

LEAVE NO TRACES

A FILM BY JAN P. MATUSZYNSKI



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2021
Official Selection



SYNOPSIS

Poland, 1983. The country is shaken by the case of Grzegorz Przemyk – a high school student beaten to death by militia. Based on true events, the film follows the story of Jurek – the only witness of the beating, who overnight became the number one enemy of the state. The oppressive regime used its whole apparatus – the secret service, militia, the 10media and the courts – to squeeze Jurek and other people close to the case, including his parents and Przemyk's mother, Barbara.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Film is a strange kind of mirror. It can dive deep into somebody's soul. Both the main character and the viewer. Everyone can see a different thing in a mirror and that's the beauty of cinema. That's the freedom we need. Grzegorz Przemyk cared about his freedom when the policemen asked him about his identity card on 12th May 1983. He knew he didn't have to show it, because martial law was suspended at that time. So he didn't.

Nobody knows who threw the final, deadly punch that killed him. It's Kafkaesque and it resembles contemporary cases. The only reason this story surfaced is that there was an eyewitness.

The film gave me an opportunity to go through different perspectives of communist regime in Poland in the 80s. That's a really multilayered mirror. And we should try not to break it. Only if we remember, can we maintain the hope it won't happen again.

INTERVIEW WITH JAN P. MATUSZYŃSKI

By Marta Bałaga


Cezary Łazarewicz's – *Leave No Traces. The Case of Grzegorz Przymek*, the book which inspired you, carries an enormous amount of detailed information. How did you approach the script in the face of such overwhelming material?

Cinema is such a profound medium – you can build up so many levels at once. You are telling a particular story and at the same time you are “stuffing” all sorts of information into it, and on several narrative levels that don't really interfere with each other. This part of the filmmaking process fascinates me a lot.

A key issue in the process of adapting this book was the decision to limit myself to what happened in 1983 and 1984. In the end, Łazarewicz describes a sprawling story that would easily fill three seasons of a TV series. Besides, everything that happened after the first trial, could be seen as dramatic repetition. Looking at that decision now after finishing the film, I think it was the right one.

What appealed to me most about Przymek's case was probably the perversity of it all. After my previous film; *The Last Family* [based on the story of painter Zdzisław Beksiński], *Leave No Traces* also strongly opposes the notion that it's enough to rely on the headlines. It's not.





From the very beginning, it's clear that Przemysław has died and it's not really about unmasking the actual killer either? What made you want to re-think the traditional structure of the thriller?

The question is, where has the most violence taken place? I'm interested in things that only seem obvious at first glance. And then, when you lean into them, you realise they are much more complex. That's how you know good cinema can come out of it in the end.

There were several such elements in this story. Jurek Popiel, our main character and witness, saw the most, but he didn't see everything. It's the same kind of perspective like in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*: you want to solve the whole mystery, but it's impossible. I was very intrigued by this, because the concept of truth, at least in an objective sense of the word, doesn't really exist here. Everyone has their own truth that can be manipulated, and on top of that, almost every character has completely different motivations.

When you show a particular era, how do you involve the viewer while still reminding them that it's not happening today, also making sure they are not suffocated by costumes and makeup? Is it simply the fact that everyone is constantly smoking?

I think the hairstyles and costumes – as long as they are done right – at a certain point cease to matter, at the same time providing a solid backdrop to the story. After I directed *The King of Warsaw*, which is set in 1937 and was told more in the vein of classic American period films such as *The Godfather* and *Once Upon a Time in America*, I have now turned more to 'New Hollywood'. I was thinking of Coppola's *The Conversation*, or Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* or other American films from the 1970s. I am mainly referring to the film's genre here, but I was also reaching for similar filming and staging means.

In the history of Polish cinema there are many examples of historical films which are hagiographic. I don't like it very much, because erecting a monument to someone shouldn't be the aim of a film – the aim of a film is to explore a story and to look for ambiguities and universal themes, which have nothing to do with Warsaw in the 1980s for example. *Leave No Traces* is a story about an oppressive system which, after all, is still going strong in so many places. This is how a story from almost 40 years ago is connected to the present and this is why it can be understood now, regardless of how much time has passed.



**What is your approach to showing real people in films?
Were your actors supposed to imitate them, even
though this time fictional characters also make an
appearance in the film as well?**

Leave No Traces is a mosaic, and when it comes to all these real figures, I wanted to approach them differently from my previous film. We have historical figures here: General Wojciech Jaruzelski, Barbara Sadowska, Grzegorz Przemyk. I wanted these characters to be based on the images we already know, although casting Grzegorz was a difficult task. We needed a boy with charisma, who would not necessarily bear any physical resemblance to him. As for Jurek, the film's protagonist, we decided together with the producers that his identity had to be changed – for various reasons. I saw a certain freedom in this decision, because such a move meant a different approach to the main characters than the one we took in *The Last Family*.



It always seemed that Przemek's case would remain a mystery. And yet, as you said, similar stories happen all over the world.

Grzegorz Przemek was most likely detained because he didn't want to show his identity card. Although, as it was later revealed, he had it all along. He didn't want to do it because martial law was suspended – he simply stood up for his rights as a citizen. At first glance this seems like a small detail, but in fact was a very important declaration. And in this context, it really doesn't matter that it happened all the way back in 1983.

The point of reference that is bound to come up now is the murder of George Floyd and I found at least seven similar cases while working on the film. Which, on the one hand, gave me hope that the story I was telling would turn out to be universal and, on the other, it hurts that this kind of abuse of power was, and still is, happening everywhere. Even recently in Poland there was a case when a man died after police intervention and riots broke out because of it.

The only thing I can do as a filmmaker is to look at this phenomenon and try to dig it through to find a story worth showing on a big screen. Without imposing any thesis and, above all, without judging my characters, because each of them has to function in some system – each of them is a different pawn on this chessboard. Now, we look at the 1980s from a safe perspective. It's easier for us to pass judgment on who was "bad" and who was "good." When I read the book, I was shocked that a case that happened before I was even born could seem so contemporary and, just like a mirror, reflects various similar situations. That is one of the reasons I thought it was necessary to film it.



In the case of George Floyd, his murder was filmed by a teenager. Przemyk couldn't count on that, but his death also sparked protests.

Przemyk's case became so high-profile and important primarily for two reasons: there was a witness who saw it and the Security Services failed to apprehend him. The second thing was the role of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, who at that time was followed by masses. It was also thanks to him that the whole thing grew to such proportions. A sad epilogue to that story was that the people responsible for beating Przemyk and, as a result, for his death, were not held accountable. This encouraged the authorities to act more aggressively, which later resulted in, among other things, the murder of Popiełuszko. This is only a theory of course, but perhaps if they had been punished back then, it would have never happened?



There is room for a bit of black humour in the film, even though you are talking about such tragic events. The music, however, is quite dramatic.

I'm glad this irony fits in there somewhere. As for the music, from the beginning I felt it should be quite expressive. My first reference point was *There Will Be Blood* [by Paul Thomas Anderson] and the Jonny Greenwood soundtrack. When I was looking for a right term for it, I decided that the music should just feel oppressive. Oppression is the common point of this whole story and I thought that music should "crush" these characters even more, locking them in a labyrinth from which they are unable to escape. Ibrahim Maalouf's work highlights this perfectly.

Enthused after *The Last Family*, I also wanted to use some songs from that period, which always provides useful commentary. I am very happy that we were able to acquire the rights to "New Year's Day" by U2 – after all, it's a song written under the influence of the Solidarity movement and the events of martial law, which also echoes throughout the story in my film.

Leave No Tracks has many layers. It's a meditation on this whole case with something intangible as its axis, something that all my main characters have no access to: power.



Do you work differently with actors when there are so many characters involved?

I think you have to give all your characters some space in a film, although it's not exactly a character-driven story. Jurek Popiel seems to be our main hero, but in fact it's Grzegorz Przemyk.

Each time, we talked about who these characters were, where they came from and how they behaved. Who is Kiszczak's subordinate Kowalczyk, played by Tomasz Kot [of Cold War fame]? What interests him? Or Jurek's parents, whose relationship is very ambiguous? These things don't just appear by chance, they are the result of many, many conversations. I always try to meet my actors individually, because it's worth it to take it all seriously. Even the smallest role may turn out to be crucial.

I certainly worked on the storyline of the paramedic Wysocki for a very long time, in order to conclude it in a small number of scenes and, at the same time, show how this entire machine could break down a man. I wanted to have static frames, from which you can't escape anywhere – it's a small homage to *Hunger* by Steve McQueen, whom I greatly respect as a filmmaker. Also, shooting on 16mm requires a lot of extra focus and motivation to be precise, but I like this precision. That's when I get the sense that I am not wasting anyone's time, including my own. You have to guide the viewer with a strong hand, I think. This is probably the most important thing in this job.

DIRECTOR

JAN P. MATUSZYŃSKI

Born in 1984. Jan graduated in Film Directing from Krzysztof Kieślowski Faculty of Radio and Television University of Silesia in Katowice and completed the Documentary Course in Wajda School. His documentary *Deep Love* was awarded, among others, Best Documentary Award at the 36th IFF in Moscow and the Silver Horn award for Best Feature Documentary Film at the 54th Kraków FF. His feature debut, *The Last Family*, premiered at Locarno, where it won the Best Actor Award, and was screened at over 100 festivals worldwide (including Rotterdam, Hong Kong, Palm Springs & New Directors New Films), winning many international awards. Jan also works in TV, his most recent series *The King of Warsaw*, produced by CANAL+, was released in October 2020. *Leave No Traces* is his second feature film.



CAST

TOMASZ ZIĘTEK

Actor and musician, born in 1989. He made his debut in 2014 as Jan Bytnar "Rudy" in the film *Stones for the Ramparts*, which made him very popular among Polish audiences. He played, among others in the films *Demon* by Marcin Wrona, *Carte Blanche* by Jacek Luskiński, *Body/Ciało* by Małgorzata Szumowska, or the British war drama *World on Fire*. He was nominated for the Eagles – Polish Film Awards for his role in *Silent Night* by Piotr Domalewski and Oscar nominee *Corpus Christi* by Jan Komasa. *Speedway* by Dorota Kędzierzawska, with Tomek's first leading role, had its premiere in 2021. Films with Ziętek as a lead are waiting for Polish premieres: *Leave no Traces* by Jan P. Matuszyński. *Eagle. The Last Patrol* by Jacek Bławut, as well as *Operation Hyacinth* – Polish original Netflix film. He is a member of the Polish Film Academy and the European Film Academy. Since 2013 Ziętek is a singer, songwriter and guitarist of The Fruitcakes, a progressive big beat band signed with PIAS Recordings and distributed all over Europe.



CAST

SANDRA KORZENIAK

Polish actress, recipient of Polityka's Passport Award in the Theatre category for making „the terms of truth and untruth in acting mean absolutely something new”. Her accomplishments include roles in auteur Cinema – *The Neighbours* by Grzegorz Królikiewicz or *The Invisible* by Paweł Sala as well as in mainstream movies such as *Spanish Woman* by Łukasz Barczyk or *Triple Trouble* by Marta Karwowska. Recently she played in the movie *A Hole in the Head* by Piotr Subbotko and HBO series *At Home* directed by Krzysztof Garbaczewski and the latest TVN series by Bartosz Konopka. Her films that are awaiting release are, among others, *The Forest* by Joanna Zastróżna, *The Day, the Night* by Kasia Machałek and Łukasz Machowski. In *Leave No Traces* by Jan. P. Matuszyński, Sandra portrays the leading female character Barbara Sadowska.



PRODUCERS

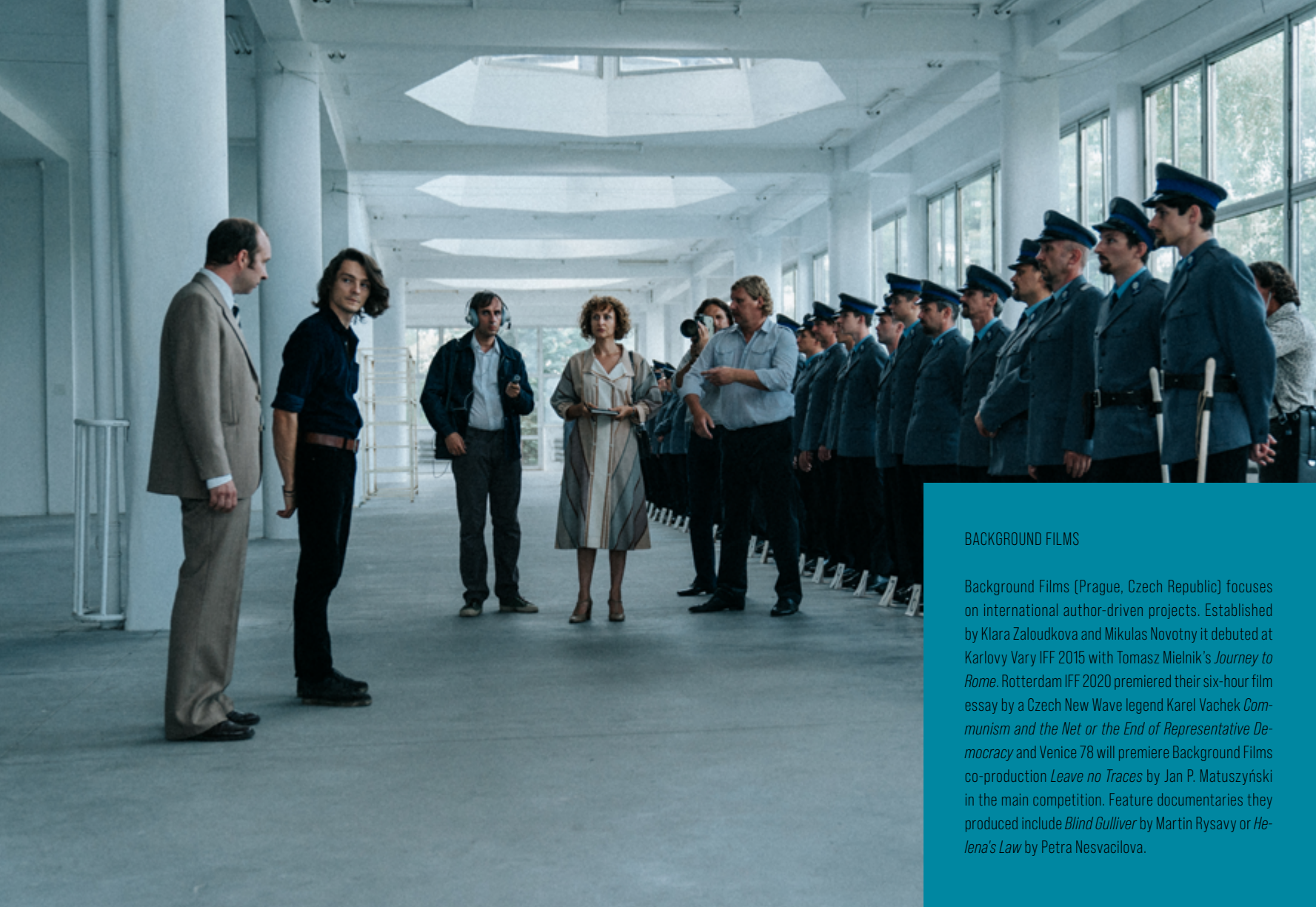
AURUM FILM

Aurum Film specialises in feature film and premium TV series production. It was founded by Leszek Bodzak. The first feature film produced by Aurum Film, Jacek Lusinski's *Carte Blanche*, premiered in January 2015. In 2016, the studio produced the feature *The Last Family*, directed by Jan P. Matuszynski to Robert Bolesto's screenplay, which received the *Golden Lions award at the Gdynia Film Festival*. The film premiered in the *Main Competition of the Locarno IFF*, and in Poland, an audience of over 540,000 saw the title in cinemas. *Corpus Christi*, Aurum Film's most recent feature production (premiered on October 11, 2019), directed by Jan Komasa to Mateusz Pacewicz's screenplay, drew an audience of nearly 1,600,000 to Polish cinemas. It has already received over 40 awards at festivals in Poland and abroad (world premiere in the *Venice Days section at the 76th Venice IFF*), including *11 Eagle Polish Film Awards* (Polish Film Awards record), and was nominated to the *Oscar Academy Award* in the Best International Feature Film category. Maciej Bochniak's *Magnesium*, a gangster crime story set in the 20th century interwar period, won a Golden Claw Award at Gdynia Film Festival. Jan P. Matuszynski's latest feature film, *Leave No Traces*, premiered in Main Competition at Venice Film Festival. Currently, Jacek Lusinski's *Inverted* is in post-production and several projects are in the development stage, e.g., *Shine of the Sun* by Jan Komasa or Paweł Maślona's *Scarborn*. As the executive producer, Aurum Film produced the high-budget production of *The King of Warsaw* series for the Canal+ network, directed by Jan P. Matuszynski based on the novel by Szczepan Twardoch.



LES CONTES MODERNES

Les Contes Modernes, i.e. The Modern Tales, is aimed at taking part in intellectual debates within our contemporary societies by any means necessary (fiction, animation, creative documentary and transmedia). Les Contes Modernes federates authors and artists of various horizons (film directors, visual artists, choreographers, graphic novelists, philosophers, game-designers etc.) who question the world surrounding us in all its complexity and who put the esthetic search at the heart of their creations. Our artistic process in favor of body movement more than dialogues is an attempt to draw a universal language, to step across the borders. Les Contes Modernes is a production company based in the Auvergne-RhôneAlpes region, South of France, between Lyon and Marseille, in La Cartoucherie, center of excellence for the animation industry. Les Contes Modernes supports projects which develop a humanist, empathic and creative approach to the world of today and of tomorrow.



BACKGROUND FILMS

Background Films (Prague, Czech Republic) focuses on international author-driven projects. Established by Klara Zaloudkova and Mikulas Novotny it debuted at Karlovy Vary IFF 2015 with Tomasz Mielnik's *Journey to Rome*. Rotterdam IFF 2020 premiered their six-hour film essay by a Czech New Wave legend Karel Vachek *Communism and the Net or the End of Representative Democracy* and Venice 78 will premiere Background Films co-production *Leave no Traces* by Jan P. Matuszyński in the main competition. Feature documentaries they produced include *Blind Gulliver* by Martin Rysavy or *Helena's Law* by Petra Nesvacilova.

FESTIVALS

World Premiere: Venice Competition –
Venezia 78

FILM INFORMATION

Original Title: Żeby nie było śladów
English Title: Leave No Traces
Genre: Drama, Political Thriller
Country: Poland, France, Czechia
Language: Polish
Year: 2021
Duration: 160 min.
Picture: Color
Aspect Ratio: 2.39 : 1
Sound: 5.1
Available Format: DCP

CAST

Tomasz Ziętek as Jurek
Sandra Korzeniak as Barbara
Jacek Braciak as Jurek's father
Agnieszka Grochowska as Jurek's mother
Mateusz Górski as Grzegorz Przemyk
Robert Więckiewicz as Czesław Kiszczak
Tomasz Kot as Stanisław Kowalczyk
Sebastian Pawlak as Wysocki

CREW

Director: Jan P. Matuszyński
Screenplay: Kaja Krawczyk-Wnuk
Based on the book: *Leave no traces. The Case of Grzegorz of Grzegorz Przemyk* by Cezary Łazarewicz
Cinematography: Kacper Fertacz
Editing: Przemysław Chruscielewski
Production Design: Paweł Jarzębski
Sound Design: Cyprien Vidal, Kacper Habisiak
Music: Ibrahim Maalouf
Production company: Aurum Film
Co-production companies: Les Contes Modernes, Arte France Cinéma
Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes-Cinéma, Canal+,
Background Films, Magiclab,
Czech Television, Mazovia
Warsaw Film Fund
With the support of: Polish Film Institute,
Provence-Alpes-Côte D'azur,
Région Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes,
Centre National du Cinéma et de
l'Image Animée and Czech Film Fund
In partnership with:
Producers: Aneta Hickinbotham, Leszek Bodzak
Co-producers: Patrice Nezan,
Laurent Versini,
Mikulaś Novotny,
Olivier Père,
Rémi Burah,
Małgorzata Seck,
Alicja Gancarz,
Magdalena Ulejczyk,
Anna Spisz

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