

Animal Magnetism: EO and the memefication of asinine truth

Madeleine Collier
NEW YORK, USA

In a short video clip circulating on social media, celebrated filmmaker Jerzy Skolimowski accepts the Cannes Film Festival Jury Prize for his recent feature *EO*. As the taut chords of Paweł Mykietyn's film score toll in the background, Skolimowski takes the podium, setting his penetrating eyes on the audience. "I would like to thank my donkeys," he begins, "all six of them." The camera cuts to the assembled coterie of film personalities, who clap and giggle, whispering to their neighbours. "Tako, Hola, Marietta," Skolimowski lists, with slow and deliberate enunciation, "Ettore, Rocco, and Mela. Thank you, my donkeys." A small smile plays on his lips before he breaks into a mulish bray: "Eeeoooo!"

This clip, shared to social media for promotional purposes by Janus and Sideshow Films, angles for virality. Cutting out long stretches of Skolimowski's address and interweaving extra audience reaction shots, *EO*'s distributors shape their marketing strategy around the charismatic personality of an eccentric, late-career filmmaker and his dotting relationship to his animal stars. The clip – trimmed to a memeable thirty seconds – cleverly capitalizes on the juxtaposition between animals' crucial role in classic and avant-garde cinema on the one hand, and online visual culture on the other. In *EO*, Skolimowski follows an itinerant donkey on a whistle stop tour of post-industrial European crises, and in so doing, draws on the long-standing cinematic tradition of borrowing animal perspectives to denaturalize human social relations. Simultaneously, *EO*'s promotional team displays a shrewd understanding of a relatively young phenomenon: animal images functioning as an engine of viral content, from the already-passé

Skolimowski's itinerant donkey continues cinema's longstanding history with the braying beasts of burden



Lolcat to rising TikTok stars Otis the box turtle (@gardenstatetortoise) and Peanut the squirrel (@peanut_the_squirrel12).

The coexistence of films like *EO* and more faddish animal content is a testament to the ways in which animals have continually played a remarkably determinant role in the development of imaging technology and visual culture across media formats and publics. After all, images that captured motion may have been established with Eadweard Muybridge's 1878 chronophotographs of galloping horses (featured in this year's *Nope* by Jordan Peele), but so too was YouTube inaugurated with Jawed Karim's "Me at the zoo" in 2005. Through the long history of the moving image, the donkey has won many notable roles, from a cameo in film pioneer James Williamson's *An Interesting Story* (1904) to Eddie Murphy's much-beloved chatterbox sidekick in the *Shrek* franchise (2001-2007). Donkeys have served as the protagonists in a range of animated films, from the stop motion *Le Roman de Renard* (*The Tale of the Fox*, Irene Starewicz, Wladyslaw Starewicz, 1937) to Disney's underdog nativity tale *The Small One* (1978).



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Likewise, they deliver consistently affecting performances in live-action films; Molly the mule was the first to receive the American Humane Society's Picture Animal Top Star of the Year (PATSY) award in 1951 for her work in *Francis* (1950). With the round, fathomless eyes of a 1940s starlet and the quiet tenacity of a well-mannered muscleman, the fluid charisma of the donkey satisfies (and troubles) role expectations across gender and species.

On hearing of one particularly affecting encounter with a donkey, Madame Epanchin, the devoted matriarch of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1869), exclaims, "Any one of us might fall in love with a donkey!" Indeed, cinematic donkeys are frequently configured as companionable, quasi-romantic partners for their lonely human complements. In Robert Bresson's 1966 *Au hasard Balthazar* (Skolimowski's template for *EO*), young Marie (Anne Wiazemsky) and donkey Balthazar are de facto star-crossed lovers; similarly, *EO* is driven by his unwavering attachment to Magda (stage name 'Kassandra', Sandra Drzymalska).

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André Bazin, co-founder of *Cahiers du cinéma*, famously pinpointed the essence of cinema to shots where humans and animals (or animated entities) share physical proximity, charging the image with authentic encounters of interspecies intimacy, alterity, and especially danger. Bazin gave as an example the 1951 Albert Lamorisse film *Bim*, another donkey vehicle which stages a close relationship between a young person and a long-suffering beast of burden. When animals and humans share the frame, Bazin would have us believe, something is captured that illuminates the potential of cinema.

In recent interviews, Skolimowski has offered a corresponding thesis on the relationship between animals and cinema, noting that humans pretend, while animals simply *are*; instead of acting, animals convey the truth of experience. This separate register of unaffected performance, which humans can only strive to achieve, keeps us coming back to *EO* – just as it fuels the endless circulation of TikTok's Monte the Singing Donkey (@montethesingingdonkey).

EO is driven out of the anachronistic paradise and begins his long wanderings through the wasteland of contemporary society



EO screenings at IFFR

Friday 27 January, 14:15, Pathé 5*
 Saturday 28 January, 21:45, de Doelen Willem Burger Zaal
 Wednesday 1 February, 17:15, Schouwburg Grote Zaal
 Saturday 4 February, 18:15, Pathé 2
 EO will run in Dutch cinemas from 2 March

* Introduced by a video essay by Kevin B. Lee

Sweet EO of Mine: A Conversation with Jerzy Skolimowski

Łukasz Mańkowski discusses *EO* with Jerzy Skolimowski, tackling the ideas behind envisioning the gaze of the donkey, the editing process, framing nature, and living life after falling in love with EO.

An odyssey through a Polish landscape, human cruelty, and a kaleidoscope of emotions, both human and non-human, told through the empathetic eyes of a donkey on the road named *EO*: this is Jerzy Skolimowski's recent film, that continues to enthrall international audiences following its Cannes premiere. The impact that came after seeing Robert Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar* in 1966 made Skolimowski reflect on humanity through his own donkey. He gave his *EO* a sense of agency, a melancholic gaze, and ubiquity; in Skolimowski's eyes, *EO* became the super-donkey, but the superheroes always tread their paths the hard way.

EO is your first animal character. Do you feel he has anything in common with your previous protagonists?
 He's an outsider, that's for certain; an emigrant, to a degree.

And so were you, for a while. But then you decided to set the film in Poland. Why's that?
 The decision was mostly pragmatic – funding. Thanks to my established position in Poland, it's easier to receive money for my films. It's easier for me to shoot my films in Poland. I know the place; I know the reality of Poland very well. I also know the language. Most of my crew are people whom I know very well, too. It's the most reasonable way.

Aside from the importance of place, I sensed in EO the importance of circularity of time. There is a recurring visual sequence of the donkey going around in a circle and the film's structure seems like a travelogue through timelessness. What is your relationship with time?
 It's a layer that circulates on a more subconscious level. Back when I was young, I was a poet, you know. A poor one, I must say, but these were the beginnings. Over the years, poetry stayed with me; the spirit of poetic ambiguity or figurativeness still echoes in my film work, as it's the very core of poetry. Just as the notion of time is. Time could be translated to life – that of the animals. *EO* was born from a love of animals and nature. It became an intervention against objectification of nature. With time, things have changed and we have what now? A cynical

act of industrial farming. And it's only for the sake of human needs.
Was there a lot of improvisation to frame nature?
 Less than usual, in fact. The script was very precise and served mostly to instruct my crew. Some of the details were designed from the start – especially the night walk sequence through the forest; the frog reflecting in the pond, the climbing spider, and the fox who's surprised by the presence of a donkey.

This scene reminded me of The Ballad of Narayama (1983), where Imamura also staged and designed nature – it became the least natural of Imamura's cinematic expression.
 I haven't seen *The Ballad of Narayama*, but since nature is the main theme of our film, we felt obliged to nature to be precise about envisioning it. We didn't want to opt for a mere fantasy, but for a consistently unfolding world, that has its own ambiance and tension. That sequence was the most challenging one, because of lighting – we built a network of lighting towers to come up with a dimmed light for a forest-at-night-effect. Dense and dark, but not completely dark, as we had to shoot the film somehow.

I know about your research on animals' gazing – but I was wondering whether you had the chance to research the anthropo-zoological perspective, e.g. through Eric Baratay's lens. What was your direction in the way you depicted EO?
 My biggest concern was to look at *EO* as the

“We focused on donkey's sight because we needed eyes for narrative device – a fundamental editing tool we relied on”



animal, although I relied mostly on spontaneity, my imagination and my perspective on animals, not necessarily on research; in a sense, it was emotions over facts. The way animals sense the world – through scents or sounds – is undoubtedly sharper and more precise. We focused on donkey's sight because we needed eyes for narrative device – a fundamental editing tool we relied on. Since the setting changed a lot, I had to reflect on that. Technically speaking, to show the landscape of characters, I relied on mastershot, but *EO* stays in the centre, with the camera being constantly in a close distance to his head. With a sudden cut to a close-up of his eyes, and a reverse shot revealing his gaze, we could point to his perspective. From objective: the mastershot; to subjective: *EO*'s point of view. The world captured through a subjective lens differs to that from objective vision – and that's



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the magic of cinema, as invented by Kuleshov and Vertov. Based on their experiment, I was convinced that, if I depict the same situation from the animal's point of view – a shot of the animal's eyes and a reverse shot to reveal his gaze – the situation will have a completely different meaning than in the objective mastershot. That device became our most basic figure of montage, as we were enabled to look at the animal's position through his own eyes. It became somewhat of an extrasensory commentary – on the contrasting dynamics between objective and subjective. It was highly possible thanks to Michał Dymek, my cinematographer, who was willing to think outside of the box, and who was not afraid to push himself to the extreme.

In Cannes, you said that after you'd finished the film, you still had the feeling that you

were “still shooting the film”. Do you think you went through a sense of mourning after accomplishing EO?
 It was an absolutely unexpected turn of events – for that, I fell for the donkey's heart. The story with *EO* is a story of the extraordinary. The donkeys are incredible animals – not that they're just genuinely wholesome, but they're somewhat humble, and calm; they abound in melancholic reverie, goodness. They are animals unable to hurt anyone. I miss the presence of my donkeys. I feel the insufficiency of the donkey's aura in my life. This is the animal that, for some reason, I started to love with all my heart; I admired *EO* and being next to him was the most pleasant thing to do. The film is done now, but the donkey is still present in my life. And I would just love to shoot a next one – maybe not just one donkey, but a film about several donkeys.

It's a sin: eliciting emotion and empathy in EO

Ren Scateni
BRISTOL, UNITED KINGDOM

“What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?” says the donkey to its master, Balaam, in the Book of Numbers after Yahweh gives the animal the ability to speak. In Jerzy Skolimowski’s latest work, *EO*, the eponymous donkey is never allowed to utter words that are intelligible to humans, and yet the Polish director orchestrates a film in which interspecies communication seems to become an achievable feat through cinematic language. Inquisitive close-ups caress the donkey’s mane and then linger on its deep, aqueous eyes; stuttering tracking shots lurk at ground level; fisheye lenses produce a distorted point of view; these and many others are the visual tricks and techniques that Skolimowski employs to achieve his vision by positioning the viewer a step closer to experiencing life as if through the eyes of animals.

To activate an even deeper connection between the human audience and *EO*, the film’s score acts not only as a non-diegetic musical accompaniment but also takes on the role of a

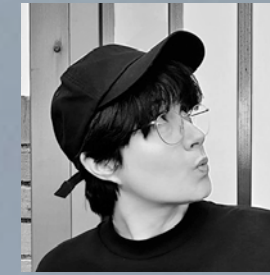
diegetic extension of the donkey’s inner emotive space. Empathic reactions and feelings akin to what human beings experience are repeatedly bestowed upon *EO* triggering a fundamental question about animals’ intellectual abilities and their emotional spectrum.

In particular, in a film so evidently concerned with animal welfare and the environment, we can argue whether attempting to extract human-like emotions from a donkey –

Against the many people EO stumbles upon, stands nature with its monumental landscapes whose stark beauty is marred by humans’ brutal, egotistical presence

compassion, dejection, revenge, curiosity – truly serves the purpose of a consciousness-raising tale, or whether a similar stance doesn’t simply position *EO* as an unwilling prop in a watered-down ecological plea. In fact, isn’t *EO* just the work of a single man and his crew? Why are we able to empathise with others only when, in the absence of a common language, a satisfying package of shared experiences and emotions is established? In this way, it’s arduous not to see *EO* as equally trapped, equally exhibited and commodified, as all the other animals we encounter in the film. As much as we can rest assured that the donkeys who collectively play *EO* – Hola, Tako, Marietta, Ettore, Rocco, and Mela – were not abused during the film’s production, as the familiar disclaimer informs us at the end of the film, it’s the implications of using animals as actors that would need to be investigated.

A similar inability to empathise with animals unless filtered through the lens of human experience is showcased in Andrea Arnold’s 2021 Cannes-laureate film *Cow*, an exploitative documentary feature packaged as a bleak critique of misogyny through repeated



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sequences of gendered animal abuse. However, while *Cow* eventually ends up being complicit in how the cows are treated (and, occasionally, killed) – for Arnold’s film observes rather than critically contextualises – *EO* is, at its core, a well-meaning commentary on human virtues, vices, and our role in the climate crisis. What Skolimowski’s film does best is guide us through a kaleidoscope of vivid vignettes of the many people *EO* stumbles upon in their wanderings like placid farmers, unfortunate truck drivers, and exalted football fans. Against them stands nature with its monumental landscapes whose stark beauty is marred by humans’ brutal, egotistical presence.

“You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now,” replies Balaam to his apparently unruly donkey in the Book of Numbers. Blind to the miraculous appearance of an angel of Yahweh – who is, in turn, visible to the animal – Balaam’s eyes are eventually opened to the divine presence. “I have sinned,” he finally concedes. Amidst the current ecological crisis, it would take a lot more than an itinerant donkey to awaken us to our wrongdoings.

A visual theology: motion in Jerzy Skolimowski's EO

Alonso Aguilar
SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

When they're framed within an extreme close-up, the pitch-black eyes of EO, the donkey that gives name to Jerzy Skolimowski's latest film, present a deeply expressive reflection. Within their glassy surface lies the register of a rambunctious collection of vignettes, where the unassuming mammal simply observes the trials and tribulations of the human experience. In spite of his erratic odyssey being the structural and conceptual throughline of the film, the lovable donkey's point of view isn't really the film's perspective.

From the first sequence, when a red strobe light and kinetic camera movements showcase EO's circus routine, the expressionistic editing is detached from the diegetic world. Bodies swirl in a slowed down frame rate, the trajectory of their motion filling the screen like brush strokes on a dark canvas. Overhead angles flatten depth of field, which yields a discomfiting viewpoint, as if straight out of a "tableau vivant". Through these inspired formal decisions, DP Michał Dymek's camera seems to exist like an omnipresent entity that has simply found interest in this donkey's eclectic journey.

EO's exuberant visual approach has been so noteworthy and idiosyncratic that it has essentially bypassed the commonplace comparisons that would otherwise take place given its shared DNA with one of arthouse cinema's most revered and canonical exhibits, Robert Bresson's seminal *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966). It's true that these cinematic analogues share a conceptual anchor in their quasi-biblical exploration of human cruelty and corruption.



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EO's and Balthazar's innocuous presence and aura of spiritual purity tends to be the sole instance of grace displayed on screen, but the way that Skolimowski and Bresson approach their subjects and their surrounding universes is almost contradictory.

Bresson's fable is deeply ingrained in his usual asceticism, portraying a naturalistic milieu composed of unemphasized snapshots of both tenderness and harrowing despair. His lyricism comes by way of suggestion, of a commitment towards a sense of groundedness from which the transcendental power of the natural world can emerge from the screen. Skolimowski, on the other hand, reaches for the operatic, fully embracing artifice and formal maximalism to create his own sensory approximation to metaphysics, and amplify the humble pillars of a Biblical moral tale to the sweeping highs of a Greek epic.

EO's dashing aesthetic is an intent that goes well beyond mere stylistic flare. It's contraposition to *Au hasard Balthazar*'s more subdued compositions and sparse camera movement stems from an ontological difference on the role of filmic reproduction, a debate that continues to mutate from the camps of Jean Epstein's photogénie and André Bazin's cinematic realism. If Bresson is, for many, the quintessential Bazinian filmmaker, in this case, Skolimowski can be understood as a postmodern emissary of Epstein's ideas about cinematic specificity, and the mythological power of sensory augmentation and emotional magnifying.

Going back to the film's opening sequence, EO's most touching moments of audio-visual pathos stem from its evocative and free

reinterpretations of motion. One of the most notable happens at the film's midpoint, a brief yet remarkable vignette where the titular donkey isn't really within the frame. The raw emotion of a small-scale football match between opposing local teams is suddenly transformed into a transfixing and disorienting dance. Possessing the role of the ball, the camera sways as it evades colliding sets of legs and powers its way through the muddy terrain. Even if the camera's place as a malleable object is put at the forefront, the manufacture of the scene immediately fades into the hypnotic rhythms of man-made spectacle, the archaic rituals that on paper might read as trivial, but are actually the most transparent encapsulations of palpable emotion.

Through its formal grandeur, EO reframes awe-struck moments of existence in a way in which their magnanimity isn't lost to the jadedness of overstimulation and routine. From oneiric flights through the tops of crimson woods, to oppressive tracking shots that distort elemental textures to the point of near abstraction, Skolimowski orchestrates a hyperreal universe that exudes life and unpredictability in every one of its frames; a sprawling symphony, the visual ebbs and flows of which mirror not only the pervasive classical score, but also the ethereal swings of a society in constant flux.

Jerzy Skolimowski approaches metaphysics through the erratic odyssey of a lovable donkey

on his way, he meets not only 'bad' people who, in one way or another, have sinned against existence. However, the "human world" in EO is too doomed from the donkey's point of view. Although the people he meets are not unequivocally bad, their lives seem to have been marked by inevitable fate. The donkey remains a mute observer of these doomed people.

That is why, if you consider EO as a katabasis and not as an odyssey, the narrative and visual style of the film intertwine best of all. Surreal episodes, a hypnotic soundtrack, and many doomed characters on EO's path form one clear picture: a journey to the afterlife. In this sense, it is interesting to entertain that only a small, grey donkey is able to see how much people have separated themselves from nature and found themselves in this afterlife.

There is one additional element in the film that echoes ancient mythology: the name of the donkey. In the original Polish, it is written as Ió, just like the heroine of Greek mythology, Ió, whom Zeus loved. In different versions of this myth, either the goddess Hera or Zeus himself turned the girl into a cow. And to escape from the wrath of the god of lightning's wife, she fled to Egypt. Donkey EO in the finale of the film is not in Egypt, but surrounded by cows.

In the end, it rings true that even if the viewer does not see the analogy with ancient mythology, EO still remains a unique and hypnotic experience that one wants to encounter again.



Skolimowski's donkey as symbol and spectacle becomes an uneasy other

Par hasard, Balthazar?

Michaël Van Remoortere
GHENT, BELGIUM

Rather than a remake of Robert Bresson's Au hasard Balthazar (1966), Jerzy Skolimowski's EO (2022) is an affirmation of the themes that this illustrious predecessor already developed. Once again, the title character is a donkey and, again, we follow the intrepid hero along the roads and resting places that make up the adventure of his life. The differences between EO and Au hasard Balthazar are greater, though, than these similarities, and so it would seem obvious to look for EO's meaning precisely in these differences. However, it remains to be seen to what extent this 'meaning in difference' is a merit of the film or the result of its half-hearted execution.

This time, the journey begins in a circus where we witness a resurrection. After Balthazar gave his life for us among the sheep on a hill crest in 1966, he's now forced to resurrect in one of the few places where something has been preserved of the ancient symbiosis between animals and humans, even though this too will not last long. Characteristic of the entire film's style, Balthazar's resurrection as EO is presented as a spectacle, not only because of the location where this event takes place, but even more so as a result of the frenetic editing, the hellish red lighting and the rousing music. He has risen and we will know it, yet contrary to the Savior himself, there is no "noli me tangere" here, and our little EO is brought back to life by the touch of his counterpart and ersatz lover, the Anne Wiazemsky stand-in Sandra Drzymalska. This moment of laying on hands will recur as a leitmotif throughout the film, each time giving the donkey the strength to get up and soldier on.

Because soon the lovers are separated. Through the good intentions of animal rights activists, EO is driven out of the anachronistic paradise and begins his long wanderings through the wasteland of contemporary society, where it soon becomes apparent that his kingdom is no longer of this world. Whereas, in the 1960s, it was still possible to get to know an entire community through

the beast of burden that accompanied them in their daily activities, this is no longer conceivable in the globalized 21st century without lapsing into cheap nostalgia. Structurally, then, EO's biggest problem is that the succession of encounters and situations into which the donkey finds itself do not feel imperative anywhere. There is no inherent, compelling logic in the way the scenes follow one another. Sometimes you're left guessing what our donkey has to do with a particular scene, or even where it is to be found at that moment. Even though it's not inconceivable that our hero's recurrent redundancy is an attempt to portray a more general and larger sense of superfluity and of being lost, this redundancy still doesn't feel compelling enough. Through its free and associative narrative structure, EO's animal perspective becomes more like a gimmick that can be renounced at any given time or, should it somehow prove necessary, can be reinstated just as well.

This narrative redundancy, or lack of radicality in the choices made, also translates itself into the meaning of our donkey. Balthazar was the complete Other, a symbol of that which was unknowable in us and in the world, and thus could not be lost to our pathetic human passions and drives. *Au hasard Balthazar* is that extraordinary work of art in which transcendence and sensualism not only find each other but turn out to be the same thing. Balthazar's death is as individual as that of any human being, while it's nonetheless also greater than that of any human being because, in Balthazar, a possibility of redemption from this world is lost. Bresson shows, in his *Au hasard Balthazar*, the mystery of the banal, and perhaps the reverse, too. Skolimowski, on the other hand, sees himself forced to psychologize his donkey, to make him human. Completely lost in a world that wants to consume him only as a clown or a sausage, the donkey has become too small, too random as well, to symbolize anything anymore. Skolimowski cannot imagine the donkey except as a Disneyfied stand-in for man. This could also have been a legitimate trajectory, were it not for the inevitable question, then,



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of why on earth you'd decide to make a film about a donkey in the first place.

The noncommittal narrative structure, and the resulting ambiguity about EO's role and position within the universe of its own film, ultimately also undermine the stylistic execution of this story. EO contains some visually very strong scenes, but they never deliver more than mere spectacle. The many scenes that cinematographically attempt to open up the perspective of a donkey to us – the style of which gave me the impression of a more intimate take on Emmanuel Lubezki's camerawork in the later Malick films – are beautiful to look at, yet they do not provide any greater insight into the animal or the world surrounding it, let alone into the human beings looking at it and the world surrounding them. EO's entire aesthetic project feels half-assed and therefore ultimately fails to make an impact. But, once again, its value as spectacle might be exactly the point.

EO confirms Bresson's elegiac ode to something lost, precisely because of its uneasiness or half-heartedness towards its protagonist. In the gap between its aesthetic ambitions and stunted ethical contrivances, we may find something essential being said about the way we live now. EO is a muddle, going back and forth between familiarizing and othering its namesake donkey, and both of these phenomenological movements are striving towards the same goal: trying to bridge the confusion of our times that separates those who watch and those who are being watched – be it donkeys or other beasts of burden. The value of its spectacle lies in just how far Skolimowski is willing to go out there, in the hope of reaching something of what Bresson could still easily grasp precisely because it had not completely vanished yet.

In these globalized times where we feel uneasy towards all otherness, maybe because it can no longer be fully other, the murkiness of EO seems to capture both our failure to see clearly and our desire to see with new eyes at the same time. We cannot therefore blame EO for its shortcomings, since they are merely ours reflected back to us.

From odyssey to analogy

Kyrylo Pyschchokov
KYIV, UKRAINE

It is hard not to view Jerzy Skolimowski's EO as an animal odyssey. It is a story about a donkey named EO, and follows the animal's great journey through Europe. Starting at a Polish circus and ending at a palace in Italy, the little donkey travels from one person and place to another. Football fans, truckers, criminals, and many others cross his path, but what EO misses the most is the beautiful woman (Sandra Drzymalska) who treated him well in the circus.

Skolimowski's film is impressive on several levels. No matter how strange it sounds, first of all, EO impresses with how well it tells a story without a human protagonist. Perhaps this is not unique, but Skolimowski maximizes its potential. This is emphasized not only via the plot itself, where there is no person at the centre, but also through the stunning cinematography from Michał Dymek.

Skolimowski transposes ancient Greek mythology into the European adventures of a donkey

The film offers an opportunity to enjoy various shots of European nature, and also widens the viewer's perspective on the donkey itself. Moreover, the footage is presented precisely from the point of view of the grey animal, which works very effectively for audience immersion in the story. Yet this is not the only thing to take your breath away in EO, as the film offers straightforward realism, and also, many surreal, almost terrifying images. This approach makes the donkey ride more hypnotic and mesmerizing.

The main thread of the film is definitely the relationship between animals and people. In fact, one of the first scenes demonstrates this right away, when all the animals, including EO, are taken from the Polish circus after protests over animal abuse. Skolimowski, however, does not choose a simple path, where everyone the donkey encounters is cruel to animals. Instead, EO really annoys various people, but they each treat him differently. If superstitious football fans are happy to kill the poor animal because he ruined their team's game, a random stranger easily lets the donkey go free – while mentioning anarchy, the best joke in the movie.

Despite the film being clearly reminiscent of an odyssey (the donkey even seems to dream of returning to the woman from the circus), I would like to compare it with another phenomenon of ancient Greek mythology, namely the katabasis. The donkey's journey resembles a descent into the underworld (not hell, this is important) through the analogy with ancient heroes. And



My name is Kyrylo Pyschchokov. I was born on 22 July 1992 in the small Ukrainian town of Putyvl. In 2009 I moved to Kyiv to study philosophy at National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, graduating in 2014 with a Philosophy/Practical Psychology degree. After university, I became actively interested in cinema and began to write my first amateur reviews. 2019 was the beginning of my professional career as a film critic. At the beginning of 2022, I became a member of the Union of Ukrainian Film Critics. Later, a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began. A few months later, I returned to writing reviews.

Critics' Choice 9 - Play

Since its return in 2015, IFFR's Critics' Choice has developed more and more into a playground for criticism. Of course, bringing the video essay and other forms of audio-visual criticism to the cinema and the film audience is always at the core of our activities. Over the last nine years, almost 50 video essays have been screened to create reflective spaces and invite exchanges between films, filmmakers, audiences and critical perspectives on cinema. Oftentimes, these events included – very playful indeed – live and performative elements, turning the cinema into a theatre of wonder, experiment and innovation. A collective and communal moment of examination of old yet never fixed questions: What is cinema? How do we watch, speak, experience, share?

This year, Critics' Choice revolves and evolves around the element of 'play'. After two pandemic years when Critics' Choice mostly took place online (and at the Eye Filmmuseum as a part of the *Vive le cinéma! Art & Film* exhibition) we felt it was time to think more about the roles we play as critics (and where). We reinvented Critics' Choice as a dress-rehearsal for the unknown future of journalism, because film and art criticism in its essence are always improvisation, try-out,

transformation and, in that sense, always challenging the status quo.

There were many inspirations. First and foremost, the open-mindedness of our fellow actors in this game. The critics we invite to create a video essay, or another form of AV-criticism, always surprise us with their inventiveness. But we also have to give credit to the video essay *RoXY* by Juha van 't Zelfde (on view at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, should you want to take a look) about the Amsterdam club of the same name that, at the end of the 1980s, became an "infectious cocktail of music, dance, eroticism, theatre and design" (thanks Juha!) His essay links this moment in dance and popular culture to visionary utopians such as Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon, a city where he envisioned play (creativity) to be the main source for self-realization, social cohesion and change.

This reminded us of an interview between Yanis Varoufakis and Brian Eno in *Everything Must Change*, an interview anthology that speaks to a post-Covid world. We wish we could quote it all (it's on page 170, if you want to get the book), but Eno speaks beautifully

and so invigoratingly about the relevance of play. Play, he says, is not only essential to learn new social and physical skills, and in our understanding of the world, it is also what makes us human. He reminds us that art is a way to continue to play, whether it is in making art or in experiencing it.

There are elements of play in all of the films we selected and in all of the videographic reflections that engage in some form of communication with those films. There is (erotic) roleplay and child's play, there are dangerous games and risky identifications with societal and gender roles. And then there is always the play with light and focus; the dance of the camera.

For starters, there is a one off 'Return of the Daily Tiger', a special publication in collaboration with Belgian film magazine *Fantômas* and IFFR's Young Critics. A mini-magazine about one film, Jerzy Skolimowski's *EO*. An inventory of perspectives. A polyphony of images, thoughts, references. It is up to you to recreate the puzzle in any melodic way that seems fit. Come play with us. And dance.

Jan Pieter Ekker & Dana Linssen

Programme



Friday 27 January 14:15 Pathé 5
EO by Jerzy Skolimowski (Poland/Italy 2022)
EO performs in a circus together with kind Kasandra, who knows how to keep her fleecy friend happy. That is, until the animal rights activists turn up at the circus gates and demand freedom for these docile creatures that probably know no other life. Soon, poor EO gets turned into a beast of burden, a commodity on a gallivanting trip through Europe at the mercy of strangers he meets on his way.
Introduced by a video essay by Kevin B. Lee



Monday 30 January 21:00 de Doelen Jurriaanse Zaal
DEMIGOD: The Legend Begins by Chris Huang Wen-chang (Taiwan, 2022)
Unheeding of his master's warnings, ace acupuncturist and martial arts apprentice Su Huan-jen decides to treat Yu Lin, the ailing Lord of the Five Mountains, only to find himself at the centre of a deadly palace intrigue. In his attempts to extricate himself from a serious accusation, Su discovers that destiny has much bigger plans for him.
Introduced by a video essay by Yoana Pavlova



Saturday 28 January 11:00 Pathé 5
Mascotte by Remy van Heugten (Netherlands, 2023)
As the sole male in his house, reticent teenager Jeremy feels obliged to play white knight to his single mother Abbey, whether driving her home after a night out or threatening her boss to protect her job. His close relationship to his mother, combined with self-esteem issues, comes to a head when she starts dating again.
Introduced by a video essay by IFFR Young Film Critics guided by Joost Broeren



Wednesday 1 February 20:00 Cinerama 2
De noche los gatos son pardos by Valentin Merz (Switzerland, 2022)
Valentin is shooting a queer, gaudy piece of heritage fetish erotica. Then, suddenly, he's gone, and the cops are called in. A crew member from Mexico has seen him in a dream, lying dead in a forest. As Valentin's corpse is found where the Mexican envisioned him to be, only to vanish again, the police investigate the case as a murder mystery.
Introduced by a video essay by Dennis Vetter



Sunday 29 January 13:45 Pathé 6
Die middag by Nafiss Nia (Netherlands, 2023)
Roya flees an asylum seekers' centre to avoid being deported. She has the address for Nassim – another Iranian woman who helps refugees in her situation. But when Roya arrives at her apartment, only Nassim's brother is there. Since he won't let Roya in, she decides to wait in the hallway. As they converse, we learn a great deal about these two people.
Introduced by a video essay by Joost Broeren



Thursday 2 February 19:45 de Doelen Jurriaanse Zaal
Aftersun by Charlotte Wells (USA/UK, 2022)
Pre-teen Sophie and her thirty-year-old father Calum go on vacation at a seaside resort in Turkey. They go scuba diving, play pool, soak up the sun and laze around. In intimate close-ups, we see Calum and Sophie applying cream to each other's bodies, practising self-defence techniques or filming one another with a camcorder. Days go by, and soon Sophie must return home to her mother in Scotland.
Introduced by a video essay by Inge Coolsaet



Monday 30 January 16:00 Worm
Critics' Choice x Young Film Critics Talk
Talk guided by IFFR Young Critics (Łukasz Mańkowski, Alonso Aguilar, Madeleine Collier, Ren Scateni and Kyrilo Pyschchykov) with directors Remy van Heugten (*Mascotte*), Valentin Merz (*At Night All Cats Are Black*), Nafiss Nia (*Die middag*) and video essayist Kevin B. Lee.

Colophon

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(The Return of the) Daily Tiger is a special single edition published by Critics' Choice 9 - Play, in collaboration with the Young Critics of the International Film Festival Rotterdam and the Belgian film publication *Fantômas*, and entirely devoted to Jerzy Skolimowski's *EO*. Just like the many donkeys in that film representing one character, we wanted to experiment with a multiplicity of voices, insights and perspectives to express our love for cinema and criticism.

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