

The Corner of Hollywood and Sinai

“Do not go gentle into that good night”

Life as more than the Sum of its Moments: Valkyrie versus *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

Movies are often well encapsulated by their taglines. Thus, I submit to you, the reader, two taglines.

One: Many saw evil. They dared to stop it.

Two: Life isn't measured in minutes, but in moments.

At first glance it might be possible to argue that both statements reflect a similar philosophy, a “seize the day” view of life. However, it is what one does when that day is seized that etches the chasm between these two movies.

The first is *Valkyrie*, one of a collection of Holocaust films to grace the screen over the last few weeks. It is the story of individuals, so frightened by the legacy being wrought for their people that they, at great risk to their lives and the lives of their families, tried to do what many of us still dream of: kill Hitler. The movie unfolds as if to tease us with possibility, but we all know the ending.

The second is *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, the visually stunning, fairy tale offspring of an F. Scott Fitzgerald short story and modern movie magic. It is the story of individuals who learn – some too late, some too early and some, in perfect Goldilocks fashion, at just the right moment – that life can happen out of order and we just have to make the most of it. Oh, and that there's no such thing as too late. Or too early.

Benjamin Button is meant to teach us to accept life, to go with the twists and turns of it, to let go of our inhibitions and fears and just sway to the quirky beat. The rhythm of the movie enforces this notion: it meanders – slow and steady – through the moments of Benjamin’s life, never frantic or anxious, always calm. Even in the worst moments – death, war, lost love – the movie’s focus, like Benjamin’s, is on the good, the peaceful, the new beginnings borne of any ending.

In contrast, the rhythm of *Valkyrie* is frenetic. There is no acceptance here. In each scene, frantic movement reigns supreme. This movie reeks of desperation and despair. The main characters of this movie are driven, not by the promise of new beginnings but by the chance to mitigate the horrors of the present.

And so we are faced with two roads. One is lined by roses and promises that, at any point along the path, if you find yourself embroiled in some unwanted murkiness, you have the power to wipe away the past, as a child would sleep from his eyes, and start fresh. The other is lined with points of no return and warns you that, at any point, if you find yourself similarly embroiled, you must struggle to escape – for that is what the righteous must do – but do not think that you will ever truly escape the scars of that detour. It is, in my mind, the difference between Confession and Teshuva, repentance.

Catholic Confession is truly fascinating, when one comprehends the promise of it. Complete freedom from sin. It is as if, with this one act, a person becomes someone new, someone without the taint of the other person’s mistakes, crimes, sins, errors, or misfortune. Someone who can start over without any disadvantage. However, just to be clear, one loses foresight as well. And so, it is likely that such a person will return to confession again and again – in a perpetual cycle of sin and absolution that makes life a twisted mimicry of the movie *Groundhog Day*.

Teshuva is something else entirely. It is the internalization of the sin. The confessional part of this process is meant to establish recognition: this is my sin. Confession becomes an act of possessiveness, not absolution. It binds the person to the crime in a very potent way. And, as if that was difficult enough, then comes the

hard part. After one admits ownership of the sin, one must begin the long process of repairing the damage. Notice the choice of words: damage is repaired but not undone. What is done cannot be undone. One can only not do it again. And one only knows not to do it again because one will forever bear the scars of that sin. It is said that a Ba'al Teshuva, a master of repentance, stands where a Tzadik, a righteous person, never will. To master repentance, to restructure one's life entirely, to switch paths so absolutely, is a near-impossible and great accomplishment, but one who does so will still never stand where the sinless man stands. Even if they end up on the same road after a while, where they started is still with them.

Valkyrie is a movie about repentance. It is a movie about flaws and those choices we make that cannot be erased. It is a movie about what to do next, after one realizes that life has taken an awful wrong turn. The men who tried to kill Hitler, many of them probably voted for him. All of them, I would speculate, knew the exact moment when they could have, quite possibly, changed the course of history, before the war started, before the killings started. None of them did. And so they planned an assassination – not to absolve them or Germany of the crimes already committed but to stop the flow of blood before it continued, to change the future, because they could not change the past. And because the futility of that made them angry enough to act.

There is a scene in *Benjamin Button* that plays over and over in my mind. Benjamin narrates a string of disparate events showing, first implicitly and then explicitly, how each discrete moment combined to cause tragedy. The point of it being that life is unpredictable and we should accept that. There is no placement of fault in the narration, no Dylan Thomas - esque "rage against the dying light." There is only a shrug, a slight hint of melancholy and the tranquility of one who has learned to "go with the flow" of a random universe.

This is unacceptable to me.

Just such a collection of random circumstances conspired to cause the assassination attempt in *Valkyrie* to fail. And, even if no one is to blame, I will not accept it. It is a

travesty and I will cry and wail and curse the weather, if need be. It is that anger that will lead a man to act. To shout out one final thing as the firing squad takes his life, to stand tall in death or run to die just one moment before the man one calls mentor. These are not futile acts, although they would be seen as such in the world of *Benjamin Button*. In that world, life is a series of new chances but in the real world, and especially, in a world borne from the ashes of the Holocaust, life is one long chance that we get to work on from the moment we are born until the moment we die. If you dent it in your youth, you must fix it in your old age.

I think we are meant to age and not de-age to remind us of this. Our wrinkles and scars and echoes of broken bones, scraped knees, first fights, first falls – these are with us all the way. We cannot erase them and we cannot erase the choices we make. We can only pick up the consequences, the mistakes, the sins, the wrong turns, put them over our shoulders and carry them with us. We cannot make up lost time. We cannot redirect the current. But we do have the choice whether or not to fight it. Life is not about the minutes or the moments – it is a singular reality, not a collection of disconnected pieces. And it is about what we do about that.

Sometimes I wish life were like *Benjamin Button* wants it to be. I wish nothing I did yesterday mattered today. But, on the other hand, I kind of like that it does. Because that means what I do today affects tomorrow. It is a terrible responsibility, a painful weight on my soul. It is what makes us Godlike. It is what allowed German soldiers, in the twilight of WWII, to throw their fate in with a plan from which there was no return. Because if all they would have been thinking of were the moments then they would have closed their eyes, shook their heads, kissed their wives and played catch with their children. But they didn't because they knew moments are only useful as building blocks, each moment an opportunity to make a life better. It is only by a life in totality that we measure the mettle of a man.