



OUTSIDERS AND EXILES: THE FILMS OF JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

Barrier (Bariera)

The screening on Tuesday 4 April will be introduced by season curator Michael Brooke

Barrier has a jester's freedom, the confidence of a man who knows his world deeply, who has measured the possibilities his history allows, and can rise to the surface holding scraps and fragments together in strange combinations which may seem mad, but make desperate sense. In the very texture of this film, the way we are led into situations, the way Skolimowski *plays*, we recognise a cool wisdom.

It is basically a boy/girl story. He is a medical student deciding to cop out of the social assembly line. She is a tram-driver, magical in sheepskin coat and boots. They come together, are torn apart, at the end meet again. Like a Godard film, the elements are simple, naive. But Skolimowski weaves an eye-opening chain of images. The film plunges us into the stuff of daily life, pushing our noses up against situations, intriguing us with strange actions, only later drawing back to establish what is 'really' the case. Take the opening. Close-up of hands lashed together in the small of the back. Voices intoning words of protest. The body, photographed from behind, leans forward, topples over, like falling off a cliff. It is frightening, we feel we're in some kind of torture-place. Then the camera pulls back, and we see it's only four medical students playing a game where you kneel on a table and try to catch a suspended matchbox in your teeth, no hands allowed. The winner earns the piggybank in which money for fees has been saved. This is one of those hard-edged Polish truth-games, lucid metaphors pushed to a cartoon clarity.

Around these truth-games lies the heritage of Poland past and present. Our hero, having caught the matchbox, goes out to a world which is full of old age, identical raincoated commuters held up at traffic lights, posters exhorting you to donate blood, and everywhere eternal Polish Easter with its candles and off-screen choirs intoning Hallelujahs in a hundred different styles. Heroic 19th century Poland looms: the boy's father wants him to redeem his cavalry sword. He goes to the pawnbroker, a lecherous well-built lady living among hunting trophies. He escapes her advances, and is out in the street clutching his anachronistic Excalibur. There he meets the girl. They sit by a brazier face to face while cars whip past them through the snow, headlamps glaring.

After a trip in her tram, they go to a nightclub, huge, white, deserted, the absurd waiters standing around, the bandsmen playing with plates and cutlery. Again the jester's sense of the absurd: the boy asks the head-waiter to change the tablecloth. He does so by substituting an entire new table. Suddenly the place is packed with World War II veterans, dancing and singing, wearing paper hats made out of women's magazines. 'One in six of them fell in the war. They sing about it,' says the boy. 'What do we sing about?' Outside the boy spars like a matador with a car wrapped in plastic sheeting; the driver yells out 'One day you'll die and there'll be no resurrection.' This headlong account can only begin to give some idea of the cool frenzy with which Skolimowski taps the deepest veins of Polish reality now, the reflexes of nostalgia, yearning for the new, the pulse of restless dissatisfaction, and the sheer wonder at being alive at all. It's a visionary film, the film of a jester with a vision that is disenchanting but not deceived into anything facile.

Michael Kustow, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1966/67

With *Barrier* Jerzy Skolimowski decisively confirms his promise as the most exciting talent to come out of Poland since the days of Wajda and Munk. And if one says that *Barrier* is paradoxically both romantic and as hard as nails, that is only to confirm it as a devastating allegory of the Polish state of mind. Reduced to its core, the film is about a national schizophrenia, the barrier between two generations, between those old enough to remember that proud day when Polish cavalry charged German tanks and those who have grown up to find themselves disenchanted with the fruits of that final, appallingly costly victory. Skolimowski presents this conflict by confronting us with a series of dazzling visual metaphors as the student, throwing off the shackles of a traditional idealism, sets off on his odyssey round a Warsaw thronged with relics from the past.

Just as Godard made *Alphaville* out of Paris, so Skolimowski turns Warsaw into an unreal world: buildings looming up menacingly, a mass of unending glass and concrete; streets filled with acres of lighted candles and mesmerised throngs of commuters running round in circles and stopping in mass obedience at a set of fake traffic lights; enormous blood donor posters with a finger pointing out accusingly. But behind this surrealist surface lurks a cold, hard reality, clearly marked in the extraordinary opening sequence. A blank white wall; a kneeling figure, hands lashed behind his back, topples forward and disappears; another follows while an off-screen voice intones medical Latin. Then the camera pulls back and we see that this is not some bizarre ritual of execution but simply four medical students playing a game with a matchbox balanced on a ruler. It's a trick, but an involving one, drawing us into a labyrinth of mystery and then pulling us sharply back with an ice-cold explanatory image. Later, we see that the candles and the chanted Hallelujahs are simply part of the Polish Easter Eve ceremony. And the deserted restaurant, where the waiters stand round in bored anticipation and the band juggle with plates, suddenly fills with veterans from the war singing their nostalgic songs and absurdly decked out in paper hats made from a woman's magazine.

This is the generation of heroic, Catholic Poland; but the student has nothing to sing about, can only sit clutching his father's sabre and complaining that he was born just too late to throw Molotov cocktails. What interests him, he claims as he dangles his set of keys in front of the girl, is not this subservience to dead ideals (succinctly illustrated in another scene when a man blinded in the war asks the girl to lead him to a wall and then reveals that he is not blind at all) but the material possessions which his years as a student have denied him. But this isn't simply a case of youth cynical about the sacrifices of an older generation: he is pulled both ways, anxious to own the gleaming new car in its plastic covering and yet refusing to climb aboard the bandwagon of the rat race. He hangs on to his father's sabre, hankers after the romantic ideal offered by the girl. 'Even in our cynical generation,' someone says, 'romantic impulses still assert themselves'. It's the way Skolimowski juxtaposes these contradictions, in a style at once flamboyant and coolly detached, that makes *Barrier* such an astonishingly accurate view of the contemporary Polish mentality.

***Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1967**

BARRIER (BARIERA)

Director: Jerzy Skolimowski

Production Companies: Zespół Filmowy 'Kamera', Film Polski

Production Managers: Stanislaw Zylewicz, Ryszard Straszewski

Screenplay: Jerzy Skolimowski

Director of Photography: Jan Laskowski

Editor: Halina Prugar

Art Directors: Roman Wolyniec, Z. Straszewski

Music: Krzysztof Komeda

Cast

Jan Nowicki (*the student*)

Joanna Szczerbic (*the girl*)

Tadeusz Lomnicki (*the doctor*)

Zdzislaw Maklakiewicz (*magazine seller*)

Ryszard Pietruski (*head waiter*)

Maria Malicka (*charlady*)

Malgorzata Lorentowicz (*lady of the house*)

Gustaw Nehrebecki (*'Elegant'*)

Zygmunt Malanowicz (*'Eddy'*)

Andrzej Herder (*'Manius'*)

B. Baer, Henryk Bak, Ryszarda Hanin, Stanislaw Lindner,

Zygmunt Lesniak, Adam Pawlikowski, Adam Perzyk, Jerzy Turek

Poland 1966

81 mins

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 (Walkover) 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! (Rece 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

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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

Walkover and *Barrier* will be released on Blu-ray by Second Run later this year