

'Squint Your Eyes' takes flight

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Film enthusiasts looking for the latest in East European cinema will get a rare opportunity this weekend to see "Squint Your Eyes," the film that scampered off with the best new director award at last year's San Francisco International Film Festival and has won various awards at Cannes and elsewhere.

"Squint Your Eyes" is another intriguing offering from the resurgent Polish film industry, which gave the world Andrzej Wajda and Roman Polanski. Thanks go to Nickelodeon Theater and locally owned MGE distributors for allowing film lovers to see the film locally.

Set on an abandoned farm in the Polish hinterland, the film concerns the property's caretaker and a runaway teenage girl he was once hired to tutor. She's headstrong, at loose ends and has already fallen among thieves. She's staying with the caretaker, who she is drawn to as a father figure, a person her nouveau riche parents consider "a nobody."

The abandoned farm is the setting for a series of vignettes involving different characters, who for one reason or another, stop by to visit or hang out. All of them come to see the caretaker, as if seeking something from him which he seems unable to give them.

The characters include the girl's parents, children, petty thieves, misfits, bureaucrats and a party of nouveau riche city slickers — and it soon becomes clear that for all its realistic goings on, the film has a parable-like subtext.

With gentle humor and exquisite cinematography, the symbolic subtext rises to the surface.

The abandoned farm is the post-Communist Polish heartland caught between its past and its future, and Jasiek, the caretaker-tutor, is the symbol of the Polish life force and its essential character.

Looked at in this way, the things that the different characters seek from him can be described as a loss of national identity.

What the girl seeks from Jasiek is an essential Polishness, which she senses her parents have lost. She wants to learn how to fly, a lesson Jasiek promised to teach her when he was her tutor.



Simply put, he tells her to "squint her eyes," or look at the world from a different perspective. Things don't end, nothing is lost, he tells her. We live in a continuum where the past is alive in the present and the future. You just have to see it that way.

All the film's characters, like Estragon and Vladimir in "Waiting For Godot," are looking for this answer.

The most symbolic representation of this idea is also one of the film's most surrealistic images: a shackled eagle, who is kept on the farm, but why or what the eagle is doing in the film is never explained.

When the eagle escapes and majestically flies off, the girl thinks she has lost a precious part of her life. It is at this point that Jasiek tells her that nothing is lost, and she should see the eagle's flight as part of an endless continuum.

His words are the flying lesson. The eagle, by the way, as every Polish national knows, has been the symbol of Polish identity and freedom for more than a thousand years. Slow-paced and luxuriantly beautiful, "Squint Your Eyes" introduces a fresh new talent in director Andrzej Jakimowski and is a film everyone interested in the new East European cinema should see.

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program "Cinema Scene" on channel 27 at 8:30 p.m. Thursday and Sunday.

If You Go

WHAT: 'Squint Your Eyes.'

RATING: Not rated; mature content.

WHEN: 11:30 a.m. Saturday and Sunday.

WHERE: The Nickelodeon, 426-7500.

LENGTH: 1 hour, 32 minutes.

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