



OUTSIDERS AND EXILES: THE FILMS OF JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI

Le Départ

Le Départ

Director: Jerzy Skolimowski

Production Company: Elisabeth Films

Producer: Bronka Ricquier

Production Manager: Maurice Urbain

Assistant Director: Jean-Emile Caudron

Screenplay: Jerzy Skolimowski, Andrzej Kostenko

Director of Photography: Willy Kurant

Editor: Bob Wade

Music: Krzysztof Komeda

Song sung by: Christiane Legrand

Sound: Philippe Cape

Cast:

Jean-Pierre Léaud (*Marc*)

Catherine Duport (*Michèle*)

Jacqueline Bir (*the customer*)

Paul Roland (*friend*)

Léon Dony (*boss*)

John Dobrynine (*the Maharajah*)

Georges Aubrey

Lucien Charbonnier

Bernard Graczyk

Maxane

Marthe Dugard

Jacques Cortois

Belgium 1967

91 mins

The young Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski is probably the most explosive and original filmmaker in Eastern Europe. Recently he visited Denmark, where he wants to shoot his next film, and where I had the opportunity to meet him both at a press conference and privately. When there were a lot of people around, he gave a closed and evasive impression – not in any impolite way, but seeming reluctant to talk openly to people he did not know. Skolimowski would always ward off unwelcome questions with ironic answers and avoid interpretations of his films. He would not talk about the use of symbols in his films, even denying that he uses symbols at all.

‘I never think of symbols when I make a film,’ he said. ‘Everything emerges concretely and spontaneously and I do not interpret anything. The passion for cars, for instance, is something real to a boy of 20, isn’t it? The character played by Jean-Pierre Léaud in *Le Départ* is obsessed by cars, but after all he has a concrete relationship to them. He uses them as vehicles, he doesn’t kiss them. I love cars myself, but cars don’t love me all that much.’

It is impossible to try to discuss the love-hate relationship to cars with Skolimowski. I tried to draw a parallel between boxing in *Walkover* and cars in *Le Départ*, and asked if the films were a kind of model for his own life. First he stopped boxing, and now – what about cars? He answers cautiously that maybe there is a point: he is not all that enthusiastic about cars, not like he used to be. As to boxing, he is happy to be finished with it. Otherwise his head would have been as spoiled inside as it is outside.

At the press conference a Danish director asked Skolimowski if he found it difficult to transplant himself from Poland to Belgium, where *Le Départ* was shot. If there were problems because of the different cultural milieux? Skolimowski answered that the problem of putting the camera in the right place before shooting is so difficult that it does not matter to him at all whether the filming takes place in Poland, Belgium or Hollywood. He says apologetically that he does not know how to answer theoretical questions, and compares himself to the man whose wife always gets irritated hearing him tell the same joke over and over again whenever they are at a party.

‘I am afraid to be boring to myself. That is why I always try to answer the same questions in a different way. The only condition is that the answer has to be true-of course.’

Of *Le Départ* he says: ‘It is a non-serious film on a serious subject. When you leave the cinema you are supposed to think the problems over on a level that is higher than the film’s. I wanted to make a film about the contrast between the things you do and the things you want to do: i.e. between the hero’s job as a hairdresser’s apprentice and his dream of winning a motor race. I wanted to connect those two extremes.’

Why does the film burn at the end?

‘That relates to the scene where the girl shows slides to her boyfriend. At a certain moment the projector catches fire because the girl has fallen asleep. The picture that burns is the very first picture of her as a grown-up person. At the end of the film, Jean-Pierre Léaud has realised that his dreams about cars were rather childish. He has suddenly learned to distinguish between what is essential and what isn’t. In short, he has grown up. That is why I let the film

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The Shout

Tue 28 March 20:45 (+ intro by Jerzy Skolimowski);
Wed 5 Apr 20:55; Fri 28 Apr 18:30

Walkover (Walkover)

Wed 29 Mar 18:20 (+ Q&A with Jerzy Skolimowski);
Sat 8 Apr 18:10

Moonlighting

Wed 29 Mar 20:45 (+ intro by Jerzy Skolimowski);
Sun 9 Apr 13:00; Sat 15 Apr 18:20

Hands Up! (Reçe do góry)

Fri 31 Mar 20:45; Mon 10 Apr 15:40

Barrier (Bariera)

Sat 1 Apr 18:20; Tue 4 Apr 20:50 (+ intro by season
curator Michael Brooke)

EO

Sat 1 Apr 20:50; Wed 5 Apr 18:20; Fri 21 Apr 20:50;
Sat 22 Apr 18:20; Thu 27 Apr 20:45

Dialogue 20-40-60 (Dialóg 20-40-60)

Sun 2 Apr 12:30; Sat 15 Apr 20:45

Deep End

Sun 2 Apr 15:40; Mon 10 Apr 18:30;
Wed 19 Apr 20:55

Le Départ

Sun 2 Apr 18:30; Mon 17 Apr 20:40

Identification Marks: None (Rysopis)

Mon 3 Apr 21:00; Sun 9 Apr 18:40

Outsider and Exile

Tue 4 Apr 18:15

The Lightship

Sat 8 Apr 12:15; Fri 14 Apr 20:40

11 Minutes (11 minut)

Sun 16 Apr 12:30; Sat 29 Apr 20:30

Four Nights with Anna (Cztery noce z Anna)

Sun 23 Apr 12:40; Fri 28 Apr 20:50

Essential Killing

Sun 23 Apr 18:40; Sat 29 Apr 14:40

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EO will be available on BFI DVD and Blu-ray from
3 April (available to pre-order at the BFI shop)
Identification Marks: None and *Hands Up!* will be
available on a 2-disc BFI Blu-ray from 24 April

Walkover and *Barrier* will be released on Blu-ray by
Second Run later this year

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burn – there is nothing more to say. *Le Départ* was shot in 27 days, and that was all right with me as I am a very lazy man and the less time I have the better I work. If I have enough time there is a risk that I won't get anything done.'

Skolimowski does not understand French at all, even though *Le Départ* was shot in French. He compares himself to a deaf-mute talking through lip-reading: he understood his actors through their facial expressions.

Nevertheless he had two interpreters around all the time. This was important because there was so much improvisation that Skolimowski did not always know what the actors happened to say during shooting.

Skolimowski holds his composer Krzysztof Komeda in high esteem. Komeda composed the music for *Le Départ* and recorded it with international jazz musicians like Don Cherry, Gato Barbieri, Rene Ureger and Kenny Clarke. 'As to myself, I can only sing out of key, but even my false notes can inspire Komeda. Or we'll talk another language. Suppose I need music for a desperate scene, then I might tell him: "Remember ten years ago. You were skiing and broke your leg. I drove by in my car without helping you. How did you react?" Anyway, *Le Départ* is a test case as to how much music a film can take, and we may have used too much. In the future I intend to use less music in my films.'

Jerzy Skolimowski in conversation with Christian Braad Thomsen, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1968

A contemporary review

Skolimowski's comedy is not so much a departure as a modification. Apart from such tiny relics of Polanski-style humour as the trampish sausage-vendor, his Polishness has become submerged in a welter of international influences, including Wilder, Lester and Forman, and while there is plenty of glossy self-indulgence (like the persistent close-ups of the bikini fashion parade), there is nothing really to equal the ski-run sequence in *Barrier*, the superb long-distance ten-minute take in *Walkover*, or that startling shot in *Rysopis* which takes us all the way down a flight of stairs. Dominating everything in *Le Départ*, of course, is the Godard touch, at its heaviest when we see a photograph of the director's wife on a wall or when someone reads a newspaper headed 'Cinéma', but also apparent in the handling of the pawnshop scene and in Léaud's party trick of shoving a safety-pin through his elbow as a bit of casual one-upmanship.

Fortunately, the film nevertheless gets along very nicely as sheer farce in its own right, with Léaud's melodramatics, all angles and outrage, and Komeda's cool soundtrack, both raging away at full pitch. The scene in which boy and girl sit slapping each other in the boot of a car is a delicious piece of improvisation, while his incessant battles with all sorts of adversaries (such as the helmeted motor-cyclist he has run down almost without noticing, or the escort of the woman he hopes will lend him a car in return for guessed-at but still unexpected services) have a pleasingly cumulative absurdity. Skolimowski's visual flair, although muted, occasionally produces some spectacular shooting, especially of Porsches at high speed, and his taste for symbolism (wigs, mirrors, projected images, recurrent references to things Indian) has clearly not yet abandoned him. But if *Le Départ* adds anything to what we already knew about Skolimowski, it proves mainly that he is currently more inspired in his bitterness than in his jokes.

Philip Strick, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1967/68