

Critique

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## Hitler Revisited: Two Recent Films



*Fairytale*

A certain advantage of participating in an esteemed film festival jury is that you get a fair chance to watch the most amazing recent films. A jury schedule deters you from gaining access to many of those quality films you wish to see, yet your appetite for tasting some excellent films is somewhat fulfilled in the end. Truly international film festivals usually maintain an official library, and distinguished guests are provided with the privilege of seeing any movie of their choice if kept on the computer. The 47th Hong Kong International Film Festival (30th March to 10th April 2023) was no exception. In one of Asia's most prestigious film festivals, held annually in Hong Kong, the FIPRESCI jury selected the best from a palette of eight Chinese films. As different art house genres consummated my film viewing experience, it's worth sharing my impression of two such films having Adolf Hitler organically attached to the whole enactment.

In a time of the contrasting rise of leftism and far rightism, albeit in exciting manoeuvres worldwide, one may feel it irresistible to weigh a

work of art that retains the Fuhrer's shadow in whatever proportion in it. In HKIFF, such two films were master Alexander Sokurov's *Fairytale* and Iranian auteur Houman Seyyedi's *World War III*, both released in 2022, winning accolades. Contemporary great Sokurov doesn't represent his homeland alone; he is a great soul representing humanity. It was vindicated when he vehemently opposed the Ukraine war; it even resulted in denying his right to leave Russia. Prior to that, he stood in support of one of his Ukrainian counterparts, and President Vladimir Putin expectedly turned down his appeal to reconsider a verdict against the prominent activist-filmmaker. Once a young friend of the legendary Andrei Tarkovsky, deeply moved by him of course, it was not a surprise that his several early features were banned by Soviet authorities simply because the tedium of military life tended to reappear in his films that didn't comply with the state-sponsored aesthetic drives.

Sokurov's newest film *Fairytale*, made after a gap of seven years, has a tailor-made representation

of Hitler and others who determined the political highways in the 20th century. Made as an animated fantasy that gives an artistic and philosophical statement about some of the most important figures from two thousand years of European history, such as Jesus, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and Churchill, it shows them all in a surreal interior, a medieval fort-like setting in animated pencil drawing and photo images. In a way, their encounters and interactions transcend time and space: they await God's approval for who will be allowed to pass heaven's door among them. God's eyes and face are rarely seen by the slight opening of the huge entrance by which the characters are given orders in a baritone voice of the imaginary Supreme Being.

The novelty of the fictional drama is that the historically well-known characters are often seen not as a solo figure, but in several figures, for instance, Joseph Stalin is seen talking to three other Stalins in differing outfits once or twice to exhibit perhaps one's duality or plurality of his mind. While animated, some archaeological footage might have been used in monochrome, apparently in the grave where even Jesus Christ is seen resting in a bed, often complaining about unbearable pain and body ache. The sound design adds to the ambience with a cacophony to which music and mass song are added but not before 45 minutes of the run time. Though fictional, the dialogues are rendered according to the men's pertinent mannerisms; their voices are perhaps copied from archival materials. They throw insults and praises in no uncertain manner. Hitler is condemned as a "Stink of burnt meat. Smell of your past." The Fuhrer complains, "Stalin smells of sheep." And so on and on, all of them loitering in a carousel.

Once Benito Mussolini exclaimed that he had read with Lenin in a library in Austria. Sharp comes Hitler's comment, "We are all a bit Socialists." Sometime after, Churchill is heard: "God, look, there is Communism everywhere." God's deep voice utters: "Leave Communists, I feel pity for them." Then Stalin is seen addressing his battle comrades. A windmill draws everyone's attention, but Hitler cannot tolerate its sound and fires his pistol at it, leading it to crumble. Meanwhile, people cry out

beyond the shifting backdrops— being heard in unintelligible roaring sound, as the masses resemble a sea of unstable waves. Among all the figures, only Winston Churchill seems to have God's acceptance for his somewhat neutral role. Historical truths linger behind these characters and their dialogues. The source of these dialogues can be a point to ponder, but they form a subtle farce of human predicament spread over the last century. The dig goes at totalitarianism crossing geopolitical borders.



*Alexander Sokurov*

Dictators are Sokurov's recurring theme in several of his most notable films. As a devoted filmmaker, not just a history graduate, he must have found interest in exploring the pathetic side of power politics. In transferring the researched materials into *Fairytale*'s script, which has taken more than two years according to the director himself, he meticulously uses deepfake technology with digital animators adding a funnier side to the projected characters— they all seem to be joking at each other— after all, it is a fairytale. The writer is not kind! The 20<sup>th</sup>-century rulers are not to the liking of Jesus, so he is irritated by those around them who are waiting for their appointment with God. Jesus says he will stay lying in the ruins and wait until his 'Father' (God) resolves the issues at stake. Clearly, the union of World War II time's infamous leaders isn't lenient in discussing their political actions, but they gossip obsessively. Bringing Jesus into their space and making him still lying there, with endless wait for God's task to be over, have a certain philosophical connotation to the story. It is fairly explicable that the sins and purgatory are not over, and the workload for

God has accumulated from aeon to aeon. Over and above that, with extended control over the craft, Sokurov recreates the ghosts of the past to hint at an apocalyptic vision of the future. It is not without anything that Mussolini, at one point, insists, “Everything will return; all I need is to cross the Rubicon.”



*Houman Seyyedi*

Surprisingly the men of history only talk and talk, never-ending, while taking casual strolls around the monochromatic ruins and wastelands where countless civilian souls form tidal waves as if depicting total unrest. Hitler and Stalin were bitter foes in WWII. Still, in the imagined afterlife, they are sober, coexisting, powerless, but driven by ego, and they are exerting soft tongue-lashing over a soundtrack of overlapped dialogues, a faint mixture of languages and orchestral music. A typically Sokurovian style is flamboyant through the entire mise-en-scene taking the viewers on a journey of realising how in the illusory next world, the negativity of the reign of those prominent rulers stands exposed. It's reflected not in those arrogant leader's speeches but in Churchill's soliloquy: “I offer nothing but tears, sweat and death.”

Hitler and WWII, perhaps the most treated subject in world cinema since the middle of the 20th century, were in central focus in Sokurov's one early feature, which was part of a tetralogy he filmed to examine the unfortunate effects of power. That was *Moloch* (1999) dramatising a slice of Hitler's life which was a best screenplay award winner at Cannes, to be followed by his other three films of the tetralogy— about Lenin, about Japan's emperor

Hirohito and a new interpretation of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century German legend Faust. WWII again formed the background of his penultimate film *Francofonia* (2015), a docu-drama I watched in Kolkata (KIFF, 2015). In juxtaposing art and war, Sokurov dealt with the great art museum Louvre in the backdrop of Paris during WWII. But here, too, the shadow of Spain's longest-reigning dictator Franco fell into a grotesque subversion. With stunning visuals and CGIs used effectively in artistic transition shots, sometimes blurring the lines between fiction and documentary, the film joins together all the elements that characterise Sokurov's style, creatively reinforced in *Fairytale* in the true sense of a post-modern pastiche.

The other film, *World War III*, directed by Houman Seyyedi, having Hitler amongst its characters, is the sixth directorial venture from the prolific young filmmaker, an acclaimed actor-editor-screenwriter for both big and small screens. Presented as a thriller cum black comedy set in present-day Iran, it has a film-within-film structure as well. The ‘world war’ is inside that structure, and the word ‘war’ is symbolic of the drama that begins in the most malleable fashion, unfolding gradually to reach the crescendo of tragic drama. The plot develops with a middle-aged daily wage earner, Shakib, who lost his family in an earthquake years ago. Dialogues reveal that he is homeless. One morning he is hired with a group of labourers to work at a construction site. His employers let him sleep in a dingy hut at the site, part of the under-production film set. The film is about the atrocities committed by the Nazis during WWII. With all the nitty-gritty of the concentration labour camp, Shakib has to go through, the hardest life of the inmates fetches images of a gig economy at its worst self.

In a compelling tale moving at a fast pace, the director of the film-within-film finds Shakib's face similar to Hitler's and his imposing direction instantly transforms a dumb labourer's role from a captive to an all-powerful ruler. Suddenly he has all the men caring about him and is offered a separate, well-furnished room in a wooden mansion to live in. Enters Ladan, his love, a deaf and mute woman from afar who finds her way to meet Shakib. Courtship is

naturally forbidden, and she is followed by disapproving village folks who suspect Shakib of luring and hiding her. So, he swiftly makes an arrangement for her to hide below the house's wooden floor, which he can lock from above and conceal the way pulling the carpet over with a piano atop this. But things take a catastrophic turn when one afternoon, on his way back from a nearby town for mundane needs, Shakib finds the whole house in devastating flames. Knowing that Ladan might not come out of the fire, and worse, she had no power to scream; she might have burnt alive, Shakib's rage is directed towards everyone trying to pacify him. Unaware of the plot that the house would be burnt down as a part of the film's storyline, a devastated Shakib can't tell anyone that he has secretly sheltered his lady love there.

A wrathful Shakib is hardly controllable, his mute personality turning for the worse implausible, and in an upsetting development, he procures toxicant to mix in the meals of the film unit. He is no longer a dumb man as he says to somebody: "Just because I'm illiterate and you grabbed me off the streets doesn't mean everything I say is a lie." The film's gory end marks a calm, cool, perhaps tired, and repenting Shakib in his full attire as Hitler witnessing a sort of last supper for the whole film unit. The excellent character development is the hallmark of this dark comedy. Riding on the class divide, the nasty gap between the haves and the have-nots, the turn of events metamorphoses into a social satire. The reshaped desires of a destitute man following an unexpected luxury, however short-lived, are reduced to ashes suddenly. He was hired at first to work for an under-production film, but soon enough was taken as an extra and, as fate would have it, finally roped in as a replacement of the lead cast. He is not a person to make out the head or tail of the whole new tasks, even can't read the documents he signs, doesn't know Hitler at all, and hardly knows that his role is to portray an evil person from the pages of history, as the character's build up unpretentiously gives a subaltern angle to the premise.

The raging fire of an unbelievable tragedy engulfed a whole unit of working people: isn't it a

warning to all who dream of windfall gains, one may wonder. The semiotics of this fast-evolving tragedy gives way to a realisation of sadder and stranger misfortune. It further establishes the filmmaker's hold over the craft, and Mohsen Tanabandeh's choice for the central role easily wows all cine-goers. Seyyedi's road map for the script finally poses a question of whether the crooked and the asinine oppressor and oppressed, to be precise, are mere offshoots of customary disorder. The film opens up a testing ground of prodigious dialectics as the unhindered progress of interrelated sequences leads a dark satire to give way to a harrowing tragedy. The grain of truth projected in this high-pitched theatre of gain and loss can be checked in a larger context.

But is it offensive to see an artistic work embedded in anarchism? Is it sickening for viewers in general? Anarchism, in Seyyedi's view, may be destined to arouse a sense of disbelief for its ascent. A rare individual anarchy of destruction in Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* or the organised anarchy of violence in Albert Camus' play *The Just Assassins* provides their justification for those acts. Given their climactic point, anarchism springs up under state repression, social injustice and abuse of power. Shakib is a docile character, always submitted to fate, but when he finds his love interest is gone forever, his reactions turn wild and unstoppable. "Don't threaten me. I'm not afraid of anything. I have nothing more to lose," he utters. His Faustian self emerges soon, making him steal money, buy a dangerous substance, and take the lives of all he held responsible for Ladan's death. A powerless Hitler is born in the act of silent butchering of people, kicking off an allegorical third world war in the climax scene. This is another global reality sprouting its head and limbs elsewhere against which the scope for sitting in a fool's paradise is shrinking daily. This may be the sole reason for allowing the anarchist reflex to turn judgemental at the end of a brilliant movie. Anyways, *World War III* deserves repeated viewing for analysing its logical contours, the trajectory of the theme, and the salient features of the whole production.