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## Pro-Animal Agenda or Creative Interest? The Reception of Jerzy Skolimowski's Film *EO*

Идея защиты животных  
или художественная стратегия?  
Рецепция фильма *Иа* Ежи Сколимовского

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### Абстракт

Фильм *Иа* Ежи Сколимовского, премьера которого состоялась на 75-м Каннском международном кинофестивале в мае 2022 года и который был удостоен приза жюри, привлек внимание СМИ и сообщества защитников прав животных. Картина предлагает уникальную перспективу, рассказывая о глобальном путешествии осла и показывая его приключения, а также несправедливости, источником которых являются люди. Сколимовски использует различные повествовательные и стилистические приемы, целью которых является сделать из *Иа* героя, представляющего интересы нечеловеческих животных и продвигающего экологическую осведомленность. СМИ признали фильм манифестом в защиту прав животных, в то время как сам режиссер выразил желание вызвать эмоции у зрителей и протест против жестокого обращения с животными. В отличие от этого подхода, настоящий анализ сосредотачивается на исследованиях рецепции, чтобы понять, как фильм воспринимается обычными зрителями. Статья опирается на триангуляцию

### Abstract

Jerzy Skolimowski's *EO*, premiering at the 75th Cannes International Film Festival in May 2022 and earning a Cannes jury award, has drawn attention from the media and the pro-animal community. The film offers a unique perspective, narrating a donkey's global journey and highlighting human-induced adventures and injustices. Skolimowski's innovative narrative and stylistic choices center *EO* as a protagonist advocating for nonhuman animals and ecological awareness. Media hailed the film as an animal rights manifesto, while Skolimowski aimed to evoke viewers' emotions and protest against animal cruelty. In contrast, this analysis focuses on audience research to capture how regular viewers perceive the film. The article implies a triangulation of research methods: film analysis, the discourse of the critical-film community and the reception of non-specialist audiences. Its theoretical foundation is built upon references from both film studies and animal studies. It contrasts directorial intent, media coverage, and critical acclaim with common adult viewers' perspectives, exploring the impact of techniques

исследовательских методов: на анализ фильма, кинокритический дискурс и восприятие неспециализированной аудиторией. Ее теоретические основы черпают как из киноведения, так и из исследований животных. В тексте сопоставляются замыслы режиссера, восприятие СМИ и оценка критиков с точкой зрения взрослых зрителей, а также исследуется влияние таких техник, как антропоморфизация, на эмоциональную вовлеченность. Два фокусированных интервью показывают различия в оценке социальной значимости фильма и его воздействия между специализированной и широкой аудиторией.

**Ключевые слова:** антропоцентризм, эмпатия, исследования аудитории, фокусированные интервью, зооцентрическая перспектива

like anthropomorphism on emotional engagement. Two focus group interviews highlight differences in assessing the film's societal significance and influence between specialized and general audiences.

**Keywords:** anthropocentrism, empathy, audience research, focus group interviews, zoocentric perspective

Jerzy Skolimowski's film *EO* had its world premiere at the 75th Cannes International Film Festival in May 2022. The film by Polish director received the Jury Prize, which opened a series of other awards. *EO* also secured six Eagles (Polish Film Academy Awards), two European Film Academy's awards, recognition from the American Society of Film Critics and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, as well as an accolade from the New York Film Critics Association and at the Valladolid Film Festival. Additionally, it earned a nomination for the Academy Award for Best International Film in 2023. *EO* tells the story of the titular donkey, who embarks on a journey around the world, encountering various adventures and injustices, all results of human actions. The director employs a variety of aesthetic elicitors, both narrative and stylistic, with the purpose of making *EO* the central protagonist and presenting the story from his unique perspective.

Skolimowski's work quickly gained recognition in the media discourse. Journalists and critics highlighted the innovative plot and the attempt to depict an animal perspective that remains inaccessible to humans.<sup>1</sup> The film was celebrated as a manifesto advocating for the rights of nonhuman animals, an ecological essay, and an earnest plea for people to reflect on their treatment of other Earth inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> Manohla Dargis, "EO Review: Imagining the Lives of Other Creatures," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2022, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/17/movies/eo-review-donkey.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Bartosz Staszczyszyn, "'Io,' reż. Jerzy Skolimowski," *Culture.pl*, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/io-rez-jerzy-skolimowski>.

interviews, the director himself emphasizes that *EO* is intended to awaken viewers' awareness: "We aim to stir the viewer's emotions, turning the film into a protest against human cruelty towards animals."<sup>3</sup> The filmmaker also underscores the anthropocentric nature of the world's organization:

The main theme of the film for me is still the issue of animals – *EO* was made out of love for animals. It is also an attempt to intervene, a way to appeal to the audience to change the attitude towards animals, which we often treat objectively. I feel that we tend to forget their feelings, their psychological needs. [...] we have created, for example, mass farms (so-called industrial farming), on which living beings are barbarously bred, cynically depriving them of the possibility of a dignified and safe life. Just to satisfy our own needs.<sup>4</sup>

In interview with *Tageszeitung*, Skolimowski goes on to mention that as a consequence of his involvement in *EO*, both he and his wife have reduced their meat consumption by two-thirds. He emphasizes that this shift is reflective of a broader responsibility for all of humanity, stating: "When I consume meat now, I experience a twinge of guilt, and even struggle with each bite of meat. My hope is to eventually transition entirely to a vegetarian diet, and perhaps even embrace veganism."<sup>5</sup>

The film has also garnered recognition within the pro-animal community. *EO* bolsters the pro-animal agenda and, being a high-profile work with international acclaim, it reaches a broad audience and brings this agenda into the mainstream spotlight. This recognition has taken various forms of commercialization. Posts encouraging people to attend screenings began to appear – even before the film's theatrical release – amidst the wave of awards and nominations it received, particularly within groups dedicated to animal studies and activism. Additionally, various organizations formed partnerships with the filmmakers of *EO*. For instance, the foundation Viva! Poland organized an auction featuring a porcelain donkey adorned with a figurine designed by Skolimowski and a poster signed by the director, which the organization promoted through newsletters sent via email to its stakeholders.

In the following text, I aim to assess whether Skolimowski's work achieves objectives that the director had in mind. Is the film's pro-animal stance, acknowledged

<sup>3</sup> Maja Piskadło, "‘Io.’ O czym opowiada nagrodzony w Cannes film Jerzego Skolimowskiego?," *Gazeta.pl*, May 29, 2022, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://kultura.gazeta.pl/kultura/7,114438,28514866,io-o-czym-opowiada-nagrodzony-w-cannes-film-jerzego-skolimowskiego.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Łukasz Mańkowski and Jerzy Skolimowski, "Punkty widzenia," *Czas Kultury*, no. 4 (2023), accessed April 18, 2025, <https://czaskultury.pl/artykul/punkty-widzenia/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jenni Zylka, "Das Tier möchte etwas ausdrücken," *Taz.de*, January 11, 2023, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://taz.de/Gespraech-ueber-Filmen-mit-Eseln/!5901977/>.

by both critical-film community and animal advocacy organizations, reflected in the reception of general public? To what extent do various techniques of subjectification, including anthropomorphism, impact the emotional engagement of viewers? In this analysis, I juxtapose the director's stated intentions, media coverage, and critical reception of the film with opinions of common adult viewers.

It is important to acknowledge that the viewpoint I am presenting here coincides with a period marked by a growing production of documentaries and fictional works centered around animals and their rights. Notably, films like *Gunda* (dir. Viktor Kossakovsky, 2020), *Stray* (dir. Elizabeth Lo, 2020), *Cow* (dir. Andrea Arnold, 2021), and others have garnered acclaim at various film festivals. Given this trend, delving into the reception of such films, which are shaping modern portrayals of animals in cinema, appears increasingly warranted.

## Methodology and Methods

I will be conducting a case study of the film *EO* through the lenses of critical animal studies (CAS), posthumanism and film studies. For scholars in the field of animal studies, anthropomorphism – defined as the attribution of human-like traits, desires, needs, biographies, and so on, to animals – can be a valuable tool when used critically. The critical use of anthropomorphism ensures that it does not merely reinforce the belief in animals' subordinate status and their lack of self-awareness:

A CAS approach then shapes the intent to untangle anthropomorphism as a form of anthropocentric projection and its rejection where it is underpinned by anthropocentric interests that sustain animal exploitation from anthropomorphism as an affective and effective means of mobilising empathy.<sup>6</sup>

As Dorota Łagodzka argues, employing such an approach in art can be justified and advantageous for animals when it facilitates a critique of anthropocentrism.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, it is worth emphasizing that film is itself an anthropocentric and anthropomorphizing medium.<sup>8</sup> Claire Parkinson, a researcher in critical animal studies and film, writes: "The mediation of a nonhuman animal's experience by film

<sup>6</sup> Claire Parkinson, *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Dorota Łagodzka, "Podmiotowość zwierząt w sztuce," *Wielogłos* 35, no.1 (2018): 63–82.

<sup>8</sup> Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013).

or any other cultural-technological means 'translates' that experience in whatever modality by and for humans, and is therefore always anthropomorphic."<sup>9</sup> Hence, the pivotal inquiry in the realm of CAS for my deliberations will be: "What contributions can anthropomorphism offer to nonhuman animals?"

Considerable discourse exists surrounding the portrayal of animals in visual culture, film, and television. Since the publication of John Berger's seminal essay *Why Look at Animals?* (1980), numerous significant publications have delved into this topic, furthering the discourse initiated by the British thinker. In his groundbreaking work, Berger argues that over the past two centuries, animals have gradually vanished from our daily existence.<sup>10</sup> He attributes this disappearance to a Cartesian-inspired worldview, perpetuated by the Industrial Revolution and capitalism. Depending on the species, humans regard animals merely as food, resources, or, at best, companions – a concept Berger refers to as "human puppets."<sup>11</sup> The epitome of this severed connection, according to the British thinker, is the zoo, where human-animal interaction is constrained by a one-sided gaze. Here, animals, displaced from their natural habitat, are relegated to the role of performers in a poorly scripted drama.<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that Berger's critique of human-animal relations is confined to the context of capitalism; he refrains from challenging human identity itself.<sup>13</sup> Since Berger's time, the following works not only contribute to ongoing reflections but also engage in polemics and chart new avenues for research in the field of film animal studies.

Scholars such as Steve Baker, Anat Pick, Akira Mizuta Lippit, Jonathan Burt, Laura McMahon, Brett Mills, Randy Malamud, Claire Parkinson, and others, have notably advanced this discourse. In the context of Poland, scholars like Justyna Włodarczyk, Marta Stańczyk, Michał Matuszewski, and Agata Janikowska have examined the intersection between film and animal representation. The discipline of film studies is increasingly gaining prominence within CAS. However, the predominant focus remains on philosophical and theoretical inquiries. Despite this, there remains a notable dearth of audience research aimed at understanding viewers' responses to depictions of animals in film. Jonathan Burt has already pointed this out in his iconic book *Animals in Film* (2002), referring to nature films:

<sup>9</sup> Claire Parkinson, *Animal Bodies and Embodied Visuality* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2018), 53–54.

<sup>10</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 13.

<sup>12</sup> Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 18–19.

<sup>13</sup> Anat Pick, "Why Not Look at Animals?," *Nescus*, June 12, 2015, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://necus-ejms.org/why-not-look-at-animals/>.

The idea that film is a form of passive consumption has played an important part in debates concerning the tension between the aestheticization of nature and the political and practical aspects of animal welfare or environmental action. Answers to some of these issues are limited by the current lack of research into the reception and effects of animal film imagery in the public domain, though the natural history film industry is constantly redefining what it sees as public taste. In other words, against the background of competing ideas of audience expectation producers create programmes based on an idea of what an audience wants which then in turn appear to define public taste.<sup>14</sup>

Today, audience research within CAS remains in its infancy.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the primary aim of this article is to propose a specific methodological approach to empirical audience research – one that may complement the insights of film criticism and broaden our understanding beyond the interpretive frameworks commonly used in specialist discourse. To achieve this goal, I employ a triangulation of research methods: film analysis, critical-film community discourse, and the reception of non-specialist audiences. The theoretical framework of this text draws from references in film studies and animal studies, particularly focusing on publications concerning viewers' emotional involvement, subjective narrative, anthropomorphism, and animal subjectivity. In turn, empirical material was collected during focus group interviews (FGIs).

Due to the confined scope of this pilot initiative, I conducted two sessions. For participant recruitment, I utilized the online system available at the University of Lodz, where the survey was hosted. Respondents belonged to a homogeneous group of people of similar age and characteristics.<sup>16</sup> These individuals were not involved in the animal advocacy movement and lacked experience in film and zoology (although one person studied a course related to film and media). This approach was taken because I posit that perception and interpretation of film's message are shaped within the eyes and minds of its viewers. Consequently, the social

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 48.

<sup>15</sup> See for example: Lara Newman, "The Effects of the Cove and Bold Native on Audience Attitudes Towards Animals," *Animal Studies Journal* 4, no. 1 (2015); Garrett M. Steede et al., "Genetic Modification, Factory Farms, and ALF: A Focus Group Study of the Netflix Original Film Okja," *Journal of Applied Communications* 102, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.2224>.

<sup>16</sup> See for example: Jolanta Lisek-Michalska, *Badania fokusowe. Problemy metodologiczne i etyczne* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2013); Greg Guest, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L. Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research* (London: Sage, 2013); Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015).

significance and influence of film representations cannot be solely determined by the judgments of expert viewers.<sup>17</sup>

I conducted two focus group interviews: 1) a FGI involving ten participants aged between 19 and 26, focused on the topic of *EO*. Prior to this study, a screening process was conducted (respondents 1–10); 2) mini-FGI consisting of four participants aged 19 to 26, specifically exploring empathy towards the animal characters in film. This session also touched upon certain aspects related to Skolimowski's picture, despite the participants not having seen it (respondents 1a–4a). The group sizes were determined based on the study requirements. Groups typically range from 4 to 12 participants – the larger ones allow a greater variety of opinions to be gathered, while the smaller ones allow more in-depth perspectives on specific topics to be brought out.<sup>18</sup>

I selected participants from the young adult demographic for several reasons. Firstly, a majority were students at the University of Lodz, where the project was being conducted. Secondly, individuals in this age group belong to Generation Z, known for their openness to issues concerning human, animal, and environmental rights. Thirdly, this generation is characterized by a strong inclination to challenge the status quo, establish boundaries, and actively advocate for their rights and a more promising future, amidst concerns such as climate change and economic uncertainty. I was particularly interested in understanding their perspectives on these pressing issues.

Qualitative research was conducted utilizing a pre-prepared scenario, vetted by non-participating specialists. Resultantly, the findings were also scrutinized by other researchers. Pre- and post-study consultations were organized to counteract bias. These sessions were convened in a focus room at the University of Lodz, and comprehensive audio and video recordings were made to aid subsequent analysis and participant verification.

It is worth noting that the Polish Film Institute has published a report on *EO*, but it primarily examines general attitudes towards the film and evaluates its

<sup>17</sup> The approach to specific aspects of *EO* varies depending on the perspective adopted by researchers and critics. For instance, when discussing the relationship between *EO* and Cassandra, the circus donkey's caretaker, many authors tend to romanticize it and emphasize their mutual, unconditional love. Yet, it is essential to acknowledge that Cassandra, as a circus performer, also became a part of the suffering endured by the protagonist. This nuanced aspect of their relationship appears to be recognized and critically examined primarily by Bianca Friedman from the Center for Human Animal Studies at Edge Hill University. She offers a distinct viewpoint on certain scenes and their implications by drawing on theories from the field of (critical) animal studies. Cf. e.g. Bianca Friedman, "Through a Donkey's Eyes: Skolimowski's *EO* Investigates Nonhuman Animal Perspective Between Realistic Situations and Evocative Scenes (Film Review)," *Centre for Human Animal Studies Blog*, February 20, 2023, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://sites.edgehill.ac.uk/cfhas/blog-post-february-2023/>; Dargis, "EO Review: Imagining the Lives of Other Creatures"; Jordan Mintzer, "EO: Film Review | Cannes 2022," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 19, 2022, accessed: April 18, 2025, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/eo-review-cannes-2022-1235150257/>.

<sup>18</sup> See for example: Lisek-Michalska, *Badania fokusowe*; Krueger and Casey, *Focus Groups*.



artistic qualities through self-completion questionnaires administered in cinemas.<sup>19</sup> The study involved 500 participants who were asked to provide feedback on the film *EO*. Sample questions and tasks were as follows: “Please write in 2–3 sentences what you think of the film *EO*,” “How do you rate the film in general?,” and “how do you rate particular aspects of the film?”<sup>20</sup> They asked about such aspects as artistic merit, direction, the film’s theme, music, set design, cast, evocation of emotions, acting or dialogues and script. In the emotional evaluation phase, respondents were asked to select up to three words to describe their emotional reaction to the film. Options included descriptors like “interesting,” “engaging,” “outstanding,” “important,” “boring,” or “tiresome.” The participants overwhelmingly characterized the film as “moving,” “ambitious,” and “innovative.”<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, my research delves into a granular examination of how specific scenes and plot elements are received, employing a methodological perspective rooted in film animal studies. This approach facilitates a comprehensive examination of how animals are depicted and what their importance is within the storyline of the movie, revealing insights into their influence on how viewers perceive and understand the film. It is worth noting that, while the empirical findings presented here are based on a relatively small sample and are not intended to be statistically representative, they serve to demonstrate the potential of this method as a valuable direction for further research into audience reception within the context of film animal studies.

## In a Homage to the Realm of Emotions

Jerzy Skolimowski’s *EO* adheres to a cinematic formula reminiscent of a road movie. It draws inspiration from the 1966 cinematic masterpiece, *Au Hasard Balthazar*, directed by Robert Bresson, wherein an unprecedented approach was taken: a donkey was cast as the central character. This donkey endures a harrowing journey, passed from person to person and suffering mistreatment from the hands of humans. Balthazar’s narrative intertwines with the equally tragic story of his caretaker, Marie, who is the sole individual to show kindness to the donkey. Regrettably, their fates conclude in tragedy – Balthazar meets his end in the mountains during a smuggling operation in which he is coerced (the animal is fatally shot

<sup>19</sup> Polish Film Institute, *IO. Raport z badania ilościowego*, October 2022, accessed April 18, 2025, [https://pisf.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/IO\\_raport\\_v02-publ.pdf](https://pisf.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/IO_raport_v02-publ.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Polish Film Institute, *IO. Raport z badania ilościowego*.

<sup>21</sup> Polish Film Institute, *IO. Raport z badania ilościowego*.



by border guards), while Marie undergoes a brutal assault and gang rape. In *EO*, one can discern numerous parallels to Bresson's film, a connection that Skolimowski acknowledges in interviews, underscoring his intention to pay homage to the French auteur.<sup>22</sup>

*EO*'s story begins in a circus, where he performs alongside an artist nicknamed Cassandra. The two characters share a special bond. After anti-circus demonstrations, bailiffs confiscate the animals, and the donkey has to part ways with the girl. Thus begins *EO*'s wandering. The protagonist is taken to stables, then escapes to a rural farm, from which he traverses forests, tunnels, and fields, eventually finding himself in the city. Trapped by firefighters, *EO* ends up at a district football game, where he is brutally beaten by football hooligans. The protagonist recovers in a clinic, ends up at a farm for so-called "furry" animals, and then on a transport with horses, heading to Italy. However, the truck driver is murdered, causing *EO* to pass into the hands of another temporary guardian. He is encountered by Italian priest who takes the donkey to his stepmother's estate in sunny Italy. While the priest and his stepmother are engaged in their own dramas, *EO* runs away again. Once more, he crosses forests, bridges, and waters, finally ending up in an Italian slaughterhouse.

The plot centers on the character *EO*, while the stories of the human characters in the film are fragmented and lack depth. They serve as either the justification or the trigger for events involving the donkey. Consequently, it would appear that Skolimowski's portrayal of *EO* aligns with the postulate of French philosopher Éric Baratay, advocating for a reversal of the traditional approach to history and its narrative style:

I will try to reverse history, to write not the history of breeding but of cattle, not of transportation but of draft horses, not of corridas but of bulls... that is, not of the ways in which animals are recruited and used, but of what they experience, feel, sense, paying – as much as possible – attention to attitudes, gestures, cries.<sup>23</sup>

The concept of inverted history can also find relevance in the realm of art, as suggested by Łagodzka.<sup>24</sup> The hypothesis that *EO* aligns with Baratay's theory is further supported by the film's formal qualities.

<sup>22</sup> Jacek Szczerba, "Skolimowski: Osioł przecież niczego nie grał, ale wierzyło się w jego śmierć," *Wyborcza.pl*, accessed November 17, 2022, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,101707,28958579,skolimowski-os-iol-przeciez-niczego-nie-gral-ale-wierzylo.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Éric Baratay, *Zwierzęcy punkt widzenia. Inna wersja historii*, trans. Paulina Tarasewicz (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo w podwórku, 2014), 53.

<sup>24</sup> Łagodzka, "Podmiotowość zwierząt w sztuce," 72–75.

In the film, we encounter numerous procedures inherent in subjective storytelling.<sup>25</sup> These procedures encompass mental images of the protagonist (e.g., flashbacks), auditory perspectives (e.g., on a farm with so-called “furry” animals), POV, often accentuated by a hand camera (e.g., in the forest scene and during the altercation with the kibbutzim). Furthermore, in *EO*, we encounter narrative devices that belong to the realm of subjective storytelling, mediated through various techniques.<sup>26</sup> These techniques encompass third-person subjectivity, the use of solemn music, unconventional color grading, bird’s-eye perspectives, and close-ups on the protagonist’s face. As Skolimowski acknowledges in interviews, the central narrative approach involves a focus on the character’s eyes and experimentation with the Kuleshov effect. A recurring procedure in the film involves a sequence of shots: 1) “objective” master shots; 2) close-ups of the donkey’s face and eyes; 3) an image that is somehow distorted, representing the subjective point of view of the protagonist. All these subjective techniques are aimed at directing the viewer’s attention toward the character’s dilemmas and experiences, both mentally and perceptually, while evoking emotions. As Skolimowski himself admits, the primary concept of the film revolves around emotions, particularly in response to the rapidly changing environment in which *EO* finds himself.<sup>27</sup> Considering the film’s overarching theme, the filmmakers’ intention to provoke a shift in viewers’ attitudes toward animals, and analyzing *EO* within the context of CAS, it becomes essential to ask: What transpires in the emotional realm of the audience? What thoughts and reflections are elicited by the emotions that arise?

The narrative approach employing the Kuleshov effect appears to be effective, as substantiated by findings from my research. During a mini-focus study, I assessed participants’ ability to discern emotions conveyed by the animal’s face, with a particular focus on *EO*. Initially, participants were shown individual frames of the donkey’s face, followed by brief scenes containing the previously displayed shots. The results of the study concerning the scene in which *EO* observes a district match (Fig. 1) are presented in Table 1.

<sup>25</sup> Mirosław Przyłipiak, “O subiektywizacji narracji filmowej,” *Studia Filmoznawcze* 7 (1987): 239–256; Jacek Ostaszewski, “Techniki subiektywizacji w filmie fabularnym,” *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 97–98 (2017): 263–277.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Birkholc, “Narracja subiektywna zapośredniczona. Wokół zagadnienia mowy pozornie zależnej w filmie,” *Studia Europaea Gnesnensia* 14 (2016): 143–158; Ostaszewski, “Techniki subiektywizacji.”

<sup>27</sup> Mańkowski and Skolimowski, “Punkty widzenia.”



Figure 1. EO observing a district match.

Table 1

**Study results related to the scene depicting EO observing a district match.**

| FRAME                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | FILM EXCERPT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Respondent 1: He is shocked.<br>Respondent 3: Surprised and curious.<br>Respondent 4: But he also seems quite cheerful [...].<br>Respondent 1: [...] by the ears of these animals more emotion can be inferred.<br>Respondent 3: And translating human facial expressions into animal ones – here he has raised eyelids and “eyebrow arches,” which in humans expresses surprise. | Respondent 3: Surprise.<br>Respondent 1: He realized that people are dumber than he thought. What are they doing here?<br>You also talked about joy.<br>Respondent 3: I think it’s more curiosity. I don’t know if I want to attribute joy to him at the time of the foul. He would come off as an insensitive donkey.<br>Respondent 2: He also feels safe here [...]. |

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

The statements above suggest that while it is possible to recognize emotions on the character’s face, understanding the donkey’s individual needs is no longer a necessary outcome. This is exemplified by the comment from Respondent 3, who expressed hesitation in attributing joy to EO during a moment of foul play. In essence, the donkey’s own distinct animal characteristics and motives for behavior seem to be overshadowed by human interpretations. Consequently, subjectivizing techniques have the capacity to construct specific meanings, but these meanings appear to be confined within the anthropocentric paradigm. This notion is supported by comments from participants, whom I asked to summarize the film in a few sentences:

Respondent 5: There is an EO donkey and he was in the circus, this was his first job, if you can call it that, that an animal can have a job. [...] And then the whole era of animals in circuses ends [...]. And later the donkey has various adventures in different places. [...] He's caught, he ends up in the city, he ends up in the hospital, he gets beaten up, and then he ends up in Italy, where his life probably ends. [...]

Respondent 9: In the end, he ends up in a slaughterhouse and is actually thrown in between calves that are younger or more mature already. And it seems to me that even if the viewer had some hope that he would find his owner back, maybe somehow she would find him in this Italy, and yet he ended up in the slaughterhouse.

Once more, the film appears to superimpose human motivations and attributes, such as work, adventures, and feelings for Cassandra, onto EO. Additionally, the comment from Respondent 9 lacks a critical examination of the donkey's relationship with his circus partner.

Respondents also provided their responses to a question regarding which scene elicited the strongest emotional reaction from them. The scene in which EO was beaten by the football hooligans emerged as the one that stirred the most emotions.

Respondent 2: I have a dog myself, so I can't imagine how any animal can be hit.

Respondent 1: I agree completely [...]. Not only did this scene move me, but it also filled me with anger.

The statements from the respondents strongly denounce physical violence against the donkey. Their condemnation is rooted in their personal experiences with so-called companion animals, which have shaped their unequivocal stance against violence towards animals. Consequently, they readily express their disapproval of this blatant display of speciesism against a film character like EO.

Audience research has revealed variations in the level of comprehension of the film. Mateusz Żebrowski, a film scholar, suggests that the film's reliance on emotions makes it accessible and understandable to viewers.<sup>28</sup> However, the opinions of the interviewees appear to challenge this assertion.

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<sup>28</sup> Mateusz Żebrowski, "Ryk ostrzegawczy," *Czas Kultury* 21 (2022), accessed April 25, 2024, <https://czaskultury.pl/artykul/ryk-ostrzegawczy/>.

| Mateusz Żebrowski, <i>Czas Kultury</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Respondents of FGI                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The creator of "Identification Marks: None" recognizes the challenges of producing a feature-length animal studies manifesto, especially considering that documentaries often excel in this area. Such a production would likely be deemed highly avant-garde and comprehensible only to a niche audience. Therefore, the director takes a subversive approach, harnessing emotions, a fundamental element in narrative cinema. Through these emotions, the director aims to prompt viewers to acknowledge that animals are in no way inferior to humans. | <p>Respondent 10: The primary emotion the film stirred in me was frustration, as I found it challenging to grasp the narrative. While I recognize that this might reflect on my own ability to understand the film, there were several scenes that felt extremely abstract and artistic, making it difficult for me to follow what was happening.</p> <p>Respondent 8: I felt that some scenes, particularly the artistic ones, should have been shorter. These scenes, I believe, may not resonate with the average viewer, who might think, "Okay, it's nice, but I don't quite grasp the point."</p> <p>Respondent 5: I had the opposite experience. For me, this film didn't leave room for interpretation so much. The director's vision and what is depicted in the film felt very straightforward. It's as if the director said, "I want to show how this donkey feels around these horses," and the film promptly conveyed those feelings.</p> <p>Respondent 7: The film was boring at times [...]. It was a film from the animal's perspective. Some scenes were incomprehensible to us, because the film was supposed to show as closely as possible what the animal's thought process is. Well, let's not hide – a donkey isn't one of the most intelligent animals.</p> |

The statements from the first two respondents indicate that many scenes in the film were unclear to them, leading to negative emotions, particularly frustration. In contrast, the remarks from Respondent 5 suggest that they comprehended the film's artistic techniques. While this points to an understanding of the director's intentions, the use of phrases like "very straightforward" and "didn't leave room for interpretation so much" conveys a somewhat negative attitude toward Skolimowski's creative choices. Respondent 7's comments imply that the feelings of boredom and incomprehension of certain scenes in the film stem from the attempt to present a zoocentric perspective through the donkey, which, in her view, is commonly perceived as a representative of an unintelligent species. Consequently, all these statements seem to miss the mark when it comes to capturing Skolimowski's intentions. *EO* is perceived as either inaccessible or infantile in its approach, failing to transcend the stereotypical perception of animals.

None of my interviewees had seen the film before. After the screening, I conducted a survey with several questions. The average rating on a scale of 1 to 10 was 6.7. When asked if the respondents would have chosen the film for a first

date, the respondents answered that there would have been something to talk about after the film, that the film encourages reflection and sharing of views on attitudes towards animals. Some people would not choose it for the same reasons and because it is “tiring,” “incomprehensible,” “meant to evoke emotions,” “difficult,” “heavy,” “has no entertainment purpose.” I also asked about extratextual factors: whether they had heard of the film before, how they found out about it, whether they had seen promotional materials. Several people wrote that they had heard about *EO*, that it was a strange film, and that it was a good film. Several people knew about the festival road of Skolimowski’s picture and the Oscar nomination. One respondent in the discussion said: “We came to the conclusion overall that this film somehow shows how an animal can experience, feel these things, it’s no wonder that it was nominated for this Oscar.” After the discussion, some respondents also admitted that they would have rated the film better. *EO* has gained in value as a result of our conversation and sharing of reflections. This only confirms the influence of extratextual factors – festival awards, discussions, reviews, texts – on the reception of a film, and brings me back to the question of the responsibility of the film community to construct meanings, and to shape public reception and audience opinion.

## Film Humane Washing

As I previously mentioned, the film created a sensation on the French red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival. Film festivals hold significant influence in determining the fate of a movie, shaping industry trends, and establishing its prestige.<sup>29</sup> According to Adamczak, it is during film festivals that the “mulling of opinions” by journalists about a given film takes place.<sup>30</sup> This settled opinion is later disseminated by the media and sometimes much later verified in film studies discourse. Elsaesser, referring to Bourdieu, points out “illusion of the game”: “With every prize it confers, a festival also confirms its own importance, which in turn increases the symbolic value of the prize. [...] Film festivals act as multipliers and amplifiers on several levels: first, they provide a privileged public, the press, as arbiters and taste-makers.”<sup>31</sup> Skolimowski’s work is imbued with numerous cultural contexts and rich symbolism.

<sup>29</sup> Marcin Adamczak, “Instytucja Festiwalu Filmowego w ekonomii kina,” *Panoptikum* 23 (2016): 20–37; Thomas Elsaesser, “Film Festival Networks: The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe,” in *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 82–107.

<sup>30</sup> Adamczak, “Instytucja Festiwalu Filmowego,” 32.

<sup>31</sup> Elsaesser, “Film Festival Networks,” 97.

Exploring these aspects can provide enjoyment to the aforementioned “arbiters and taste-makers” who, during the Cannes Film Festival, formed their opinions on *EO*. This was subsequently reflected in the jury's award, serving as a mark of the film's quality, as well as in numerous reviews, interviews, reports, and comments. In writings about Skolimowski's work, one can certainly find references to Bresson and other films featuring equines,<sup>32</sup> as well as allusions to *The Shout*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Night of the Hunter*, *Orpheus*, and *Don Quixote*, only in one paragraph.<sup>33</sup> After all, the donkey has made appearances in the *Bible*, Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, and Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. However, this elevated and erudite discourse within film criticism often lacks in-depth exploration of the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals. Commentary on this subject tends to be confined to describing what is visible on the screen and suggesting that we can perceive reflections of ourselves in the eyes of the donkey.<sup>34</sup>

Admiration for the film and its erudite readings are extremely anthropocentric, as is often the case within the film industry and the realm of culture. While there are some discussions attempting to empathize with the donkey's emotions, the majority of descriptions center on how “we,” the viewers, experience the film. Additionally, there are instances of speciesism, including those ingrained in language and those resulting from the lack of problematization of homocentrism. For example, in his text, Mateusz Żebrowski refers to animal studies and describes the emotions he believes can accompany a donkey.<sup>35</sup> However, he not only fails to challenge the dominion of humans over nonhuman animals, but he also reinforces the validity of an anthropocentric perception of reality. When discussing the “symbiotic relationships” between homo sapiens and other species, he references a scene of animal therapy depicted in a film. This therapy method primarily serves the interests of humans and employs animals to further human objectives.

The film's choice to highlight condemned manifestations of speciesism is noteworthy. Opposition to animal abuse enjoys widespread support, and there is also significant public backing for initiatives such as animal-free circuses and a ban on fur farming (for instance, as documented in the *Report on the Fur Industry in Poland*).<sup>36</sup> While activities like aquarium keeping and hunting still hold popularity as

<sup>32</sup> Dargis, “*EO* Review: Imagining the Lives of Other Creatures.”

<sup>33</sup> Mark Kermode, “*EO* Review – The Bold and the Bray from Veteran Polish Director Jerzy Skolimowski,” *The Guardian*, February 5, 2003, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/feb/05/eo-review-circus-donkey-drama-veteran-polish-director-jerzy-skolimowski-strangely-beautiful-oscar-contender>.

<sup>34</sup> Mintzer, “*EO*: Film Review | Cannes 2022”; Kermode, “*EO* Review.”

<sup>35</sup> Żebrowski, “Ryk ostrzegawczy.”

<sup>36</sup> Martyna Kozłowska et al., *Raport na temat przemysłu futrzarskiego w Polsce* (Warszawa: Fundacja Międzynarodowy Ruch na Rzecz Zwierząt – Viva!, 2017).



pastimes or passions, they represent just a fraction of the overall issues concerning nonhuman animals, especially when compared to more critical manifestations of speciesism. The most pressing concerns in this regard are the industrial breeding of animals for meat and other zoonotic products, along with animal experimentation (the latter theme does not appear at all in the film).<sup>37</sup> While the issue of industrial breeding does surface in the film, it appears to be somewhat trivialized and inadequately emphasized. During a scene in a truck a priest engages EO in a conversation. He remarks: "I consumed kilograms of meat, hundreds of kilograms. I even sampled salami made from donkey. Are you curious about the taste? Does it intrigue you? Have I spoiled your appetite?" (EO begins to recoil, displaying signs of discomfort.) The statement appears to carry a humorous tone, thereby diminishing its potentially contentious nature. However, when considering the subsequent scenes in the film – such as the priest celebrating mass, offering gratitude for the food (including a wafer described as "the fruit of the earth and the labor of human hands"), and later consuming meat-based spaghetti while engaging in a heated argument with his step-mother – it is possible to interpret this sequence as a critique of religion. It suggests that even within religious contexts, animals may suffer. In this interpretation, one could argue that the director chooses a certain level of evasion. This also holds true for the final scene where EO arrives at the slaughterhouse and herds the cows inside.

In the closing shot, we observe the animals entering the dark building, and the director seems to opt for subtlety, allowing the viewer to infer what will likely transpire next. It is indeed not always necessary to depict the actual killing or consumption of animals in order to convey the message related to speciesism. However, it is worth noting that in the film, other manifestations of speciesism, such as the mistreatment of EO by football hooligans and the scene involving so-called furry animals on a farm, are portrayed and commented upon in a much more direct manner. During the FGI I conducted, I chose to inquire about which manifestations of species discrimination the respondents found most objectionable. I presented the participants with frames from *EO* that pertained to speciesism. Respondents identified these instances and added three additional forms of species discrimination, which sometimes overlapped with those already identified. Subsequently, I asked the participants to select up to two manifestations of speciesism that provoked the strongest opposition. Here are the results:

1. slaughter for fur 0
2. superficial assistance to an animal 0
3. use of animals in circus 0

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Singer, *Wyzwolenie zwierząt*, trans. Anna Alichniewicz and Anna Szczęśna (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Marginesy, 2018).

4. slaughtering/breeding animals for meat 1
5. breeding animals for ornamentation 0
6. physical violence/abuse of an animal 10
7. use for labor 0
8. horse training 0
9. hunting 4
10. treatment as a toy 5
11. subjective treatment 0
12. unequal treatment of species 0
13. undefined legal status 0

Direct physical violence against animals elicited the strongest opposition from participants. The results clearly indicate that this form of abuse – the most explicit and severe manifestation of speciesist behavior – evokes the most intense emotional response and resistance. Symbolic and cultural forms of objectification, such as treating animals as toys and hunting, also generated relatively strong reactions, likely because they signal a clear denial of animal subjectivity. In contrast, less visible, systemic forms of domination – such as breeding animals for meat or using them for labor – appear to be perceived as less troubling. The lack of opposition to many of these practices may point to their normalization within the participants' cultural framework.

What follows in *EO*'s eyes reflects only a specific, curated portion of the world. When we engage with an audiovisual text, we often find ourselves quick to criticize this perspective, as criticism tends to be our default response. It is possible that the director deliberately chose to vividly portray certain instances of speciesism in order to make the film more engaging for viewers, preventing them from rejecting it due to its brutality or its excessively intrusive depiction of behaviors and customs that we typically view as natural, normal, and necessary (Melanie Joy's "the 3 N's of justification," referring to the consumption of animals).<sup>38</sup>

I asked the participants in FGI what emotions the character most evoked in them. The dominant feeling was sympathy: "I wouldn't say that this movie somehow opened my eyes to how an animal perceives the world. It was such simple compassion for what the animal was going through" (Respondent 1).

Respondents also shared their opinions on whether a film like *EO* could potentially impact people's attitudes toward animals and their treatment:

Respondent 5: I don't think so, because once someone goes, they go on purpose, knowing a little bit about what it is. And it's not affordable enough. [...]

<sup>38</sup> Melanie Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism* (Newburyport: Red Wheel, 2020).

Respondent 9: I agree with Respondent 5, because when they go to see such a film, people will go either for the director's name or because it was nominated for an Oscar. [...] they can expect that it will be something in the direction of artistic cinema and it is not a revolution on the other hand and it seems to me that it does not have much impact. Even though it gives some emotions, are they huge ones or do they want to change? I don't think so.

Respondent 1: I think that if, for example, there are people who use physical violence against an animal and they see such a film, it will not move them at all. And I believe that this will not contribute to change. When it comes to, for example, changing the approach to stopping eating meat, I also believe that this is not enough. For me, the decision to stop eating meat, for example, is comparable to the decision to move to another country.

The statements made by the respondents appear to validate the film's superficially novel and call-to-action nature. The discursive selectivity in *EO* suggests that the donkey is primarily a passive observer of human reality, and the techniques of subjectivization employed in the film ultimately serve the narrator in providing commentary that pertains to humanity. The distributor's website for the film states: "it is, above all, a deeply humanistic film – a manifesto in defense of what remains innocent in us."<sup>39</sup> As a result, Skolimowski's *EO* appears to fall into the very trap that Baratay warned against:

The task requires caution, for we are accustomed to talking about ourselves, and it is easy, because of this habit and the nature of the documents, to succumb to the tendency to focus on human acts, only to see secondarily the consequences they had on animals. In turn, one should start from these (animal – author's note) experiences and only later evoke human motives.<sup>40</sup>

The reception of the film says more about our intention to humane washing, than about the donkey and the suffering inflicted on nonhuman animals by humans. This again brings me to the extratextual factors, the importance of interpretation and the value of the film, which are shaped by the festival circuit, film criticism, distributors and promotion. The examples of film-critical texts cited earlier point to the risks involved in using anthropomorphism in film to evoke empathy. This is a danger that Claire Parkinson writes about in the context of popular culture: "Empathy, however, is easily managed through popular culture, the danger being that pleasurable empathy is forgotten once the narrative is

<sup>39</sup> Gutek Film, *EO*, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://gutekfilm.pl/io-skolimowski>.

<sup>40</sup> Baratay, *Zwierzęcy punkt widzenia*, 54.

over.”<sup>41</sup> A clear confirmation that *EO* falls into this trap is the presence of the donkey, playing the role of Jenny in *The Banshees of Inisherin* (dir. Martin McDonagh, 2022), at the Academy Awards gala. She was introduced on stage by the evening's host, Jimmy Kimmel. The donkey did not look happy, turning sideways, taking tiny steps and trying to break free from the string on which she was held. Jimmy Kimmel emphasized in his speech that the donkey was not only a player of the role of Jenny, but also an emotional support animal (the donkey even wore a sheet with the glossy inscription “EMOTIONAL SUPPORT”), while at the same time the psychological well-being of the actor animal was ignored. The animal simply became a participant in a humorous scene for artistic elites. This shows a complete lack of self-reflection on the part of the film community and a failure to take responsibility for shaping such and not other opinions and trends, let alone any attempt to problematize the issue of animal acting – yet the very use of nonhuman animals as actors to fulfill human needs (we are the ones watching the films) is a manifestation of speciesism.

The role of *EO* was portrayed by six donkeys, a decision influenced by concerns for the animals' well-being and budget constraints.<sup>42</sup> The film concludes with the statement: “The film was created out of love for animals and nature. On set, animal welfare was a top priority. No animals were harmed during the filming.” It remains difficult to ascertain whether a particular role had no impact on the animals' psychological well-being, as the phrase concluding the film's statement on the absence of harm is somewhat selective in its treatment. Skolimowski acknowledges that he chose to cast a donkey as the protagonist simply because he felt like doing so:

I've never made a film in which an animal plays one of the main roles. At most, there were some episodes with a dog. But we've been wanting to do this for a long time. We assumed that if it happened, it would be a dog. [...] But it was disturbing to realize that it was bordering on cliché. [...] It was decided by chance. Life threw us to Sicily, near Palermo. [...] One day we discovered that the town of Custonaci, with a population of five thousand, was organizing a giant nativity scene. [...] There is a huge black bull with dangerous horns, a cow, and sheep. And a donkey is standing a little to the side. [...] We immediately understood, almost without words, that this was an animal that could attract the viewers' attention for 90 minutes.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Parkinson, *Animal Bodies*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Szczerba, “Skolimowski.”

<sup>43</sup> Szczerba, “Skolimowski.”

Once again, we encounter a certain selectivity – *EO* condemns circuses that use animals, yet discussions with Skolimowski suggest that the director does not even recognize the necessity of addressing the use of animals in other forms of entertainment or artistic endeavors, such as film production or live nativity scenes. This absence of self-reflection holds significance when considering the statements made by my respondents. They underscored the controversial nature of the subject concerning the involvement of animals on a film set:

Respondent 9: For me it was also curiosity, but more of a curiosity about working on set with an animal. [...] When they took it away at the beginning and there was a close-up of there being a tear, I was really wondering how they achieved that tear? How did they cause it? Was this added in post-production? And how the animal was treated, because of course there was an inscription at the end that no animal was harmed, but there were several scenes where I would question it. [...] I thought about what the animal felt during it.

There were more statements like this one. Respondents raised questions, for instance, regarding whether a donkey was coerced into kicking a torturer on a fur farm. Their observations reveal a strong sense of empathy towards animal performers. I believe that deliberate omission of this significant topic in interviews is a conscious decision. Furthermore, Skolimowski acknowledges that they did not conduct thorough scientific preparation for the film shoot:

My most important assumption was to look at *EO* as an animal. However, I could only use my imagination; I don't know of any scientific investigations into the specifics of how animals perceive the world. [...] *EO* is a project born of spontaneous energy, without any special scientific preparation.<sup>44</sup>

The director makes this point by talking about an artistic attempt to reflect on the screen how donkeys perceive reality, but it is an important statement in the context of the problem of animal-actors being ignored in media discourse. Journalists, talking to Skolimowski, formulate questions focused on the author's plot, feelings and the director's needs, for example: "How do you direct an animal that doesn't quite understand what you need for a given shot or scene?"<sup>45</sup> The filmmaker, discussing his experience working on set with a donkey, mentions that the animal was

<sup>44</sup> Mańkowski and Skolimowski, "Punkty widzenia."

<sup>45</sup> Daniel Kasman, "The Donkey's Eyes: Jerzy Skolimowski Discusses *EO*," *MUBI Notebook*, November 18, 2022, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://mubi.com/en/notebook/posts/the-donkey-s-eyes-jerzy-skolimowski-discusses-eo>.

challenging to collaborate with, but he and donkey developed a special bond.<sup>46</sup> He frequently employs the personal pronoun “we.” In these same interviews the director explores the idea that humans aspire to dominate the world while simultaneously establishing a power dynamic with the donkey-actor. He romanticizes this relationship, projecting his own emotions onto the donkey and attributing feelings to the animal that Skolimowski believes he experienced. In a lighthearted manner, he also humorously remarks that his most effective tool for achieving the desired results on set was a carrot. Notably, these themes and statements recur across all the interviews, and in many instances, Skolimowski's comments appear nearly identical. As a result, the interview essentially solidifies a consensus regarding the discussed themes, the interpretations created, and the values imposed, which have already been clearly defined by the prevailing opinions at film festivals, and are subsequently reiterated. In the case of *EO*, these values are not primarily centered around animal-related issues, but rather revolve around auteurism, art cinema, and national cinema – components that constitute the essence of European cinema and the principles upheld by festivals. This is especially evident in the way domestic reactions unfold in response to Oscar nominations or the attainment of prestigious awards (Fig. 2, 3).<sup>47</sup> Figure 2 presents social-media reactions framing *EO* as a collective national success, expressed through slogans such as “ALL POLES” and “ONE DONKEY.” Figure 3, in turn, illustrates the celebratory circulation of news about Skolimowski's Oscar nomination in Polish media, where the director is symbolically positioned as a representative of national cinematic achievement. These moments serve as clear indicators of the film's success, determining its worth and elevating Skolimowski to the status of a Polish “national treasure.” In media discourse and public debates, hardly anyone contests this significance; in fact, everyone seeks to draw closer to it. Domestic events, institutions, and even cities underscore their positive value by highlighting their connections to Skolimowski. Naturally, critical voices do exist, as exemplified by certain critics on platforms like Filmweb. The Oscar nomination received ironic commentary from ASZdziennik, a satirical website known for publishing fictionalized news and interviews. The website released an imaginary conversation with an actor who portrayed *EO*:

Szymon: Good morning, I'm here with Oscar-nominated outstanding actor Donkey. How are you feeling?

<sup>46</sup> E.g. Kasman, “The Donkey's Eyes”; Amy Taubin, “HIT THE ROAD, JACK: Jerzy Skolimowski Discusses His Donkey Odyssey,” *Artforum*, November 23, 2022, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://www.artforum.com/film/jerzy-skolimowski-discusses-his-donkey-odyssey-89686>.

<sup>47</sup> *Typowy Jędrzej – student filmoznawstwa*, Facebook, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/typowyjendrzefilmoznawca>; *Łódź*, Facebook, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/lodzpoliska>.

Donkey: Good morning, I am very happy and proud of my work.

S: How did you feel when you found out about the nomination?

D: I was shocked and couldn't believe that our humble film deserved such an award. It was a great honor for me and I would like to thank the director – Jerzy Skolimowski – from this place.

S: What was the most difficult thing while working on this film?

D: The most difficult thing was portraying the emotions and feelings of the donkey. I had to spend a lot of time preparing for the role and working with the director to portray it in the best way possible. Fortunately, Mr. Jerzy once played the role of a donkey in a nativity play and knew perfectly how to guide me.

S: Do you have any plans for the future? Have the phones been ringing off the hook yet?

D: I would like to continue my acting career and take part in various film projects. I am open to different roles and would like to further develop my talent. I am tentatively contracted with Disney for a certain role in the MCU, but of course I can't reveal details yet.

S: Thank you for the interview. Good luck in the future!

D: EO, thank you very much.<sup>48</sup>



Figure 2. Image captions, from left: “ALL POLES” and “ONE DONKEY.”

<sup>48</sup> Szymon Żurawski, “Rozmawiamy z panem Osłem nominowanym do Oscara. *Iiii-o, iiii-o! EOOOO!!!*,” *ASZdziennik*, January 24, 2023, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://aszdziennik.pl/144179,pilne-rozmawiamy-z-oslem-nominowanym-do-oscara>.





Figure 3. Facebook post from the Łódź profile covering Skolimowski's Oscar nomination.

Critical or polemical texts and commentaries, however, remain scarce and often offer anecdotal evidence. They struggle to challenge the preconceived notions set by journalists and the prevailing consensus on the matter.

Given that “they (festivals – author’s note) are clearly a product also of globalization and the post-Fordist phase of the so-called creative industries and experience economies, where festivals seek to realize the time and location advantages we also know from tourism and the heritage industry,”<sup>49</sup> Jerzy Skolimowski’s *EO* inadvertently emerges as a cinematic testament to the prevailing forces of anthropocentrism and capitalism, which have contributed significantly to the widespread exploitation and objectification of nonhuman animals we witness today. In a similar vein, it stands as a monument to a parallel loss akin to the one John Berger elucidated in the context of zoos in his essay *Why Look at Animals?*

At the same time, *EO* may be seen as indicative of a broader cultural shift in how animals are perceived within mainstream cinema. Its very existence – along with Skolimowski’s own remarks about reducing meat consumption, as mentioned in the introduction to this text – signals an emerging awareness and a growing willingness to engage with animal subjectivity and suffering, even if only cautiously and imperfectly. In this sense, *EO* may reflect – and to some extent contribute to – a subtle shift in the cultural conversation about our relationship with nonhuman animals.

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<sup>49</sup> Elsaesser, “Film Festival Networks,” 103.

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