



Essential Killing

Director: Jerzy Skolimowski
Country: Poland
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An interview with the director by Emanuel Levy:

Fantasy

I like to think I live a quiet existence, staying away from the havoc of city life, keeping a low profile, enjoying splendid near-isolation. I toyed with the idea of making another small film set in the forests around my house in Poland. And suddenly this big secret CIA operation landed just around the corner. It naturally has lent itself to a dramatic fantasy that became ESSENTIAL KILLING. The film is obviously not based on a true story, or else it would either have already made headlines around the globe or it would have remained a sealed top-secret special force operation. But given the fact that US military planes actually landed less than 20 kilometres from where I live, the plausibility of the situation portrayed in the film seemed, when I got the initial idea for the storyline, absolutely exciting.



CIA black sites in Europe

The existence of secret CIA black sites in Europe for the purpose of the US government's war on terrorism remains a controversy. None of the governing bodies in Poland has admitted allowing or having any knowledge of CIA planes landing here, although it is a well-established fact through the European Parliament investigation and even admitted by the authorities of Lithuania, which was also a suspect on the list published by the Human Rights Watch. I believe the Polish prosecutors are still continuing their investigation into that matter. High treason charges against our then president and our ex-prime minister are being considered, as I learned from the Polish press only a week or so ago. Naturally, I researched the subject to a certain extent, but my goal was not to register the details, nor the exact procedures, which – for obvious reasons – we can only guess at, especially in relation to the Polish part in the global scheme.

In the skin of the Alien

A man is placed in circumstances that explore the boundaries of human resistance. It's a struggle of one against many. Because we are prone to keep the side of the underdog, the story tests the measures of our empathy for a human being. I truly enjoyed an imaginative exercise of placing myself for a moment in the skin of the alien, the collective enemy (the last one on the interchanging historic list), and the ultimate victim of circumstance.

Predator and prey

I did not want the politics to extend beyond this immediate life or death struggle. The film is not a commentary on America or Afghanistan and, I believe that would have been too easy and, most of all, distracting to emphasize too much on the U.S. military. Yes, they are the most powerful military in the world and the idea is to have massive power against one. Yes, if you depict waterboarding torture by Americans, it will be controversial. If your protagonist is a suspected Muslim terrorist, it invites controversy. But all this is depicted in the film matter-of-factly, reserving judgement. My interest was in the chase, the idea that in war and brute, primal survival, every human can be both predator and prey. ESSENTIAL KILLING is simply an extreme telling of that theme.

Taking no sides

Whether he is or is not a terrorist is a question the film does not explore either. But any biases the audience projects onto the protagonist will inevitably be one layer of the experience of watching the film.

For me, the film is a struggle for survival, neither political nor apolitical, taking no sides. It will satisfy me most if anyone watching this film will feel, for a mere 83 minutes, free of any preordained judgements and will get involved in the primal journey together with the main character. This is a movie about man as part of nature at its most desperate. Matters have been reduced to brute basics. If survival is essential, one might have no choice but to kill.

Stripping away at the hero

Clearly, there are templates and echoes of mainstream action films, but here we have a character whose actions can hardly be ascribed to a hero. I wanted to explore base survival without artificially creating a character to root for. My explorations were to strip away usual notions of the heroic journey and tell a story about the instinct to survive and to fight and struggle and to kill. That experience will be colored by, at best, a more ambivalent identification with the character.

Landscape

Landscape, aside from interesting me visually, is clearly the best key to the character and his outsider status in the second landscape of the snowy forest. Landscape establishes the character, his predicament, it tells the story. Landscape in this film made any expository dialogue superfluous. It was enough. The first Afghani desert segment of the film was actually shot near the Dead Sea in Israel. I loved the bold, expressive pikes in the mountain range structure that I passed each morning going to our shooting location in the canyon, and I insisted on our helicopter flying above these. I did not know then they would serve as the opening image of the film. They seemed so unreal, so extravagant. I don't know which caprice in the laws of nature would create such splendour but I'm glad to remain oblivious and in awe. I like to think that the snowy landscape part of the film takes place in the forest of a Grimm's Fairy Tale without the magic. Although it remains as an ambiguous "Eastern European" country in the film, that portion of the film was actually shot both in Poland and in Norway. We are very satisfied by the fact that both snowy worlds (Norway and Poland) blend so seamlessly together

Difficult circumstances with Vincent

Vincent Gallo is an actor who can convey the animal intensity I wanted for the character. We worked in the most difficult circumstances, but the results in my eyes fully justify all efforts. We jumped from the Mediterranean bliss (T-shirts and sunscreen) of the Israeli shoot straight into a very snowy Polish winter. Vincent's role demanded him to do things like walk barefoot on the snow in only a jump suit. With the temperature reaching minus 30 degrees Celsius, this certainly required some bravado on his part. We used all the precautions available, and he faced it with impressive dedication. Vincent is a very physical actor. Putting all his own animalistic drives into the role, Vincent fit perfectly in the wild, struggling for survival.



Existential nowhere

This film is closely tied to nature. The elements, the trees, the wildlife, the urge to not go hungry, to kill, being in a lawless and unforgiving, but also often beautiful, sometimes even serene environment. Simply a story of Man and Nature. Nature without the sentimentality but all its splendour. It's really an extreme outsider's journey to an existential nowhere. After all, even if he does escape the army, how is he to ever get home? How would he ever adapt beyond the contingencies of kill or be killed? I particularly like the moment in the film in which he is awakened by the deer. Mohammed's initial instinct is to reach for his gun, to kill. But the animals are not afraid of him. They look back, regarding him with the same curiosity that he has for them. It's as if they are the same species, or as if they shared the same fate for having similar degrees of control over their environment. For me, this is a very important moment as it reveals the character's realization he is part of a greater whole. It is also then that he has the first inkling he's never going to make it out of there alive. Yet, he is still capable of seeing the tragic beauty around him.

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