

The Year Before the War

DAVIS SIMANIS

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Many great films have concerned themselves with war – the chaos or the glory (depending on your perspective) of the combat itself, or the long and painful aftermath that follows the destruction. The socialist bloc specialised in this latter category in particular, with many of the greatest filmmaking minds producing their most affecting work out of the question of how best to live in the ruins of the old world.

But what about the moments just before the shooting starts? When tensions are at their peak, when rhetoric and emotion is strained but not yet allowed to break? What would a cinematic spectacle that drew on the derangement of a carnage not yet unleashed look like? That is the question posed and answered by Latvian director Dāvis Sīmanis in *The Year Before the War*, a counterfactual historical thriller that doubles as a parable about the constant danger of man's inherent irrationality. Set in the febrile, charged Europe of 1913, the film is Sīmanis's third about war, and his most ambitious to date.

"These are critical periods that represent a test for civilisation," the director recently stated. "Life takes an extreme form of existence. The nature of relationships is shown in a radical manner, in its purest sense. I am interested in showing characters that are not only confronted with a war that is on the outside, but who are also struggling inside themselves." The film plays on the concept of ordinary people being pushed into increasingly extraordinary scenarios: Sīmanis has said that the story is nominally based on the real life of an infamous Latvian anarchist, but this historical source has been distorted and extrapolated to the point of fantasy.

Czech actor Petr Buchta plays Peter (or is it Hans?), a humble doorman from Riga who over the course of 95 densely narrated minutes finds himself dragged hither and yon across a continent on the brink of cataclysm, coming face to face with various the men behind the ideologies set to explode into violence. From Riga to Prague, London to Paris, Vienna to the Swiss Alps, our protagonist encounters

communists, anarchists, fascists, and nationalists; he is shot at and commits murder; he has an affair with Mata Hari (Inga Siliņa); psychoanalysed by a "mad scientist" incarnation of Sigmund Freud (Ģirts Ķesteris); and comes face to face with a rolecall of caricatured avatars of political and artistic revolution, including Trotsky (Gints Grāvelis), Proust (Jānis Putniņš) and Lenin (Lauris Dzelzītis).

The point of all this misadventure is clear enough: the period just before the First World War represented one of the most febrile moments in the continent's history. The mass politics that would produce the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century were on the march. New technologies were upending perceptions of the world and our place within it – and provoking radical artistic modernisms in response. And the world's first war of industrialised slaughter was around the corner. As Sīmanis has noted, in this context a hero as blank and malleable as Peter/Hans helps us to reflect upon the nature of radicalisation: "I see my main character as someone who could be referred to as *The Man Without Qualities*, such as in Robert Musil's novel. Someone down to earth who is susceptible to being manipulated and impressionable to his surroundings."

Stylistically, the director reflects the madness with a combination of the dreamlike and the gruesome, heady symbolism played off against moments of abrupt violence. The monochrome cinematography by Andrejs Rudzāts is clearly inspired by the gothic chiaroscuro of German Expressionism, and this comparison is forced home by an acting style that recalls the dramatic gestures of silent film. Of course, cinema itself was one of the great artistic and technological avant-gardes of the 1910s, as Sīmanis acknowledges: "From the beginning, I wanted to focus on an eclectic visual style. The film is a certain homage black and white films, not necessarily silent films, but films that were produced before WWII." The film is thus also a reckoning with the role that cinema itself played in making – and breaking – the modern world.