

Who would celebrate Hitler today?: The German satirical film *Look Who's Back*

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Directed by David Wnendt; written by Wnendt, Johannes Boss, Minna Fischgartl and Timur Vermes

The satirical film *Look Who's Back* [*Er ist wieder da*], based on the novel of the same title by Timur Vermes, has been seen by over two million people, making it one of the most watched in Germany this year.

After 70 years, Hitler (Oliver Masucci) suddenly awakes in the middle of a new housing development in Berlin at the site of his former bunker. He is discovered by recently fired television news reporter, Fabian Sawatzki (Fabian Busch), who thinks he is a Hitler impersonator. Sawatzki senses that this “Hitler” will be a crowd puller and his last chance of getting his old job back. Hitler finds his bearings quickly and comes to the conclusion that it is high time to intervene in the national crisis in Germany and that destiny has catapulted him into the year 2014 because only he can save the country.

Hitler notes with satisfaction the unpopularity of all the established parties. It reminds him of the last years of the Weimar Republic. Sawatzki organises a tour for the “Führer” through modern Germany and the substantial positive resonance Hitler generates emboldens him. A YouTube video that receives a million views opens the door to a television program.

Unlike the historical Hitler, the movie Hitler does not need to use terror to assert himself. He does not need to purge the press of critical journalists to enforce conformity in the media. Instead, he finds that people in those circles willingly oblige him. One effective scene in *Look Who's Back* involves television writers who are ordered to develop racist gags for a political program and do so with cynical professionalism.

Moreover, the unstable Sawatzki is fascinated by “Hitler’s” authoritarian charisma, not only because he does not “act” like others, but because “he simply is him”—a man with a vision who advances it relentlessly.

When the head of the television station, Katja Bellini

(Katja Riemann), is accused of sedition, a representative of the state attorney’s office assures her the charges must be the work of left-wing crackpots. Everything will be done “according to the rulebook,” according to which the crimes and misdemeanours of rightists are ignored, or minimized. Nothing will get in the way of further television appearances by Hitler, declares the man from the state attorney’s office, who likes the programme.

The well-portrayed, omnipresent hypocrisy and deceit bring to mind Hans Christian Andersen’s famous fairy tale about the emperor’s new clothes. No one wants to brand Hitler, who publicly compares foreigners with vermin, as a right-winger. He is viewed as a charismatic, subversive figure with his own special brand of irony and ambiguity.

Social Democratic Party chairman Sigmar Gabriel sends his own get well card after the Hitler figure is beaten up by radical right-wingers and ends up in the hospital. The unscrupulous station head even calls him a fighter for democracy. (In Vermes’ novel, Hitler is also awarded the Grimme Award, one of the most prestigious honours for a German television programme.)

This is anything but farfetched. The German press celebrated the right-wing putsch in Ukraine as a struggle for democracy. Politicians seek an alliance with the right-wing Pegida movement. Racist, anti-Islamic caricatures are celebrated in the name of freedom of art. Not all that long ago, certain German intellectuals were euphoric when Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Just like in Andersen’s fairy tale, a “naive” individual speaks the truth. It is Sawatzki who indignantly notes that people are celebrating the real Hitler. It is enough to send him to a mental institution.

At the same time, *Look Who's Back* makes many superficial and sweeping generalisations. It gives the impression that Hitler would, in general, have a decent chance of finding a foothold in modern-day Germany. It

suggests that a right-wing demagogue, who strives for world domination for irrational reasons, would be able to conquer the media like a pop star, and easily play the masses, as the film says, like a keyboard. All he has to do is harp on a few popular social issues. Documentary scenes of “Hitler’s” encounter with the “people,” which the director adds into the film, seem to partially confirm this. In an interview with the *Bild* newspaper, the German tabloid, Wnendt complained angrily about the number of people who ranted against foreigners when confronted with the “Hitler” figure.

A key scene in *Look Who’s Back* tries to offer a bit of historical explanation. Hitler claims that an entire population of normal people elected him in 1933, because at their core they were just like him. Then he says, turning to the Germans today: “I am a part ... of all of you.”

Public opinion changes when a video emerges showing the Hitler character shooting a small dog. The entire population expresses its horror. This scene reflects the widespread view in self-styled intellectual circles that the German population is a backward mass that is easy to manipulate.

This view is an essential ingredient of the postwar ideology that was barely called into question by the 1968 protest generation, despite its criticism of the continuing role of the Nazi elite in the West German state. The integral relationship between fascism and capitalism that was part of the socialist understanding of fascism in an earlier period was replaced by superficial criticism of “mass society” and “mass communication,” and similar ideas.

While *Look Who’s Back* voices honest concerns about current conditions, it is replete with commonplace prejudices and conceptions that explain nothing about the actual historical causes of Hitler’s rise to power.

In a few places, the film portrays Hitler as foolish, where devastating criticism would be more appropriate. The “criticism” in *Look Who’s Back* of the ruling parties—who have been attacking social and democratic rights for years and are now conspiring to rebuild German militarism—is virtually devoid of genuine content. For example, the SPD’s Gabriel is presented merely as a joke. Other parties and politicians are dismissed in a similar manner. Only the characterization of the Greens—as a narrow-minded, right-wing party that supports the state (“Environmental security is homeland security”)—hits the mark.

Of course there are disoriented, right-wing responses in the public such as those Wnendt captured in his

documentary segments. But what do they actually represent? Why does Wnendt let the political system off scot-free, ignoring the fact that it makes a conscious effort to divert various fears into nationalistic and racist channels? Moreover, it is also obvious that people can react provocatively to a provocation such as a man dressed in a Hitler outfit, without the most serious conclusions being drawn.

Nonetheless, the considerable interest in *Look Who’s Back* certainly reveals it has hit a nerve. This is undoubtedly due to the film’s depiction—whatever its serious limitations—of a hypocritical and dishonest political atmosphere, which is the general experience of masses of German people.

In better-off social layers, moreover, there is a certain fascination with this presentation of a powerful leader, prepared to recklessly flout democratic rights—a presentation that also reduces Hitler to a relatively harmless figure.

The striving of broad layers of the working population for radical change has nothing to do with the desire for a dictator. The fear and suspicion expressed throughout Wnendt’s *Look Who’s Back* about a mass movement getting out of control are jarring, and telling. In spite of itself, the film is never able to break free from prejudices about the “masses.” This ambivalence and hesitancy eventually have a paralysing artistic and social effect.

The actual behaviour of broad layers of the German population in the present immigration crisis is clear. Many people have spontaneously helped the suffering refugees. It is the political elite who deny assistance to the refugees—including women and small children—and instead pen them up in camps, an operation that awakens ominous historical associations.

Polls have also shown there is a deep popular mistrust—to the point of indignation—about the media’s reporting. The crassest examples of this are the recent official reactions to the terror attacks in Paris. The German media is relentlessly propagating the need for restrictions on democratic rights and even a “world war” against terror.



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