

LFF 2017: Life Guidance

By Mari Jones, 20.11.2017



The unspecified future time period that we see in *Life Guidance* doesn't have advanced technology at every turn, neon skylines filled with flying cars, or even obedient robots in every household (although there is a mechanical rabbit at one point). Instead it looks almost exactly like our present, the modern, minimalist décor and the ideal work ethic something that a lot of us probably strive to have in our own lives. It is this that makes Ruth Mader's film so much more sinister, the similarities to our world making this dystopian future seem more of an inevitability than an imagining.

That title refers to a company who tell people in this affluent new time how best to live their lives to achieve their full potential – a system that Alexander (Fritz Karl) begins to question when they come knocking on his door one day. He hasn't been living with total direction, something established early on when his son (Nicolas Jarosch) catches him lazing on the sofa, his cry of "that's not optimal Dad" falling on deaf ears. But when a strangely cheerful representative from 'Life Guidance' arrives to gently push Alexander back on track, he begins to test the boundaries of the system and tries to find out exactly what could happen to him if he decides to stop obeying their demands.

Similar in tone to the films of Yorgos Lanthimos, particularly the brilliant *Alps*, Ruth Mader's film quickly establishes the rules of this odd world while building a horrible sense of foreboding. Each scene has an innate eeriness to it, from the measured, emotionless way the

characters talk, to the pointless business meetings where everyone simply agrees with one another, to the opening scene of a group of children singing what appears to be a national anthem that leans heavily on the idea of compliance. This is 1984 through and through, except in Mader's hands the true dark Orwellian nature is held back until much later on, the writer-director initially focussing on the coldness of their efficient yet unfeeling time, while also injecting moments of uneasy humour to show the ridiculousness of a system that is built to serve the needs of capitalism. It is when Alexander begins to explore the reach of this very system, and the extent certain people will go to in order to keep it in place, that Mader and co-writer Martin Leidenfrost slowly allow the true horror at the centre of their story to come to light – a horror that is shockingly something you could envisage as a very real possibility, even in our own time.

Mader fills her film with moments that emphasise the innate creepiness of it all, Christine A. Maier's beautiful cinematography often using clean, linear shots to show the characters surrounded by immense buildings, making them seem trapped amongst it all. Shots from afar sometimes look like surveillance footage, Fritz Karl's restrained yet tense performance only adding to the suggestion that he is being watched. Renate Martin and Andreas Donhauser's production design adds to this cold, unfeeling time too, whites, blacks and washed-out blues the colour palette of Alexander's drab world. No wonder he wants to break free. It's almost a shocking contrast then when he does wander from his designated path (his sat nav practically screaming at him to get back on route) and comes upon a place where people live without rules and restrictions, the earthy browns and warm oranges of their clothing and the architecture inviting to both him and us. However, Mader and Leidenfrost show this place to be just as problematic, these directionless, visibly poorer folks wandering aimlessly like zombies with their heads bowed down. They might be free from capitalism, but they seem to be paying another price for doing so.

The quiet, unhurried pace of the narrative adds to the eeriness felt throughout, something that gradually builds and which ekes out the tension of each scene. Yet atmospheric as it is, this can often become glacial to the point of frustration, leaving you wishing Mader and Leidenfrost had let loose even for a couple of minutes and kicked it into high gear, or even added more moments of incident to keep the threat constantly over Alexander's head. Still, this can be mostly forgiven when the result is a clever, intriguing sci-fi in which Mader and Leidenfrost do away with clunky exposition (often a by-product of films such as this) in favour of simply stepping back and inviting us to catch up if we can, allowing the disturbing images and the stark, almost muted performances to do the talking most of the time.

With Manfred Plessl's brilliant, creepy score further invoking that sci-fi genre feeling, *Life Guidance* is a fascinating film and one that is brought to perfect life through a combination of Mader's superb direction, excellent design and cinematography, incredible performances, and a fantastically nuanced story. Films about dystopian futures always work best when what they depict is slightly outside our own reality. Mader has realised this, and the result is terrifying.

Overall

A beautifully-made dystopian vision that's chilling and startlingly realistic. However the glacial pacing lets it down at times. **7 out of 10**