

# Home cinema



Fat cats: Daniel Olbrychski in 'The Promised Land'

## TRAGICOMEDY OF ERRORS

Examining the folly of human endeavour in their own unique ways, these three Polish films deserve their 'classic' label

### POLISH CLASSICS VOLUME 2 ILLUMINATION

Krzysztof Zanussi; Poland 1972; Second Run/Region 2 DVD; 89 minutes; Aspect Ratio 16:9; Features: new filmed interview with Zanussi, Marcin Latallo's short 'A Trace', booklet

#### THE PROMISED LAND

Andrzej Wajda; Poland 1974; Second Run/Region 2 DVD; 163 minutes; Aspect Ratio 16:9; Features: new filmed interview with Wajda, booklet

#### ESCAPE FROM THE 'LIBERTY' CINEMA

Wojciech Marczewski; Poland 1990; Second Run/Region 2 DVD; 88 minutes; Aspect Ratio 16:9; Features: new filmed interview with Marczewski, booklet

#### Reviewed by David Jenkins

If a film could physically cackle at the folly of human endeavour, then the trio of swaggering Polish classics included in Second Run's box-set would be thumping the floor and wiping away the tears. But it would be a laughter dashed with melancholy, as if to suggest that the tumult of

bitter tragedy which befalls the characters in these films is merely the natural state of man, both unavoidable and inexorable. Each film here deals with a specific stripe of the pessimism rainbow, from art (Wojciech Marczewski's *Escape from the 'Liberty' Cinema*, 1990) and commerce (Andrzej Wajda's *The Promised Land*, 1974) through to science (Krzysztof Zanussi's *Illumination*, 1972).

In a supplementary video interview, the 87-year-old Wajda (still tart and combative) talks about how the concept of money never really entered into his cinematic lexicon: people walk into bars, order a drink, then leave. No money changes hands on camera. This may be down to the fact that the cruel machinations of his seminal late-50s trilogy of *A Generation* (1955), *Kanal* (1957) and *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) were set against the largely currency-free backdrop of World War II. *The Promised Land* works as a grubbily opulent corrective, posing the question: is it possible to attain financial success (dominance, even) within a total moral vacuum?

The film, little known outside mainland Europe, is based on the 1898 novel by Wladyslaw Reymont, which was handed to Wajda by his old Lodz Film School colleague Andrzej Zulawski. It appears that Zulawski handed

Wajda much more than words on a printed page, as *The Promised Land* is exactly the type of phantasmagoric hell-ride with which Zulawski was making his name as a filmmaker. Another of the film's close cinematic antecedents is Marcel L'Herbier's bounding silent epic *L'Argent* (1928), particularly in the way both films capture the gilded parlours of fiscal excess with a camera that seldom pauses for breath. If it stops to think, then all is lost.

At the turn of the 19th century, Lodz became Poland's de facto textile manufacturing base, and its once verdant landscape was soon littered with looming redbrick workhouses. This gave rise to cutthroat financial chicanery, labour exploitation, savage undercutting of competition and widespread corporate sabotage. That the three tinpot fat cats at the centre of *The Promised Land* – Moryc (Wojciech Pszoniak), a Jew, Karol (Daniel Olbrychski), a Pole, and Maks (Andrzej Seweryn), a German – are able to overlook their differences in their rabid pursuit of capital comes across as a richly ironic statement considering how the cultural topography of Europe in the early 20th century was set to landslide.

As ripping a yarn as *The Promised Land* is, with its psychedelic interludes, fish-eye crowd

scenes and occasional dollops of industrial-accident-based splatter, it feels more like a triumph of bristling style over edifying substance. And though the material is leavened by the hair-trigger performances (the ginger-coiffed Pszoniak, who performs with the intensity of an orchestra conductor, is the standout), it's not long before a hefty dose of karmic retribution for the gang's incalculable raft of transgressions seems more like an inevitability than a possibility. And for the climactic gag, Wajda infers that the entire sick process we've just witnessed is simply a single extraneous component within a vast corporate machine.

Regular *Sight & Sound* contributor David Thompson mentions in his exhaustive booklet essay that one of the reasons this movie – which, incidentally, Wajda believed would be his Hollywood calling card – is barely known is that it was instantly deemed anti-Semitic because it was made in Poland. He also notes that while the film does contain quasi-caricatured Jewish business leaders, which some might deem problematic, there's no sense that Wajda is singling out any one race or religion as being more devious or ethically corrupt than the other. In the realm of capitalism, evil is all-inclusive.

The machine of government bureaucracy is coolly dismantled in Wojciech Marczewski's meta-cinematic comedy *Escape from the 'Liberty' Cinema*, in which a Lodz fleapit has to cancel all screenings when the actors in a lightweight matinee go on strike in the middle of a projection. To explain this queer phenomenon to government lackeys, members of the board of censorship and a preening local film critic (complete with indoor scarf and drama-queen gesticulations), the shambling hero (Janusz Gajos, credited as 'Cenzor') screens a key passage from Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), another film about the logistical bother caused by fourth-wall-shattering movie actors.

Set during the dying years of the communist era, Marczewski's jocular satire scolds the concept of artistic censorship. It bemoans the fact that it's not just a process through which seditious and combustible material is excised from public view, but one whose strictures promote premeditated self-censorship whereby artists feel that, for the sake of ease, they should avoid playing too fast and loose with the rules. The director also takes aim at a culture that's been swaddled in red tape, with much of the film's humour (managing to be at once specialised and inclusive) deriving from government officials attempting to rationalise this freak occurrence with local distribution models and bureaucratic buck-passing. And with *Daybreak*, the sentient melodrama that refuses to end, Marczewski offers a wry archetype of the sappy and bland popular entertainments filling Polish cinemas throughout the 1980s.

The film's central snafu takes up much of the running time, and the comic motif of officials having to deal with a situation that is far beyond their intellectual comprehension recalls Milos Forman's similarly sardonic *The Firemen's Ball* (1967). Yet it's the equally eccentric scenes of



'Escape from the Liberty Cinema'

redemption that prevent the film being dismissed as a single-joke novelty. Gajos is eventually transported to the roof of the cinema, where he finds all the lost and abandoned characters he has cut out of movies. He interacts with them and is eventually made to feel sorry for what he has done. It's the point at which the tone of the film changes from arch, angry and disbelieving to rueful, reflective and bittersweet.

*The Promised Land* and *Escape from the 'Liberty' Cinema* are fascinating and necessary rediscoveries from Marczewski and Wajda, but they both pale next to Krzysztof Zanussi's astounding cerebral odyssey *Illumination*. Questioning nothing less than the fabric of the known universe, the limits of human knowledge, the immutability of death and the potential for spiritual salvation, Zanussi's film deals in the kind of acute, mellifluous philosophical orations that

*Krzysztof Zanussi's astounding cerebral odyssey 'Illumination' questions nothing less than the fabric of the known universe*



'Illumination'

have made Terrence Malick's most recent work so stimulating and mysterious.

At its centre is Stanislaw Latallo's goggle-eyed Franciszek, a gangly student (first in physics, then biology) whom we accompany through a period of intense existential anxiety and auto-critique. He sees his first dead body following a mountain-climbing accident; he marvels at the complexities of the human brain during surgery; he visits a far-flung shrine in search of more poetic forms of enlightenment; he has a child with his girlfriend and is unable to shift his feeling that the arduousness of simply being will be automatically passed down the bloodline. Alongside the poetic prognosticating, it's extremely refreshing to see a screen scientist who isn't either a paragon of contented logic or totally insane. It's also refreshing to see a character in search of life's meaning who is slovenly, awkward and mumbles much of his dialogue.

Despite the film's frisky elliptical timeframe, Zanussi is always methodical in the way he builds the drama. He employs title cards and still images (often scientific diagrams or quotations from textbooks) to contextualise Franciszek's journey, reminding us that great scholars have trodden this path many times before and have written of their adventures. *Illumination* also offers a sublime showcase for the great Polish cinematographer Edward Klosinski, who went on to work with both Wajda and Kieslowski. Every edit feels immaculately judged, and every shot is framed and executed in a way that manages to be incredibly precise yet also graceful and lyrical. All three of these titles deserve the epithet of 'classic', but this one does so in spectacular fashion.

Each film, sourced from brand new restored transfers, comes with a video interview with its director. The newly commissioned booklet essays, by David Thompson, Michal Oleszczyk and Michael Brooke respectively, are of the highest quality, with special mention going to Brooke's encyclopedic knowledge of Poland's censorship board. 📖