

# FILM CRITICISM

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Cover: MAN OF IRON

# Men of Wajda

Geoffrey Fox

In *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, director Andrzej Wajda has given us complex images of the class struggle in modern Poland, reflecting his private obsessions, his career as a filmmaker, and the demands made on him by the increasingly self-conscious Polish working class. In *Man of Marble* (1976), he imposed his vision on the past; in *Man of Iron* (1980), events have imposed themselves on his vision. The second film completes the first, esthetically and politically.

When *Man of Marble* finally opened in Wrocław in February 1977, after months of hesitation by the Polish censors and only two months after the big strikes in Radom and Warsaw's Ursus tractor factory, the audience rose and began singing the Polish national anthem; in Warsaw, people paid scalpers up to fifteen times the usual 30 *zlotys* for admission.<sup>1</sup> Wajda had broken the seal on a secret that Poland kept only from itself — the alienation of the workers from the workers' state. And he had done this almost by accident, while poking around a theme of immediate personal concern: the tension between the creative film artist and the bureaucratic control of film production.

*Man of Marble* opens with old newsreel footage of enthusiastic marchers, bearing immense poster-portraits of Stalin and the long-forgotten Bolesław Bierut.<sup>2</sup> Next, a young labor hero orates fervently before a mass rally and assumes stirring poses for photographers and a sculptor. The music is heroic, the hair is short, the gestures stiff and determined. It is the early 1950s. Then suddenly the hair becomes longer, the gestures flowing, the music rock — we race through modern Warsaw in a van with lithe, blond Agnieszka and her camera crew as the credits appear.

Agnieszka (Krystyna Janda) is looking for material for her diploma film when she discovers the fallen marble statue of the labor

hero from the newsreel, locked in a museum storeroom with other relics of the 1950s. Intrigued, she sets out to reconstruct his story through the film archives and interviews.

The "man of marble" was Mateusz Birkut (Jerzy Radziwiłowicz), a simple and enthusiastic young bricklayer assigned to construct the steel-mill city, Nowa Huta. It was the now-famous filmmaker Burski (played by Tadeusz Łomnicki and Jacek Łomnicki) who made him a hero. Burski was then an ambitious beginner whose hilarious *cinéma vérité* reports of the party's attempt to turn peasants into proletarians were taking his career nowhere; he then had hit on the idea of finding, or creating, a "Stakhanovite" (exemplary worker) to inspire the masses and gain recognition for himself.<sup>3</sup> He found Birkut.

The scene, as recounted by Burski, is a send-up of the whole "social emulation" movement of the epoch. Birkut and his carefully selected crew are rehearsed, stuffed for days with extra proteins, specially barbered and posed, and then in eight gruelling hours lay the unprecedented (and absurd) number of 30,509 bricks before camera, spectators, and the local band. Both directors and star are now launched on their separate careers.

Birkut delights in his sudden fame, posing for his statue and photographs, speaking before trade union meetings, and demonstrating his bricklaying technique in outlying villages. He believes his own myth. But the idyll ends when, during one of these demonstrations, someone hands him a hot brick, crippling his hands. Birkut is shocked: how could one worker do this to another? His comrade Witek tries to explain that, to most workers, "socialist emulation" is simply speed-up.

Birkut now channels his socialist zeal into the defense of workers against officialdom, much to the latter's annoyance. When Witek is accused of the hot brick incident, Birkut rushes to his defense with a perposterous tale of overlapping conspiracies, in which he and Witek headed rival counterrevolutionary bands dedicated to sabotaging each other because both were labor heroes! The show-trial ends in confusion, and the film record is stashed in the archives for Agnieszka to discover twenty-some years later.

After a farcical sequence in which Birkut, drunken and disgusted, careens through the streets with a Gypsy band and finally "returns" a Nowa Huta brick through the glass door of police headquarters, he is tried, condemned, and disgraced for anti-state activities. His statue and portraits are removed from public display and he is imprisoned until the workers' revolt of 1956, which results in amnesty for victims of past "errors and distortions."

Agnieszka's interviews of his old acquaintances present sharp, comic sketches of the various modes of adaptation by old-line Communists to the new, more prosperous Poland: the oily security officer who arrested Witek, now producing strip-tease shows in Warsaw's Palace of Culture; the construction chief of Nowa Huta, dreaming of remaking picturesque Cracow in neat rectangles; Witek, become a captain of industry who consents to be interviewed in his helicopter; Birkut's ex-"live-together," now the wife of a well-to-do minor entrepreneur, breaking down into alcoholic blathering when she



recalls her desertion and denunciation of Birkut in his hour of disgrace; and the filmmaker Burski, living in suburban splendor — when not jetting around Europe — and a little afraid that Agnieszka will think he has sold out. Burski is a self-caricature of Wajda, who in 1950 was assistant director of an actual documentary on Nowa Huta and is today Poland's best known and most powerful film figure.

But Birkut himself has disappeared. The modishly-dressed young opportunist who directs Agnieszka's unit at the film institute is furious: this stuff she has put together, this *mélange* of tape and film with its record of moral deterioration and long-ago injustices, this cannot possibly be presented on television! The chairman of the State Radio and Television Committee has made it perfectly clear — complete with diagrams — that television is to present a “propoganda of success.”<sup>4</sup> The young *apparatchik* seizes her camera and denies her further film stock. Agnieszka persists, of course — after all, this is a movie — and finally finds Birkut's illegitimate son in — where else? — the Lenin Shipyards of Gdansk. He tells her his father is dead. The final scene in *Man of Marble* shows Agnieszka marching triumphantly through the film institute corridors with Birkut's son on their way to confront the Minister. But the film ends ambiguously and abruptly, leaving open several important questions. Will Agnieszka be permitted to complete her film? And what really became of honest, stubborn Birkut? To find out, Polish film audiences would have to wait four years.

What had happened was that Wajda decided he had gone far enough in his challenge to the official historiography. Merely talking about censorship was, ordinarily, enough to activate it in Poland in 1976 — and *Man of Marble* is about censorship, the censorship of history and of filmmaking. It is also about corruption and the hypocrisy of Communist functionaries. The logic of Wajda's plot had led him to a scene in which Agnieszka and Birkut's son search for his father's grave in the Gdansk cemetery, where — Wajda would have given the necessary clues — it becomes clear that Birkut died in the shipyard workers' revolt of 1970. However, the director told Daniel Bickley and Lenny Rubinstein in 1980, “I decided to cut out this scene, but on the advice of my friends rather than the demands of my opponents. Even those on my side in the Ministry [of Culture] did not feel the film could be released with this scene in it. The scene was impossible for them to accept.”<sup>5</sup>

Nobody but Wajda could have made a film this critical in Poland, or probably anywhere else in socialist Europe. Considered one of the founders of modern Polish cinema, Wajda enjoys both prestige and power within the cultural establishment. His many films have won prizes in the Soviet Union, the United States, and elsewhere, and he is also well known as a stage director. In addition, he heads one of the eight movie units that propose film ideas to the Minister of Culture, who then approves financing. He has described himself as an “older, established director who has proven himself [and] can vouch for the talent of a younger colleague, who normally would be unable to discuss new films with the Minister. That is my duty as a producer, to act as a go-between with the Ministry.”<sup>6</sup> When other intellectuals were already breaking openly with the party (especially over the

repression of the strikers), the Ministry of Culture could ill afford to alienate Wajda.<sup>7</sup>

Even after the cuts, as Nina Darnton tells it, *Man of Marble* was still so politically pointed that, after it was released in 1977, the Vice Minister of Culture, who headed Poland's film industry, was dismissed. And soon thereafter, his boss, the Minister of Culture, was moved to the then less politically important job of Minister of Education, expelled from the Politburo, and subsequently sent out of the country as Ambassador to Switzerland. But nothing happened to Wajda. " 'Nothing can ever happen to Wajda,' says Krzysztof Teplitz, smiling. 'He is a national hero.' " <sup>8</sup>

Despite its puzzling anticlimax, Wajda's morality play about two innocents a generation apart won a double triumph: an immense popular success at home, where the film made it *permissible* to talk about repressed and painful memories, and more plaudits abroad. *Man of Marble* won the International Critics' Prize at Cannes in 1978, partly in admiration that such a film had been made at all, and partly because it has been made so well — Wajda's visual images are stunning, and the interspersal of authentic and fake documentary footage as a kind of unspoken commentary on the reconstruction of reality is extremely effective.

Wajda went on to do other projects, films and plays, waiting for his chance to complete the story. His plan, as he told Bickley and Rubinstein, was to "begin in 1976, then jump back to the last years of the life of Birkut, the 'man of marble.' But the story's focus will be on the life of the young worker, Birkut's son." <sup>9</sup> Contemporary events — the growing workers' movement — made it too late to "begin in 1976" to recount the struggles of 1970; the real story, the only one anybody cared about, was happening in 1980. All else was prelude.

The same Ursus tractor factory that had "exploded" in 1976 went on strike again on July 1, as soon as they heard the Government's announcement of yet another attempt to raise meat prices. Work stoppages spread from shop to shop, involving grievances over production norms, family allowances, food supplies and prices; the Government, afraid of another massive revolt as in 1970, raised wages and bought off — temporarily — each group of strikers with special concessions. This improvised stratagem had the effect of inspiring others to make similar demands: "Those who do not strike do not eat meat," was the message. <sup>10</sup>

Soon workers in Warsaw, Lublin, Swidnik, and other towns were making more extensive demands for greater equality and refusing to be satisfied with the wage hikes and the special shipments of meat that the Government rushed to the strike scenes. Then the Lenin Shipyards of Gdansk, the very same yards that had been at the center of the 1970 uprising that brought down Wladislaw Gomulka, went out. By the time Wajda was ready to film *Man of Iron*, the shipyards were occupied and controlled by the strikers who were demanding, among other things, recognition of their own "independent" trade union federation.

So Wajda's "man of iron," Maceij Tomczyk (played by the same Jerzy Radziwilowicz who played Birkut) becomes a "Solidarity"



organizer and a comrade of Lech Walesa in the Lenin shipyards. Walesa himself not only appears in news tapes and films but even lends his reality to the fiction in a bit of dialogue with Tomczyk and Agnieszka. Other well-known figures who play themselves in the movie include Tadeusz Fiszbach, Gdansk first party secretary, and Anna Walentynowicz, the crane operator and union organizer whose firing was one of the grievances of the Lenin strikers.

The resulting film is extraordinary, combining the saga of a too-simple Everyman and a collective self-portrait of the Gdansk strikers. If the newsreels were a device to dramatize the fiction in *Man of Marble*, the fiction is a device to condense and fill in the background for the far more urgent and complex current events in *Man of Iron*.

As in the earlier film, the story of the "man of iron" is assembled before our eyes by a television journalist, using interviews and film archives. But this time the journalist is not a persistent seeker after truth, but a pudgy, cowardly spy sent to gather dirt on Tomczyk by the sinister television executive.

The journalist, Winkiel (Marian Opania), discovers first of all that Gdansk is dry — the strike committee has so decreed, in an important measure to maintain strike discipline. He then finds out (after he secures a bottle of vodka from a party boss's secret cache) that young Tomczyk was a student at the Gdansk Polytechnic during the 1968 strike, which Birkut (his father), then an unofficial leader among the shipwrights, refused to support, telling his son that the students had fallen for government "provocation." Then, when the shipyards strike two years later, Tomczyk and the other students refuse to join. The strikers become more assertive, the state panics and then throws militia and armor against them. Birkut is one of the casualties.

After the death of his father, Tomczyk momentarily goes berserk, then drops out of school to become a shipwright. He spends the next years protesting the abuses of workers. Tomczyk, like Birkut, stands for a broader movement within the working class, and here Wajda uses the "man of iron" to show the false starts, setbacks, and persistence of those who were organizing outside official channels.

*Man of Marble* told two stories, skillfully interwoven: the detective tale of shrewd and thoroughly modern Agnieszka, and the folk epic of old-fashioned, principled Birkut. *Man of Iron* also has its detective journalist and its morally pure folk hero, but both narrative lines fall within a third story whose protagonist is an entire class. All movies have that "other" story, the one that does not fit on the screen and that sets the conditions in which the film is made, but few movies try to tell it. *Man of Iron* does. The strikers with whom both Winkiel and Tomczyk mingle in the shipyards are real strikers, who also take an active interest in how they are portrayed. The film's climax coincides with the victory of that class, overwhelming the little lives of the scriptwriter's creations. It is the ceremonial signing of the formal protocol by the Government (represented by Deputy Prime Minister Mieczyslaw Jagielsi) and the Gdansk regional interfactory strike committee, MKS (represented by Lech Walesa), on August 31, 1980, "a peace treaty between two sovereign powers," "a truce in Poland's class war."<sup>11</sup>

Their participation in this film was extremely important to the workers of Gdansk, so important that Wajda has complained that they will not let him cut out any of the overlong characterizations and minor characters. As a result, the film is as misshapen and vibrant as the movement it represents, full of humor and exaggerations and extravagant gestures — like Lech Walsea's producing a foot-long red and white pen, a souvenir of the Pope's visit, to sign the "truce."

The self-consciousness of the Polish working class in the 1980s indicates a new awareness of the importance of mass communications. Thus the New York Times reported (November 10, 1981) that the miners of Sosnowiec "resolved to strike because their grievances had not been presented over television," and editorial control over television news concerning the workers has been a persistent demand of the Solidarity cadres.

In *Man of Iron*, Wajda's use of the strikers has been balanced by their use of him, resulting in a marvellous propaganda film of broad collective authorship, augmented by the skill of one of Europe's finest directors. The great difference between *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* results from this collaboration.

Incidentally, Tomczyk and Agnieszka are now married (Lech Walsea attended their wedding) and have a child. The next stage of the class struggle in Poland may one day be represented by the daughter of the son of the man of marble.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>From film notes on the Kosciuszko Foundation, prepared from materials by Stephanie Doba and Antonin Liehm, from the Brazilian magazine *Istoé* (13 May 1981), 3.

<sup>2</sup>A Polish Communist and Soviet citizens who became president of Poland in 1946, Bierut was one of that class of well-meaning but ineffective eastern European functionaries affectionately satirized in Isaac Deutscher's 1950 essay, "The Tragic Life of a Polrugarian Minister." Bierut died shortly before the 1956 protests that brought down the government and resulted in the installation of Wladislaw Gomulka as president. See Deutscher, *Heretics and Renegades and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>3</sup>Aleksei Grigorevich Stakhanov was a Soviet coal miner in the Donets Basin whose team increased its daily output sevenfold by an improved division of labor (1935); "Stakhanovism" was promoted as a variety of "scientific management" (the term used by the American efficiency expert Frederick Winslow Taylor) emerging spontaneously from the workers themselves.

<sup>4</sup>On Chairman Maciej Szczepanski's theories and diagrams for the Happiness Hour news program, see Richard M. Levine, "Polish Government Vs. the Workers: Why TV Is the Prized Weapon," *TV Guide* (November 7, 1981) 15ff.

<sup>5</sup>*Cineaste*, XI (Winter 1980-81), 7.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>7</sup>The Committee for the Defense of Workers, KOR, was founded by writer Jerzy Andrzejewski, socialist economist Edward Lipinski, actress Halina Mikolajska, political activist Jacek Kuron, and six others in September 1976. That same year, Wajda "refused to sign a petition circulating among opposition figures protesting a proposal to write the Communist Party's leading role in the country into the Polish Constitution...At the time, Wajda was making 'Man of Marble,' which he knew would be a politically important film. He reasoned that it was more important for him to see that film released than to add his name to a long list of others on the petition.

" 'I didn't sign, but I was wrong,' he says now with deep feeling. 'I think that regardless of what I thought at the time, I should have signed, and I can never forgive myself.' " See Nina Darnton, "Poland's Man of Films," *New York Times Magazine*, October 11, 1981, p. 141. On KOR, see Daniel Singer, *The Road to Gdansk: Poland and the USSR* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), pp. 186ff.

<sup>8</sup>Darnton, p. 130. Teplitz is a Polish film critic.

<sup>9</sup>*Cineaste*, 8.

<sup>10</sup>Singer, p. 212.

<sup>11</sup>Both phrases are from Singer, p. 209. His is the best account I have read of the sixty days leading to the Gdansk agreement.