

Zvizdal is Berlin's portrait of a chasteningly stubborn couple

by Els Van Steenberghe, published in *Knack Focus* (16/05/2016)

translated by Nadine Malfait

Changing the world starts with meeting the individuals who embody that change. That seems to be the starting point from which Yves Degryse and Bart Baele have been travelling the world since 2003.

Their backpack is filled with curiosity and commitment, their eyes brim with admiration and their lorry holds a treasure trove of film equipment.

Encounters in Jerusalem (2003 and 2013), Iqaluit (2005), Bonanza (2006) and Moscow (2009) have become moving portraits of survival in places where surviving is hard, or made hard, by fellow humans. The portraits, as a whole, form the *Holocene* series. *Berlin* shows them in a theatrical setting, in such a way that you invariably feel like you are briefly in situ yourself.

They've done it again with *Zvizdal*, their sixth *Holocene* portrait. It was French journalist Cathy Blisson who told them about this old couple that has been living in a huge area riddled with radiation since 1986. Every year on April

26th, the day the nuclear disaster is remembered, they stand at their gate to welcome those who have come to remember their loved ones.

Berlin has recorded their encounters, but also the hard toil it takes to last in an environment that is becoming more of a wilderness every the day. They have to do everything themselves: grow oats and potatoes. Milk comes from one skinny cow, the eggs from a few chickens. Their lame horse tries to help them plow the land and the dog tries to keep guard. They do, also, have the occasional rest. It has yielded one of the most beautiful scenes, which *Berlin* uses in the opening scene. After a funny and denunciatory intro about the Kafkaesque administration in Ukraine, Baele films the couple as they stare vacantly for two minutes, waving flies away. The grooves in their faces have deepened with age, sun and worry. There's always something that goes wrong: a crop that fails, the death of an animal or the pain in your chest that gets worse...