



EVENTS

# Jerzy Skolimowski in Conversation

This event is hosted by the *Outsiders and Exiles – the films of Jerzy Skolimowski* season curator Michael Brooke. Michael is a freelance writer and multimedia producer specialising in British and central/eastern European cinema. A regular contributor to *Sight and Sound* and BFI DVD releases, he has also produced and/or contributed to numerous acclaimed DVD and Blu-ray releases of the work of Walerian Borowczyk, Krzysztof Kieślowski and Andrzej Wajda for various UK-based video labels.

Since picking up the Jury Prize at Cannes last year, Jerzy Skolimowski's latest, arguably most beautiful film, *Eo*, describing the eventful life of a donkey travelling from Poland to Italy, has been garlanded by other festivals and nominated for an Oscar. Fitting acclaim for an 84-year-old Polish director who after achieving great prestige in the 1960s was forced into exile, where he succeeded in making at least three outstanding films – *Deep End* (1970), *The Shout* (1978) and *Moonlighting* (1982). Abandoning cinema for 17 years to be a painter, he eventually returned to Poland and began a close collaboration with his second wife, Ewa Piaskowska, co-writing and co-producing films – four of them to date, including another major prize-winner, *Essential Killing* (2010), in which Vincent Gallo played an Afghan prisoner escaping rendition in Poland and struggling to survive the ferocious local winter. His character was, as Skolimowski described him when I met the director at the time, a man reduced to becoming an animal.

In *Eo*, an animal now takes centre stage. Meeting again with the still strikingly youthful Skolimowski at last year's BFI London Film Festival, I found him fully retaining the independent spirit and wry humour that infuses his films. Freely sharing his thoughts with Piaskowska, he explained to me in his heavily accented, slightly eccentric English how *Eo* first took shape. The prolonged schedule (26 months in all) [due to Covid] obliged Skolimowski to use not only six donkeys but three cinematographers (mainly Michael Dymek, but also Paweł Edelman and Michael Englert). However, it is hard to detect any obvious change in style, so daring and fluid is their work, the camera often floating over landscapes or taking us deep into the donkey's point of view. 'I gave them a total freedom; I encouraged them to go as far as they could, experimenting with lenses and crazy camera movements, doing some extravagant shots, as much as they could to be unorthodox.'

This is totally in line with the rule-breaking way Skolimowski made his very first films. At the age of 19, he was a semi-professional boxer and a published poet when writing at a country retreat brought him into contact with Andrzej Wajda. Already an established director with his war trilogy (*A Generation*, 1955; *Canal*, 1957; and *Ashes and Diamonds*, 1958), Wajda was planning a film about the youth of the early 1960s. 'I didn't care about movies at the time, and I criticised the script. I said, "This is all nonsense, young people don't behave like this, they ride scooters, they take trams, and so on." So Andrzej said, "Why don't you write a few pages for me?" The same night,

I wrote 25 pages. I gave them to him in the morning, and that was exactly *Innocent Sorcerers* [1960]. He said, "Alright, let's shoot it, and you play the boxer." So I thought, "This is all so easy, that it can happen like this, forget about the poetry!" With encouragement from Wajda, as well as from star student Roman Polanski, Skolimowski won a place at the prestigious Łódź Film School. 'Suddenly I realised that this means four years of study, and when I finish I can become the assistant to the assistant, and maybe after ten years I would make my first feature. I thought "No, that's a waste of time, I have to do it immediately.'" As the most expensive commodity in Polish cinema was the film stock, Skolimowski took what he was given for specific exercises – tracking shots, zooms, subjective camera, shooting through glass – and secretly created scenes that, when combined, gave him his first feature, *Identification Marks: None* (1964). Skolimowski himself took the lead role as a failed student resigned to doing his military service. 'It was all improvisation – when there was an opportunity to shoot with the camera 30 seconds of something, I was there, always with the same costume and the same haircut. Who else would do that for me?'

As the subject matter of his first films was his own generation, dealing with their hopes and anxieties, Skolimowski continued to take roles in his own films. For many, his face may be more familiar than his filmography, as he has been called upon to act by many leading directors – in Volker Schlöndorff's *Circle of Deceit* (1981), Taylor Hackford's *White Nights* (1985), David Cronenberg's *Eastern Promises* (2007) and more recently even for Marvel. 'You know, this is the easiest money I've ever earned! I'm a very disciplined actor, I always hit the marks, I know my lines perfectly, I'm a dream actor for directors, because I understand what they want and I'm not pushy with my ideas. Of course, I have my limits because of my accent and my Slav face.'

The four features Skolimowski made in Poland in the 60s are all tours de force of direction, hugely inventive in terms of framing, movement and editing. In *Walkover* (1965), he expanded the idea of long takes to make the film in 26 shots, with sequences happening virtually in real time. *Barrier* (1966), the poetic masterpiece of this period, begins with a bizarre game played by a group of medical students, one of whom falls for a tram driver (played by Joanna Szczerbic, who became the director's first wife). The influence of Italian cinema permeates the film, and by now Skolimowski was established as a key name among the various 'new waves' sprouting up all over the world.

Skolimowski's international status gave him the chance to make a film in Belgium, *Le Départ* (1967), with Jean-Pierre Léaud. By his own admission, speaking foreign languages is not his forte, but Skolimowski's visual sense and directing actors through example saw him through. The film has a brilliant jazz soundtrack, the creation of Krzysztof Komeda, also famous for his work on Polanski's early films. 'I was practically a jazz groupie, and jazz was the underground music in Poland, you were not allowed to play it. The particular group I followed was Krzysztof Komeda's sextet and I became friends with them.' Komeda soon became Skolimowski's composer of choice. 'The technique I developed with Komeda was that I was showing him a very rough cut of the film, without the full soundtrack, not all the dialogue or even effects, and he encouraged me to produce the sounds of my emotions. We were close friends so I wasn't embarrassed or shy, I was just making sounds.'

Still revered as a major figure in Polish jazz, Komeda died at the age of 37 following a fall in Los Angeles in 1969. Subsequently, Skolimowski worked

with different film composers – notably the versatile Stanley Myers – but with his return to Poland has found a new creative spirit whose haunting work on *Eo* is completely in harmony with the film's visual beauty.

'With Paweł Mykietyn, I have finally found a collaborator in the class of Krzysztof Komeda. This is the third time I've worked with him, and his music helps *Eo* tremendously because with the lack of dialogue, it's like the expression of the donkey himself many times in the film.'

Skolimowski's real troubles in Poland began with his fourth feature, *Hands Up!* (1967), in which former medical students reunite ten years after graduation at a drunken party and question how they have succumbed to the Stalinist attitudes and fears of the previous generation. Rather presciently in view of *Eo*, Skolimowski himself plays a vet who is challenged over his treatment of animals and questioned as to why he isn't a vegetarian. Most of the action takes place in a railway goods carriage (the script began life as a theatre piece), and inevitably it evokes thoughts of transportation to the death camps – the fate that befell Skolimowski's father in 1943. What proved completely unacceptable to the Polish censors was a sequence in which the men erect a vast billboard carrying the face of Stalin, only by mistake he has two sets of eyes. The film was suppressed, not premiering until 1981, at Cannes – and for three decades the director was an exile. 'I led a kind of gypsy life, moving from country to country with my wife and two small boys, and I had to earn some money. Finally I settled in London for some years.'

For the most part, London proved to be a fruitful location for Skolimowski. After completing post-production there on *The Adventures of Gerard* (1970), based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Napoleonic adventure stories ('the worst film I ever made'), he launched into the delirious *Deep End* (1970), set in London but mainly shot in Munich. A teenage boy (John Moulder Brown) in his first job out of school at a seedy public baths becomes impossibly infatuated with his alluring co-worker (Jane Asher). On this occasion there was, as Skolimowski has commented, 'a lot of good chemistry' in every department. Yet in spite of tremendous critical accolades – Andrew Sarris called it 'a work of genius' – the film disappeared quickly and was long unavailable until it was restored in 2011.

After *Deep End*, Skolimowski veered between literary adaptations and personal projects, delivering at least two memorable films: *The Shout* (1978), adapted from a Robert Graves short story, and *Moonlighting* (1982), made as a super-fast reaction to the imposition of martial law in Poland, and starring Jeremy Irons as a Polish worker in London who has to hide his co-labourers from political realities to finish the conversion of a Kensington house (Skolimowski's home at the time). Other projects were less successful. *King, Queen, Knave* (1972), from a novel by Vladimir Nabokov, starring Moulder Brown in another tale of youthful obsession, mainly falls flat. *Success Is the Best Revenge* (1984), from an original screenplay, and *The Lightship* (1985), from a novel by Siegfried Lenz, were attempts by Skolimowski to deal with his own concerns about the relationship between a father and son, and both featured his elder boy in a key role. Neither were made to his satisfaction, and while his Turgenev adaptation *Torrents of Spring* (1989) is stylish and well crafted, it is also curiously anonymous. After his doomed effort to adapt Witold Gombrowicz, *30 Door Key* (aka *Ferdydurke*, 1991), Skolimowski, having relocated to the US, decided it was time to return to another great passion, art.

‘Suddenly I went through the process of becoming a real painter. I had many exhibitions, I sold some stuff to museums, to private collectors, some of them serious people – Dennis Hopper bought three, Jack Nicholson four. And I managed to find a new wind, I felt like a young artist, I climbed quite a long way up.’ It’s easy to feel that the sensibility behind the bold colours and forms of his large canvases is the same behind the stunning visual textures of *Eo*. ‘I think Julian Schnabel said that though my paintings could be taken as abstract, there is always organic form in them.’

Skolimowski’s new phase of filmmaking began with his return to Poland in the early 2000s and his collaboration with Piaskowska. *Four Nights with Anna* (2008) was a small-scale project shot close to their home, and opened up the possibility of making more ambitious films. *Essential Killing* was followed by *11 Minutes* (2015), in which a variety of simultaneous narratives set in contemporary Warsaw are boldly intercut with a dynamism that suggested the hand of a far younger director. When asked how the writing process works, Skolimowski laughs. ‘You’ll get two versions of that. My version is that first of all we establish what the film is about, the general idea, some parts contradictory but for us to choose which way we should go. Then Ewa starts to write it. When she’s done some pages I take them and make corrections and changes and cuts. So I do the editorial work, then it goes back to her and she puts her additional input into that. And it goes like this between us.’

Piaskowska adds: ‘Usually because I’m a night person, it’s a good way, we work very quickly. And that way we don’t rely so much on reason, it allows for accidental stuff.’

The director continues: ‘I would say my input is more on the visual side, and Ewa is developing the emotional relations between the characters. We both work on the dialogue, she suggests certain lines, I do my corrections. I’ve been known as a dialogue specialist since *Knife in the Water*.’

Polanski’s debut feature, *Knife in the Water* (1962) carries Skolimowski’s credit as co-writer, and it’s an association that has been renewed with Polanski’s latest film, *The Palace*. ‘He had the idea of a film which would take place in one location with an ensemble of people together on New Year’s Eve. I told him my family story, which we used in the final script of *The Palace*, but then he got the idea that it would be New Year’s Eve 1999, when there was the panic about [the threatened global computer meltdown] Y2K. When he asked me if I would work with him on the project, I said yes, but I think Ewa should be involved, as my last scripts were written with her. So we agreed, and worked very fast – in two to three months the script was ready.’

Given the strange journey Skolimowski himself has made through different countries and cultures as well as genres of cinema, I suggest to him that *Eo* may be read as partly autobiographical. He is amused by the idea. ‘Yes, there are some allusions to the immigrant experience, and the outsider. In that case, it is autobiographical!’ Piaskowska adds: ‘*Eo*, he’s not that different to Vincent Gallo in *Essential Killing*, is he? Or poor Jeremy Irons, the Polish man with no work in London? The underdog, the outsider, the person whose fate is decided by those who are stronger around him. Barely scraping by, trying to stay upright, not to get drawn in by the waves. It’s the same character, isn’t it?’

**Jerzy Skolimowski interviewed by David Thomson, *Sight and Sound*, April 2023**



---

## JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

Born 5 May 1938, Łódź, Poland

Selected filmography

### As Director

- 1960** **Little Hamlet** (Hamles) (Poland) short + writer  
**The Menacing Eye** (Oko wykol) (Poland) short + writer  
**Erotique** (Erotyk) (Poland) short + writer
- 1961** **Boxing** (Boks) (Poland) short + writer  
**Your Money or Your Life** (Pieniądże albo życie) (Poland) short + writer  
**Rzezba** (Poland) short + writer  
**The Nude** (Akt) (Poland) short + writer
- 1962** **Druga taryfa** (Poland) short + producer/ writer
- 1965** **Walkover** (Walkower) (Poland) + writer/ editor, cast as Andrzej Leszczyc  
**Identification Marks: None** (Rysopis) (Poland) + writer/editor/art director cast as Andrzej Leszczyc
- 1966** **Barrier** (Bariera) (Poland) + writer
- 1967** **Le départ** (The Departure) (Belgium) + writer
- 1967/81** **Hands Up!** (Ręce do góry) (Poland) + producer/writer/art director, cast as Andrzej Leszczyc
- 1968** **Dialóg 20-40-60** (Czechoslovakia, segment **The Twenty-Year-Olds**) + writer
- 1970** **Deep End** (Germany/UK) + writer, cast as man with newspaper  
**The Adventures of Gerard** (UK) + writer
- 1972** **King, Queen, Knave** (Germany/USA) + cast
- 1978** **The Shout** (UK) + writer
- 1982** **Moonlighting** (UK) + producer/writer, cast as boss
- 1984** **Success Is the Best Revenge** (France/ UK) + producer/writer
- 1985** **The Lightship** (USA)
- 1989** **Torrents of Spring** (Italy/France) + producer/writer, cast as Victor Victorovich
- 1991** **Ferdydurke** (30 Door Key) (Poland) + producer/writer, cast as headmaster
- 2008** **Four Nights with Anna** (Cztery noce z Anną) (France/Poland) + producer/writer
- 2010** **Essential Killing** (Poland/Norway/ Hungary/UK/Ireland) + producer/writer
- 2015** **11 Minutes** (Poland/Ireland) + producer/ writer
- 2022** **EO** (Poland/Italy) + producer/writer

### As Actor

- 1960** **Innocent Sorcerers** (Niewinni czarodzieje) (Poland, d. Andrzej Wajda) as boxer
- 1966** **Sposob bycia** (Poland, d. Jan Rybkowski) as Leopold
- 1972** **A Slip-up** (Poland, d. Jan Lomnicki) as garage owner
- 1981** **Circle of Deceit** (France/Germany, d. Volker Schlöndorff) as Hoffmann
- 1985** **White Nights** (USA, d. Taylor Hackford) as KGB Colonel Chaiko
- 1987** **Big Shots** (USA, d. Robert Mandel) as Doc
- 1996** **Mars Attacks!** (USA, d. Tim Burton) as Dr Zeigler
- 1998** **L.A. Without a Map** (Finland/Luxembourg/ UK/France, d. Mika Kaurismaki) as minister
- 1999** **Operation Simoon** (Poland, d. Wladyslaw Pasikowski) as Hayes
- 2000** **Before Night Falls** (USA, d. Julian Schnabel) as professor
- 2007** **Eastern Promises** (UK/Canada/USA, d. David Cronenberg) as Stepan
- 2012** **The Avengers** (USA, d. Joss Whedon) as Georgi Luchkov  
**The Day of the Siege: September Eleven 1683** (Italy/Poland, d. Renzo Martinelli) as King Jan III Sobieski
- 2018** **The Stolen Caravaggio** (Italy, d. Roberto Andò) as Jerzy Kunze  
**Juliusz** (Poland, d. Aleksander Pietrzak) as Chorwat

### As Writer

- 1960** **Innocent Sorcerers** (Niewinni czarodzieje) (Poland, d. Andrzej Wajda)
- 1962** **Knife in the Water** (Nóż w wodzie) (Poland, d. Roman Polanski)
- 1972** **A Slip-up** (Poland, d. Jan Lomnicki)
- 1985** **Mesmerised** (UK, d. Michael Laughlin)
- 2023** **The Palace** (Italy/Switzerland/Poland, d. Roman Polanski)

---

## OUTSIDERS AND EXILES: THE FILMS OF JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

### **Jerzy Skolimowski in Conversation**

Tue 28 March 18:30

### **The Shout**

Tue 28 March 20:45 (+ intro by Jerzy Skolimowski); Wed 5 Apr 20:55; Fri 28 Apr 18:30

### **Walkover (Walkower)**

Wed 29 Mar 18:20 (+ Q&A with Jerzy Skolimowski); Sat 8 Apr 18:10

### **Moonlighting**

Wed 29 Mar 20:45 (+ intro by Jerzy Skolimowski); Sun 9 Apr 13:00; Sat 15 Apr 18:20

### **Hands Up! (Ręce do góry)**

Fri 31 Mar 20:45; Mon 10 Apr 15:40

### **Barrier (Bariera)**

Sat 1 Apr 18:20; Tue 4 Apr 20:50 (+ intro by season curator Michael Brooke)

### **EO**

Sat 1 Apr 20:50; Wed 5 Apr 18:20; Fri 21 Apr 20:50; Sat 22 Apr 18:20; Thu 27 Apr 20:45

### **Dialogue 20-40-60 (Dialóg 20-40-60)**

Sun 2 Apr 12:30; Sat 15 Apr 20:45

### **Deep End**

Sun 2 Apr 15:40; Mon 10 Apr 18:30; Wed 19 Apr 20:55

### **Le Départ**

Sun 2 Apr 18:30; Mon 17 Apr 20:40

### **Identification Marks: None (Rysopis)**

Mon 3 Apr 21:00; Sun 9 Apr 18:40

### **Outsider and Exile**

Tue 4 Apr 18:15

### **The Lightship**

Sat 8 Apr 12:15; Fri 14 Apr 20:40

### **11 Minutes (11 minut)**

Sun 16 Apr 12:30; Sat 29 Apr 20:30

### **Four Nights with Anna (Cztery noce z Anna)**

Sun 23 Apr 12:40; Fri 28 Apr 20:50

### **Essential Killing**

Sun 23 Apr 18:40; Sat 29 Apr 14:40

*EO* will be available on BFI DVD and Blu-ray from

3 April (available to pre-order at the BFI shop)

*Identification Marks: None* and *Hands Up!* will be available on a 2-disc

BFI Blu-ray from 24 April

### **In Cultural Partnership with**

THE 21ST  
POLISH  
FILM  
FESTIVAL **KINOTEKA**

9 Mar-27 Apr kinoteka.org.uk

## **Mamuśka!**

### **Polish Kitchen and Bar**

Proud partners of the BFI's Jerzy Skolimowski season. Show valid BFI ticket and enjoy 20% off your bill at Mamuśka!

---

## **BECOME A BFI MEMBER**

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://bfi.org.uk/join)

## **BFI PLAYER**

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780