



EO

Director: Jerzy Skolimowski

Country: Poland

Date: 2022

A review by Mark Kermode for *The Guardian*:

By far the most intriguing category at the 95th Academy Awards is that of best international feature. While German director Edward Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* seems an obvious pack leader (it's up for nine awards – including best picture), there's buzz around Colm Bairéad's *The Quiet Girl* (the first Irish feature to be nominated in this category), and enthusiastic support for Santiago Mitre's historical drama *Argentina, 1985*. But the dark horse – or rather donkey – is *EO*, the strangely wonderful Polish entry from veteran director Jerzy Skolimowski, inspired by Robert Bresson's 1966 French masterpiece *Au hasard Balthazar*.



“This film was made out of our love for animals and nature,” says a closing intertitle, reassuring viewers that “the animals’ wellbeing on set was always our first priority”. That’s good to know, because the world through which the titular donkey travels includes its fair share of violent encounters with bestial humans. There are the football hooligans who beat him because they believe his braying lost them a game; there’s the furrier who snaps caged foxes’ necks and gets a hoof in the face for his troubles; there’s the illegal flesh-trader who sells *EO* for salami; and the donkey’s unexpected friend who confesses that he’s eaten “hundreds of kilograms of meat”, including donkey.

Yet there are also moments of heart-stopping tenderness and beauty, as *EO* teases smiles of joy from children at a petting zoo, and inspires aching love and devotion in a young woman named Magda (Sandra Drzymalska), who performs under the circus name Kasandra.

It’s at the circus that we first meet *EO*, as a strobing crimson light sets the scene for the dark fairytale adventures to follow. The big top can be a scary place, but Magda is there to protect him – from the whip, from the crowds, and from the aggressions of men. But when protesters force a ban on circus animals, *EO* is set upon a series of lonely, picaresque encounters: solemnly watching a ridiculous local official wield a huge pair of scissors while declaring that he “works tirelessly, amending any irregularities”; causing mayhem at an upmarket stable where his movement prompts perfectly timed slapstick chaos; braying plaintively at a shop window wherein exotic fish swim round and round in tanks, trapped like so many of the animals in Skolimowski’s quietly politicising film.



Cinematographer Michal Dymek imbues these sequences with a blend of hand-held verité grit and dreamy, poetic magic, often focusing upon *EO*’s dark eyes, which seem like vast pools of understanding. In one sequence, Dymek frames *EO* in a stable, illuminated by light that suggests something heavenly (the “little donkey” of Christian folklore), an echo of the rich religious allegories of Bresson’s original film. Later, *EO* is described as having “three hooves up in high heaven”, reinforcing the idea that he is a holy soul, touched by transcendence.

More surprising are the sequences that tip into nightmarish fantasy (Skolimowski’s eclectic directorial CV notably includes the surreal 1978 British chiller *The Shout*), with blood-red drone footage sweeping like an

unleashed spirit through woodlands where one might meet Hansel and Gretel. There's a touch of Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* when EO ventures downstream, watched by crawling spiders and screeching owls, caught in the laser beams of rifle sights. Like Orpheus's journey into the underworld (a crepuscular tunnel provides an eerie backdrop), EO's quest seems to lead him to hell and back, resurfacing in front of giant windmills, waiting for Don Quixote.

A thrillingly inventive and at times experimental score by Pawel Mykietyn highlights the shifting tones of Skolimowski and co-writer-producer Ewa Piaskowska's vision, simultaneously down to earth and out of this world (I'm still puzzling over a sci-fi-inflected sequence involving a scampering, four-legged robot!). What is clear is that this donkey's-eye view of the world sees mankind in all its madness; the laughter and the cruelty; the kindness and the killing (it's not just animals who suffer sudden death); the love and the hatred intertwined. And then, just when you least expect it, Isabelle Huppert appears on a cross-cut between carnivores and communion, reminding us of the imperious, incestuous absurdity of humanity, all filtered through the doleful eyes of a lowly beast within whose gaze we may see ourselves.



From: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/feb/05/eo-review-circus-donkey-drama-veteran-polish-director-jerzy-skolimowski-strange-but-beautiful-oscar-contender>