

**PARACELSUS** (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim. 1493-1541).

The film. Germany 1943. Directed by G.W. Pabst. Werner Kraus (Paracelsus), Harald Kreutzberg (Fliegenbein).

(Adapted from an e:mail letter to a colleague, 2-12-96)

The assertion that this is a propaganda film celebrating **Hitler's** leadership qualities is simply silly. It's many things but first and foremost an **anti-establishment film**. The "Hutten-Song", the central icon of the piece, is sung underground in the empty tavern, a conspiratorial setting. "Die Trummel trummt terem tum-tum, ihr Herren, eure Zeit ist um." This is 1943, everybody knows who the "Herren" are. And the song captures all the ominous threat of the Peasant Wars (1525) and later popular uprisings against an oppressive establishment.

Against **Them**, the establishment, that is, are **Paracelsus**, Ulrich von **Hutten** and, on the periphery, **Erasmus** of Rotterdam. Who's missing? You guessed it, Martin **Luther**, the central figure of the age. The film makers can't use him here. He's NOT against "them", unfortunately. On the contrary, he stridently and unconditionally upholds secular authority, no matter how vile.

But Paracelsus bears some of Luther's features (much like Brecht's Galileo), he writes and "preaches" in the vernacular. Most of all, as a physician he's the man of reason and common sense. Es gibt keine Wunder, there are no miracle cures. Everything has natural causes and must be healed naturally.

"Ich weiss, es wird einmal ein Wunder geschehn" (from the movie **Die Grosse Liebe** of 1942 and heard with increasing frequency as only miracles and miracle weapons could win the war) is sweet seductive rubbish, an opiate for the common man. A great film, though, whose title might well be "A Song is Born."

Paracelsus is not a leader a la **Hitler/Mussolini**. On the contrary. He is a scholar/healer, he is against all kinds of false prophets, in medicine and politics. Eventually he gets Schreibverbot and Lehrverbot, is forbidden to write and teach and is forced into exile. Whom do you think that called to mind in 1943? It's the Einsteins, Adornos and **Ernst Cassirers** of the time, there's even a faint resemblance of the latter's facial features ...

The young woman and her Johannes follow him, even biblical language here: Wir aber wollen gehen und ihn suchen. And where will he be? "Ueberall wo Leid und Not ist". "Ueberall" is again the first word of the next shot when the imperial ambassador invites Paracelsus to join the Court at **Innsbruck**. But he will never join the establishment, not even that of **Emperor Maximilian**, the "letzte Ritter" and a man of impeccable integrity. He, Paracelsus, will devote himself to the "Muehseligen und Beladenen", "all ye that labour and are heavy laden", the people on crutches who were introduced in one of the first shots and who have multiplied in the last -- it is now 1943! Read **Matth. 11.28** ff. It will not remind you of **Hitler**.

The real and dangerous Fuehrer/Verfuehrer figure is Fliegenbein, made up to look like **Goebbels** until he removes his mask. **Jupp-Schnauze**, **Reichs-Luegenmaul**, die **Grossdeutsche Klappe**, as we called him. His jerky moves are like Goebbels' who had polio (?) as a child. His dance is a **Veits-Tanz** (even Paracelsus calls it that) **not a Totentanz**. He creates mass hysteria, they follow him as rats and children followed the **Rattenfaenger von Hameln**, a contemporary synonym for Hitler. Paracelsus cures them, and him, Fliegenbein (in more than one way). **Hutten** too is "cured", but by his own insight. He is a Reichsritter, the military man, can he bring about a change before he is himself defeated? This comes as close to a call on the military to act, as is possible in as public a forum like this. Hutten will try. His 20th century compatriots will try a year later and fail as well, on July 20, 1944. Hutten is toasted in the tavern scene for who he is and what he will attempt. So is the **Reich**, Hutten's Reich, not the Third...the "other" Germany, das heimliche Deutschland. "Unsterblichkeit ist im Gedaechnis seines Volkes weiterleben"... Immortality is to live on in the memory of your people (not the great military victory or even the success of a coup). You need to have been there in 1943, El Alamain and Stalingrad have already happened, to understand the full implications...The war is lost. True to the military-aristocratic tradition that continued to inform the best, they no longer fought for victory or even survival, but in accordance with their own self-image. And, as one of the conspirators against Hitler, Henning von Treskow, is said to have put it a year later, to show the world that the German resistance was prepared to risk their very lives.

Johannes is the **Zauberlehrling** and like Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice almost causes a catastrophe, but **Froben's** death is due to apoplexy (says Paracelsus and we believe him). Paracelsus is cast down a flight of stairs and appears dead. Das habe ich nicht gewollt, says his horrified rival and academic enemy (too late, an incredible touch of honesty and naiveté). Johannes now too knows there is no magic Elixir, there may be a cure eventually but if it does come it will come through R&D. (There IS magic in money!).

**Erasmus** remains on the sidelines. "Vernunft" occurs only once.

The **Flagellants** (GUESS WHO THEY ARE) officially outlawed at the **Council of Constance** a hundred years

earlier, anachronistic here (!), are beyond remedy. An ihrem Wesen wird die Welt NICHT genesen; just let them pass, don't get swept away by them. Die Nacht hat zwölf Stunden, dann kommt schon der Tag. A touch of Schwejk.

We mustn't base our interpretations of these and other **brown era artifacts** on an unproved premise ("they are all made by Goebbels") and then arm ourselves with selective evidence. That is not only methodologically unsound but dishonest.

These are not Nazi films, they are films made during the Nazi era. The genre Nazi film does exist, but it is far from all-inclusive. Twelve years isn't enough time for the total retooling required. These people used to be superb independent professionals, they didn't all become automatons in '33. Some complied. Most dragged their feet, sneered and continued to manipulate icons and the Volksseele. Like all artists they hated censorship and got even. To understand how requires an extensive knowledge of contemporary conditions. Goebbels' directives don't explain much, they are interesting, but they are policy texts. You can insist all you want that they were followed to the letter, it simply and demonstrably isn't so, at best you're half right. Even in the most accomplished of propaganda films like **Jud Suess** (1940) and **Friedrich Schiller** (1940) there is a lot of subversive stuff, a consolation and delight for those who could recognize it. In the early forties people began to look for "confirmation" that it was the "establishment" (**Partei und Partei-Bonzen**), the fat cats, who were responsible for the increasing horror and misery everywhere. And the entertainment industry, then as now, gladly gave them what they wanted. But you had to have properly calibrated antennae in order to get the message.

A vignette to the point: An unusual incident occurred during the filming of **Hitlerjunge Quex** (1933). According to information available at the **Filmmuseum Potsdam** the film was already 80% complete when Reichsjugendführer Baldur **von Schirach** sent his text "Vorwaerts, vorwaerts, schmetterten die hellen Fanfaren ..." with the refrain "Unsere Fahne flattert uns voran..." The young actors steadfastly refused to sing such "rubbish" ("Quatsch", "Bloedsinn") and the director Hans Steinhoff had to hire a childrens choir to do it. Incidentally, "unsere Fahne flattert uns voran" had another, favorite meaning for us: beer breath.

POSTSCRIPT (2-14-96)

A note on the additional material I put in your box. The song is one of a number of contemporary adaptations/imitations of **Landsknechtslieder**, this one set in the **Thirty Years War** (1618-1648) and itself adapted for the movie, with identical rhythm: "die Landsknecht ziehn im Land herum" becomes "ihr Herren eure Zeit ist um." Ironically this is a collection of soldiers' songs for pacifist purposes (cf. the cover page with Death leading the column and beating the drum) the preface says so and one song has the refrain: Jungvolk (sic!) gib acht, dass man dich nit zu Landsknechten macht. The edition I have is the sixth, 1929.

(last modified 4/5//09)