

Karlsruhe Film  
International Film Festival  
WORLD  
PREMIERE

A FILM BY VITALY MANSKY

# PUTIN'S WITNESSES

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# PUTIN'S WITNESSES

**A FILM BY VITALY MANSKY**



**Karlovy Vary  
International Film Festival**  
Documentary Films – Competition

**LATVIA | SWITZERLAND | CZECH REPUBLIC**

2018 - COLOR - 95 / 102 min

**deckert**

## **WORLD SALES & PRESS**

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# SYNOPSIS

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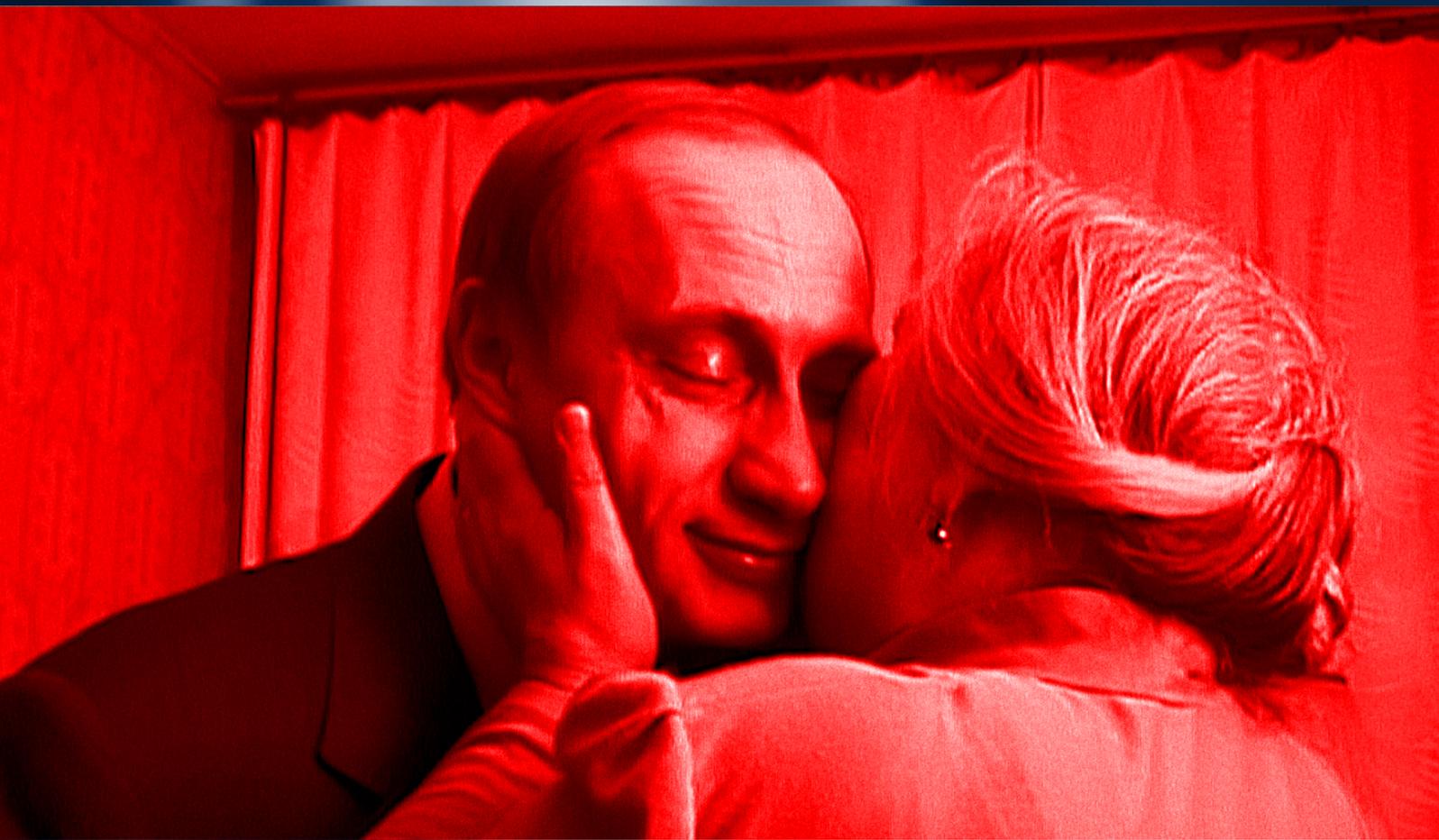
The events of the film begin on December 31, 1999 when Russia was acquainted with its new President. The film is based on unique and strictly documentary testimonies of the true causes and consequences of the operation "Successor", as a result of which Russia ended up with the President who still rules the country. The protagonists of the film are Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, and the Russian nation, as always being a silent witness of its own destiny.



# STATEMENT

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To overcome a grave and far-advanced illness it is necessary to make a diagnosis and to study the history of this illness. That was my logic when I conceived a film about the events, which followed the unexpected resignation of Russia's president Boris Yeltsin and the start of «Operation Successor». I was witness to and participant of this operation, which brought Vladimir Putin to the Moscow throne. My testimony is very important not only for the Russian society – to cure it from an advanced disease, but also for other countries – to prevent them from losing their freedom.



# INTERVIEW

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*Interview by former director of Visions du Réel Jean Perret with director Vitaly Mansky*

## **How were the unique materials that went into this film shot? What were the circumstances that made it possible?**

At the end of the 1990's, I was making several films in parallel - about Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Putin and a film about my home, which was part of a series of films commissioned by ARTE and made by seven different directors.

The materials shot for all these films turned out to be very important as a reflection of a crucial transition in Russian history, in the years 1999-2000, so they became part of this film.

Around this time, I also shot an essential film about life inside the Kremlin, which allowed me to enrich "Putin's Witnesses" with those images.

I filmed many scenes myself with a small handcam in parallel with, or sometimes separately from, the cameramen working with me. When I started to put together the new film, I saw that the materials I shot independently turned out to be the most convincing and the most important ones for the purpose of looking back on and reflecting upon the process of change that this film portrays.

## **Were some scenes of the film staged or rehearsed? Did the protagonists ask you to film any particular shots, portraying important events from their point of view?**

In comparison with how material concerned with power in Russia, and even life in Russia in general, is delivered today, we can say that the filming process was extremely free. When filming Boris Yeltsin, we had certain limitations first and foremost connected to his weak health, and with the aspiration on the part of his family to make him look more presentable. However, we were the ones who always suggested and chose the days when we wanted to shoot.

Concerning the filming of Putin, one has to understand that when Putin became the Acting President, there was a certain degree of uncertainty in the Kremlin.



There were clans observing each other very cautiously and nobody fully understood who makes the decisions at different levels, including, for example, those relating to our access. I also used this uncertainty factor quite effectively.

In 2001, when the film was being completed, I remember well that the fact that I could first show it to Putin was decisive. High-ranking officials were not able to censor it after because the film was accepted by its main character. That was the trump in my hands, which allowed the film to be released in its original shape.

And, although there were suggestions of shots and scenes by Putin, they were connected with the first film. It's a rather complicated story. The story of working with Putin started with a film without Putin. Putin was announced as the successor on the night of the 31st of December 1999. On the 1st of January 2000, without consulting anyone I started to make a film, "The Unknown Putin".

At that time nobody really knew who was this person who became the president. It was a rather unusual situation - he was quite a closed person due to his background working for the KGB. We began the research on Putin's background with my colleagues. By the middle of January, I received the first footage. I saw the material with Putin's teacher and realised that it was very emotional. So I passed it to Putin to have a look. It was without any strategy or plan, simply a human gesture. I thought that this would be nice for him to see. And when Putin saw the material, he invited me to a meeting and started to ask me questions. Who are we filming? What are we filming? At this meeting he suggested to film another few people and during this very meeting we agreed that we would start making a film about him.

**What were the conditions making it possible for you to be present in the closed circles of power in Russian? Did you sign any contracts with the characters you were filming? Were you free in your actions? Were any bans imposed on you?**

This is quite a difficult question because if I answer it as it is, I would probably not believe it myself. But it is as it is.

The first person I began to film, as a representative of power, as it were, was Gorbachev. At this time, Gorbachev had been out of power for nine years.

And, given his very complicated relationship with Yeltsin, Gorbachev was absolutely removed from the media for nine years too. He was dead as it were for Russia.

I found this very interesting and very valuable as material for documentary film. So, as the head of the documentary service of a state channel, I pushed for and obtained the permission to make a film about Gorbachev. Gorbachev himself, could not believe that this is possible. It was so unexpected after almost nine years of silence in the media that a state channel would commission a film about him.

However, when I started to make the film about Gorbachev, the state television decided to play it safe and to make a film about Yeltsin as well. So that's how I started to make the film about Yeltsin, and then the events which led to the appearance of Putin occurred.

So, by the will of circumstances, I became the director of the three films. What is more, I initially offered my colleague Sergei Miroshnichenko to direct the film about Putin but in the process of filming Sergei was refused access, so I was left alone to make it.

**You've decided to conceive the film with a text composed and narrated by yourself. What are the reasons of this? Why did you decide not to include interviews with specialists, observers, historians?**

There are a few factors here. The first factor is that practically all the experts and the participants of the events would lie if they were interviewed today. They would present the situation in view of the context of today. And the proof of this is a whole number of films, which have recently been made about that period of time.

Truthfully speaking, although it is not a sensationalist or investigative film revealing secret protocols, what I tell and show in the film and the very fact of its existence put me in danger. I live outside Russia now and the authorities treat me and my projects rather harshly. Yet, the main experts and witnesses who would have needed to take part in the film, continue to live in Russia and they are connected to the Russian authorities and business. So, to assume that they would have taken part in the film, and if they had taken part, that they would enrich it with any revelations carrying historical truthfulness would be extremely naive.

**Who were you, Vitaly Mansky, in the period of Vladimir Putin's ascent to power? As an independent filmmaker and producer, were you active in any political party, or did you have any sympathies for certain political movements and politicians? What was your journey as a creative filmmaker between the months of the shooting and 2015-2018 when you decided to create this film?**

I have never belonged to any political party or movement. In the Soviet times, I wasn't even immediately admitted into the Pioneers' organisation, which was compulsory for all children in the Soviet Union. Thereafter it only got worse. However, of course, my sympathies have always been within the zone of democratic change, first in the Soviet Union, and then in independent Russia. Let's say that my sympathies have always been with Gorbachev and with early Yeltsin, before his second term, when he stayed in power for another four years being quite seriously ill.

Concerning Putin, I had serious questions, well, you can see it in the film, I am not going to spoil it, but I still put my trust in the people whose opinion I respected, I trusted them in their choice. So I tried to look at Putin with hope.

If we are speaking about the context of the film itself, it is neither accidental nor planned that despite the fact that Putin was declaring purely liberal views about the future of Russia at the time, all my conversations with him revolved around my personal doubts about their sincerity. Though formally there were no signs of trouble about this at the time except for the fact itself that Putin came from the KGB.

What else can I add here? At that time, I was really the head of the documentary department of the national television. But Russia in 1999 and Russia in 2014, 15 years later, were completely different countries. The projects we were then making for the state channel are hard to imagine today.

This film is very personal for me, it is a very intimate dissection of personal mistakes and of a personal tragedy. The tragedy which is happening to Russia is also happening to each person individually.

For some people, it might also mean rising up from their knees and acquiring something but, in any case, what is happening is the root of evil of Russian life. The film is about this turning-point. In the end, this process of change has led me to immigration. It was not immigration in pursuit of comfort but a step made under absolute necessity and it may be that this very step has given me the right to make such a film.

### **Is cinema able to change the world, or at least affect the contemporary historical process in Russia ?**

In general, no. Yet, how does looking in the mirror in the mornings affect each of us? Of course, looking in the mirror will not save us from ageing, from turning grey and from getting wrinkles, but looking in the mirror can help us see our state, our mood, to see some accidental dirt on our face that we can wash off with water, it can help us look ourselves in the eye, maybe to feel something within ourselves. Film is like this mirror allowing us not only to look at ourselves here and now, but also in a kind of historical perspective. In this sense, for a person capable of analysis, such cinema in its totality plays an important role. I would say that, if the history of the Third Reich had not been fixed in cinema, perhaps humanity, not having received this vaccination would be more easily inclined to repeat the mistakes of the past.

# VITALY MANSKY

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Vitaly Mansky was born in 1963 in Lviv /Ukraine, USSR.

V. Mansky graduated from VGIK – All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography in 1989 and became one of the most prominent contemporary Russian documentary filmmakers and producers. He has shot more than 30 films as a director which were screened at festivals worldwide and were awarded several times. As a producer, Mansky produced films with directors like Renata Litvinova, Alexander Rastorguyev, Sergey Miroshnichenko, Dmitry Zhelkovsky, and Sergei Loznitsa.

In 1996, he launched a project that aims to archive amateur private video files that were shot in the times of the former USSR (from 30's till 90's of the XXth century).

V.Mansky is the producer of the national Laurel Leaf award for the best Russian documentary films. He is the founder and President of Artdocfest – Russian Open Documentary Film Festival for Russian-language creative documentaries.

Since 2014 V. Mansky lives in Latvia.

## FILMOGRAPHY (selection)

- 2018** Putin's Witnesses
- 2016** Rodnye (Close Relations)
- 2015** Under the Sun
- 2014** The Book
- 2013** Pipeline
- 2011** Motherland or Death
- 2009** Beginning / Nikolina Gora. Epilogue
- 2008** Virginity / Dawn / Sunset. Dalai Lama 14
- 2005** Gagarin's Pioneers
- 2003** Anatomy of t.a.T.u.
- 2002** Broadway. Black Sea
- 2001** Gorbachev. After The Empire / Yeltsin. Another Life / Putin. Leap Year
- 1999** Private Chronicles. Monologue
- 1995** Bliss
- 1993** Cuts of a Recurrent War



# CREDITS

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**WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY** Vitaly Mansky  
**SOUNDDESIGN** Anrijs Krenbergs  
**EDITING** Gunta Ikere  
**MUSIC** Karlis Auzans  
**PICTURE DESIGN** Alexandra Ivanova  
**COLOR GRADING** Andromeda AG | Patrick Lindemaier  
**PRODUCED BY** Natalia Manskaya | Studio Vertov  
Gabriela Bussmann | GoldenEggProduction  
Filip Remunda & Vit Klusak | Hypermarket Films

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