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Sean Penn's Zelensky Doc Substitutes Bromance for Storytelling

By Tom Masters

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Sean Penn and Volodymyr Zelensky. **President Of Ukraine / flickr**

Sean Penn and Aaron Kaufmann's long-awaited documentary about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, which recently premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, is proof that even with the best luck and access imaginable, an extraordinary journalistic opportunity can easily be missed.

Double Oscar-winning actor-turned-activist Penn and his crew were in Kyiv filming the documentary as the Russian invasion began and the first part of "Superpower" captures the misplaced optimism felt by many, Penn included, on the eve of the war that Putin's bluster was just that.

Derailed by Ukraine suddenly being at war, "Superpower" is forced to become a very different film, and while it boasts some extraordinary footage of Kyiv in the first days of the invasion and several compelling one-on-one conversations with Zelensky, what follows is a jumbled

sequence of events with a confusing timeline that lacks focus or direction.

Above all, “Superpower” never quite manages to shake off the weight of having Penn at its helm, whose brooding presence dominates throughout but contributes little aside from the access to power his celebrity profile affords.

Less a documentary about Zelensky than a bromance movie starring Penn as the Ukrainian president's well-connected superfan, “Superpower” tells us far more about the strange world of celebrity activism than that of Ukrainian politics, a subject in which by his own admission Penn is a "total Pollyanna."

That descriptor turns out to be apt as he veers from political naivety to volatile displays of emotion that blur the line between journalism and activism. As the title suggests, Penn is far from ambiguous in his views on Zelenksy, and his fawning in his presence often borders on the embarrassing.

Embed:

> Sean Penn gives his Oscar to President Zelensky, says, “When you win, bring it back to Malibu.” pic.twitter.com/b2AvLxuKVc
>
> — Mike Sington (@MikeSington) November 9, 2022

Arguably too smitten with Zelensky the myth to attempt painting an objective portrait of Zelensky the man, Penn overlooks the actual superpower the actor-turned-politician has — his genius for media relations.

This is a shame, as in many ways Penn would seem well-positioned to offer insights into the transition from acting to politics. Instead, several instances of Zelensky using his instinctive talents in the field are allowed to pass without comment.

Looking increasingly strung out and on the edge of a breakdown as the film drags on, Penn drinks and smokes incessantly, even when interviewing high-ranking diplomats — something bizarrely celebrated by the camerawork, which never strays far from Penn’s various vodka sodas or his overflowing ashtray.

There are, however, some extraordinary moments, such as when Zelensky joins the crew in a Kyiv bunker on the morning of the invasion and calmly discusses the events unfolding in real time around them. It's a journalistic coup that even Penn's breathy remarks about how inspired he is by Zelensky's leadership can't totally undermine.

On his return to Ukraine after several months of war, Penn meets a visibly transformed Zelensky in an incongruously sunny garden for what is by far the documentary’s best interview. Afterwards, Penn casually announces he intends to travel to the front line and proceeds to undertake a perilous journey to the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, the site of some of the bloodiest battles of the war to date.

There, he and his crew meet Ukrainian fighters in the trenches, with Russian forces just a couple of hundred meters away and the constant rumble of artillery in the background. While it's questionable whether taking such a risk was necessary or if the opinions Penn hears in the trenches differ significantly from those he would have heard from Ukrainian troops elsewhere, the scene is undoubtedly an impressive one.

As a way of raising the profile of Ukraine's existential struggle, particularly in the United States, "Superpower" will almost certainly deliver. But Penn's dewy-eyed approach will frustrate anyone hoping for an incisive examination of the Zelensky phenomenon — or a more level-headed, analytical approach to Ukraine's massive challenges.

Still, every now and again, Penn manages to get it just right. Walking through the rubble of a Kyiv kindergarten destroyed by a Russian missile, he reflects how incredible it is to think that all the devastation around him is due to the will of just one man.

He sounds genuinely bewildered as he says it. And who can blame him?

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