

# Bird Atlas

OLMO OMERZU

2021

A familiar feeling for those who spend their time plugged into news feeds churning out endless iterations of bad news is that all our problems are more connected, and thus more insurmountable, than ever before. The personal is political – family dynamics and private consumption choices play into questions of social justice and supply chain issues; the climate crisis is inextricable from the capitalist drive for accumulation; and everything is bound together and seemingly exacerbated by the global network of social media. How to dramatise this sense of compounding complication in a vaguely coherent way? How to make it engaging, perhaps even funny onscreen?

Ljubljana-born director Olmo Omerzu finds his own way through this Gordian knot in his most recent feature, *Bird Atlas*. He does so with a family drama with international implications, that carefully modulates between blandness, allusion, and allegory. For a minor-key and small-scale feature, *Bird Atlas* draws some surprisingly weighty conclusions. In the process, Omerzu establishes himself as one of Central Europe's most promising young directors of both actors and ideas.

The film follows the tribulations of Ivo (veteran Czech actor Miroslav Donutil), the taciturn director of an electronics company whose distrust of his heir apparent Martin (Martin Pechlat) means he is still burdened with the family business long past retirement age. Ivo's discovery that his company is in serious debt as the result of long-term embezzlement prompts the first of several health crises, and the film becomes a race against time: will our protagonist get to the bottom of this financial impropriety before his heart gives out once and for all? Ivo's search for answers, strung out enjoyably with twists and turns by screenwriter Petr Pycha, ultimately reveals some disturbing truths about both his offspring and his long-serving, long-suffering secretary Marie (Alena Mihulová).

Ivo's granite-faced demeanour and implacable pursuit of personal justice map perfectly onto the desaturated corporate world that Omerzu conjures up, seemingly sapping the life out of its inhabitants. This stultifying atmosphere is punctured

as the narrative progresses by Omerzu's most outré stylistic device: the titular birds in the background, whose tweets and chirrups are subtitled, creating a kind of avian Greek chorus commenting upon the action in front of them (and us). The gnomic wisdom of these feathered onlookers is pointed in its criticism: "Real wealth is physical health"; "The power of the mighty rests on the tears of the poor"; "Without family, one shivers in the infinite cosmos."

The thinking behind this magical realist mischief is never fully resolved: do these birds, in their quasi-Marxist pronouncements, reveal Omerzu's own anti-capitalist intentions? Is this an attempt to paint this tale of Czech industrialists as a modern-day Greek tragedy? Or perhaps this is all a pointed comment on social media and its endless twittering analysis? Whatever the answer, the birds reveal the broader socio-political implications of Ivo's family strife. As does the eventual revelation as to Marie's motivations: she has an American boyfriend, who she has never met in person, serving in Afghanistan, who she is desperate to bring safely home. The contrast drawn between the glass and metal of corporate Europe, and the distorted footage of soldiers in the distant desert, lays bare the divergent emotional stakes of the various characters.

Omerzu deals gracefully with these shifts in tone and perspective, as what seems at first like a detective story unravels into a more ambiguous portrait of frustrated individuals. In his own words, the "film works as a contrast between characters, between selfishness and naïve love, between reality and virtuality." The director demonstrates his skill with older character actors after his work with young non-professionals on 2012's *A Night Too Young* 2018's *Winter Flies* (which won Best Director at Karlovy Vary). In this, he is aided by the intelligent camerawork of Lukáš Milota, whose tight, abrupt framing derives maximum discomfort from the bland corporate settings; and composer Monika Midriaková, whose queasy score, closer in tone to that of a horror film, captures the disquiet beneath the characters' moneyed outward appearances.