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The [LUX Prize Selection Panel](#) ^[1] chose [Essential Killing](#) ^[2] to be part of the [Official Selection of the LUX Prize 2011](#) ^[3]. Captured by the US military in Afghanistan, Mohammed is transported to a secret detention centre in Europe. When the vehicle he is travelling in crashes, he finds himself suddenly free and on the run in a snow-blanketed forest, a world away from the desert home he knew. Relentlessly pursued by an army that does not officially exist, Mohammed must confront the necessity to kill in order to survive.

Essential Killing's main actor Vincent Gallo won the Volip Cup for Best Actor at the Venice Film Festival. Director Jerzy Skolimowski received the Special Jury Prize for Lifetime Achievement on the festival, as well as at the 18th cinematographers' festival Plus Camerimage. Winner of Best Film, Best Director, Best Score and Best Editing, Essential Killing dominated the prize list at the 13th Eagle Awards, Polish cinema's most prestigious accolades. The film also triumphed at the 36th Gdynia Polish Film Festival: it was awarded for Best Film, Best directing, Best producers, Best cinematography, Best Music and Best editors.

Essential Killing was in competition at the 2nd Les Arcs European Film Festival, the Irish Film and Television Awards and the Budapest's Titanic International Film Festival.

There is not a moment of respite for viewers in Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski's 83-minute-long political thriller Essential Killing, full of blood and wild nature. It is a full-on indictment of imperialism, military violence and religious wars.

Vincent Gallo plays a presumed Afghan terrorist hunted down by the US Special Forces after his escape from a secret detention centre in Northern Europe. Forced to cross remote regions in the middle of winter, starving and frightened, the man becomes a ruthless killing machine, an elusive prey-predator in a tense man-hunt.

Using a neat paraphrase of the Hollywood action movie, the Łódź-born director "takes apart" the hero and recreates him as an outsider and public enemy reduced to his most brutal essence. Skolimowski, who is an actor as well as director, puts Gallo's body to the test; he is tortured and abandoned in a hostile environment of nature in its purest form.

The smooth rocks of the prologue in Afghanistan, the dazzling white snow (filming took place in Israel, Norway and Poland), the water in the streams and the wild animals are painfully contrasted with determined human madness. Gallo never utters a word, only grunts and moans, and even the woman who helps him (Emmanuelle Seigner) is mute.

Skolimowski doesn't pass judgement. In the brief flashback scenes, we see the protagonist in the company of his wife and while he listens to the chant of a mullah calling on people to fight for Allah's cause. But it is of no importance to the director whether this hunted man is a terrorist or a man fighting for his country.

The perspective adopted by the director is that from a helicopter, like embracing a mortifying reality and keeping one's distance at the same time. Having arisen from news of the Polish government's possible involvement in secret manoeuvres by the CIA on national territory, *Essential Killing* is a stripped-down drama, "essentially" a film about the survival instinct.

Extracts from the press conference with Jerzy Skolimowski at the 2010 Venice Film Festival, where *Essential Killing* won the Special Jury Prize and Best Actor Award :

Where did you get the idea for *Essential Killing*?

I live in a remote forest region in Mazury [Poland]. One night, I was returning home by car and I almost veered off the road. I then realised I was very close to the secret military airport where CIA planes were landing with prisoners they had captured in the Middle East. I wondered what would happen if a vehicle transporting prisoners had an accident on that same road. That's how the film's story came about, with the idea of a man in chains, fleeing barefoot in the snow across the wild forest, pursued by the army.

Did you set out to make a political film?

I'm not interested in the political aspects of the matter. There has been a lot of speculation about the existence of CIA flights and secret prisons in Eastern Europe. Only the Lithuanian government has officially admitted it more or less. And it's an almost proven fact that there were two other prisons of this kind, one in Romania, the other in Poland. However, none of the Polish governments since 2002 have confirmed this, although an investigation was opened recently. What interested me was the story of a man who returns to an animal state and has to kill to survive.

We never find out if Vincent Gallo's character is actually a terrorist.

I thought it would be a better story if people didn't know. With these two hypotheses that lead him to the same experience, he either wins our sympathy and solidarity, or not. Some will think he's a terrorist and will be appalled, regarding him as a killer and enemy. But others may think he is innocent, just involved by accident and simply the wrong man, in the wrong place,

at the wrong time.

In my opinion, this ambiguity plays an important role: it's like checking our capacity for empathy towards other human beings, how far we're prepared to go with an oppressed man whom we're rather fond of, but who repeatedly commits acts that we can't accept from an ethical point of view. I considered him more of an anti-hero. His actions are really hard to accept, but at the same time, he fights with such strength and goes through such experiences that sometimes we hope he'll manage to survive.

Everything seems to conspire against the protagonist.

It's the story of one man against a multitude, practically one man against all, including nature, which proves very cruel with the cold weather. We were shooting in 35-degree [Fahrenheit] temperatures, night after night: it was the most demanding shoot I've ever done. Also, the main character is literally tortured by nature: he has to survive in these temperatures, without clothing and in chains at the beginning.

Why did you insert flashbacks, dreams and images of the protagonist's future?

The flashbacks were created to give the audience a bit of information about the protagonist's past. But it's very minimalist in order to avoid people knowing whether he's a terrorist or not. Moreover, there's a strong probability he's an innocent man who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Above all, I wanted to include some quotations from the Koran, in particular the most significant, which is the first: "It is not you who kills, rather it is Allah who kills".

Via [Cineuropa](#) [4]

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