

Landscapes which get in the way

Invincible, directed by Werner Herzog

By Stefan Steinberg
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After nearly a decade devoted to documentary films and opera productions, German director Werner Herzog has written and directed a new feature film, which is now playing in German cinemas. *Invincible (Unbesiegt)* opened last summer at the Cannes festival to generally poor reviews and the producers and director have evidently waited for what they think is the right moment to release the film to a German public.

The film deals with the discovery by a German cabaret agent of a strong man working as a blacksmith in a Jewish shtetl in eastern Poland. The year is 1932, one year before the Nazi take-over. The young blacksmith, Zische Breitbart, is invited to Berlin to work in a popular cabaret run by the hypnotist and charlatan Erik-Jan Hanussen. To placate his predominantly pro-Nazi clientele, Hanussen persuades the dark-haired Zische to wear a blonde wig and the type of spiked helmet characteristically associated with the Aryan mythical hero Siegfried. According to Hanussen, Zische, in the course of his stage appearances, is to fulfil the desire on the part of the Germans for “a strong man, a hero, a leader.”

The naïve Zische initially plays along for a time, but then in a fit of conscience and confronted by his young adoring brother, Zische strips off his wig in the middle of a performance and proudly declares his Jewishness. The Nazis in the audience are scandalised and Zische’s career in cabaret is effectively finished. Hanussen reveals in a confrontation with Zische that he too suppressed his Jewish origins to make a career for himself and indeed he is subsequently picked up and persecuted by the Nazis. A relationship between Zische and the pianist at Hanussen’s cabaret fails to take off. Zische returns to his village determined to warn the village elders of the danger of German fascism. Shortly afterwards he dies tragically of a wound incurred during one of his displays of strength. According to film notes, the story is loosely based on real events.

Along with Wim Wenders, Rainer W. Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff and others, Werner Herzog was a leading member of the generation of German film directors

associated the German “New Wave.” The movement developed in the mid-1960s and for nearly two decades produced the majority of the most interesting and thoughtful German films. The attention paid by the new wave directors to German history and in particular the experience of fascism in the twentieth century, as well as the depth of the attention, varied from individual to individual.

Rainer W. Fassbinder repeatedly took up the issue of fascism and its repercussions for contemporary German society in his films (*Lili Marleen, The Marriage of Maria Braun. Lola*, et al.), with varying degrees of success. Wim Wenders largely ignored the subject. Schlöndorff took up the Nazi era in his cinematic reworking of Gunter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*.

Herzog evinced a reluctance to deal directly with the theme in his films. There were always somewhat vague psychological presentiments of fascism in such films as *Aguirre, Wrath of God* and *Fitzcarraldo*, in which the filmmaker presented characters who had rarely been dealt with in post-war German cinema. *Aguirre* was the crazed, self-obsessed Spanish prince who single-handedly dreams of conquering Peru. *Fitzcarraldo*, the German entrepreneur attempting to take culture to the natives by erecting an opera house in the South American jungle, evoked the colonising efforts made by fanatical German nationalists at the start of the twentieth century. Repeatedly Herzog returned to the tragic figure in his films, striving after the seemingly impossible and failing dismally, but his own relationship to these figures remained equivocal.

Under circumstances where few German directors were prepared or willing to deal either directly or indirectly with the heritage of fascism, Herzog’s romantic and mythical (and somewhat hysterical) depictions of the rise and fall of demagogic figures found a resonance amongst German audiences. At the same time Herzog is accomplished in conjuring up dramatic pictorial landscapes (e.g., the breathtaking long opening pan in *Aguirre*). Describing his films Herzog returns continually to the theme of landscapes. “Perhaps I seek certain utopian things, space for human

honour and respect, landscapes not yet spoilt, planets that do not exist yet, dreamed landscapes. Very few people seek these images today.”

Now for the first time in his work as a director Herzog has turned directly to the experience of National Socialism as a film motif. The result is a thoroughly disappointing and unconvincing piece of work. Herzog seems more trusting of his instinct and his sense of pictorial inspiration than to be making any real attempt to get to grips with the characters he creates and the situations in which they find themselves. He boasts of having written the script in 10 days.

Almost every element in the film grates. All of the young Nazis and their women in the film are peroxide blond, dumb, arrogant and aggressive. The elderly Jews from the shtetl all sport straggly beards, look downcast, but have hearts of gold. Herzog is leading us by the nose. There are no shadings, we are presented with black and white characters and situations. His film avoids any real conflicts that require us to think and work through what is happening.

Herzog was determined to win the services of Jouko Ahola as the strongman, Zische Breitbart, and Anna Gourari as Hanussen’s concert pianist. Ahola is a real strong man and Gourari is an accomplished concert pianist. During pauses in filmmaking, she relates in an interview, Ahola lifted weights and she practised piano. In their respective realms of weight-lifting and piano playing both are commendable. In terms of the dynamic of the film, their inability to inject any sort of feeling into their attempts to develop a relationship is frankly embarrassing.

The recurring *dreamed landscape* in *Invincible* is a crag of rocks teeming with red crabs. The image crops up at various points in the film; the omnipresence of the crabs recalls the scene in *Aguirre* where the central figure played by Klaus Kinski is overrun by a host of tiny monkeys. What an outcrop of rock teeming with red crabs has to do with Zische’s fate in Nazi Germany is never explained or hinted at in the slightest in the film. One is left to conclude that during a visit to Easter Island Herzog was so impressed by the sight of the crabs that he decided it had to be in his film. *Invincible* suffers as a result.

One further additional point should be raised in connection with Herzog’s treatment of fascism and the year 1932. *Invincible* presents German fascism as if its only motivating force was the discrimination and persecution of Jews. The relationship between anti-Semitism and hostility to the socialist workers’ movement is entirely absent. In fact, the year 1932 was characterised by mass unemployment and a wave of demonstrations by the leading organisations of the working class—the German Social Democrats and the Communist Party. Two general elections took place in July and November. Between the two elections the NSDAP lost

over two million votes and leading members of the party despaired, believing that the party’s pinnacle of success had been reached and passed. In November the combined votes for the SPD and Communist Party exceeded those of the National Socialists. The divisive policy of “social fascism” imposed by the Stalin-led Comintern was decisive in enabling the Nazi’s to transform the situation and take power less than six months later.

Apart from one reference in a discussion between leading Nazis to plans to blow up the Reichstag and thereby create a provocation which could be used to discredit the Communist Party, the film ignores entirely the activities and measures undertaken by the Nazis against working class organisations. In fact, recent research indicates that not only was Hanussen informed of the plans to set fire to the Reichstag, but that his knowledge of or involvement in the plot was the most probable explanation for his arrest and murder in 1933 by the Nazis.

Anti-Semitism was a crucial element in the Nazi ideology developed by Hitler after the First World War, but at the heart of National Socialist politics was the dismantling of the independent organisations of the working class. As competent historians have explained, Hitler hated the Jews primarily because they were socialists, not the socialists because they were Jews. The first occupants of Nazi concentration camps in 1933 were members of working class parties and the trade unions. Only after the dismemberment of these organisations and the suppression of any form of democracy and domestic opposition were Hitler’s hands free to move to the systematic persecution of the Jews and other minorities later in the decade.

The positive reception given, not so long ago, by significant layers of German intellectuals and sections of the German left to the theses of Daniel Goldhagen in his book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* indicated the extent to which a class-based analysis of fascism has been replaced by a conception of fascism as a purely national-racial movement. In addition to the implausibility of its characters and action, Herzog’s inspirational and unhistorical treatment of his subject matter in *Invincible* also plays into the hands of those today who seek to deny the social and class roots of National Socialism.

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