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CANNES 2019

OLEG

A FILM BY JURIS KURSIETIS



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2019 – Latvia, Belgium/Lithuania/France - 1h48mn - color
English with some Russian, Polish, Latvian, French & Flemish

SCREENINGS IN CANNES

FRI. 17, 2:45 PM @ THEATRE CROISSETTE (WORLD PREMIERE)

SAT. 18, 11:30 AM @ ARCADES 1 (OFFICIAL)

SUN. 19, 11:30 AM @ PALAIS H (MARKET)

MON. 20, 12:00 PM @ GRAY 3 (MARKET)

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SYNOPSIS

Belgium, today.

Oleg is a young Latvian butcher. He arrives in Brussels in the hope of getting a better salary in a meat factory. His experience turns short after being betrayed by a colleague.

Alone in a country where he doesn't belong, he quickly falls under the yoke of Andrzej, a Polish criminal...

INTERVIEW WITH JURIS KURSIETIS

What was the starting point for this film?

In 2013, while I was shooting my first film, MODRIS, a journalist friend of mine told me about an article he was writing on foreigners who come to work in Western Europe. His investigation focused on the life of one of them. My film is inspired by this true story. This journalist friend, who ended up co-writing OLEG, had me read the in-depth interviews he conducted with this man. They ended up being the foundation of the film. The main elements of my narrative, the pivotal moments, come from the story of his life. Only 20 to 30% of the plot is purely fictional.

Why did you decide to shoot your film in Belgium?

That's where the true story my film is based on took place. Brussels gives the impression of being an ideal, multicultural capital. This is another reason why I was captivated by the story. When we refer to exploited workers from Eastern Europe, we expect the location to be in Great Britain or someplace similar. Belgium doesn't immediately come to mind. But with time, as we delved deeper into our research, it became clear that this was indeed the right place for this story. In January 2015, my director of photography and I went to scout locations. Before leaving, I tried to locate workers from Eastern Europe who worked in Belgian factories. I was told that I wouldn't find any in Belgium, that Eastern European factory workers were mostly found in Great Britain and Ireland. Nevertheless, we left for Belgium, but with no contacts. I wanted to visit meat-packing factories to flesh out the screenplay. Once there and by complete chance,

we came across about a dozen Latvian workers. Our story was indeed right there! It was just taking place out of sight.

Your film speaks about a form of modern slavery. Andrzej thinks of Oleg as nothing more than a piece of meat...

What I recount in the film is so multilayered with so many levels of interpretation, that we could speak for hours about correlations, hidden meanings, and the symbolism that fills the story. All of these elements pushed me, consciously or unconsciously, towards the story I wanted to tell. The situation of these workers is all the more dramatic as the government is fully aware of it, but prefers to turn a blind eye. It's very practical to have these tasks done by underpaid people. I never for a moment imagined that the Belgian police or the office that issues work permits couldn't be aware of what was taking place. But the situation suits everybody just fine; everyone gets something out of it. If the guys are less expensive, the factory has a bigger profit margin. It's at this moment that people like Andrzej show up. At the bottom of the food chain, there's Oleg, who is exploited by the entire system. It is very complicated for workers like Oleg to extricate themselves from this situation, because they are trapped in the system. They often have debts in their home countries and have to face family obligations. The situation becomes insoluble, and they end up capitulating. All of this is of an indescribable cruelty. The same mechanisms are at work in the animal food chain.



Andrzej exerts an extremely strong influence over Oleg. How did you direct you're actors to create this tension?

I didn't try to create conflict between them, or to keep them separated before takes, nor did I have them rehearse. I let them improvise and develop scenes together. I believe that the quality of an interpretation and the intensity of a sequence rely upon the choice of actors. I met Dawid Ogrodnik, who plays Andrzej, in Warsaw the summer before the shoot. I told him about the project and the character: he jumped up from his chair! I liked the energy he gave off which coincided with the character, whose manner of functioning Dawid had immediately understood. From that moment on it wasn't necessary to add artificial tension. Everything was already there, within reach.

How did you choose Valentin Novopolskij, who plays the leading role and appears in every shot?

At first I had wanted a Russian actor to recall the situation of «non-citizens» in Latvia. These «non-citizens» are a direct consequence of the Soviet era – they possess neither Russian nor Latvian citizenship, and they are stigmatized because of it. They constitute a factor of crystallization for the nationalist vote in Latvia. Oleg is thus doubly isolated in Belgium. It was extremely important for me that Oleg belong to these «non-citizens» and for Russian to be his first language. To find our leading actor, we held castings in Russia

and the Ukraine. I gave the actors two scenes to play, and when I saw Valentin's delivery, I was truly captivated. Without my really having to direct him, he showed me his vision of the character. I chose him long before we started shooting the film, in 2016. We started the shoot 18 months later, in January 2018. His character triggers empathy, and even if his actions seem illogical, the spectator wants to stay with him – and that applied to me as well! So even if I didn't approve of some of his choices, I couldn't tear myself away from my main character.

Oleg's romance with Zita ends as soon as she learns that he isn't an actor but a butcher.

Yes, the question of social status is crucial to this scene. Zita works for a European institution, with humanist ideals, but she is incapable of treating a man from a different social background as an equal. In this scene, I didn't necessarily have in mind to address contentious issues between Eastern and Western Europe. For me, that's not where the film's main point lies. In any case, in OLEG, it's a situation where Eastern Europeans exploit fellow Eastern Europeans. Oleg and Zita simply come from two different worlds.

When Oleg is in Ghent, he goes to Saint Bavo's Cathedral where he sees Jan and Hubert van Eyck's painting, The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. In the foreground of this polyptych altarpiece, we see the fountain of life, which refers to baptism. At the end of

the film, Oleg gets baptized. Is he the mystic lamb in the painting?

In any case, it's what he believes. I introduce a lot of elements from my life and my reading into my films. When we were scouting locations in 2015 with my director of photography, we stumbled upon this cathedral with its famous painting by the two brothers. I interpreted it as opening up a possibility for the character. Oleg also sees himself as a victim. He needs time to understand that he has to make a choice: accept his status as a victim or escape. I didn't want to make a film that was only realistic. I wanted to integrate a form of abstraction, by endeavoring to show his spirituality. This altarpiece allowed me to develop the spiritual aspect of Oleg's personality. Yet my protagonist isn't religious. When he goes into the cathedral it reminds him of his childhood and his relationship with his grandmother.

What camera and equipment did you use in order to be as close as possible to the characters as if we are walking by their side?

My director of photography found the solution by using a mini Alexa to which he attached a 18mm lens. He had a special belt made in order to always have extra batteries within reach. On the shoot for MODRIS, he'd had to carry 25kg of material, and we had to find another system for this film. This light and mobile camera allowed us to shoot in cramped spaces and stay as close to the character as possible. That wouldn't have



been possible with a bigger camera. Staying as close as we could was essential for me. It is also for this reason that I asked to have a square frame for the image: I wanted to capture him as closely as possible, have the entire space be filled with his face. The starting point is precisely Oleg's face. This format reminded me of a passport photo.

Was the goal of this proximity with your actor and the format to make us feel as though Oleg was trapped?

Indeed, I wanted the film to feel claustrophobic. People often ask me why the character doesn't just run away. This terrible experience of his isolation reveals his insecurity and psychological dependence.

What is the film's music?

I always listen to music when I'm writing a screenplay. While I was writing OLEG, I listened non-stop to the Russian composer Georgy Sviridov, specifically the album he composed just before his death. It allowed me to express the fate of suffering beings, as well as the spirituality in the moments when Oleg struggles with his situation. The other composer is Peteris Vaks, who originally comes from Latvia. He is still very active today. It seems to me that his music also introduces a form of humanity into the narrative. He's one of those people whose personal life is fascinating. His father was a priest, which was very complicated during the Soviet era. I generally don't use a lot of music in my films, but when it's the case, it has to be rife with meaning. The music influences how the sequences are edited and supports the narrative. It urges Oleg on and helps him out of the extremely unhealthy situation that Andrzej has been forcing him to live. My intent isn't religious, but in a certain way it is about Oleg finding his soul.



BIO-FILMOGRAPHY OF THE DIRECTOR

Juris Kursietis (1983) worked for six years on Latvian national television as an international journalist. After a Master's degree in cinema from the Northern Media School in the United Kingdom, he became an assistant director on a number of Latvian movies.

He directed his first feature-length film MODRIS, between 2012 and 2013.

In 2014, the film was selected for Toronto, San Sebastian New Directors (Special Jury prize), Warsaw, Cottbus, Thessaloniki, Leeds, Goa, Tbilissi (Best Director), Riga (Best First Film and Best Actress in a supporting role), FesbioFest, Bergamo, Guadalajara, Chicago, Vilnius, Fajr, Brussels, ArtFilmFest, Kinoshock (Best Director), Helsinki, CinEast, Lübeck, Santa Barbara, Prishtina and Busan.

OLEG, his second film, was pitched at the ARCS Coproduction Village in 2016 and the first images were shown at the Karlovy Vary work-in-progress in 2018.

The film has been selected for the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes, 2019.

OLEG (LM 2019)

MODRIS (LM 2014)

WILL HAVE IT TOMORROW (CM 2008)

THE BICYCLE STORY (CM 2007)

CAST

OLEG
ANDZEJS
MARGOSA
KRISTOF
ZITA

Valentin Novopolskij
Dawid Ogrodnik
Anna Prochniak
Adam Szyszkowski
Guna Zarina





CREW

Director **Juris Kursietis**
DOP **Bogumil Godfrejow**
Sound **Vytis Purnas**
Editor **Matyas Veress**
Production Designer **Laura Dislere**
Artistic Direction **Stephan Rubens**
Costume Designer **Inese Kalva**
Make-up **Maija Gundare**
Producers **Alise Gelze, Aija Berzina**
Coproducers **Isabelle Truc, Lukas Trimonis, Guillaume de Seille**
Production Companies **Tasse Film (Lettonie), Iota Production (Belgique), In Script (Lituanie),
Arizona Productions (France)**
Line Producers **Adrian Politowski, Cedric land**
With the support of **Latvijas Nacionālais Kinocentrs, Lietuvos Kino Centras, Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel
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