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# 'Life Guidance': Film Review | Venice 2017

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Courtesy of Venice Film Festival

## The Bottom Line

The future looks bleak.

## Austrian actor Fritz Karl plays the lead in Ruth Mader's dystopian tale, which premiered as part of the Venice Days section in Venice.

Life in the near future might look like a perfect spread from *Architectural Digest* but the liberty of each individual turns out to be more than paper thin in *Life Guidance*, the second fiction feature from Austrian director Ruth Mader (*Struggle*). An unsettling but also frustrating dystopian fable packaged as property porn, this feature imagines a future not all that different from our own, where capitalism has triumphed and its rules, including the expectation of ever-better results, are being applied to each person individually as well. The film's hero, however, is quite content with his life and refuses to better himself, which leads to an unasked-for intervention from the mysterious bureau of the title.

While Mader clearly has something to say about how the current form of capitalism is unsustainable and how the rules of profit-making and business cannot be applied to one's private life and search for happiness, the screenplay and direction retain an intentionally somewhat stifling quality that lends the proceeds a generally ominous air without ever becoming truly involving. After its premiere in the Venice Days program of the Venice Film Festival, this should pop up on other festival rosters, though it might be a harder sell in commercial release beyond German-speaking territories.

The perfectly shaven and groomed Alexander Dworsky (Fritz Karl) has a perfect modern home; a perfect wife, Anna (Katherina Lorenz); a perfectly cute son, Franz (Nicolas Jarosch); and a good job in a skyscraper that suggests the importance of transparency. But from the first shot, a medium overhead view of the couple in bed, the picture looks perfect but something is not quite right. Alexander says: "I love you," to Anna, while caressing her face. Instead of saying "I love you, too," however, his wife simply repeats

exactly what he has said. There's no suggestion in the film that Anna's a Stepford Wife, but just this repeated bit of dialogue immediately suggests that something about their communication is off.

Ace cinematographer Christine A. Maier, most famous for her collaborations with Jasmila Zbanic, here works in widescreen images that frame the work of production designers Renate Martin and Andreas Donhauser as if each shot had to go into an expensive-furniture catalog or fancy-living magazine. Not a speck of dust can be found anywhere, books are perfectly lined up on the shelves and the coffee table stands at exactly the same distance from the two perpendicular-standing settees. It all looks too perfect and pristine for anyone to live in, especially with a child, though supposedly the Dworskys do.

When Gregor Fainmann (Florian Teichtmeister) knocks on their door, however, he insists that one thing can still be improved: Alexander's attitude. He was sent by Life Guidance, a vaguely defined entity that is charged with turning stray sheep in the herd of overachievers into the best versions of themselves and give them the will to keep on improving. Alexander does not believe he requires assistance but Gregor insists that his help to become "optimal" is not something optional. However, Alexander opposes this intrusion into his private life, going on a journey out of his own perfect world and into a zone that his GPS doesn't even recognize. There, he visits the Fortress of Sleep,



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a collection of buildings where second-class citizens wander around like zombies and where a church visit might offer solace.

Mader and her technical crew conjure a futuristic world that looks like just a slightly better version of our own, which is of course the point. Cool white, blues and wood colors dominate, though everything associated with Life Guidance seems to prefer an artificial, overly joyous orange. Beyond the obvious contrast with the somewhat run-down and old-fashioned Fortress of Sleep, small irregularities start to appear in the perfect world as well, which suggest it is all just a facade.

But if the surfaces of these worlds are perfectly thought out and captured, what is missing is a clear narrative arc and a sense of empathy for at least one character. Alexander, as the rebel against the system, doesn't seem all that different from his colleagues and his revolt remains a very polite one, allowing him to keep his shirt and tie on throughout. Why he wants to revolt or how exactly he can achieve independence from Life Guidance is also not always entirely clear, with the plotting and connections between the various scenes occasionally on the oblique side. The Fortress of Sleep, the

Life Guidance agency and the leaders behind it remain theoretical ideas more than functioning entities, which makes it hard to understand how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. Causes or possible solutions, such as the overachievers' lack of spirituality, are introduced but then not developed any further, turning them into thematic dead ends. And without any real identification with the protagonist and his struggle, the narrative finally remains a very speculative exercise in trying to regain some independence in a world that doesn't allow for any.

Through its intentionally stiff acting — Lorenz especially is stone-faced perfection — its precision camerawork and its booming score, courtesy of Manfred Plessl, this cautionary tale does exude a troubling air throughout. But one only needs to turn on the news these days to understand that, for the Western world, trouble is probably not far off in the future.

*Production companies: KGP Kranzelbinder Gabriele Production Cast: Fritz Karl, Katherina Lorenz, Florian Teichtmeister, Nicolas Jarosch Director: Ruth Mader Screenwriters: Ruth Mader, Martin Leidenfrost Producer: Gabriele Kranzelbinder Director of photography: Christine A. Maier Production designers: Renate Martin, Andreas Donhauser Costume designer: Tanja Hausner Editor: Niki Mossboeck Music: Manfred Plessl Casting: Marion Rossmann Venue: Venice Film Festival (Venice Days) Sales: Picture Tree International*

*In German 101 minutes*