

REVIEW

"A Safe Space for Nature Lovers"

Tomáš Elšík's *Resilience* (*Při zemi*, 2025)

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Resilience is a gripping eco-thriller that blends techniques of documentary filmmaking with a detective narrative. The film is split between the everyday musings of Pavel, a young man who has dedicated his life to nature preservation and protecting the land from deforestation, and Klára, an ornithologist whose latest case inquiry goes beyond the line of duty.

In the film's opening sequence, Pavel is walking his dogs along a frozen lake. He marvels at the icy floor below him, which has encased the healthy algae growing underneath. He whistles contentedly as he skis across the crystallized layer in his hiking boots, singing the nursery rhyme of the "white wolf." At this point, Pavel's blithe spirit seems unbreakable as its symbiotic relationship with nature changes like the seasons. But this closeness and acute spirituality come at a cost when his carefree attitude is bluntly thrown into disharmony by the presence of a wildfire. Caused by local construction works, images of uprooted tree stumps, chainsaws buzzing into trunks, and smoke clouds billowing from the ignited grass and branches cascade the screen. These machines of destruction ravage Pavel's fields. The once fruitful forest has had its growth stunted and the green aesthetic of the landscape has been replaced with an ashen grey. The devout Pavel's face is blackened from the neighboring blaze as he single-handedly tries to rescue the environment. His wane expression is one of rage, frustration, and sadness. As he hurries to provide damage control and stop the spread of the fire, he whimpers, "If you put a lot into it, you burn out." The once positive Pavel looks inward as he gradually realizes and accepts the futility of his position. However confident and hardworking his efforts may be to protect the earth, they are in fact minuscule in comparison to the overshadowing industrial powers that are working against him and his garden.

Working for the Czech Ornithological Society is Klára, who spends her time protecting the local environment from illegal farming and other man-made threats. On one of her routine expeditions in the countryside, accompanied by her cooperative brown Labradors, she encounters the corpse of an endangered white-tailed eagle. When she uncovers numerous other wildlife that have died from similar unnatural causes, Klára

suspects foul play and a larger threat to the area's ecosystem. As the investigation unfolds, the evidence points to a restricted pesticide used by the local farmers to protect their crops. In the lab, Klára's research indicates that the toxicity in the chemicals was also present in the insects ingested by the animals, which leads to their painful death by poisoning. Using GPS from the victim's locations, Klára maps out potential culprits within close proximity. This tense game of cat and mouse comes to a close when she raids the offender's pig pen with the police, finding the evidence she needs to put the farmer behind bars. In the courtroom, however, Klára looks on in disbelief and disappointment as the judge foregoes the criminal's two-and-a-half-year prison sentence with a three-and-a-half-year probation period instead. The damage to mother nature has already been done and the guilty party will walk away scot-free.

The performativity of this reenacted plot propels the film forward with its heightened style of suspense, leaning into the conventional aesthetic and tone of gritty police dramas. Importantly, this shift in mood and pace is seamless as it is interwoven with Pavel's generic interview scenes. In fact, this very juxtaposition masks the drastic contrast in the two characters' personalities. Pavel is a hypersensitive soul, hippie-like and emotionally governed by his deep-seated connection to nature. Klára is tougher, grounded by scientific findings and an empirical rationale. However opposing they seem, they are fighting for the same cause and as a result of the documentary's editing, they are united on screen.

There are many striking images in *Resilience*, from the grotesque decomposition of animals to a 360-degree camera pan that indicates the passing of a day. However, it is the microphotographic shots of the elements that exemplify the filmmaker's impressive style, elevating the substance of the film even further. They offer an organic beauty that is either overlooked by the naked eye or impossible to witness. For example, the archival NASA footage of solar winds on the sun's surface is both hypnotizing and formidable. It is the technology of the astrophotography telescope that allows us to observe the perpetually oscillating rings of fire knotted around the planet. During a montage of microscopic flora and fauna, the audience is permitted to appreciate the detailed textures of a flower's petals, and the glistening dew drops that are otherwise invisible to human sight. Even bubbles of trapped air enveloped by icy crystals look like intricate snowflakes of DNA in a petri dish, each one a uniquely shaped shard of glass.

Similarly, there is also a very innovative use of sound in the film. Nature's electromagnetic signals have been interpreted as electronic cues in the score, illustrating the ways in which nature is constantly communicating with itself, correcting itself and seeking - in this instance - an aural equilibrium. Notably, the score uses samples of audio lifted from solar winds captured on Venus. When accompanying the more abstract images of the documentary, such as the extreme close-ups of natural elements, these unusual noises add a sense of other-worldliness. As a result, it is as if the audience is looking at the world for the first time again, in awe of the sublime spectacle on display that we often take for granted in our everyday lives.