



OFFICIAL SELECTION

INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL
ROTTERDAM
2015

BATTLES

A FILM BY Isabelle Tollenare PRODUCED BY Michigan Films



PRESSKIT




SYNOPSIS

Is a war ever truly over? BATTLES offers a wondrous view of our discordant world. The film reveals a past that has not passed, by observing the traces that remain in landscape and memory. The troops are long since gone but a ghost army continues to haunt the land.

A bomb, a bunker, a tank, a soldier— four archetypes of warfare lead us chapter by chapter to places in Europe where conflicts have occurred in the recent past. We discover the transformation of people, objects and landscapes after demilitarization. An old man in a land swamped with bunkers, scenes of a bizarre prison camp at night, the last moments of antique explosives, an army of women working on inflatable artillery. How people live with and between the military traces that surround us. Conflict seems to be near, then far off again, but always absurd.

BATTLES is a unique world in which the everyday and the extraordinary are observed with equal attention. A twilight zone where past and present, war and play, threat and innocence intersect.



‘When the combat ceases, that which is
does not disappear, but the world turns away.’

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

While making my previous short film Viva Paradis (2011) in Tunisia just after the revolution, I was struck by a mix of past and present in the landscape.

Indeed, the last vestiges of Carthage, representing Tunisia’s early history, are juxtaposed with the ransacked houses and burnt out banks, reflecting its very recent history. I saw how both were visited by tourists, as if they were similar monuments. I wondered what would happen with these ruins of the recent upheaval. Will they be removed, rebuilt, or will they be retained in the same state? Would they ever gain the same status as those monuments of Carthage? It made me reflect on what is happening to all those relics of traumatic events that make up our recent history.

What is to be done with the remnants of occupation, dictatorship and war? Should we preserve them or destroy them, retain them or let them go to waste, remember or forget? They present us with difficult questions. Precisely those dark events and the trail of destruction they leave behind are thought-provoking, because we would prefer not to be confronted with them, and certainly not reminded of them on a daily basis.

With Battles, I observe, over the course of four chapters, the different ways of dealing with a military past that continues to leave its mark. Explicit traces, blatant blots on the landscape, like the bunkers in the third chapter. Those are so insurmountable that people have started to accord the concrete mastodons a new role, by transforming them into animal stables for instance. In ‘chapter 1: a bomb’, we follow hidden remains, explosives which, after decades under the ground, still pose a threat. An ingenious procedure to destroy them is all that can be done.

Besides those tangible traces, I allow time in the film to the reminiscence, experience and interpretation of history. That is how in 'chapter 2: a soldier' I take you to a reenactment in a former prison, where tourists want to know what it is like to be oppressed and humiliated in wartime. History becomes a story, a game. In the last chapter, remembrance is used to shape the national identity. The military show of power that goes hand in hand with it, however, does not bode well for the future.

The four chapters illustrate one by one the absurd aspect of living with a military past. With everyday life as the central theme of the film, I include scenes of people who work, eat, relax and indulge in small talk. It is an everyday humdrum, though, where abnormal events have managed to sneak in. In Battles, I want to expose this link between the ordinary and the extraordinary. This is manifested in the use of plan sequences, which, while observing everyday scenes patiently, also play up the alienation and humour by using the static wide frames and lengthy periods of time.

While making the film, I myself was taken aback by the exceptional situations in which I found myself. Adding a handful of subtle surreal elements to the film reinforces the sense of disbelief and amazement: the tank balloon which floats through the woods at the end of the film; the reversing combat planes; the soldier who briefly fades away.

The bunker, soldier, tank and bomb combined form a ghost army. They no longer belong to the present time, but are still around. The past continues to infiltrate the present.

This merging of times is also echoed in the film's visual language. I play with the spectator's sense of time by showing images which cannot always be placed in time. What is that image of those parachutists descending from

the sky? Is it a reminder of the past, a reenactment, or is it a new air raid?

Images of smoke, fire, a storm, even fireworks, evoke memories of war situations and are given another connotation. In that way, the past is brought to life even more, something which is also underlined by the film's sound design: sewing machines sound as aggressive as machine guns, and can we make out thunder, or is it explosions, in the distance? As is aptly sung at the end of the film: 'We awake to the rumble of a storm, or the echo of a past war'.

I deliberately decided not to give any background to the four topics. Not the historical facts which are the cause of the remains, nor the location, are essential in the film. It is what is happening now with the remnants that matters.

I did think it important, though, that the film was about the recent past. In all the topics, it is the effects of the 20th century that are being felt. The further back into the past, the more abstract it becomes. The less we can imagine it, the more we lose the emotional connection with what happened. It struck me as intriguing to look at how we deal with something we still have some connection to. In terms of the personal involvement of both the characters in the film and the spectators.

Battles shows a world full of conflict, change, and people trying to adjust. Amidst this constant transformation, images of nature are a recurring theme in the film. Wind rushing through the leaves, creaking tree trunks. The swell of the sea. Clouds gliding past. Those images, too, are an indicator of time. But where the other images bring confusion in terms of time, they bring the spectators back down to earth. Nature is, after all, timeless, related, as it is, to the present, past and future. Old scars will disappear, new ones will be formed. As silent witnesses of those events, the earth, stars, the sea, the trees will still be there. Before and after the storm.

ISABELLE TOLLENAERE

Isabelle Tollenaere (born in Ghent, 1984) is an independent and promising, young filmmaker. She studied documentary filmmaking at Sint-Lukas Brussels University College of Art and Design. Since then she has made 3 short films; her graduation film *Still Life* (2007), *Trickland* (2010) and *Viva Paradis* (2011). These short documentary films have been widely exhibited at international film festivals such as IDFA (NL), CPH:DOX (DK), FID Marseille (FR), EMAF (DE), EXiS (KR), New Horizons (PL) en Belo Horizonte International Film Festival (BR) amongst others. They were shown at art institutions like Centre Pompidou (FR), in projection or as video installation. *Battles* (2015) is Isabelle's first feature length film, which will have its world premiere at International Film Festival Rotterdam, in the Bright Future section. Currently she is working on a second feature documentary, *California City* (in co-direction with Liesbeth De Ceulaer and Sofie Benoot), which was pitched at Vision du Réel 2014.



DIRECTED BY
Isabelle Tollenaere

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—Witfilm (NL)

CO-PRODUCED BY
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IN ASSOCIATION WITH
Cobra Films (BE)
Atopic (FR)

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The Netherlands Film Fund
Belgian Tax Shelter





MICHIGAN FILMS

Michigan Films is a Brussels-based independent production company. Founded in 2006 by Olivier Burlet and Sébastien Andres, Michigan Film has already produced or co-produced fifteen feature documentaries and around twenty art short films and videos.

Throughout the years, Michigan Films has developed an international network with partners from France, Holland, United Kingdom, and the United States. Michigan Films supports committed authors with strong political opinions. The challenge of the company consists in promoting independent film works to the wide public.

Their films have been shown in international festivals (Visions du Réel, IFF Rotterdam, Locarno Festival, FID Marseille, Cinéma du Réel, NY Film Festival, etc.) and have been broadcast on national television, both in Belgium (RTBF, BeTV) and abroad (ARTE, TV5). In parallel, some projects have been shown in contemporary art circles (Sydney Biennial, Centre Pompidou).

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

MING OF HARLEM Phillip Warnell
Prix George de Beauregard FID Marseille, New-York Film Festival, Jihlava, Viennale, FIC Valdivia, IDFA, Tate modern, Bozar,...

LE CAMP Jean-Frédéric De Hasque
Cinéma du réel, DocVille Leuven,...

THE WAVE Sarah Vanagt
Locarno, Biennial Sydney, IDFA, IFFR Rotterdam, Indie Lisboa, Rencontres internationales Paris/Madrid/Berlin, Hors Piste,...

FLEXING MUSCLES Charles Fairbanks
Visions du Réel Nyon, Anthology Film Archive, FIC Morelia,...

JOSÉE ANDREÏ, AN INSANE PORTRAIT Fabrizio Terranova
Muestra Internacional Documental Bogota, FIFA Montréal, IFFR Rotterdam,...

WITFILM

Witfilm is the production company of award-winning director Boudewijn Koole and producer Iris Lammertsma. Witfilm focuses on creative, social and youth documentaries, its key assets being concept development and intensive coaching of filmmakers, resulting in innovative, visually powerful films of artistic nature and thorough as regards subject matter in which audiences are continuously challenged. Witfilm (co-) produces both nationally and internationally. Awarded productions include the feature length documentary *Happily Ever After*, the youth documentary *Tonight We'll Become Women* and the dance film *Off Ground*. By making high quality and visually exciting films Witfilm aims at contributing to a thriving documentary sector and to a stronger positioning of the Dutch film industry abroad.



TECHNICAL DETAILS

HD, 2015, 87',
color, surround 5.1, BE/NL

SHOOTING FORMAT
Full HD

SCREENING FORMAT
DCP – 5.1 surround

DIALOGUES
Russian, Latvian, English, Dutch

SUBTITLES
English or Dutch/French





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