



ESSENTIAL KILLING

A film by Jerzy Skolimowski

SYNOPSIS

In an award-winning performance (Best Actor- Venice Film Festival), Vincent Gallo plays Mohammed, a Taliban fighter captured by the US military in Afghanistan after a violent desert attack goes awry. While being transported to a secret detention center in Europe, the vehicle crashes and he suddenly finds himself free. But his newfound freedom quickly disappears as he is relentlessly pursued in a snow-blanketed forest by an army that does not “officially” exist. A critically-acclaimed, thinking man’s action thriller, *ESSENTIAL KILLING* tells the story of one man’s struggle for survival, where morality has no place as he confronts the necessity to kill in order to survive.



Comments from JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

A DRAMATIC 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. After *FOUR NIGHTS WITH ANNA*, 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

In *ESSENTIAL KILLING*, 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, ESSENTIAL KILLING 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 coloured 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 in ESSENTIAL KILLING. 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

Everything in 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.



JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

With over twenty films to his name, Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski's work includes the Berlin Golden Bear winner THE DEPARTURE, Cannes Grand Prix winner THE SHOUT, the political drama MOONLIGHTING, and THE LIGHTSHIP, for which he won Best Director at the Venice Film Festival. Skolimowski also collaborated with Roman Polanski on the screenplay for KNIFE IN THE WATER. As an actor, he has appeared in EASTERN PROMISES and BEFORE NIGHT FALLS. Skolimowski returned to Cannes as director in 2008 with the critically lauded thriller FOUR NIGHTS WITH ANNA, which opened the Director's Fortnight and also won the Grand Prix de Jury at the Tokyo International Film Festival. Skolimowski is an accomplished painter who has taken part in the Venice Biennale and exhibited across Europe and the US.



SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2010	ESSENTIAL KILLING
2008	FOUR NIGHTS WITH ANNA
1991	30 DOOR KEY (aka FERDYDURKE)
1989	TORRENTS OF SPRING
1985	THE LIGHTSHIP
1984	SUCCESS IS THE BEST REVENGE
1982	MOONLIGHTING
1978	THE SHOUT
1971	KING, QUEEN, KNAVE
1970	THE ADVENTURES OF GERARD
1970	DEEP END
1967	THE DEPARTURE (LE DÉPART)
1968	DIALOGUE (segment "The 20-Year-Olds")
1967	HANDS UP! (RECE DO GÓRY)
1966	BARRIER
1965	WALKOVER
1964	RYSOPIS (IDENTIFICATION MARKS: NONE)

A HAPPY MEMORY

For the second feature I produced, I chased down the Warsaw boxing hero and well-loved movie director Jerzy Skolimowski. I had a Robert Graves short story and a script by Michael Austin, and having seen DEEP END (1970), I felt that Jerzy's eye on the English landscape would be a good pairing for THE SHOUT. After reading it, he exclaimed 'I want to do it, and I want to shoot this cricket match!' As it turned out, cricket was a game he was unfamiliar with. The film was like a summer holiday in beautiful north Devon, and with the great actors and collaborators, Jerzy delivered a great movie which went on to win the Grand Prix de Jury at Cannes. I am thrilled to be involved with Jerzy so many years later on such a provocative title as ESSENTIAL KILLING.

JEREMY THOMAS - EXECUTIVE PRODUCER



ESSENTIAL KILLING

a film by JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

MAIN CAST

Mohammed

Margaret

American Contractors

Helicopter Pilots

Interrogating Officer

Soldier in SUV

Woman on Bicycle

Ukrainian Logger

Vincent Gallo

Emmanuelle Seigner

Zach Cohen

Iftach Ofir

Nicolai Cleve Broch

Stig Frode Henriksen

David Price

Tracy Spencer Shipp

Klaudia Kaca

Dariusz Juzyszyn

MAIN CREW

Director

Written by

Music

Director of Photography

Production Designer

Editor

Sound

Costume Designer

Make-Up Designer

Hair Stylist

Producers

Executive Producers

Co-Producers

Jerzy Skolimowski

Jerzy Skolimowski

Ewa Piaskowska

Paweł Mykietyn

Adam Sikora

Joanna Kaczynska

Réka Lemhényi

Robert Flanagan

Anne Hamre

Barbara Conway

Gabriella Nemeth

Ewa Piaskowska

Jerzy Skolimowski

Jeremy Thomas

Andrew Lowe

Ingrid Lill Høgtun

Ed Guiney

Jozsef Berger

ESSENTIAL KILLING

a film by JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

2010 - Poland/Norway/Ireland/Hungary
83 minutes
35mm, color - 1:1.85 - Dolby Digital
Language - English, Arabic, Polish

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