

Andrzej Wajda as Historian

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From the end of World War II until 1989, Polish cinema, like almost all fields of social life in Poland, was subject to overwhelming pressure and control from the communist state, which was watching over the purity of socialist orthodoxy in the works of scholars, writers, journalists, and filmmakers. In People's Poland there was only one way of interpreting the past and recounting history, and that was defined and enforced by the authoritarian state. Any departure from the established Marxist–Leninist norm was regarded as an act of sabotage and punished. Reprisals included a ban on public film screenings and publications, and in some cases even imprisonment or interdiction to pursue one's career. It was not until the Round Table “Revolution” of 1989 and the fall of communism in Poland – which was followed by the demise of the Soviet system in Central and Eastern Europe – that both ordinary people and artists were able to breathe the air of freedom and enjoy pluralism of thought. But, after that crucial landmark, historical discourse in Poland, both academic and artistic, ceased to be the property of the state. History became both a subject of open argument and a free area for debate between different social actors: historians, journalists, artists, writers, filmmakers, and ordinary people. It was under such conditions of belonging in two different worlds that filmmaker and historian Andrzej Wajda had to work and make his films.

As Hayden White states:

No history, visual or verbal, “mirrors” all or even the greater part of the events or scenes of which it purports to be account, and this is true even of the most narrowly restricted “micro-history.” Every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. (White 1988: 1194)

Writing history is to some extent “analogous,” but not identical, to making a historical film. Just as a historian conceptualizes the object of his/her studies,

A Companion to the Historical Film, First Edition. Edited by Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu.
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selects his/her source material and factual documentation, and chooses the style of narration, so does a director determine the object of his interest: s/he collects, selects, and arranges material so as to use it as a basis for making a film in a chosen style. The selection of source documents, the ways by which historians interpret, juxtapose, and compare them, the ways of representing them, and the ways of creating a historical narrative are, from a technical point of view, not unlike what filmmakers describe as selection, editing, camera movement and perspective, close-ups, foreground, background, lighting, music, acting, and so on. Albeit in different ways, these two sets of operations are used to construct different versions of possible historical worlds. This also means that the wealth of cinematic means of expression enables a filmmaker to put across thoughts, criticism, polemics, and opinions on a given matter in no less interesting, profound, and useful ways than those who write history do.

That being so, we must recognize the validity of Robert Rosenstone's suggestion that, for a film to be regarded as historical, it should be involved in a broader debate on the past and it should engage in a dialogue with academic historiography as well as with other forms of dealing with the past, which are found in literature, television, theater, on the Internet, or in the activities of historical reconstruction groups. Films that wish to be regarded as serious works of history should make a creative contribution to our understanding of the past, and to history, in the context of the present day. Moreover, the evaluation of a film as a work of history should be based not on criteria developed in historiography, but on strategies of argumentation, metaphorization, and symbolization – that is, on forms of audiovisual modeling of a possible historical world – and should pay heed to the specific way in which the film enables us to understand the past in the context of historical knowledge that we already possess (Rosenstone 1995: 1–82, 169–198; Rosenstone 2006: 1–32, 154–165).

Historical films by Andrzej Wajda

Wajda is one of those directors who have made historical reflection on the past the hallmark of their films. His war films are visualizations of the German occupation and of the struggle against the invaders in Poland. The stories of specific characters in his films mirror the lives of thousands of people affected in different ways by the war: people who fought in the Polish army in September 1939 (*Lotna*, 1959); those who, after the defeat, joined in the armed struggle against the German invaders as members of underground resistance – both communists and people subordinate to the London-based Polish government in exile (*Pokolenie / A Generation*, 1954; *Kanał*, 1956); those who tried only to survive the war, looking after their own interests (*Wielki Tydzień / The Holy Grail*, 1995); those who were persecuted and killed in the ghettos and concentration camps on account of their Jewish origin (*Wielki Tydzień*;

Samson, 1961; *Korczak*, 1990); those who were made passive witnesses to the Holocaust, those who hid Jews and saved their lives, and those who betrayed to the Nazis the Jews harbored by Polish families (*Wielki Tydzień; Samson*); those who collaborated with the Germans and, more or less intentionally, participated in the genocide (*Wyrok na Franciszka Kłosa / The Condemnation of Franciszek Klos*, 2000); those who suffered from the mental disorder described by Antoni Kępiński as the KZ syndrome¹ (*Krajobraz po bitwie / Landscape after the Battle*, 1970); those who were murdered in Soviet prison camps (*Katyń*, 2007); finally, those who, immediately after the war, found themselves to be “doomed soldiers” (also known as “cursed soldiers”), waging armed struggle against the newly installed communist regime (*Popiół i diament / Ashes and Diamonds*, 1958; *Pierścionek z orłem w koronie / The Crowned-Eagle Ring*, 1992).

In his works concerned with earlier historical periods, Wajda approaches the past in similar ways. In *Danton* (1982) he reflects on the social experience of change in the status of a historical figure who, from a creator of history, becomes its victim. Yet most of these films and television plays thematize the Polish struggle for independence and its consequences during the Napoleonic campaigns and national uprisings of the nineteenth century. The experiences of thousands of Polish soldiers who believed Napoleon and fought his morally dubious wars in the hope of regaining national freedom are concentrated in the vicissitudes of two characters in *Popioły* (*Ashes*, 1965): Rafał Olbromski and Krzysztof Cedro. The stories of the protagonists of *Wesele* (*The Wedding*, 1972) and *Noc Listopadowa* (*November Night*, 1978) reflect the destiny of many Polish patriots who, driven by Romantic impulses, organized conspiracies, plotted insurrections, and revolted against the invaders.²

Wajda's films concerned with contemporary history are visualizations of the fate of Poles trapped in the communist system, in which some found their place, rebuilding the country, whereas others did not, fighting for freedom of expression and to expose the criminal character of the communist system (*Człowiek z marmuru / Man of Marble*, 1976; and *Człowiek z żelaza / Man of Iron*, 1981).

The above-mentioned films by Wajda are highly diversified in terms of drama, style, aesthetics, and the perception of history. It is therefore fair to say, on the basis of the interplay between various interrelated dramatic and formal devices, that they model alternative versions of possible historical worlds in many different ways.

I shall present the historiosophical, dramatic, and formal diversity of Andrzej Wajda's representations of the past and the multidimensional character of his cinematic tales in the examples of two films. I shall analyze first *A Generation*, Wajda's film début of 1954; and, second, his *Man of Marble*, made in 1976. The comparison of such different works from such distant periods of his cinematic and historical activity will reveal the complexity and depth of the reflection on the past that Wajda conveyed to the screen.

Formally, the historical narrative of both *A Generation* and *Man of Marble* is more or less transparent. Endowed with a beginning, a development, and a conclusion,

these films portray realistically specific fragments of a recent or more distant past, in chronological order, in each case through a linear story consisting of a series of causally related events occurring in time and space. The narratives of both films revolve around a more or less dynamic action, understood as a series of changing situations, circumstances, and events. These all combine to form a well-articulated diegetic and dramatic whole, manifesting itself as a dynamic, internally coherent space–time structure of the represented historical world. Disruptions to the integrity and continuity of the space–time order of events presented in the films – for example in the form of retrospection or introspection – are justified dramatically and clearly marked, so that they do not lead to the disintegration of the represented world and they do not disrupt the narrative.

At the same time, the formal and dramatic devices applied by the director to achieve these results are different in the two films, which means that each one represents a different version of cinematic historical realism. Thus each one models the past in a different way.

A Generation/Pokolenie (1954)

Shot in black and white, *A Generation* is a visualization of the past that tells the story of a group of young communist resistance fighters – Stach, Dorota, and Janek Krone. The protagonist is Stach, a young boy who makes a living by stealing coal from German rail transports. After one such incursion that ends tragically in his friend's death, he gives up robbing trains and finds employment in a carpenter's shop owned by Berg. Under the influence of Sekuła and Dorota and a young activist in a communist resistance youth organization called the Association of Fighting Youth (*Związek Walki Młodych*) – an activist whom he had met at school and fallen in love with – he joins the left-wing People's Guard (*Gwardia Ludowa*), another communist resistance organization. Stach involves Janek Krone, a friend from work, in resistance activities. Their unit takes part in combat actions organized in support of Jews fighting in the Warsaw ghetto. During one of such actions Janek Krone dies. The day after the action, Dorota is arrested by the Gestapo. In the conclusion of the film, Stach takes over her duties, organizes a new combat group, and becomes its commander.

The construction of characters in *A Generation* relies on the assumption of their rationality, that is, on the belief that their behavior can be explained through their own knowledge about the circumstances of their actions, as well as about the purpose and potential or actual consequences of these actions. Thus the decisions and actions of each character are dramatically motivated. Stach has several reasons for stealing coal from German transports. One of them is poverty; another is a firm conviction that stealing from German invaders is an act of patriotism. Stach's joining the communist resistance movement is also dramatically justified. The boy makes the acquaintance of Sekuła, a friendly old communist, who

awakes his political and ideological awareness. An additional incentive to join the underground is provided by Stach's love for Dorota, a beautiful activist. The motives of Stach's decisions and actions are economic, political, ideological, and emotional. Thus the events presented in the film unfold according to a causal logic adopted by the director in constructing his historical world.

In *A Generation* Wajda imbues the past with emotions. Stach and Dorota are united by love. Other characters are driven by irrational impulses. For instance, after Stach is beaten by the Germans, his young friends break the rules of underground operations and, in a fit of anger, without approval from their commanders, they carry out a death sentence on a German soldier. Wajda also injects emotions into particular events. Stach watches with horror as the Germans lead the arrested Dorota out of the building; and the scene showing Janek Krone's death is even more dramatic. Fleeing from German soldiers, the boy runs up the staircase of a tenement house. Soldiers follow him in hot pursuit. The door to the roof turns out to be locked. Cornered by the enemies, he shoots at the Germans until his ammunition is out, then climbs onto the banister and throws himself off the edge, committing suicide in order to avoid being captured (see Figure 8.1).

The film is set in Warsaw and its outskirts, in natural outdoor locations and in interiors that are either natural or modeled on natural ones, giving the viewer an opportunity to discover the visual aspect of the past during German occupation. We see the streets, the buildings, and the poor suburbs of Warsaw; the actors' costumes enable us to observe how its inhabitants dressed during the war and what German soldiers looked like; the setting presents everyday living conditions,



Figure 8.1 Dramatic scene showing Janek Krone's death. *Pokolenie* (*A Generation*, 1954). Producer: Wytwórnia Filmów Fabularnych / Feature Film Production Company, Wrocław. Director of production: Ignacy Ȧaub. Film director: Andrzej Wajda

specific locations, flats, workshops, staircases, everyday articles, and weapons. The opening scene gives us a panorama of the represented historical world by way of surveilling the working-class slums of Wola, a quarter of Warsaw. We see ramshackle, miserable houses, rags hanging on washing lines, children chasing a ball, and shabbily dressed people roaming the streets. Other outdoor scenes in Warsaw show dilapidated buildings, sometimes burning or smoldering; cobbled streets, empty or filled with people; and human corpses hanging on roadside posts, which complete the grim landscape of the occupied city. The interiors of buildings, where many scenes take place, also look gloomy as they show the living conditions of the working class. One sequence, filmed in several static shots cut and pasted together, depicts Stach's flat: a single low-ceiling room, claustrophobically cramped, poorly furnished, and lit by a kerosene lamp, with unplastered walls and one single window looking out on the yard.³

In *A Generation* Wajda succeeds in creating a comprehensible, realistic, and convincing fragment of reality. Visually, the film's opening shot reconstructs the past from an impersonal, objective perspective. Yet Wajda's plot is often recounted by a subjective narration, which is achieved through two formal devices. One is camera viewpoint – a technique of subjectivizing the film narrative by making the camera adopt the viewpoint of a specific character. In the scene of Janek Krone's death, which is largely filmed from a third-person perspective, we also look briefly through his eyes at the German soldiers firing at him. Similarly, we experience Dorota's arrest scene through Stach's eyes. At another point – in a scene showing a clandestine meeting of the People's Guard in Dorota's flat where she gives a fiery ideological speech to the assembled comrades – the camera takes a panoramic shot of the listeners' faces, then cuts to a close shot of Dorota and Stach standing near each other and looking out of the window. This is followed by a long shot in which we are looking out at the yard where children are frolicking in the dusk, by the light of burning torches. The above examples can be interpreted in different ways. In the first two scenes of the film the narrative is subjectivized in order to emphasize the personal drama of the characters: Janek Krone, who is hopelessly trapped, and Stach, who loses his beloved. In the third scene, the subjectivized narration serves to emphasize the nostalgic mood of the two characters and their yearning for normality symbolized by the carefree children playing in the yard, in sharp contrast with the realities of war and resistance.

Wajda also achieves subjectivization by pushing Stach to the foreground and by incorporating his off-screen commentary. The first panoramic shot of the outskirts of Warsaw is accompanied by Stach's voice-over, in which he introduces himself to the viewers, acquaints them with the world on screen and reveals that the story they are about to watch is his own. His commentary recurs in *A Generation* a few more times, reinforcing his role as witness and guide to the recounted events. As a result, the cinematic reality becomes the projection of the perception, knowledge, or perhaps memory of the film's protagonist. Subjectivization increases realism, because it endows it with participant and eye-witness authenticity.

The images and camerawork of *A Generation* draw on the aesthetics of Italian neo-realism. Monochrome images are more or less deliberately unpolished, characteristically underexposed, and technically imperfect, so as to suggest documentary footage. Wajda's indoor takes are dark and appear to be deliberately underexposed. Yet even outdoor scenes in the daylight are darkened – either by the billows of black smoke obscuring the sky (as in the scenes that show the burning Jewish ghetto) or by long, broad streaks of shadow cast by buildings over the streets and squares (as in the scenes that show Janek Krone being pursued by the Germans and a military action in support of Jewish fighters in the ghetto). These features combine to create an impression of documentary footage filmed on authentic locations under natural conditions (see Figure 8.2).

The impression of documentary photography is reinforced by the way in which specific shots are filmed and framed. Wajda uses mostly long takes, which slow down the pace of the action, and he films them mostly in full or medium shots – and only seldom in long shots or close-ups. He manages to achieve the effect of registering an authentic pre-film reality that exists beyond the camera frame by framing specific shots in the manner of a documentary filmmaker. The scene showing a meeting in the brickyard, for example, is filmed in long takes from a fixed camera set in a spot and at an angle that do not offer the spectator a privileged perspective on the cinematic reality. Another example could be a scene in which Sekuła inspects a door fitted into a door frame by Stach. The scene is



Figure 8.2 Shot from a scene that takes place in a cheap bar where Stach makes the acquaintance of Sekuła; like other dark, black-and-white images in Wajda's film, this one appears to be deliberately underexposed. *Pokolenie* (*A Generation*, 1954). Producer: Wytwórnia Filmów Fabularnych/Feature Film Production Company, Wrocław. Director of production: Ignacy Taub. Film director: Andrzej Wajda

composed in such a way as to suggest that the camera spied on the workers and could not show everything, unless it revealed its presence. Historical reality is thus presented on the screen as if it were unstaged, and images appear to be authentic.

In *A Generation* music, too, has a number of important functions in the process of modeling the cinematic past within the narrative. Wajda uses music in a standard way – that is, both as a structural element of the represented historical world and as an accompaniment heard from beyond the frame. In the first case, music enables Wajda to identify more clearly the place of action and to imitate the effect of screen realism. For example, in a scene showing a meeting between Stach, Dorota, and Sekuła, we hear organ music. The sounds are coming from a church by which the three characters have arranged to meet. Music plays the same role elsewhere in the film. In the scene of an evening meeting between Stach, Jacek, Janek, and Mundek somewhere close to the walls of the Jewish ghetto – the meeting during which the boys plan an action to assist Jewish fighters – we hear the sounds of kitsch, funfair music coming from afar. Thus the presence of church music in the former scene and of funfair music in the latter, dramatically justified as it is, also appears to be a natural element of historical diegesis, disambiguating the place of action and intensifying the sense of realism of the past portrayed on the screen. In both cases diegetic music constitutes a “natural” background for the unfolding events.

Off-screen music played by a symphonic orchestra has, by contrast, descriptive and illustrative historiographical functions. Music from beyond the frame also determines the emotional attitude of the viewer to the cinematic historical world. The scene in which Janek Krone looks at corpses hanging on roadside posts and reads a German announcement is accompanied by a sinister musical motif. In the sequence of Janek Krone’s suicide, very loud, almost hysterical music emphasizes his tragic situation. In contrast, the images of Stach riding in a cab through Warsaw on his way to a timber yard are accompanied by cheerful music, illustrating the good mood of the main protagonist, who is enjoying the ride. At one point, however, Stach passes a group of Jewish workers escorted by the Jewish police. The character of the music changes rapidly from joyful to disturbing, accentuating the change in Stach’s mood, as well as the tragic situation of Jews.

Although the film is made in a realist, quasi-documentary style, Wajda does not refrain from formal devices of a distinctly metaphorical character to provide more synthetic representations of the past. A significant historical theme in *A Generation* is the Warsaw ghetto uprising, of which we learn from conversations between characters. Wajda shows the tragedy of the Jewish fighters and other inhabitants of the ghetto in a symbolic way. The fighting in the Warsaw quarter is not represented on the screen, nor do we see the Jewish combatants or the suppression of the uprising by the Germans. The drama of the inhabitants of the ghetto is conveyed only through images of burning buildings and of a sky obscured by billows of black smoke, which are accompanied by monumental music heard from beyond the screen, which intensifies the atmosphere of the Holocaust horror (see Figure 8.3).



Figure 8.3 Wajda shows the tragedy of the Jewish fighters and other inhabitants of the ghetto in a symbolic way. *Pokolenie* (*A Generation*, 1954). Producer: Wytwórnia Filmów Fabularnych/Feature Film Production Company, Wrocław. Director of production: Ignacy Taub. Film director: Andrzej Wajda

At an ideological level (or in terms of a worldview), *A Generation* conforms to the tenets of socialist realism. The film is saturated with communist “newspeak” and presents reality in a way that lends credence to a left-wing vision of the human world. The result is a fairly schematic film with a didactic message. The main exponent of communist views, which are articulated in the characteristic style of communist propaganda, is the old worker Sekuła, who acts as an ideological leader, teacher, and agitator. In *A Generation* the true patriots and fighters for the country’s freedom and for a future world of justice are members of the People’s Guard; they never question the objectives set by their leaders or the methods of achieving them. In contrast, the soldiers of the Home Army – which obeys the Polish government in exile – are arrogant collaborators, wheeler-dealers, and anti-Semites. One of the characters, Mr. Ziarno, embodies all the negative traits of Home Army soldiers. The positive characteristics of a true communist and patriot, on the other hand, are concentrated in the characters of Sekuła, Dorota, and Stach. The film also presents an uneven evaluation of specific underground organizations and their contribution to the struggle against the Germans. Wajda overplays the role and significance of the People’s Guard at the expense of the Home Army, as the film suggests that the main armed force to shoulder the burden of the struggle against the Germans was the former, whereas the latter was involved in shady activities on the fringe of the main theater of combat. Yet Wajda softens the socialist–realist pattern of the plot by introducing the character of Janek Krone, who, unlike Stach and Dorota, is an ambiguous figure – one might even say, the

opposite of a socialist–realist hero. Janek is not convinced that fighting is a good idea: he would like to survive the war and look after his old father. Even though he eventually joins the group, his motives remain unclear. Ultimately, however, he is the one who dies during an attempt to assist Jewish fighters, having made himself pursued by a German patrol, which enables the other members of his unit to withdraw to safety. By introducing Janek Krone, Wajda turns a one-dimensional, tendentious depiction of the past that was typical of socialist realism into a picture with shades of grey, thereby improving its credibility as a historical account.

Man of Marble/Człowiek z Marmuru (1976)

Wajda employs different strategies of constructing a cinematic historical narrative and different techniques of modeling the represented historical world in his 1976 *Man of Marble*. The film is an audiovisual auto-reflection, as well as a “record” of the historical experience and self-understanding of a generation that has seen the demise of many of its hopes and dreams and the beginning of a political thaw that started in Poland in October 1956. Wajda gives us a tale about history and – to put it in a broader context – about the relationship between the present and the past that can be an intellectual challenge to its viewers. Depending on his/her level of cultural awareness, the viewer may perceive *Man of Marble* as a realist historical film or as a work that transcends the confines of traditional cinematic realism and can be interpreted as a self-reflective historical tale. The film may appear either as a metaphorical structure endowed with the status of a formally transparent representation of the past or as a metaphorical structure that manifests its dependence on a number of cultural and media coordinates, thus revealing the constructed nature of cinematic historical narratives, and consequently the conventional and fictional dimension of the represented historical world created in the act of filming.

In the narration and modeling of the historical world represented in *Man of Marble* it is possible to distinguish several different levels of organization, marked by tensions at the audiovisual level, which result from the coexistence of various black-and-white and color sequences in opposition to one another. We can distinguish the following principal narrative planes that define *Man of Marble* as an audiovisual metaphorical structure: (1) color sequences presenting the contemporary context; (2) color sequences presenting the past reality; (3) black-and-white sequences presenting a history produced by the media of the time (Witek 2005: 237; Godzic 1984: 95). As metaphorical structures, the above sequences are organized in such a way that they can be interpreted as interrelated statements, which combine to create a specific formal and fictional whole (see Figure 8.4, Figure 8.5, and Figure 8.6).

Man of Marble can be perceived as a complete, finished story, traditionally built, consisting of a beginning, development, and end. It tells a linear, chronological tale of two protagonists: in the present, Agnieszka, a young documentary filmmaker; in the past, Mateusz Birkut, a hero of socialist labor. Both struggle with personal



Figure 8.4 A color sequence presenting a contemporary frame. *Człowiek z Marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, 1976). Producer: Zespół Filmowy X/Film Team X. Laboratory: Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych/Documentary Film Production Company, Warsaw, <http://www.wfdif.com.pl/o-nas.html>. Director of production: Barbara Pec-Ślesicka. Film director: Andrzej Wajda

problems, but each is also entangled in history in various ways. The story of the bricklayer Mateusz, a celebrity and a victim of his times, is picked up from the moment when he becomes a hero of socialist labor and is pursued through his long successful period – the years in which he attains the status of a living legend of the working class in People’s Poland – down to the point where his career as a Polish Stakhanovite comes to an end. His story is shown through the prism of Agnieszka’s vision and struggle to finish a diploma film about the victims and heroes of the Stalinist era – a film that she is ultimately unable to complete because of various formal, bureaucratic, and ideological obstacles.

Agnieszka assumes the role of a historian tracing the dark truth behind the images of Polish newsreels and monuments to heroes of socialist labor (the black-and-white past). As Tadeusz Sobolewski writes, her film is to be a magical reversal of the evil done several years earlier by the film director Burski, whose propaganda film about Birkut had turned the ordinary man into a statue destined to legitimize the communist system and the governing regime (Sobolewski 1989: 22). In conducting her own investigation for the purpose of making her film, Agnieszka attempts to re-evaluate the history of the 1950s. Her strategy is to find and interview people involved in those events: Burski, the author of Birkut’s image, drawn after idealized versions in Polish newsreels; Birkut’s wife, Hanka; Jodła, one of the communist party secretaries at the construction sites of Nowa Huta, where



Figure 8.5 A color sequence presenting a historical retrospective frame. *Człowiek z Marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, 1976). Producer: Zespół Filmowy X/Film Team X. Laboratory: Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych/Documentary Film Production Company, Warsaw, <http://www.wfdif.com.pl/o-nas.html>. Director of production: Barbara Pec-Ślesicka. Film director: Andrzej Wajda

Birkut worked; Michalak, Birkut's "guardian angel" from the Security Office; and Wincenty Witek, Birkut's friend.

Wajda's work carries a strong dramatic and emotional charge as it tells a very personal, sometimes bitter story – one that includes betrayal, despair, suffering, falsehood, and heroism in the case of Birkut; enthusiasm, triumph, failure, and disappointment in the case of Agnieszka. Her particular strength is the ability to coax – or even force – her subjects to remember the past. This allows us to watch the color story of the bricklayer set against the audiovisual black-and-white panorama of the Stalinist period.

Wajda employs a peculiar construction strategy, which is based on interrelationships: he makes a film about a film that reflects on another film. The black-and-white sequences (type 3) can be regarded as archival documentary material and as a legitimate historical source consisting of images of the past made in the past. In *Man of Marble*, some of the sequences modeled on documentary films play the role of authentic newsreel footage: they are actual fragments of propaganda documentaries reporting on the achievements and accomplishments of the working class. Other monochrome film materials, the so-called "outtakes" created by Wajda, serve as newsreel shots that have purportedly been excised for various reasons from the official versions approved for public distribution.



Figure 8.6 A black-and-white sequence presenting a media historical frame. *Człowiek z Marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, 1976). Producer: Zespół Filmowy X/Film Team X. Laboratory: Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych/Documentary Film Production Company, Warsaw, <http://www.wfdif.com.pl/o-nas.html>. Director of production: Barbara Pec-Ślesicka. Film director: Andrzej Wajda

With characteristic precision, Wajda “re-produces” the narrative strategies of the Polish Film Chronicle. This means that the viewer who watches, for example, Burski’s film titled *Oni budują nasze szczęście* (*They Are Building Our Happiness*) believes it to be archival footage. Wajda achieves the apparent authenticity of the Polish newsreel by using test shots and a peculiar, choppy editing. This device suggests that we are dealing with raw, unprocessed footage. Two good examples are the scenes showing the mutiny of workers at a construction site and Birkut’s interview taken by a recruitment officer.

Color sequences of the second type, which can be perceived as a reconstruction of events from the past, play the opposite role. This narrative plane of the film is also articulated in the realist style, in accordance with the principle of formal transparency. In *Man of Marble*, a color sequence of the second type is a visualization of the memories of witnesses who participated in the represented events of the 1950s. These serve to verify the veracity of the newsreel footage and to expose any distortions it may contain. The person thanks to whom these memories can come to light is, again, Agnieszka.

The black-and-white sequences modeled on the documentary footage of the Polish Film Chronicle appear to be a “realistic” record, an objectivized materialization of the official audiovisual experience of the 1950s. They are a visualization of a specific conception of the world and of the human being, a conception produced

in conformity with the state-imposed cultural standards of the time. What we are dealing with here is the so-called “poetics” or, more broadly speaking, aesthetics of socialist realism (Włodarczyk 1986). The monochrome images of the Polish Film Chronicle, juxtaposed with color sequences, can thus acquire specific meanings in the process of interpretative interaction. The director’s use of the black-and-white newsreel images may symbolize the one-dimensional way of perceiving the world at the time. Such an interpretation seems warranted, given the fact that – as Janina Falkowska writes – works of art of the Stalinist period were based on a black-and-white perception of the world (Falkowska 1996: 156). This is the kind of image we find when watching the footage of the Polish Film Chronicle, which presents two versions of the world: the desired one, built by the working class; and the evil one, constructed by the enemies of the people. The color sequences representing the images of the past that exist in the minds of witnesses to real history seem to present the social reality of that time as a more complex sphere of experience. It is therefore easy to see that the very fact of using color and monochrome sequences to present a specific fragment of the 1950s enables Wajda to emphasize the existence of two diverse visions of the world in his film: the official one, which predominated in the Stalinist period, and the multicolored and more nuanced one of memory.

Wajda’s strategy of modeling the represented historical world metaphorically, by means of the color/monochrome opposition, may acquire other meanings. Oliver Stone once observed that witnesses often construct, magnify, or embellish their experiences. Trying to interpret this structural device employed by Wajda in *Man of Marble*, we might therefore presuppose that, by showing the memories of his characters in color, the director indicates that these characters color their accounts. Experiences remembered by them become a collection of mysterious rumors, anecdotes, jokes, and sayings. Their multidimensional aspect means not so much that they are more complex, elaborate, or true, as that they have been experienced and remembered in a more personal manner. In these memories the past frequently appears as more colorful, sometimes less pompous, and hence different from the monochrome, official version of memory, which justifies the interpretation of the historical context of the second type as an audiovisual metaphor of memory, a fictionalization and an embellishment of recollections. The color sequences that constitute the historical frame can be perceived as a form of idealization and humanization of the gloomy past.

Man of Marble’s narrative consists of two types of narration: a so-called objectivized narration and a subjective one. The color sequence of the first type, depicting the present, is mainly articulated via this third-person narration. When Agnieszka converses with a TV journalist, the two of them are filmed from an impersonal perspective. The viewer is cast in the role of a witness to the events unfolding before him/her – a voyeur with a privileged perspective, which affords him/her a good insight into the historical world presented on screen. The film departs from this third-person narration as soon as the frame changes into the

retrospective one. In monochrome sequences of the third type we are watching the same images as Agnieszka, and thus we are looking at them through her eyes. In the case of the color sequences of the second type, we are dealing with the characters' recollections: their visions or perceptions of history, which they share with us. We are watching the 1950s through their eyes. They act as guides to their own memory. Thus, in the historical frame of the film, events appear to be narrated from the point of view of specific characters: Agnieszka and her interlocutors.

All the changes in the historical time–space are signaled through conventionalized means of expression. The introduction of monochrome documentary sequences is justified by the plot. Agnieszka watches old newsreels, selecting footage that she needs for her film about Birkut. Color sequences representing the historical frame are also signaled in a conventionalized way. The transition from the “color present” to the “color past” takes place during Agnieszka's conversations with witnesses, and it is marked by a close-up on the characters as they are recounting their memories (Burski, Michalak, Hanka, Witek). On several occasions, during a transition to the time–space of the 1950s, color images of the historical frame are accompanied for a while by contemporary commentary from the character who is sharing recollections. This means of expression is used, for example, in the scene showing the clandestine filming of Agnieszka's conversation with Michalak. That is why the editing together of two texturally and diegetically different shots does not result in their formal incoherence and does not give away the constructivist character of the film. These transitions from one sequence to another and from one historical time–space to another are smooth and fictionally justified.

In *Man of Marble* the represented historical world and its inhabitants have been constructed in such a way that a viewer with a specific degree of audiovisual competence can easily believe in their authenticity. The historical world of the 1950s and 1970s is, in a way, legitimated by conventionalized aesthetic strategies, which are generally recognized by the viewers as realist and which enable interpretative interaction with the film in terms of its “screen realism.”

Critics often perceived this film as a successful attempt at exposing the official version of history as distorted. This interpretation appears to be warranted by the way in which Wajda constructs Agnieszka, casting her in the role of a filmmaker and investigator, an explorer of mysteries from the dark past, and a discoverer of what is commonly described as the historical truth. According to Tadeusz Miczka, the main purpose of most of Wajda's films is to revise the traditional vision of history, that is, its state- or party-approved version (Miczka 1996: 33). This belief appears to be shared by other scholars, who offer similar interpretations of Wajda's works. Stefan Morawski (1975) writes that Andrzej Wajda is a critical artist who strikes where silence reigns or general hypocrisy lurks. He is, as it were, on constant alert to awaken dormant consciences and to challenge official optimism, in the belief that it is an artist's duty to be critical and to sensitize people to flawed history. According to Morawski, Wajda's works are a rare case of the present being absorbed into the

sphere of symbols and archetypes, whereby the filmmaker becomes a visionary of the past who searches for ways to the best possible history of tomorrow.

According to some scholars, *Man of Marble*, as an audiovisual structure, has a specific purpose. In writing about this film, one critic says that Wajda reveals here a characteristic Stalinist deviation, which consists in altering historical facts (Amengual 1996: 239). Tadeusz Sobolewski seems to concur with this interpretation when he writes that the film can be perceived as a tale about the lie of the ritual art of socialist realism and about the powerful influence of its propaganda images. In this context, specific metaphorical structures or strategies of modeling the represented historical world acquire a new significance. "Film documents incorporated by Wajda in this film" writes Sobolewski, "become documents in reverse: they make it possible to arrive at the sources of falsehood: at the sin of a lie that none of the participants is willing to confess." Wajda juxtaposes monochrome sequences from official newsreel footage with images buried deep in the archives and never used by the Polish Film Chronicle. An example of the former are scenes showing a May Day march, with young smiling people in the uniforms of the Union of Polish Youth carrying flags and banners. An example of the latter are images depicting the construction of Nowa Huta: mud, shabby barracks, and emaciated people queuing for meager scraps of food. The juxtaposition of these two types of sequences can be interpreted as an attempt at exposing the propagandist character of the official newsreels of the Polish Film Chronicle. The belief in the revealing function of *Man of Marble*, which is considered by many critics as a realistic film, is likely to be reinforced by the color sequences of the historical frame, which contrast with the newsreel footage and expose the mechanisms of creating the official version of the world. In the footage of the Polish Film Chronicle we see images of triumphant Birkut; in the color sequences representing the memories of witnesses to those events, the figure of Birkut resembles a martyr. In this case, the color sequences of the second type expose the newsreel images as staged: a product of a newsreel director intent on manufacturing a hero for the working people. According to Tadeusz Sobolewski again, the filmmaker is trying to show that, just as a living Birkut is hidden under the marble surface of a socialist hero, so is a living truth about the 1950s hidden under the mask of films, newspapers, and images from those years.

It is not only the historical frame of the film that can be perceived and interpreted as an exposition of falsehood. According to many critics, it is no coincidence that the color sequences of the first type depict a modern, industrialized, dynamically developing country (for example in the scenes showing the construction of the Katowice Steelworks, shot from a bird's eye perspective) and its capital – a sophisticated, growing metropolis where Agnieszka makes her diploma film (for example in the scenes showing a film crew driving around Warsaw). In Wajda's film, the present is a world filled with achievers. Agnieszka, a young ambitious documentarian, aims to make a film in the American style – she wants to employ

modern techniques: a hand-held camera, electronic bugging devices, and dramatic changes in the pace of action. People who used to be associated with Birkut in the 1950s seem to be doing well in the new realities and are not particularly eager to discuss the dark past, which, even when painted in color, contrasts sharply with the optimistic images of the present.

The world of today may appear to have nothing to do with the epoch of the Stalinist regime, but this notion changes as we watch the film. In the 1970s Agnieszka comes up against the same difficulties that the filmmaker Burski encountered in the 1950s when he was attempting to make the first film about Birkut. He was unable to complete this film in the Stalin era, just as Agnieszka is unable to complete hers in a period that seems so very different. This subtle similarity between the stories of two films made by two different people in two outwardly different epochs is not coincidental. According to Sobolewski, Wajda seems to suggest that the contrast between the totalitarian past and the technocratic present of the 1970s is deceptive. In the ostensibly different, seemingly Americanized world of the 1970s we encounter the same people we saw in the flashbacks and newsreels from the 1950s. Crafty young men, like the TV journalist, are unable to learn anything from their example. The social reality of the 1970s was shaped in the 1950s, and the current time is saddled with the old sins. A similar, but somewhat bolder interpretation is put forward by another critic, who writes that the difficulties encountered by Agnieszka are the same as the obstacles with which Wajda contended when creating *Man of Marble*. Thus the director tells us his own story, except for the fact that his film has been successfully completed. According to this same scholar, this film can therefore be interpreted as a disguised question about the abandoned process of de-Stalinization of the social reality of the 1970s (Amengual 1996: 238). As a result of this abandonment, the modern, American-like décor of present-day reality – Poland in the 1970s – is no more than the same old face of the totalitarian regime, only slightly made up by the “propaganda of success.” This suggests to some exegetes that *Man of Marble* is not only an attempt to expose the practice of distorting history, it is also an attempt to expose the practice of distorting the present: first the present of the 1950s and then the present of the 1970s, which remains firmly rooted in the Stalinist past while masquerading as a reformed, democratic world.

It is easy to see that the film meets almost all the criteria of a classic, realistically oriented historical film. All the means of expression employed by the director seem subordinated to the needs of clarity and continuity. The film may therefore be perceived as a textbook example of the so-called descriptive realism, characteristic of the cinema initially described by film critics as the cinema of social protest and then as the cinema of moral anxiety, which revealed the corruption of morals and displayed a society in a state of moral decay (Miczka 1996: 43; Dabert 2003). The filmmaker appears to be a classic historian tracing the truth. But the fact that *Man of Marble* fits comfortably in the paradigm of a broadly defined classic historical cinema does not exclude interpretations that place it outside this cultural context.

A number of scholars and film critics point out that, at many levels, this film goes beyond traditionally defined realism. By adopting the construction strategy of making a film about a film and in a film, Wajda achieves the effect of intermediality and intertextuality. The intermedial dimension of the film is evident even at the basic level of interpretation, since it is fictionally justified. Other interrelations, however, are applied in a subtler way, and therefore an advanced audiovisual competence is required of the viewer to detect these sophisticated cultural games. Here we are dealing not only with one medium present in another – that is, a film in a film. The construction of *Man of Marble* as an audiovisual metaphorical structure is also based on the peculiar coexistence of various overlapping and interacting narrative, fictional, and aesthetic strategies, which carries with it certain consequences.

Let us first examine a color sequence of the first type, representing the world of the 1970s, in which we are dealing with a special type of intertextuality: an allusion to Hollywood cinema. In the classical American crime films of the early 1970s we often find the following fictional pattern: the protagonist, usually a plain-clothed policeman, has to solve a relatively straightforward case. As he delves deeper into the matter, however, he encounters increasing difficulties; witnesses will not testify and the inquiry becomes increasingly complicated, until finally he is taken off the case. Undaunted, although deprived of his badge and weapon, he acts on his own account and manages to expose a truth that is inconvenient to many influential figures implicated in the crime. If we substitute Wajda's protagonist Agnieszka for the policeman in the above fictional pattern, the analogies become obvious. A young, ambitious, and aggressive documentarian resembling the stereotypical American TV journalist comes across a mysterious and intriguing story from the past. She wants to unravel the mystery in the course of making her diploma film. During her work, she comes up against enormous obstacles, as a result of which she is deprived of her film and camera. She nevertheless continues to explore the engrossing story, which leads to the revelation of facts that are embarrassing to some contemporary decision-makers (Lis 1985: 80–81). One can easily see that this fictional structure is a borrowing: *Dirty Harry*, one of the most popular films of the 1970s, is based on the same pattern.

The resemblance does not end with this fictional pattern. We can also detect some analogies to American cinema in the structure of the represented historical world and in the film's composition. Sequences depicting contemporary Warsaw, a car drive through the wide arterial roads of the city, the comfortable life of its inhabitants, and the international achievements of Polish filmmakers – all these scenes follow each other in fairly rapid succession. Images of the city, filmed in long shots, alternate with close-ups on the faces of Agnieszka and her film crew. The sequences are illustrated with fast-paced, rhythmical disco music composed by Korzyński. Redolent of the “propaganda of success,” these images are in fact a stylistic convention based on the aesthetics of films such as *Dirty Harry* and, more generally, on the aesthetics of the Hollywood cinema of the 1970s.

Scenes of Agnieszka's interviews with witnesses also draw on the television style of documentary cinema. One example of a direct cinematic allusion to a specific documentary is Agnieszka's conversation with Jodła on the roof of a newly constructed building in Nowa Huta: there is here a clear reference to Kosiński's film of 1972 titled *Budowałem miasto* (*I've Built a City*), which includes a similar interview with two inhabitants of Nowa Huta – a worker who has built the city and his son, a secondary school pupil (Sobolewski 1989: 15).

Some allusions are also present in the historical part of the film. The structure of the color sequences of the second type is in dialogue with the cinematic style typical of socialist realism. These sequences are characterized by a peculiar manner of constructing the historical space, which usually consists of panoramic shots of a construction site, in alternation with images of workers – that is, heroes of socialist labor – filmed in close shots and extreme close-ups. In the cinema of socialist realism, the gestures of the characters and the way they move are meant to symbolize their attitude and personal characteristics. The posture of a worker, which accentuates his personality, should be “workmanlike.” That is why, in the scenes showing workers who set out to break another bricklaying record, Burski insists on filming Birkut's workmanlike gait in several takes; Birkut's broad shoulders, taken against the sunny, blue sky, are “workman's shoulders” too. In the scenes of Birkut's record-breaking, his figure is filmed in low-angled or extreme close-ups, whereby it appears as the figure of a demigod: a giant of socialist labor.

The composition of the picture – the strategy of making a “film in a film” – enables Wajda to build complicated intertextual and intermedial narrative structures, with the help of which he can move across historical time–space in an ingenious manner. In its historical part, the film appears to be nostalgic: it is characterized by a retrospective stylization that evokes the atmosphere of the past epoch, and it draws on the poetics of that period and on images borrowed from other films, which were made in the historical time–space presented by the director. “Both ‘what is new’ and ‘what is old,’” writes Falkowska, “preserve the same atmosphere and style of the 1950s” (1996: 262). The historical frame of the film is a masterly pastiche: a collage of color and monochrome images of the Stalin era borrowed from the cinema of socialist realism. Thus, in the historical part of the film, the director quotes images from the 1950s in their entirety by reproducing the audiovisual metaphors, style, and historical image-worlds known from other works of socialist realism. The color sequences of the first type are an intertextual metaphorical structure that is also a pastiche: a collage of audiovisual styles and conventions of the 1970s cinema. Images and visualizations of the 1970s are presented holistically, through references to audiovisual metaphors, styles, and image-worlds that are contemporary to the filmmaker.

Other critics argue that the fictional and aesthetic structure of the whole film draws directly on another celebrated American picture: Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. The plot of *Man of Marble* seems to duplicate the fictional structure of Welles's film. In both films, the stories of their protagonists are presented from different

viewpoints. Like *Citizen Kane*, Wajda's film is characterized by a combination of contemporary and retrospective images, a rather fast pace of editing, and a degree of formal incoherence that is intentional and fictionally justified. Both films contain shots, scenes, and sequences of contemporary themes sharply juxtaposed with retrospective scenes, shots, and sequences, which in the case of *Man of Marble* are partly modeled on archival documentary footage. Wajda's use of a wide-angled lens and of very frequent shots from below introduces two further similarities with the way Welles modeled the world represented in *Citizen Kane*. Wajda characteristically deforms space by stretching the center of the frame, so that the characters almost tumble into the lens. According to Janina Falkowska, by drawing on *Citizen Kane*, Wajda manages to turn the bombastic seriousness of the cinema of socialist realism into a biting parody.

On many planes, *Man of Marble* transcends the classic paradigm of the realistic historical cinema. This is because Wajda makes the strategy of allusions and quotations almost the primary principle of the audiovisual construction of this film. Quotations, allusions, and references to the cinematic tradition are ubiquitous here. Hence, in the present interpretative context, *Man of Marble* appears as a non-traditional historical film that points to the constructivist as well as context- and culture-dependent nature of the cognition and modeling of the represented historical world. Consequently the film can be perceived as an example of the so-called "ironic realism" (Witek 2005), which means that Wajda distances himself from classically defined cinematic realism through the ironic use of various narrative patterns commonly known and described as realist – namely Hollywood realism, the strategies of descriptive realism typical of the cinema of moral anxiety, socialist realism, and documentary realism – in order to demonstrate or communicate the cultural and constructivist dimension of audiovisual metaphorical structures and their enormous culture-forming role. Wajda seems to use his film to demonstrate the suggestive power of moving images, by which films can create history, a particular kind of cultural reality, and the illusion of transparency of the audiovisual narrative strategies. Wajda's ironic realism does not refer to some historical reality beyond film or culture – as traditionally minded viewers and critics who interpret the film at the basic level of the represented world would like to believe. Instead, his ironic realism refers only to other culturally sanctioned strategies of creating and modeling cinematic, literary, historiographical, pictorial, and fairy-tale possible worlds.

Conclusions

Andrzej Wajda is an outstanding, world-class director-historian, who uses sound and moving images to build complex multidimensional structures of possible historical worlds that elude traditional conceptualization in historiographical terms. His films are serious, creative, and highly interesting works of history. In their modeling of the historical represented world, they combine representations of the past with

critical historical, existential, ethical, and aesthetic reflection at many levels of their narrative structure. They tackle issues similar to those dealt with by professional historiographers, but they approach the past in a way characteristic of the cinematic medium. They are also an important voice in the discussion about history and its status in the contemporary world. Wajda demonstrates in all his works that critical reflection on the past and on history is possible not only through the medium of a conceptual language and of written historical narratives of the academic type, but also through the use of audiovisual means of expression. His historical films thus constitute a viable alternative to academic historiography in the realm of creating knowledge about the past and of modeling social historical experience.

Translated by: Grzegorz Dąbkowski

Notes

- 1 Antoni Kępiński was one of the most eminent Polish psychiatrists. After World War II he studied concentration camp survivors. He was one of the first doctors in the world to diagnose mental disturbances in former prisoners of concentration camps. What he has described as “the KZ syndrome” is known from the American literature as “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD). See Kępiński 1970.
- 2 The exception to this rule is *Ziemia obiecana* (*The Promised Land*, 1974), in which the director portrays the lives of industrialists and workers in early capitalist Łódź through the prism of the shared story of its main protagonists: a Pole, a German, and a Jew. This film is a metaphorical generalization of the experience of multicultural nineteenth-century Łódź and of the demise of traditional values of Polish nobility such as patriotism, honor, love, justice, and respect for tradition, which were replaced by the pursuit of economic success measured in money.
- 3 In *A Generation* we can hear people speak their national language as they spoke it at the time, and we can see their different behaviors and attitudes. German soldiers speak German; Poles speak Polish; nationalists like the master craftsman Ziarno use anti-Semitic rhetoric; convinced communists like Sekuła or Dorota use communist “newspeak” – that is, a language packed with propaganda slogans; the behavior of German soldiers is characterized by self-confidence, arrogance, and contempt for the population of the occupied country; Berg, the owner of the carpenter’s shop, is haughty with his workers but servile with the Germans; the attitudes and behavior of members of the communist resistance are characteristically uncompromising. Thus the attitudes, language, manner of speaking, and interactions of the characters are modeled on the behavior of people living in Poland in the represented period – that is, during German occupation.

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