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2025

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BALTIC COMPETITION
TALLINN BLACK NIGHTS FILM FESTIVAL
2025

a film by **AISTĖ ŽEGULYTĖ**

HOLY DESTRUCTORS

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85 min. / DCP / 1.85:1 / 2025 / Lithuania, France, Latvia
Film dialogues in Lithuanian and Spanish

LOGLINE

Two powerful forces, both driven by the hunger for life, collide: the relentless growth of microfungi and the boundless persistence of humans.

SYNOPSIS

HOLY DESTRUCTORS delves deep into the invisible world of organisms that emerge during the decay of organic matter. Biodestructors are microfungi that existed millions of years before humans and will likely outlive us. Their presence transforms bodies into extraordinary energy that nourishes the soil and gives rise to new life in this endless cycle. By blending archival and new footage with shots of growing fungi, director Aistė Žegulytė takes viewers on an enigmatic journey through a microscope lens, where humans continue to fight against time by preserving images, bodies, and memories.

AISTĖ ŽEGULYTĖ
scriptwriter & director

Aistė Žegulytė studied photography and later film directing in Lithuania. During her Master's studies, she completed a traineeship at the Krzysztof Kieslowski Film School in Poland. Since graduation, she has been teaching film workshops in schools with various cinema art projects. Her debut feature-length documentary, Animus Animalis (2018), premiered in Leipzig, was successfully screened at numerous international festivals. The film won 3 Silver Cranes at the National Film Awards for Best Sound, Best Editing and Best Documentary.

In her films, she is exploring human relationship with nature of different forms, in all its variety and complexity. Holy Destructors is her second feature-length film.

ANIMUS ANIMALIS (documentary) 2018, 70 min, Lithuania

DOK Leipzig, Next Masters Competition Program, World Premiere

Thessaloniki Documentary Festival, International Competition Program

Vilnius Film Festival Kino pavasaris, European Debut Competition Program, Cineuropa prize

CPH:DOX, Artis&Auteurs section, Denmark

Hot Docs, Animal Magnetism section, Canada

Beldocs, Firework program, Serbia

Cinema Planeta, International Competition, Mexico

Docaviv, Israel

Brussels International Film Festival, Director's week-European Competition, Grand Prix

Iceland Documentary Film Festival, Main Competition

New Horizons, Poland

BEAST IFF, Portugal

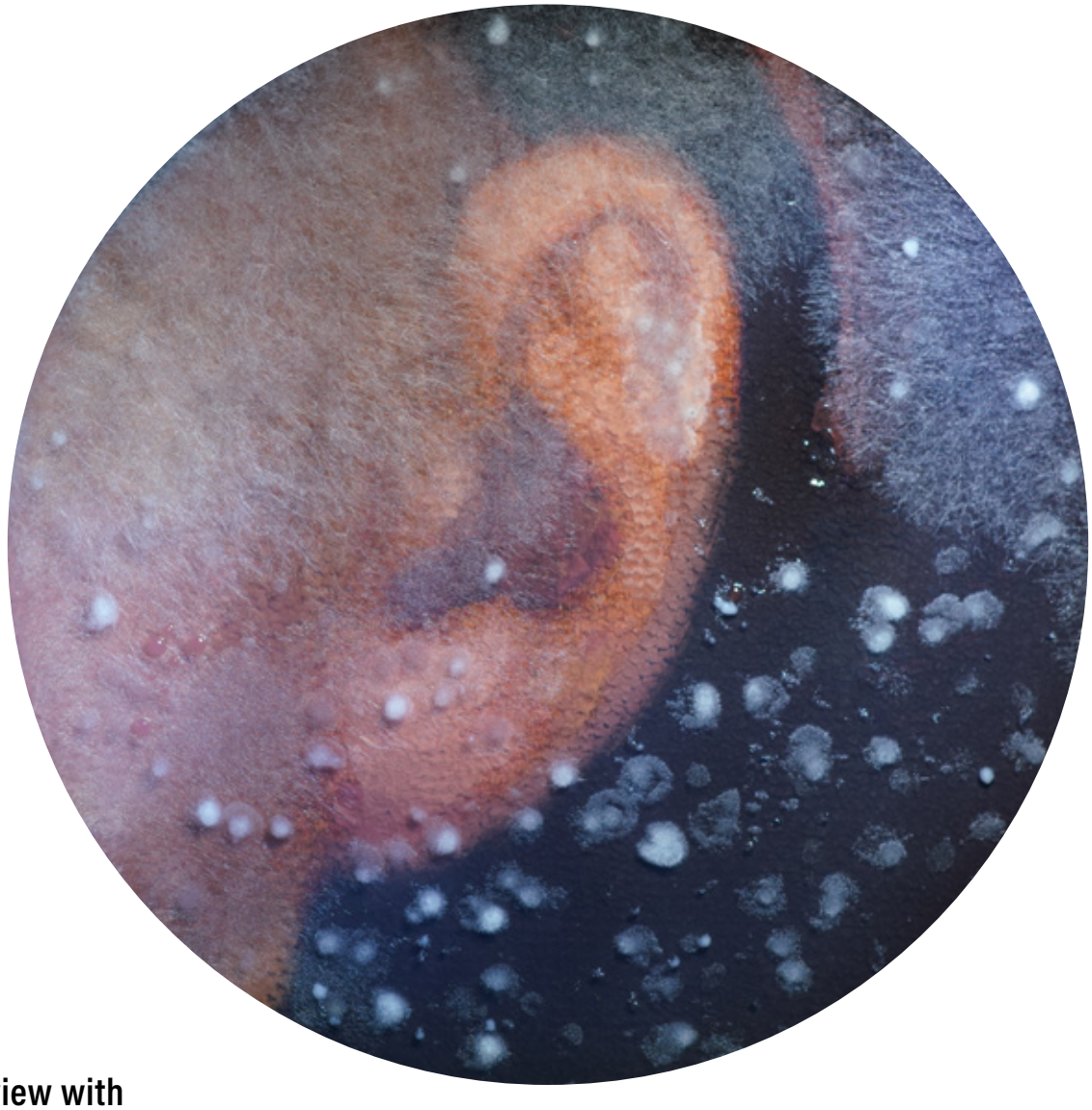
Riga IFF Latvia, Special Mention

Baltic Film Festival in New York

Montreal International Documentary Festival (RIDM)

POFF 23 Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival

Premiers Plans Angers Film Festival, Grand Prix



Interview with Aistė Žegulytė

What drew you to the world of fungi?

It all started with my fascination with the way fungi decompose organic matter, a process that also works as a bioconstruction. This is the central theme of the film and the reason I was drawn to fungi. They are like magicians of a vanishing world, organically transforming it into something else. It's as if death and pain take on a new form. I have always been drawn to themes of change and transformation – and, conversely, to moments when time stands still.

How did fungi enter your field of interest?

If I remember correctly, it was in 2017, when I was working on my debut feature documentary Animus Animalis: A Story about People, Animals and Things. Together with the cinematographer Vytautas Katkus and the editor Mikas Žukauskas, we were looking for ways to depict decomposition, since we wanted to weave in a theme that would counter the art of taxidermy. We came across an online video showing a little mouse being consumed by a fungus. We were fascinated by the idea that mold could devour a mouse. We wanted to capture it ourselves, and that's when I met Jurgita Švedienė from the Laboratory of Biodeterioration Research, along with other mycologists.

This film has several different storylines. Did they emerge from exploring fungi as a phenomenon – where they live and how they function? How would you describe the process of making this film – did it grow out of research, or was it also shaped by those magical coincidences that often lead documentary filmmaking to unexpected places?

Of course, everything started with research. I was writing a script about how fungal destruction turns into construction. But as I kept writing, I realized that life itself opened up much more interesting perspectives. In the end, all our storylines and characters branched out like fungal hyphae – everything unfolded vividly. One character led us to another. It was the mycologist Jurgita Švedienė from the Laboratory of Biodeterioration Research who suggested I meet the conservator and biochemist Olga Ščit-Latonienė, a close friend of hers. She told me that Olga collects fungi from paintings at the Pranas Gudynas Restoration Centre of the Lithuanian National Museum of Art. I was really surprised – I had never imagined that fungi could be collected from paintings!

Olga then explained how she collects the fungi and how different they can be. If the paintings come from China, the fungi tend to be much more colorful. That's when my imagination really took off! At that time Olga had just collected fungi from the mummies of the Giedraitis bishops. Unfortunately, we didn't manage to capture that. But then the COVID pandemic began, and the restoration of the Giedraitis mummies was delayed, so we filmed that process as well as the transfer of the remains. Everything happened quite organically – we met other conservators and started visiting the place more often. The centre itself fascinated me and the cinematographer Vytautas Katkus: the long corridors and small rooms where conservators worked, trying to bring back and preserve the past – all of it looked very cinematic. Later, the editor Danielius Kokanauskis brought a new perspective to our story, and the film gained even more depth and strength – for which I'm truly grateful.

The film also contains a religious dimension. You filmed not only in churches in Lithuania but also the Semana Santa procession in Valladolid, Spain. Could you talk about this aspect – why is it important to you and to the film's theme?

We spent a long time looking for a painting that conservators would restore and preserve, and at the same time for a celebration that would mark its return to its original place. That's when we met the very kind conservator Janina Bilotienė, who was restoring the Miraculous Painting of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Krekenava. This is how the miraculous dimension entered the film. Through it, we traveled into the past – back to the Middle Ages, when people believed in miracles and such paintings were of great importance to them. We also filmed the restoration of the Bernardine Church and the celebration of Easter there, which I have always associated with transformation, with the belief that death is not the end. For me, the Easter celebration has always carried a strong longing for eternity, and through that longing the fragility of our existence is revealed. I think that's how I came to religion myself – sensing the breath of eternity. Even if mixed with mold, it still carried the scent of eternity.

The Valladolid procession appeared in a very intuitive way. Vytautas Katkus, who had traveled to Valladolid for a film festival to present his short Cherries, sent me online images of the Semana Santa celebration and suggested we film it – saying, "let's shoot this, it really works for our film." At that very moment our shoot at the Recompose funeral home in the United States had been canceled, and I felt it was a sign that Valladolid had to be part of the film. In this Easter procession, walking is of great importance, but I also found traces of cinema there – in the way that, by acting or staging something, we try to live through certain emotions. Going to Valladolid felt like traveling into the past – in search of transformation, a touch of eternity.

This is not the first time you have worked with the cinematographer Vytautas Katkus, who also shot Saulė Bliuvaitė's film Toxic, and who was recently awarded Best Director at the Karlovy Vary Festival for his debut feature The Visitor. Could you talk about your creative journey together, and also about deciding to shoot part of the film in a circular format?

If it weren't for Vytautas, there wouldn't be my films. He's a real generator of ideas and suggestions. I really value our creative friendship and feel grateful for the chance to create together. We spent a lot of time thinking about how to tell this story not through narrative, but through feeling. We often talked about eternity, about the sense that nothing ever ends – and from that came the idea to shoot part of the film in a circle. A circle has no corners that close anything off; everything turns within it like an endless spiral, leaving no room for death. The funny thing is, only later did we realize it was also a perfect metaphor for the microscope, the main tool for observing the world of fungi. Vytautas built the circular shape himself and attached it to the camera screen. The footage was still recorded as a square, but he was shooting while seeing through the circle, which meant we still had room to adjust the composition in post-production.

But the fungi are shown in a full frame, returning to the usual film format.

From the very beginning, we wanted to show the world of fungi in a way that would pull the audience in as deeply as possible. The idea was to separate these two worlds – as if we look at people objectively, through a microscope, but at fungi subjectively, immersing ourselves in them with all our senses.

How did you film the fungi themselves? There are so many of them – how did you decide which ones to capture?

When I first started writing the script, initially with Licia Eminenti and later with Vėjūnė Tamuliūnaitė, we imagined the fungi as characters. Vėjūnė suggested dividing them into certain archetypes. At the beginning, we planned five different species, each with distinct personalities – one was erotic, another was scientific, the third simply beautiful. Each had its own function, but of course, once we began shooting the film, things changed. Not everything could be filmed the way we had envisioned. Together with Jurgita Švedienė and the mycologist Dr. Patrick Hickey, based in Edinburgh, we selected fungi according to what they consumed, and from that their characters followed. In the end, three main protagonists remained in the film: Rhizopus stolonifer – common bread mold, one of the rare fungi that reproduces sexually; Penicillium vulpinum, the most beautiful fungus, which grows on paintings and wood, unfolding in bloom like a flower; and Pilobolus crystallinus, not a mold but a dung-loving fungus found in nature. The latter is one of the stranger fungi that synthesizes light, and its appearance reminded me of a human being – as if it had two eyes stretching toward the light. For us, this fungus became a symbol of knowledge. Alongside these three main fungi, the film also features Aspergillus niger, which we identified as a dangerous fungus – it grows on mummies and can also grow on humans, so we gave it a fatal role, connected to the desire to dominate, to violence.

After selecting the fungi, Patrick and I began to cultivate them. This was the longest process – we started back in 2020 and grew them for five years. At first, we made tests to understand how they grew. Then we created the most suitable scenography for each fungus, deciding what to grow it on and how to film it. The main goal was to capture the entire life cycle – from spore, to reproduction, to new germination. At first, I wanted to cultivate the fungi myself – to be close to them, to smell them, to form a relationship. But once I found Patrick, I felt a sense of peace, realizing he was the true "fungi guy", and I entrusted him with the task. He is like an inventor, completely devoted to the fungal world. In his laboratory he was constantly experimenting, searching for ways to grow fungi and on what surfaces – and when something failed, he never gave up. With him I learned to accept that some fungi simply refuse to grow. What inspired me most was Patrick's persistence. That is what I find so beautiful about documentary filmmaking – you meet people who, when you are struggling, give you strength and faith that you must keep going and never give up.

You also continue to collaborate with the composer Gediminas Jakubka. How did you work with him?

I really wanted to work with Gediminas, though this time we didn't work as long as we did on my debut film. I would occasionally show him the fungi footage, but we only started working seriously after Gediminas finished the soundtrack for Saulė Bliuvaitė''s film Toxic and released it on vinyl. I wanted Gediminas to compose the music for the fungi sequences. There is a lot of diegetic music in the film, but I asked him to create the sound of the fungi world – as if it were the music they themselves were listening to, but which we, the audience, could also hear. For each species we looked for its own distinctive music, something that would highlight its character.

You dedicate the film to your grandma, grandpa and dad. What's your personal connection to the film's theme?

This dedication is really important to me. In my first film I was already reflecting on death and the passing of time. I was very close with my grandparents, and even back then I felt that at some point I'd have to say goodbye. When I started writing the script for the second film, I was thinking about that farewell – mostly about my grandma, because she was the one I had the closest bond with. But I never imagined it would actually happen the way it did. When COVID hit, everyone's health got worse, and then they all passed away – first my grandpa, then completely unexpectedly my dad, and finally my grandma, even though I thought she'd be the first one I'd have to say goodbye to. This film helped me face that farewell and come to terms with it – not to sink into darkness, but to understand that everything turns into another form, and nothing really disappears or ends.

CREW

written and directed by	AISTĖ ŽEGULYTĖ
co-written by	VĖJŪNĖ TAMULIŪNAITĖ, LICIA EMINENTI
director of photography	VYTAUTAS KATKUS
director of photography for microfungi	Dr. PATRICK C. HICKEY
editor	DANIELIUS KOKANAUSKIS
sound designer	KEN YASUMOTO
composer	GEDIMINAS JAKUBKA
producers	ULJANA KIM, MIGLA BUTKUTĖ
co-producers	CHRISTOPHE AUDEGUIS
	DOMINIQUE MARZOTTO, LIONEL ARIEL GUEDJ
	ROBERTS VINOVSKIS, DOMINIKS JARMAKOVIČS

with the support of

National
Film Centre of Latvia

Production

Studio Uljana Kim
Antakalnio 94-25
LT-10202, Vilnius
Lithuania
kim@lfc.lt

To Be Continued
48 rue d'Enghien
75010, Paris
France
contact@tbcprod.com

Studio Locomotive
Vagonu iela 16,
LV-1009, Riga
Latvia
dominiks@locomotive.lv

International Publicist

NOISE Film & TV
Kai Hermann
kai@noisefilmpr.com