

Deceptive masterpiece

★★★★★ / 5 stars

Gilles Michiels in *De Standaard*, May 23, 2022.

*Fact or fiction? Genre exercise or autobiography? Mockumentary or utopia? The genius theatre film *The making of Berlin* overwhelms from start to finish.*

The title, *The making of Berlin*, sounds cryptic but simultaneously says everything it needs to say. This project tells the story of a Berliner, his city and the theatre company which goes by the same name, but is above all a construction of all these portraits assembled. Sounds like a comprehensive set-up? This final installment of Berlin's series of city portraits, the Holocene Cycle, masterfully fulfills all its promises.

Utopian project

The film starts with theatre-maker Fien Leysen following the company of Yves Degryse and (the absent) Bart Baele while working on a unique documentary. They are painting a portrait of Friedrich Mohr, who at the end of the Second World War worked for the Berlin Philharmonic as an orchestra director - 'the roadie of the orchestra'. The orchestra was given a protected status by the Nazi regime at the time, which shut the musicians off from reality but also gave them the chance to continue with their old lives. In 1945 however, their downfall was also in the air: if the Russians took the city, 'apolitical' artists were just as likely to be seen as the enemy.

Friedrich Mohr pulls you into his moving story and his unfulfilled dream of the time: performing Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* with the orchestra in several bunkers. Degryse and his team promise him to realise this utopian project, a plan for which they join forces with the orchestra of Opera Ballet Vlaanderen and radio station Klara.

Fact or fiction

The making of Berlin - with live music - tells of a personal tragedy and a complex piece of the city's history but also offers an authentic glimpse into Berlin's work process, which is full of dry humour. When a crew member says he would rather not participate in the making-of, Degryse asks if he would like to as a character ('We'll call you Dirk'). If the set designer gets inspiration during a car journey, the group stops in a motorway car park and draws the set plan on the pavement.

Scenes like these are absurd but never feel implausible in a sophisticated scenario. In other words, what you believe becomes less and less important. Then, after a huge plot twist, the viewer is presented with a mindfuck that completely erases the already blurred line between fact and fiction.

In this way, Berlin pushes you into the role of the musicians in their bunkers, who only get a filtered view of the world - the epitome of the artist in isolation. But the documentary-focused company mainly looks outwards. It knows better than anyone that every story - of a person, of a city, of a company and by a company - is a making-of, subject to mediation and composition. And sometimes a cliffhanger to cling to.

Berlin offers a hyper-aware glimpse into its inner chamber and in doing so also captures all the beauty and danger, pain and poetry, that comes with storytelling.

source: https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220522_97673235

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