War. Based on a real person, Franz is as ordinary as anyone. He is not a general, a king or even town mayor. He's only directly responsible for a few lives, namely his wife Franziska (Valerie Pachner), her sister Resie (Maria Simon), his children, and his elderly mother. As Nazism creeps into his rural community and its hateful ideology poisons his neighbours and friends, Franz decides to stand against it. He fights back, denouncing the ideology and vowing never to swear allegiance to Adolf Hitler. Franz refuses to do even so much as return the Sieg Heil salute.

This rebellion is a blatantly heroic act. But in Malick's film, it is never quite celebrated as such. Instead, the act of rebellion is portrayed with torturous consequences. Its ramifications are merciless. We are asked to question the merit of Franz's decision as he puts his life in grave danger, and Franziska and the children are shunned from their community. Western cinema is obsessed with the individual hero and their response to the call of a quest, but *A Hidden Life* shows the broader impact of its protagonist's response. By the beginning of the film, Franz has already solved his moral dilemma; what follows for the rest of the runtime is simply the effect of his decision, as well as our own wavering support or denunciation of it.

Franz's defiance is mostly symbolic. His only punishable act is refusing to swear allegiance to Adolf Hitler. He doesn't fight the Third Reich in any meaningful or malicious way. Yet the people he loves suffer for it — Franziska and the children are ostracised from their community. There is no material reward that comes from his action, only punishment. The classically Hollywood heroic act of fighting Nazis becomes questionable, its black and white morality obscured. The misery Franziska endures because of her husband's choice invites us to condemn Franz for his high and mighty righteousness. However, the latent power of his decision becomes apparent as character after character begs him to change his mind. Simply by refusing to support the Nazi regime, Franz exposes everyone else's complacency. His dissent proves that dissent is possible and that flexing freewill is just as easy as giving it up. This revelation triggers a

terrifyingly realistic self-preservation mechanism in those confronting him. Instead of being inspired by Franz's defiance, they double down on their complacency. It seems they realise the truth about their poisoned morality and are desperate to return to blissful ignorance. They have learnt to embody the blind obedience expected of them, and in doing so enact its cruelty. They ignore Franz's exposure of such beliefs as simply imaginary. At one point, a lawyer tries to convince Franz to sign an admission that renounces his rebellion against the Nazis. If he does this, the lawyer thinks he can get Franz out of gaol. "Sign these papers and you'll be set free," the lawyer says.

"But I am free," replies Franz. If he were to sign the papers, he would lose something far greater than legal emancipation.

The Nazi characters are never depicted as moustache-twirling villains but humans parroting beliefs they don't properly understand or following orders they don't question. Their loyalty and complacency to the Third Reich raises one of the 20th century's most fascinating questions. How were the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust possible? How did the Germans, a supposedly cultured and 'civilised' nation, allow themselves to support such a blatantly evil ideology? *A Hidden Life* depicts the Nazism takeover of Franz's town in a convincing manner such to depict the gradual disease of this ideology to land on its citizens' footsteps. It comes like a virus, at first lying dormant among the people, with only a few publicly exhibiting symptoms. Then it flares up, burning hard and fast throughout the town. Infection spreads quickly and soon the whole community is taken by it. The mayor rants antisemitic tropes. Sieg Heils replace waving hello. The postboy religiously dings his bell as he passes Franz. Jörg Widmer's cinematography brilliantly accentuates the spread of this hateful sentiment through the use of wide angles. By their nature, wide angle lenses distort their subject matter. Malick uses this to great effect, beautifully capturing the nuances of social interaction, warping distances between people for emphasis. Groups swell together as a terrifying mob when confronting individuals, their mass intimidatingly looming over all others. Meanwhile individuals standing only a metre from each other seem worlds apart. And in contrast, when two people embrace, like the lover protagonists Franz and Franziska, they seem to appear as one, their souls united. The wide angles portray the subjectivity of human social interaction, giving an impression not unlike those existential moments at parties where you start to analyse who's laughing at whose jokes and which team everyone is on. It's a primal sort of feeling, a hangover from our prehistoric days, that question in the back of our minds: "Whose tribe are you in?". A scene in which Franziska is chased away from the village harvest exemplifies the way Nazis were able to take control of social life to horrific effect. At first the farmers are dotted through the field, working as individuals carrying out separate tasks. However, once one farmer begins to antagonise Franziska, the rest soon join. Franziska appears meek and alone, paling in comparison to the threatening mob.

The wide angles don't just display the world in an anthropological way – they also show off its magnificent beauty. *A Hidden Life* is set in rural Austria, with mountains, waterfalls and rivers aplenty. The scenery is graceful, pristine nature and it provides a spiritual-like background to the conflict of the film. The contrast between picturesque views of Austrian countryside and the hateful ideology spreading among the villagers seems to indicate they are not so much destroying the harmonious good of nature as they are shutting themselves off from it. Hence, their God is silent. They have abandoned Him (or She or It) and His (or Hers or Its) path, not

the other way around. Religion plays an important part in the film, although it's not definite who or what God Malick is evoking. There are parallels hinted at: drawn between Franz and Christ, both morally righteous ordinary men willing to die for the sins of others. Malick's characters use New Testament terminology, but only because they are 20th century Europeans. Though the film isn't explicitly religious, its references to God suggest that there's something grander than a strict biblical interpretation. One character in the film accuses the community's churchgoers-turned-Nazis of being "admirers", not followers. They sing the hymns but don't understand the words. God is clearly more than a selective observation of traditions and rituals. Malick seems to be channelling a similar God to the one exalted by American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson – one that is a transcendental force of good. The God in *A Hidden Life* is nature, grace, beauty and love.

This is not a new subject for Malick – he has dealt with this kind of transcendentalism many times before. But comparing *A Hidden Life* to other works in Malick's filmography shows that it also offers up a new perspective. Malick's war film *The Thin Red Line* (1998) portrays a group of men with all choice taken away from them. They are at the mercy of nature and its chaos (or God, in an abstract sense). Meanwhile, the characters in *The Tree of Life* (2011) are faced with a plethora of choice, which they must navigate to determine their relationship to nature. *A Hidden Life* straddles the middle of these two films – it shows the power that a single, firm and determined choice can make and how it can guide and reconnect one to nature.

Since returning from a 30 year hiatus, Malick's filmography has been somewhat difficult viewing. *A Hidden Life* is no exception. Surprisingly, its narrative is quite conventionally structured, with three acts, and an inciting incident, midpoint, climax and resolution, but this doesn't mean it's a conventional film in any other way. It's not easy watching nor is it escapism. There are no plot twists, quotable dialogue or showy set pieces. Instead, there are poetic musings heard through voiceover narration and long takes of people farming. The task of the film is to think, to connect, to meditate upon ideas greater than the ones you came into the film with.

Leaving the cinema, I overheard a group talking about their viewing experience. One of them said something to the effect of "So, did anyone else have a nice nap?". Cue laughter. With a runtime of nearly three hours, I understand their response. *A Hidden Life* is slow and not for everyone. Instead of being about good guys and bad guys, it is about one man who does good while everyone else, including people much like you and me, are sinners. True, the film is about a man defying the Nazi Party – one of the greatest monsters of human history and Hollywood's favourite evil-doers – but *A Hidden Life* is not about Franz's effectiveness at wrecking their nasty plans or causing them woe. If you want movies like that, go watch *Schindler's List* (1993) or *Valkyrie* (2008). *A Hidden Life* doesn't portray a classic Hollywood hero taking a stand – it instead shows the degradation of everyone else's morality and how the good suffer for it. Franz Jägerstätter is a man who suffers a great deal simply for having a belief in what's right. He is a true hero but, unlike the ones we've come to know and love, his story is not so much his exceptionalism as it is about our capacity for un-exceptionalism. Malick's film shows us who we owe for the good that we enjoy – the hidden lives of the many people like Franz Jägerstätter that we've buried. It shows us what we do to the true heroes.