

The Berlin Film Festival - Part 4

Two German films about fascism

Stefan Steinberg, Bernd Reinhardt
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Two German feature films presented at the recent Berlin film festival approached the theme of fascism from very different standpoints and with varying degrees of success. *Aimee and Jaguar*, by German director Max Faerboeck, opened the official competition at this year's festival. Based on the life of Lilly Wust, now 85 and living in Berlin, it deals with her love affair with the Jewish woman, Felice Schragenheim. When they first meet, Lilly already has four children and a husband on the Eastern front. Under such circumstances, Lilly considers filing for divorce and begins living with Felice. It is 1943 in Berlin, two years before the end of the war.

Lilly is unaware that Felice is Jewish. However, for some time the Gestapo has been on Felice's trail. She and other Jewish women friends--among them, Lilly's maid--have been acquiring passports enabling Jews to flee Germany. During the day, Felice works at the publishing house of a Nazi newspaper. One day, Aimee and Jaguar, as they call themselves, arrive home following a swim. Gestapo agents are waiting for them. Felice is arrested, sent first to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt, then to another camp from which she never returns.

The strength of the film is its convincing portrayal of a profoundly open and honest love affair. In dealing with its subject matter, the film never descends into kitsch, nor becomes dull or melodramatic. At its heart is the tension between the two women, and their relationship is portrayed in a very sensitive and moving manner. Disconcerting, however, is the manner in which all the other aspects of life are so stubbornly subordinated to the central theme of a love story.

The psychology and character of the people who surround Lilly and Felice comes across in a simplified and clichéd way. There are the grim, ice-cold Gestapo operatives and somewhat simple hangers-on, like Lilly's husband, who enthusiastically lap up the Nazi appeals. And there is the brooding Nazi intellectual, unsettled by the newspaper reports, embodied in the figure of Felice's editor. Even Felice's Jewish girlfriends come across as oddly distant and shadowy figures, as do Lilly's communist father and her maid.

As lovers, Lilly and Felice appear extraordinarily sympathetic to the audience. However, as independent individuals operating within (fascist) society, they remain strangers. At the end of the

film one hardly knows more about them than one did at the beginning. It is possible to conjure up images of Lilly's previous housewifely existence with her four children. About Felice one learns virtually nothing. What remains is their powerful and remarkable love for each other, which because of its treatment retains a powerfully mystical element.

Both main actresses (Juliane Koehler and Maria Schrader) were awarded the Berlinale Silver Bears for their performances.

Didi Danquart's film, *Jewboy Levi*, can be recommended without qualification. Danquart wrote the script, based on the stage-play by the dramatist Thomas Strittmatter.

The film's setting is a Black Forest village in 1933. Worn-out tracks and a damaged tunnel necessitate the visit of a railway repair team from Berlin to this desolate region where time seems to have stood still. Radios are unknown, everyone is avowedly Catholic and the fascist take-over in Berlin is, on the whole, treated with nonchalance.

The basic economic unit is the farm, which dictates the lives and concerns of the rural population. The purpose of marriage and family is to preserve the farm and to increase its stock. Lisbeth, daughter of farmer Horger and still single, is being wooed by Paul, unemployed and without roots, who constantly quotes from the verses of Dadaist Kurt Schwitters and has nothing but contempt for farmer Horger.

Things are quite different for Levi. The itinerant Jewish trader is also interested in Lisbeth. Respected in the community and following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, he provides the villages in the Black Forest with necessities that can only be acquired in the city or even farther afield. Horger thinks highly of him and his wife looks forward to his visits, when he brings her cottons and silks for sewing. In humorous vein the film follows the loquacious Levi on his travels as he philosophises over life with his pet rabbit Jankel.

When the railway engineer, a committed Nazi, appears in the village with his secretary and the railway workers things begin to change. The repair crew disrupts the inhabitants' settled routine. The life of the village increasingly centres around the concerns of the railway. As a state enterprise it represents the new Hitler regime and also proves to be a new source of income for the farmers supplying the rail workers. Lisbeth advises the unemployed Paul to get himself a job with the

railway. In the evening, the railworkers sit in the local inn with the villagers. The "People's Broadcaster", a radio donated by the engineer to the inn-keeper and at first emphatically rejected as modern rubbish, blares out for the Berliners.

The new guests at the inn make no secret of the fact that they hold Jews responsible for the deplorable state of the nation's affairs and that the new regime will clean up the problem. Paul for one is unconvinced by the new government and tries out his latest anti-Hitler-joke on the two village cripples, mocking the engineer and his men: "Something here smells of brown shit."

The engineer plans a "little festivity" inviting the village officials--the mayor, the priest, the teacher and the pharmacist. Horger sells a calf to the engineer for the party at a bargain price. Levi had previously offered a considerably higher sum for the animal. To his wife Horger justifies his bad deal, "The railway is the government."

Those who do not take advantage of the new opportunities and connections opened up by the railway, rapidly lose out to their competitors. Horger eventually begins to feel the force of this himself. On one occasion Lisbeth, who works at the inn, defends Levi against the anti-Semitic vulgarities of the engineer and his crowd, with the consequence that Horger's grocery deliveries are turned away by the railway. "Must have a skeleton in your cupboard," says a suspicious farmer, seeing that Horger's goods have been rejected by the engineer.

The film's depiction of definite social mechanisms at play refutes the conception that Nazism is merely synonymous with racist ideology, eagerly soaked up by a potentially racist population. Anti-Semitism was deliberately used by the Nazis in order to enforce the new regime. The farmers begin to watch over one another, unconsciously assuming the values of the new system.

What also makes this film well worth seeing is the depiction of the characters, none of which are stereotypes. Everyone has seen films featuring vulgar, blunt and usually stupid Nazis, cunning informers and intrepid resistance fighters. Instead Danquart presents characters whose behaviour, with its own inner contradictions, is completely comprehensible. Paul for example looks down on farmers. They are for him "brainless milkers-of-cows". However, because he has no means himself, he cannot win their respect. Jobless in the countryside, his value and standing is nil and he remains an outsider.

Paul is struck from the beginning by the Nazi engineer and his followers. He is fascinated that such solid members of the community like Horger can be pressured by the Nazis. Paul's anarchistic provocations more and more take on the character of a challenge rather than disapproval. In one scene he surprises the engineer's secretary (and lover) as she bathes in a stream. She scolds him for his lack of manners and advises him to work for "the right side," there are better things for him to do than "frighten little girls while they bathe." With that she touches on Paul's sore spot. Here in the village under the present conditions, he has no prospects.

Paul humiliates the engineer at the party, and, for his efforts, gets beaten up by the railworkers, who denounce him as a "red pig" and throw him in the river. Soaking wet, pushing his motorbike home, he encounters Levi, who expresses his sympathy for Paul's plight and tries to help. Paul explodes furiously, "Take your dirty Jew fingers off my motorbike!"

Horger has also changed. Someone has killed Levi's pet rabbit, ripping off its head. Levi tries to buy another from Horger, who shoves Levi from his farmyard. "I can't sell meat anymore and you want a rabbit?" the farmer bawls. "I am not going to let you destroy my farm, you ... Christ-killer!"

"I don't understand you, I don't understand any of you!" says Lisbeth to her mother. When the daughter asks her what has everyone got against Levi all of a sudden, the older woman tries to forestall all further objections and retorts simply: "You are a Catholic."

The final scene of the film takes place in the inn. The railworkers, accompanied by an accordion, are loudly bawling an anti-Jewish song, compelling Levi to sing as well. Shamed in front of his daughter, Horger demands they stop tormenting Levi. The railworkers respond "What's wrong, Horger? Are you a Jew?" Horger spits back: "I am no Jew," and suddenly brays in Levi's direction, "It's all his fault!"

At the end even Paul is to be found "on the right side," despite his love for American swing music and Schwitters, the German artist, who like many others had to flee Germany during the Nazi regime.



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