



## OUTSIDERS AND EXILES: THE FILMS OF JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

# Essential Killing

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*Directed by:* Jerzy Skolimowski

©: Skopia Film, Cylinder Productions, Element Pictures, Mythberg Films, Syrena Films, Canal+ Poland

*A Skopia Film production*

*Co-produced by:* Cylinder Productions, Element Pictures, Mythberg Films

*In co-production with:* Canal+ Poland, Syrena Films

*Co-financed by:* Akson Studio, Task Films

*With the support of:* Polish Film Institute, Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board, The Norwegian Film Institute, Motion Picture Public Foundation of Hungary, Eurimages

*A Polish Film Institute co-financed production a Jeremy Thomas presentation*

*Production Services:* Transfax Film Productions

*Worldwide Sales by:* HanWay Films

*Executive Producers:* Jeremy Thomas, Andrew Lowe, Peter Watson

*Produced by:* Ewa Piaskowska, Jerzy Skolimowski

*Co-producers:* Ingrid Lill Høgtun, Jozsef Berger, Ed Guiney

*Line Producers:* Bjarne Bjørndalen, Marek Rozenbaum

*Senior Production Executive:* Gaute Lid Larssen

*Production Executive:* Jan-Erik Gammleng

*Production Managers:* Andrzej Stempowski, Bjørn Fjærestad

*Production Supervisor:* Itai Tamir

*Production Co-ordinators:*

Natalia Stempowska-Szpadzik, Terje Strømstad, Shirley Hermann

*Production Accountant:* Robert Bachurzewski

*Location Managers:* Dariusz Klodowski, Eran Kotzki

*Post-production Supervisors:* Dávid Jancsó, Neseser, Jakub Chilczuk, Malgorzata Sandecka

*2nd Unit Directors:* Józef Skolimowski, Michał Skolimowski

*1st Assistant Director:* Jérôme Dassier

*1st Assistant Director/Office:* Julia Popkiewicz

*2nd Assistant Directors:* Krzysztof Kasior, Teresa Czepiec, Tessa Eggesbø, Jonathan Rozenbaum

*3rd Assistant Directors:* Jon Are Uhnger, Max Konoplov

*Script Supervisor:* Beata Krekiewicz

*Casting Director:* Paweł Czajor

*Screenplay by:* Jerzy Skolimowski, Ewa Piaskowska

*Additional Writing:* James McManus

*Director of Photography:* Adam Sikora

*Additional Camera Operators:* Tomasz Wozniczka, Paweł Zelasko, Przemysław Klej

*Underwater Photography:* Marcin Boguszewski

*2nd Unit Camera Operators:* Jens Ramborg, Patrick Safström

*A Camera Operator:* Rafał Paradowski

*B Camera Operator:* Ciarán Kavanagh

*Gaffers:* Paweł Cichoński, Jarl Johnsen, Udi Rimer

*Key Grips:* Jerzy Nogal, Guy Neeman

*Stills Photographers:* Ivo Ledwozyw, Carsten Aniksdal, Guro Rugstad Jenssen, Lars-Petter Iversen

*Visual Effects by:* Platige Image, Alvernia Studios

*Visual Effects Producers:* Jarosław Sawko, Piotr Sikora

*Special Effects Co-ordinator:* Janusz Bykowski

*Chief Editor:* Réka Lemhényi

*Editors:* Maciej Pawliński, Maciej Pawliński

*Additional Editors:* Dávid Jancsó, Wanda Kiss

*Production Designer:* Joanna Kaczyńska

*Art Director:* Jacek Czechowski

*Set Decorators:* Julia Kasprzak, Ariel Glazer

Appropriately coming from a filmmaker who has endured his own share of troubles, *Essential Killing* deals with survival against the odds. Premiered to acclaim at the Venice Film Festival, Jerzy Skolimowski's challengingly visceral film shows a man caught on the run in his sun-beaten, desert home and transported far away to a freezing, snow-clad forest, where he escapes his captors and then has to fend for himself against other humans and animal life. But there is more detail to be glimpsed than that. The opening landscapes could be Afghanistan, the men in uniform speak English in American accents, the workers in the forest are speaking Polish, and our mute central figure – incarnated by a raggedly hirsute Vincent Gallo – experiences flashbacks to an Islamic world, accompanied by readings from the Koran.

Is the Polish-born, now once again Polish-resident Skolimowski having his *mazurek* and eating it? The fact that his film aims not to make any political statement has aroused suspicion, but he remains resolute about his ambiguous, poetic approach. 'I live in a really remote area of wild forest in Masuria,' he says. 'Of course I was aware that in my neighbourhood there is a secret military airport where CIA planes most likely landed. It was a widespread rumour that is now practically confirmed. The Lithuanian government admitted that they had such bases, so it was the turn of the Poles. One winter night I was driving back home, and though my car is pretty solid – a four-wheel drive – I skidded off the road. I nearly rolled over down the slope, but stopped at the last moment. And I realised that I was close to that secret airport – that I was on the same road on which they most likely transported those prisoners in a kind of convoy. So I thought if that could happen to me, it could happen to anyone.'

Skolimowski's original conceit of filming entirely in Poland was expanded to include Israel for the desert scenes and also Norway to guarantee the snow, but that didn't change his viewpoint. 'To me the story is not who he is, or whether he is guilty or innocent, but the fact this man is barefoot, in chains, in the snow in the forest. This is the story – the process of him turning into an animal.'

The casting of Vincent Gallo in the central role came out of an encounter at the Cannes Film Festival, where the director gave the actor the script. Two hours later Gallo said yes, claiming that wintry conditions didn't scare off a man brought up in Buffalo. Skolimowski now laughs at the idea: 'Buffalo can't have been that severe! In Norway, sometimes it was minus 35 Celsius. With night shooting that really was difficult. We tried to take as much care as possible, but he wasn't easy. Vincent is a Method actor, and playing such a part – one man against everybody else – he kind of accumulated that in his private life as well. There were some conflicts, delicately speaking. But I can't blame him – the circumstances were very, very tough. The character he played required this attitude. What really counts is the final result, and on the screen he's just phenomenal.'

David Thompson, *Sight and Sound*, April 2011

Against the odds, the second short film about killing from a Polish master proves almost as compelling as the first. Jerzy Skolimowski's film deliberately excludes the sociological dimension of *A Short Film about Killing*, but its play with offscreen realities and genre does put it within shouting distance of Kieslowski's 'cinema of moral anxiety'. As usual Skolimowski focuses on the

*Props Masters:* Bogdan Piotrowski,  
 Per Henry Borch, Arie Weiss  
*Construction Manager:* Marcin Trybulski  
*Costume Designer:* Anne Hamre  
*Make-up Designer:* Barbara Conway  
*Special Effects Make-up Artists:*  
 Tomasz Matraszek, Janne Røhmen  
*Hair Designer:* Gabriella Németh  
*Hair Stylist:* Robert Kupisz  
*Music:* Pawel Mykietyn  
*Music Adviser:* Janice Ginsberg  
*Sound:* Robert Flanagan  
*Boom Operator:* Paul Naughton  
*Recording Mixer:* Michelle Cunniffe  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Fiadhnaít McCann  
*Stunt Co-ordinators:* Robert Brzezinski,  
 Kristoffer Jørgensen  
*Consultants:* Piotr Kolodziejczyk, Szymon Skalski,  
 Konrad Orłowski  
*Dialogue Coach:* Malgorzata Skuza  
*Filmed at:* TVP Studio  
*Cast:*  
 Vincent Gallo (*Mohammed*)  
 Emmanuelle Seigner (*Margaret*)  
 Zach Cohen (*American contractor 1*)  
 Iftach Ofir (*American contractor 2*)  
 Nicolai Cleve Broch (*helicopter pilot 1*)  
 Stig Frode Henriksen (*helicopter pilot 2*)  
 David Price (*interrogating officer*)  
 Tracy Spencer Shipp (*young soldier in SUV*)  
 Mark Gaspersich (*head of pursuit team*)  
 Phillip Goss (*military doctor*)  
 Klaudia Kaca (*woman on a bicycle*)  
 Dariusz Juzyszyn (*logger*)  
 Raymond Josey (*American soldier*)  
 Robert Mazurkiewicz (*hunter*)  
 Janusz Wojtarowicz (*Margaret's husband*)  
 Pawel Baranek (*drunk farmer 1*)  
 Marcin Galazyn (*drunk farmer 2*)  
 David Jefferson, Donnell Knox, Geo D. Olivier  
 (*American soldiers*)  
 Kamil Ruszecki, Stanislaw Marek Lukasik (*soldiers*)  
 Jérôme Dassier (*SUV driver*)  
 Geir Marring (*fisherman*)  
 Poland-Norway-Hungary-Ireland 2010©  
 84 mins

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struggles of a loser, this time a jihadi in Afghanistan who is arrested and tortured by US forces after killing three 'enemy combatants'. He's unable to explain to his infidel jailers that he's lost his hearing at least temporarily because of a missile blast. An accident allows him to escape while he is being 'rendered' and he finds himself on the run in the harsh Polish winter. Motivated only by his survival instinct, he kills three or four more people and a dog to win himself a few more hours or days of life. But his situation is fundamentally hopeless, and his end is inevitable.

The genre elements in *Essential Killing* have given it the label of 'survival drama'. But there's nothing heroic about this anonymous jihadi. (He's never given a name on the soundtrack, only in the cast list in the end credits.) The film is anything but triumphalist, and it's hardly a celebration of the indomitable human spirit. Skolimowski has long specialised in challenging viewers not to empathise with fundamentally unsympathetic characters, and he starts here from the awareness that the jihadi's plight will trigger sympathy for purely circumstantial reasons. He periodically takes us inside the man's head: first to convey his panic at going deaf, second to show his attempts to reassure himself that he was acting on Allah's will by killing men in Afghanistan, and third to suggest that sentimental memories of a wife and child (or are they self-pitying dreams of what might have been?) prime his instinct to battle on through the snows and forests – and, crucially, to kill again. These glimpses of what's going on in an increasingly unhinged mind merely underline that this man sees himself as being at war; in their stylised way, they're part of the film's realist foundations, anchoring the story in the realities of the 'war on terror' and 'extraordinary rendition'. The truth of this backstory prevents the film from becoming a vacuous fable in the vein of Losey's all-too-abstract *Figures in a Landscape*. The recognisable political context meshes with our memories of war movies and hunters-and-hunted plots to provide a charged fictional terrain on which Skolimowski can raise questions about humanity and inhumanity.

To call them 'questions', though, is probably overstating the case. The film's real achievement is to blur the line between detachment and involvement: to create a situation in which the viewer feels close to a dying protagonist while at the same time remaining free to judge his evermore-desperate actions. The strategy is in some ways analogous with Hitchcock's fondness for generating unease by manipulating audiences into identifying with flawed and potentially villainous characters, but the only recent film that comes to mind as working in quite this way – with similar moral anxieties built into its structure and method – is Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu*, another empathetic portrait of a loser who finally vanishes from his own film.

Skolimowski made no films between 1991 and 2008 (he says he spent the time painting), and was apparently nudged back into the fray by acting in Cronenberg's *Eastern Promises*. It's interesting that his two 'comeback' films are both in some sense responses to the most popular films in Kieslowski's *Dekalog*: the exploration of desire and voyeurism in *Four Nights with Anna* (2008) plays like a commentary on the subtexts in *A Short Film about Love*, while this film, as we've noted, reframes the moral issues behind *A Short Film about Killing*. Skolimowski, though, is the 'wild man' that the urbane Kieslowski never could be, and in Vincent Gallo he's found an actor to match his own fearlessness. *Essential Killing* would be much less powerful if it didn't show the jihadi's physical sufferings with such visceral immediacy, and if the realism weren't strong enough to deliver surrealist shocks like the staggering final image.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, April 2011