



OUTSIDERS AND EXILES: THE FILMS OF JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

Identification Marks: None

Made at the Łódz Film School, thanks to planning student exercises so they could be combined into a coherent feature, Skolimowski's debut introduced his freewheeling style and his alter ego Andrzej Leszczyc (played by the director not so much for egomania as for guaranteed availability), who spends a final day of freedom before compulsory military service tying up some loose ends.

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'At your age I was in the uprising,' mutters an invading character in search of hospitality; this being Skolimowski's disenchanted world, however, the war hero is quickly unmasked as a charlatan. Fresh from writing *Innocent Sorcerers* and *Knife in the Water*, Skolimowski was in 1964 the spearhead that had punctured the bubble of heroic Polish cinema after its dramatic growth during the late 1950s, and his first film as a director confirms his radical impatience through an unnervingly restless fury unmatched by his later works.

As Skolimowski the stylist has developed, Skolimowski the purist has been left behind; his trilogy of farewells to the decrepit Polish tradition may have reached its highest decorative point with *Barrier*, but it is in *Rysopis* that the bewildered allegiances of the generation that just missed the war are exposed in their most revealing form.

With a touch of sentimentality despite its cool exterior, *Rysopis* is concerned with a society in which everything is a betrayal, from the educational system that fills the student with a wealth of useless knowledge to the friends who rough him up when he catches them eavesdropping or the clinic that merely kills his dog instead of curing it. People are constantly being overheard, stared at, interrogated, spied on; the prickly discomfort of pervasive suspicion is in the air, looming over the streets like the enormous shadows that are thrown on a wall behind Andrzej as he makes his way to the Recruiting Centre.

In this Kafkaesque atmosphere, still chilly where in *Barrier* it has become more comfortably bizarre, woman is the inevitable haven – if she can be caught. Skolimowski divides her into three, all played by the inescapable Elzbieta Czyzewska: the 'wife' who has become impermeably toughened by the process of breadwinning, the fluffy blonde householder who offers amiable entertainment to just about anything male, and the naive student whose sincerity is confirmed by a natural hairstyle instead of a wig and whose empty head conceals a still warm heart.

The latter makes the only tolerable companion in the limbo prior to Andrzej's enlistment (she is prepared to make faces at him, after all, whereas his wife is beyond such forms of communication), but this is no Hollywood fantasy in which she will be waiting for him when he comes out.

It's always fun at the beginning, the key phrase in his final conversation with the woman who knows him best, establishes that the student girl would soon go the way of all flesh. Glumly the film concludes that, 20 years after the war, the army is still the only career offering a chance of purpose and excitement, and precious little of either even so. As Andrzej says to a street interviewer

(characteristically, no record is made of his words), ‘I’d like to be launched on something definite,’ adding, rather primly, ‘The main thing’s to do your best.’ Andrzej and Skolimowski are naturally interchangeable; if the director’s acting debut is unremarkable, his expressionless durability makes for an appropriate impersonation – and in any case this frequently gives way to subjective camerawork. The immense tracking shots of *Walkover* are yet to come, but *Rysopis* nevertheless has its astonishing technical moments, the most memorable being the headlong rush down an entire flight of stairs. Anti-heroism may be its theme, but *Rysopis* marked the arrival of a new kind of filmmaking courage.

Philip Strick, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1969

It may be the contradictory mainspring of Skolimowski’s films that underlying their will o’ the wisp qualities is a moral seriousness, even an old-fashioned seriousness. This emerges not surprisingly as a contradictory sense of movement. The films have their febrile side, an apparent unwillingness of camera and characters to stand still for a second, that could be tied to themes of youthful revolt or restlessness or just hapless disorientation, and even to a theme that may be more personal to Skolimowski, as the onetime boxer (and forever football enthusiast) who feels the pinch of time passing that is particular to the athlete.

But then there are sudden checks and halts, strange passages of suspended time or paralysed action, as if the film had just been brought up short by a warning that a life that has not been properly grounded will inevitably be lost. Skolimowski has taken short-cuts through his career – instead of completing a number of exercises at film school, he saved up the pieces of film to make one feature, *Rysopis*, to prove he was ready for the real thing. Within his films one feels both the élan and the anomie of characters who are short-cutting through their lives.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 1990

IDENTIFICATION MARKS: NONE (RYSOPIS)

Director: Jerzy Skolimowski

Production Companies:

Panstwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa w Łodzi, Film Polski

Screenplay: Jerzy Skolimowski

Director of Photography: Witold Mickiewicz

Art Director: Jerzy Skolimowski

Music: Krzysztof Sandowski

Cast

Jerzy Skolimowski (*Andrzej Leszczyc*)

Elzbieta Czyzewska (*Teresa/Barbara/housewife*)

Tadeusz Mins (*Mundzek*)

Andrzej Zarnecki (*Raymond*)

Jacek Szczek

Poland 1964

75 mins

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

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