



Please note that this film contains a sequence of flashing lights which might affect customers who are susceptible to photosensitive epilepsy.

Receiving its British premiere at the 2022 BFI London Film Festival and joint winner of the Cannes Jury Prize, Jerzy Skolimowski's *EO* is a vividly realised homage to Robert Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar* and an original work in its own right. On its journey through life, a donkey with melancholic eyes and a fondness for carrots experiences joy and pain, with the wheel of fortune randomly turning his luck into disaster and his despair into unexpected bliss. The latest collaboration between Polish director Skolimowski (*The Shout*) and his veteran producer Jeremy Thomas, *EO* is a distinctive and ultimately poignant work. Brilliantly shot by Michal Dymek and featuring immersive sound design, the drama ponders the follies of humanity while never resorting to sermonising. Interspersed with moments of bracing surrealism, *EO* reminds us not only of the need for humility, but also of Skolimowski's immense contribution to world cinema.

Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programme and Audiences

An 86-minute spin-dryer of sound and image, *EO* is an animal rights rallying cry, a bizarre donkey's-eye-view art film, and one other thing: a loose retelling of Robert Bresson's 1966 masterpiece *Au hasard Balthazar*. Even for elderly Polish auteur Jerzy Skolimowski, responsible for the stylishly zoned-out, subversive *Deep End* (1970) and a handful of other innovative films over the intervening years, that's a tall order. *Au hasard Balthazar* was a film that Jean Luc-Godard once described as 'containing the world in an hour and a half'.

Yet right from the opening frames of *EO* we understand this is not an attempt to restage Bresson's religious allegory of human cruelty and salvation. It opens with strobing red lights over a staged circus performance, one where a young woman (Sandra Dryzmalska) stands over a donkey on its back. With its four hooves in the air, she pretends to resurrect it as it jumps to its feet on cue. It's an immediate distinction from the stark, clean simplicity of Bresson's work, and perhaps all the better for it: Skolimowski's free-floating camera, red filters and abrupt perspective switches all suggest a bold aesthetic of its own making rather than a likely ill-fated attempt to mimic a classic.

What *EO* shares with *Balthazar* are the most basic parts of its DNA: the story of a humble donkey who is separated from a young woman who dotes on him, unwillingly sent on an odyssey from owner to owner, facility to farm, kindness to savagery. We soon learn that EO – a soft-muzzled grey circus donkey – was actually rather content and protected by his handler.

His journey begins when he is forced into relocation after animal-rights activists picket the circus. (The egotism of the well-intentioned is a frequent theme here: even the humans who mean well are too alienated from the natural world to truly protect it.) The mule gets lost – or runs away – from the farm he is taken to, showing real agency when he wishes to escape; he wanders the woods at night in a surreal, fairy-tale-like sequence. The film switches to EO's own perspective at points as he watches lonely frogs leap through trickling streams, his affinity for his fellow animals shown in sharp

relief to smoke-billowing power plants, ugly industrialism and busy highways encroaching on the natural world. From lonely country roads to city streets, football pitches to the Italian countryside, EO's long journey across Europe reveals the rotten heart of its modernity, contrasted with the tender innocence of this animal.

The camerawork sometimes seems to be omniscient as it flips upside down, snakes over mountains and rivers and dwarfs its sweet little mule against the roaring power of man-made dams or hunting-rifle lasers. Cockeyed, beautiful and sensitive even in its depiction of occasional animal cruelty, it has a cumulative effect that borders on the hypnotic. Its one visual homage to Bresson occurs in tight close-up on EO's large, liquid brown eyes, an effect that remains as haunting as ever.

This is a film which concerns itself with nebulous and wide-reaching subjects, never exactly didactic but also never unclear about its aims as a dressing-down of European greed and indifference to suffering. Through its various episodes, it highlights the exploitation of the weak and the innocent, from a Polish trucker attempting to sexually assault a starving migrant worker to the carnivorous, leather- and fur-wearing indifference of the various characters who drift into the story. In a heart-wrenching segment, EO meets hooligan football fans whose tribalism and violence nearly get him killed. But it is more often human myopia that does damage: we are a drain on the pastoral, natural world. And who can blame Skolimowski, at 84, for thinking so? EO himself is always on the side of his fellow occupants of a simpler, older world; at one point, he kicks a mink-farm worker square in the forehead. This can verge on the comic or even goofy – yet the visual experimentation and narrative unpredictability are constantly engaging.

Even for those of us who have the narrative of Bresson's more spiritual film imprinted on our memories, *EO* is never obvious about where it's heading, maybe because its protagonist doesn't know either. The film can be unwieldy, cartoonish and head-scratching. And yet it is bold in a way few contemporary films truly are, and its culmination of sound and image before the final cut to black is like a fist closing around your heart.

Christina Newland, *Sight and Sound* ([bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound](https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound)), 23 May 2022

Jerzy Skolimowski on 'EO'

Several decades ago, I said in an interview (I think it was *Cahiers du Cinéma*) that the only film that moved me to tears was [Bresson's] *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966). I think I discovered it shortly after its release. Since then, I haven't shed a single tear at the cinema. Thus, what I owe to Robert Bresson is to have acquired the strong conviction that making an animal a character in the film is not only possible but can also be a source of emotion.

I wanted above all to make an emotional film, to base the narration on emotions, much more than in any of my previous films.

Directors use intellectual arguments and emotional language to provoke actors to deliver the desired effect. With my donkey, the only way to persuade him to do anything was with tenderness: words whispered in his ear and a few friendly caresses. Raising your voice, showing impatience or nervousness would have been the fastest path to disaster. Donkeys don't know what 'acting' is, they can't pretend anything – they simply ARE. They are gentle, caring, respectful, polite, and loyal. They live to the fullest in the present moment. They never show narcissism. They do not skimp on the supposed

intentions of their character; and never discuss their director's vision. They are excellent actors.

When the breeder showed me the photos of the available donkeys, I immediately liked those of the Sardinian breed. I knew EO must be grey with white spots around the eyes. I went to a stable near Warsaw to visit the animal that had seduced me the most in the photos. His name was Tako. As soon as I saw him, I knew he was going to be the star of my movie.

A second casting was then carried out to find him the best possible doubles. We used 6 donkeys in total: Tako, Hola, Marietta, Ettore, Rocco and Mela.

Production notes

EO

Directed by: Jerzy Skolimowski

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A Skopia Film production

Co-produced by: Alien Films Srl

In co-production with: Polwell Sp. z o.o.

Production Companies: Moderator Inwestycje Sp. z o.o., Veilo Ewa Żyłka, Podkarpackie Film Commission

Co-produced by: Wojewódzki Dom Kultury w Rzeszowie, Podkarpackie Regional Film Fund

Funded by: Podkarpackie Region and the City of Rzeszów

Realised with the support of: Regione Lazio - Fondo regionale per il cinema e l'audiovisivo

In association with: Ares

A Polish Film Institute co-financed production Executive Producer:

Jeremy Thomas

Produced by: Eva Piaskowska, Jerzy Skolimowski

Script Supervisors: Renata Gałuszka, Barbara Omyła

Casting Director: Paulina Krajnik

Casting Director Italy: Jorgelina Pochintesta

Screenplay by: Eva Piaskowska, Jerzy Skolimowski

Director of Photography: Michał Dymek

Additional Directors of Photography: Paweł Edelman, Michał Englert

Stills: Aneta Gębska, Filip Gebski, Łukasz Bąk

Edited by: Agnieszka Glińska

Production Designer: Mirosław 'Mietek' Koncewicz

Production Designer Italy: Katarzyna Lewińska

Set Decorators: Robert Dyrz, Kamila Grzybowska-Sosnowska

Make-up Artists: Aleksandra Dutkiewicz, Weronika Zielińska

Music: Paweł Mykietyń

Music Orchestra: Sinfonia Varsovia

Music Supervisor: Paweł Juzwuk

Sound Design: Radosław Ochnio

Sound Mixers: Marcin Matlak, Michał Walczyński

Sound Mixer Italy: Azzurra Stirpe

Sound Mixer Sicily: Michał Matlak

Re-recording Mixer: Paweł Jazwiecki

Stunt Co-ordinator: Tomasz Lewandowski

Cast

Sandra Drzymalska (*Kassandra*)

Lorenzo Zurzolo (*Vito*)

Mateusz Kosciukiewicz (*Mateo*)

Isabelle Huppert (*countess*)

Tako (*Eo*)

Hola (*Eo*)

Marietta (*Eo*)

Ettore (*Eo*)

Rocco (*Eo*)

Mela (*Eo*)

Tomasz Organek (*Ziom*)

Lolita Chammah (*Dora*)

Agata Sasinowska (*Kaja*)

Anna Rokita (*Dorota*)

Michał Przybyśławski (*Zenek*)

Gloria Iradukunda (*Zea*)

Piotr Szaja (*stableman*)

Aleksander Janiszewski (*bailiff*)

Delfina Wilkońska (*animal rights activist*)

Andrzej Szeremeta (*vet*)

Wojciech Andrzejuk (*hooligan 1*)

Mateusz Murański (*hooligan 2*)

Marcin Drabicki (*Jan*)

Maciej Stępnik (*Wasył*)

Fernando Junior Gomes da Silva (*assassin*)

Krzysztof Karczmarsz (*Dyspensa's trainer*)

Waldemar Barwiński (*vet II*)

Saverio Fabbri (*animal trader*)

Katarzyna Russ (*bartender*)

Alert (*Dyspensa*)

Poland/Italy 2022

88 mins

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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

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

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