

## MOVIELINE

Essential Killing: Dear Vincent Gallo, Why Do You Torment Me So?

Toronto Film Festival || by Stephanie Zacharek

Oh, Vincent Gallo! There's no escaping you. You follow me from continent to continent, from festival to festival. Last week, in Venice, I saw your strange little picture *Promises Written in Water* (also playing here in Toronto), and while I wasn't wowed, I couldn't quite dismiss it, either. But while in Venice, I missed Polish filmmaker Jerzy Skolimowski's *Essential Killing*, which netted you the Best Actor award there - in fact, you've got pretty much the only role, aside from Emmanuelle Seigner, who appears very late in the picture. So today in Toronto, I decided to check out *Essential Killing*. I needed to see for myself if you really deserved that award, you scalawag, you.

The answer is yes. *Essential Killing* is virtually a silent film, and Gallo gives a wordless performance as a Taliban or Al Qaeda tribal soldier (the picture spells out none of the details, only the essentials) who's captured by U.S. troops. He's stripped of his clothes, beaten and tortured. As he's being transported with some other prisoners to another location, the truck in which the group is traveling crashes, and they're no longer in the desert: They appear to have been transported to somewhere in Eastern Europe, or perhaps Russia. Gallo's character scrambles away from the crash, now finding himself in a snowy landscape that's completely foreign to him, and his captors pursue him as if he were an animal. In this role, Gallo looks gaunt and haunted, even more so than usual.

Skolimowski shapes the filmmaking around him quietly, the way you'd settle a blanket over a sleeping child. These snow landscapes, often replete with lonely or angry barking dogs, aren't exactly becalming, considering that Gallo's character is on the run for his life: Dressed in a bloodied white camouflage outfit - his wounds are numerous, including a bleeding cut on his foot incurred when he steps into a steel-jawed trap - he trudges, limps and, when he's able, sprints through this dazzling white-tipped forest terrain.

What makes this performance so mesmerizing when - face it - so much of what Gallo does is just patently annoying? His character does some extreme things to survive: He claws at tree bark and chomps on it; he scoops some ants from a dirt hole and shoves them into his mouth; and, most shockingly, he holds a nursing mother at gunpoint so he can suckle here. Frankly, if you described these things to me before I'd seen the picture, I'd say that Gallo is the last person I'd want to see doing them.

And yet for once, Gallo - who I sometimes do like as an actor and as a filmmaker - shows no affectation. Perhaps because he doesn't speak in the film, much of his energy is forced into his limbs and into the trunk of his body, and it has a lot to say, even in the context of its dogged exhaustion.

This is a striking, primal performance, and maybe it's an example of what can happen when a filmmaker takes one of an actor's essential tools - his voice - away and pushes his focus elsewhere. Gallo has a reputation for being self-aggrandizing and annoying as a personality, but this performance overrides and whites out any personality quirks. In *Essential Killing*, he's confounding and surprising, challenging everything we think we know about Vincent Gallo. In other words, he does what we always say we want actors to do, and what we don't always allow them to do.