

Emperor Ming the Merciless of the planet Mongo – Hollywood’s dark alternative to the earthbound and merciful Charlie Chan of the fortune cookie bon mots. H. G. Wells had mostly left the future far behind by then, but his 1890s novels *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *The Invisible Man* were made into successful films. (*The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*, of course, would be filmed again and again in later years.) Wells was a very respected prognosticator by the thirties, and his book *Things to Come*, which served as the basis for Menzies’s film, was treated with due seriousness by an anxious interwar public.

Wells’s book and screenplay, written with Lajos Biro, the erstwhile collaborator of Lubitsch and Josef von Sternberg, provided Menzies with the unprecedented opportunity to let his imagination soar. Vincent Korda, Alexander’s brother, was the nominal art director, but it is most likely that Menzies’s vision was the one that prevailed. *Things to Come* can be criticized for keeping a certain distance from its characters – which perhaps reflects Menzies’s inexperience with actors and his preoccupation with the spaces surrounding them – but even so, Ralph Richardson and Raymond Massey are extremely memorable. Richardson’s tyrant, “The Boss,” reflects the crudity of Benito Mussolini and anticipates Mel Gibson’s “Mad Max.” Richardson was much underrated as a screen actor: His Korda films, especially *Four Feathers* (1939), are excellent, and his classic roles in *The Fallen Idol* (1948), *The Heiress* (1949), and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1962), deserve far greater attention than they have gotten.

With war looming, Wells and Menzies created a credible contemporary world and then destroyed it. That the destruction depicted in the film did not come to pass in real life can mostly be attributed to Nazi laxity in developing a nuclear weapon. With contemporary hindsight, the film’s leap into the space age seems quite abrupt. In spite of developments such as Robert Goddard’s rocket experiments and Fritz Lang’s *Woman in the Moon* (1929), with its rocket designed by Herman Oberth and Willy Ley, Wells still relied on a space gun for interplanetary travel – just as Jules Verne and Georges Méliès had a few generations earlier. Only a few years after *Things to Come* was made, Nazi rocket scientist Werner von Braun would “aim at the stars” – and all too frequently hit London. In any case, Menzies’s vision of the future features spectacular sets tempered with throwbacks such as Roman Empire-style tunics. This seems to have anticipated Michael Anderson’s *Logan’s Run* (1976) and George Lucas’s *Star Wars* series. On the whole,

Menzies’s “world of tomorrow” seems a lot less silly than Lang’s much-celebrated *Metropolis* (1927) made a decade earlier. Why Menzies directed so few films over the next twenty years remains a bit of an enigma.

Fascism on the March

Leni Riefenstahl v. Joris Ivens 1935–1937

It was inevitable that film, as the most popular and influential medium of propaganda in history, would respond on many levels as the relative calm produced by the Treaty of Versailles gave way to the madness of a worldwide depression. Being somewhat dependent on the European market, Hollywood studios approached political and economic issues very gingerly. Even *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), released only four months before the invasion of Poland, tiptoed around anti-Semitism. The writing on the wall should have been evident to everyone by that point, but eighteen months later, Charlie Chaplin was still under pressure not to release *The Great Dictator* (1940).

Europe did not have the luxury of such timidity. The Nazis took over the German film industry in 1933, and Joseph Goebbels immediately established that it was at the service of the Reich, by which he clearly meant the Party. Although he probably fancied himself the creative force behind all German films made over the next twelve years – a kind of über-auteur – he was still dependent on “artists” and technicians to do the nuts-and-bolts work of fashioning alternative realities to be projected on to screens. Nobody was more successful in this regard, at least in the eyes of der Führer, than Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003), a reasonably attractive dancer turned actress turned director. Her film performances, beginning in 1926, were mostly in mountain films directed by the ex-geologist Arnold Fanck. In 1932, Riefenstahl directed and starred in one herself, *The Blue Light*, a film of striking imagery, and in 1933, she performed in what would be her last of such films, *S. O. S. Eisberg*, codirected by the American Tay Garnett. That same year, Hitler appointed her “film expert to the National Socialist Party.”

In 1934, Riefenstahl was assigned to make *Triumph of the Will*, which would ostensibly be a documentary about the Nazi Party Congress at Nuremberg. Despite her later protestations that she was a naïve and apolitical documentarian, it must have been obvious to

her that the whole event was staged for the benefit of her and her immense crew. (Morris Dickstein recently pointed this out in his excellent survey of Depression-era culture, *Dancing in the Dark*.) All of the resources of the Reich and vast sums of money were put at her disposal, and unprecedented masses of people were summoned to perform the rituals that she and her collaborators devised. Nothing like it had ever been seen before, and we are fortunate that the event did not create a lasting genre, although choreographers of annual military parades in Beijing and Pyongyang probably owe Riefenstahl something. (While I was sojourning just off the coast of Venezuela roughly a decade ago, I glimpsed on TV a failed attempt by Hugo Chávez to evoke a similar ethos.)

There is an undeniable brilliance to Riefenstahl's imagery, even though it builds on what German Expressionist directors had accomplished in the preceding fifteen years. Still, for any thoughtful person, the spectacle of Hitler and his henchman being glorified can evoke nothing but deep repulsion and horror. Although Riefenstahl managed to avoid the amorous attention of Goebbels and probably remained on platonic terms with Hitler, her soul was in bed with the Nazis. When Paris fell, Leni telegraphed Hitler: "You exceed anything human imagination has the power to conceive, achieving deeds without parallel in the history of mankind." Innocent neutral observer, indeed. I recommend *Leni*, the book by my late friend Steven Bach, as a balanced and authoritative study of Riefenstahl.

After his early poetic documentaries, Dutchman Joris Ivens (1898–1989), became politicized during his 1930 visit to Moscow and began a worldwide odyssey unparalleled by any other filmmaker. This even included a period in Hollywood and making a U.S. government-commissioned film, *Power and the Land*, in 1940. As a committed leftist, much of Ivens's late career was devoted to documentaries extolling the Cuban, Vietnamese, and Chinese Revolutions, and he somewhat sacrificed personal artistry for the causes to which he devoted his life.

The Spanish Earth (1937) was made at a time when issues were more clearly drawn than today. Although it took President Franklin Roosevelt several years to drag America kicking and screaming into the war against fascism, there is a sense of nostalgic comfort in knowing that Ivens was on the side of the good guys before public opinion swung in that direction. The film shares with the then vastly popular *March of Time* series the use of both actualities and staged or reconstructed scenes. When Ivens was criticized for not being objective, he replied, "a documentary filmmaker has to have an

opinion on such vital issues as fascism... if his work is to have any dramatic, emotional or art value." Riefenstahl could have taken some lessons on candor from him, but then, her cause was less noble and she was not called upon for explanation until after it had been defeated. Ernest Hemingway's script for *The Spanish Earth* – and his narration of it – is utilitarian and undogmatic, which allows the viewer to decide on their own which side they support. Although Ivens's quiet craftsmanship pales beside Hitler's regimented multitudes, it is worth thinking about which film is genuine art and which is, to use a popular Nazi term, degenerate.

Animation in the 1930s

Walt Disney / Ub Iwerks / Max Fleischer

With the emergence of figures like Walter Ruttmann and Oskar Fischinger in Germany, and with the coming of sound, Len Lye in Britain, abstraction became the dominant form of animation in 1930s Europe. Lotte Reiniger continued work on her silhouettes, and eventually landed in Britain. In France, Ladislav Starevitch spent the first decade of the sound era working on the puppet feature, *The Tale of the Fox* (1930).

America, as always, was different. This was in part because almost all animation came out of studios inextricably linked to the commercial film industry and its exhibition venues. The studios created by Walt Disney (1901–1966) and Max Fleischer (1889–1972) continued to grow and flourish, but in their own ways. Disney was based in Los Angeles and reflected the "wholesome" middle American values of Uncle Walt's Kansas City roots. Fleischer's New York-based outlook was more sophisticated and cosmopolitan, as Max was a transplanted Viennese Jew. Disney's characters tended to be anthropomorphic creatures gifted with human speech and dress. Fleischer's tended to more-or-less human, although I must confess I would cross to the other side of the street if I ever saw Betty Boop or Popeye coming toward me.

I have another confession: I tend to be ambivalent about animation, even though some of my best friends are animators. (I had a close friend who was so compulsive about the genre that he was addicted to everything from the homoerotic *Johnny Quest* to the post-pornographic *Family Guy*.) I do believe, however, that no other form of film is so intrinsically creative.