

## **Chapter Five**

# **Andrzej Wajda: The Mickiewicz of the Polish Screen?**

Unlike Konwicki, who despite his unquestionable contribution to the achievements of the Polish Film School, remains marginalized from discussions of the period, Wajda represents the best-known brand of Polish filmmaking worldwide.<sup>326</sup> His brilliant cinematic career started in 1955 with the release of his debut film *A Generation* (*Pokolenie*), a movie that largely stays in line with socialist realist aesthetics, but nevertheless gestures towards a more unorthodox approach to both cinematic style and the protagonists' psychology. Wajda's real success in the West, however, started with his second feature, *Kanał* (*Kanał*, 1956), and climaxed with the release of *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*, 1958) two years later. His long cinematic career continued until his death in October 2016, and has been marked by numerous awards and recognition on a global scale including an Academy Award.

A quick review of Wajda's most praised productions reveals what his major two topics of interest are: 1) individuals (seemingly common characters who nevertheless always exhibit unorthodox qualities), whose fate is determined by extremely complex historical circumstances, i.e. History; 2) adaptations of the Polish literary canon. In short, unlike Konwicki who sides with ordinary and anonymous people, Wajda highlights the greatness of particular individuals, either those who churn with the wheels of history, or those who greatly contribute to Polish cultural tradition (writers

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<sup>326</sup>. Konwicki's commonly accepted place within the Polish Film School is that of "experimental filmmaker," and the discussion of his works is rather brief (especially in contrast with Wajda's, Has's, Munk's or Kawalerowicz's films). Tadeusz Lubelski is one of the few scholars who stubbornly insists on including Konwicki's cinematography in the canon of Polish film.

such as Mickiewicz, Fredro, Wyspiański, Iwaszkiewicz). If we then return to Neal's concept of nation-building, Wajda and his works definitely figure as a model example of how to incite the collective notion of "who we are" and "what sets us apart," as his art celebrates what Neal describes as "extraordinary events, noteworthy accomplishments, and unusual tragedies."<sup>327</sup> Benedict Anderson's concept of a nation as an "imagined community" provides a useful framework here. Anderson states that each nation is imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>328</sup> The fact that people who share the same notion of national belonging will never know each other, but nevertheless are united by imaginary bonds, partly explains why Poland, after the century-long partitions, managed to survive as a nation. Anderson elaborates on his idea asserting that at the core of each imagined community is the notion of fraternity, which makes it possible "... not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings."<sup>329</sup> As noted earlier, dying, thus, sacrificing or defending, rather than killing or invading is one of the pillars of Polish identity; the exploration of the tragic and sacrificial becomes Wajda's major preoccupation.

Anderson does not, however, elaborate on how to feed and sustain national imagination. In other words, Anderson does not explore the mechanisms that are put in place to keep certain myths alive. This question is especially intriguing in the case of postwar Poland, where two different, contrasting notions of national community competed with one another. In other words, during the communist period there existed an imagined community - advocates of democratic Poland - within a wholly different imagined community (supporters of a Communist Poland along Soviet lines). I will argue that Wajda's contribution to preserving a fraternal spirit and the

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327. Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience* (M.E. Sharpe, 2005), p. 20.

328. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Third (London & New York: Verso, 2006), p. 6.

329. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

“communion” among Poles in negotiating this complex and contested national identity has been enormous.

While Konwicki frames collective Polish experiences in a subtle way, Wajda operates intensively and openly in the (imagined) markers of the Polish nation. What they both share is that Wajda (just like Konwicki) also concentrates on expressing the collective experiences of postwar Poles, but he does so through his decorative and “dramatic” style, and he displays a very clever use of national mythology. Throughout the period of the Polish Film School, Wajda developed his distinctive cinematic style: this made his *auteur* reputation abroad, as Western critics considered Wajda’s striking visual imagery to be his authorial signature.<sup>330</sup> He harnessed these forms however to appeal mostly to Polish national sentiment. Bolesław Michałek gestured toward a similar reading of Wajda’s films in 1973: “His [Wajda’s] symbolism is ... parochial, rooted in the soil from which he sprang, the environment in which he grew up, and the age by which he was moulded.”<sup>331</sup> At the same time, in order to appease the communist censors, Wajda included politically correct dialogues and ideologically acceptable storylines, something that very often attracted heavy criticism from anticommunist patriotic circles. Before I analyze some of Wajda’s productions to demonstrate how the artist oscillated between satisfying both sides (the pro-Soviet government and Polish patriots), and how this oscillation provided the space for manifesting the “artistic I” reminiscent of the *auteur*, I will first address two related matters: 1) I will clarify the political climate around Wajda and his ideological inclinations and 2) investigate how he himself and the press of the 50s and 60s modeled him into “*the national filmmaker*” – or even the Mickiewicz of the Polish screen. Establishing the extra-textual role of Wajda in the early stage of his career, together with the attitudes implicit in his art, is crucial for understanding the link between the 19<sup>th</sup> century *wieszcz* and postwar *auteur*.

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330. With respect to Wajda’s cinematic style, the word “baroque” is mostly often applied; however, Marek Haltof points to the ill-usage of the adjective. I subscribe to Haltof’s objections and will use “decorative” and “dramatic” – the second of these two terms was suggested to me by professor Herbert Eagle.

331. Bolesław Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda* (London: Tantivy Press, 1973), p. 7.

## The Making of a National Filmmaker

The extent to which Wajda was subversive during communism, but – at the same time – became the party’s darling, still may seem troubling to some: on the one hand, the body of his works clearly manifests his effort to cherish the idea of independent Poland; on the other hand, the fact that he was able to secure state funding for more than twenty pre-1989 films suggests that Wajda had an opportune, if not amicable, relationship with the authorities. While Konwicki openly admits he initially did believe in the world order proposed by communist ideology in postwar Poland, Wajda is less outspoken.<sup>332</sup> Today, he leaves no doubt that his life and art had been dedicated to undermining the totalitarian system in which he existed, but he did not elaborate on the processes that helped him make so many films during the PRL regime. Piotr Włodarski’s book, *Pan Andrzej* (2001), is one of very few attempts (if not the only one) to describe Wajda as a party informer; in the book, the author claims that Wajda aimed at creating movies that would function as the moral voice and representation of “true” postwar Polish history, while nevertheless collaborating with the communist regime to secure his career and position.<sup>333</sup> Although the book itself does not present much valuable research, as many facts have been taken out of context, the very debate about whether Wajda (and in fact, any other artist of the communist era) was a collaborator or rather a “true Pole” undermining the workings of the USSR, is very telling. In the Polish context, in light of the long-lasting tradition of artists acting as the voice of the nation, this accusation bears enormous weight far exceeding the times of Mickiewicz and Słowacki. The famous conflict between the Nobel Prize laureate,

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332. Konwicki wrote a few novels according to socialist realism’s aesthetic; he also was a communist party member, but such was common among people working in culture in the immediate postwar period. His novel, *A Hole in the Sky* (1959) became a turning point in his career – Konwicki himself called the book an “attempt to defend a Stalinist,” as he described in it a young protagonist who naively believed in the idea that turned out to be a fraud, causing an emotional breakdown. See Stanisław Nowicki, *Pół wieku czyszcza. Rozmowy z Tadeuszem Konwickim* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1990). pp. 111-12.

333. Piotr Włodarski, *Pan Andrzej* (Łódź: Zakład Poligraficzny Łódź, 2001).

Czesław Miłosz, and another postwar Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert, perhaps best describes the gravity of similar debates: among his Polish countrymen Miłosz has been criticized for leaving Poland and leading a comfortable life in the United States while Herbert, who voluntarily refrained from publishing any of his works in the communist press, became the “morally” superior poet who sacrificed his own career in the name of political protest. The conflict between the two poets is very emblematic of the way in which the Polish public pressures creative individuals to work and even live a certain way. Therefore, it should not be surprising that Wajda, “*the Polish filmmaker*,” became the target of similar debates and suspicions.

Despite certain suspicions, Włodarski’s claim remains rather singular, as the majority of critics and scholars celebrate Wajda’s achievements as the greatest national director.<sup>334</sup> In his attack, Włodarski is stubbornly one-dimensional (the subtitle of the book reads: *A liar, mythomaniac or conformist – a book about comrade Andrzej Wajda*) as he does not acknowledge that in order to be a filmmaker in communist Poland, one could not just simply make films; movies had to carry forward official ideology. Oftentimes, filmmakers had to compromise their beliefs and ideas not because they wanted to show their support for the party, but simply because they wanted to be able to make a film. What is more, positive cinematic depictions of communists may also be read as these artists’ attempts to go against black-and-white understandings of the world to acknowledge that there were, in fact, “good communists.”

What is more important, Wajda’s postwar leftist sympathies, like many of his contemporaries’, was not abnormal. In one of his interviews Konwicki, extremely irritated by the interviewer’s repeated questions on the postwar political climate,

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334. When talking about the most important filmmakers of Polish cinema, Roman Polański and Krzysztof Kieślowski arguably occupy positions similar to Wajda. Yet neither of the two could be considered to be *the* national/Polish filmmaker – they both left Poland and made many films in other languages. A common misconception lies in the fact that both are French filmmakers. Thus, in common parlance Wajda is seen as the only “authentic” national director who, just like the poet Zbigniew Herbert, refused to leave the country, though he could have easily done so.

exclaimed: “The whole of Europe was on the left!!! Being on the left was all right!! Being on the left was cool!! Being on the right was disgusting and terribly reactionary!! ... I felt ashamed toward Jews who were my friends! ... Nationalism has led to terrible carnage [WWII]!!!”<sup>335</sup> Wajda’s leftist sympathies, then, should not be equated with communism as such, and even if that was the case, one should bear in mind that, as communist ideology changed throughout the period of People’s Poland, so did one’s attitude towards it. In their book on how Wajda had been followed and closely supervised by the communist Secret Service (*Służba Bezpieczeństwa*, SB), Witold Bereś and Krzysztof Burnetko write about an eavesdropped conversation (1977) between Wajda and the actor Daniel Olbrychski. During the talk, Wajda explained that he would not sign any anticommunist protest because he could do much more through one of his films than through his signature.<sup>336</sup>

Certainly, Wajda’s explanation can be understood as the act of a subordinate, rather than a sly way of fighting totalitarianism through film art. But there is one more fact that Bereś and Burnetko urge us to consider: throughout the period of communist Poland, the international distribution of Wajda’s films brought such a large income to Polish cinema that the Ministry of Culture included his productions in the regular budget. Wajda became a great financial resource for the Communist party.<sup>337</sup> This fact gave him the opportunity to make films – and make a profit for the party – even if those films were not always clear with respect to the official ideology, because this was advantageous for the state.

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335. “.. cała Europa była na lewo!!! Na lewo to było w porządku!! Na lewo to był szpan!! Na prawo natomiast ohydna, straszna reakcja!!” .. odczuwałem wstyd wobec Żydów, którzy byli moimi przyjaciółmi! .. Sprawy nacjonalizmu doprowadziły do straszliwej rzezi!!!” Nowicki, *Pół wieku czyszcza. Rozmowy z Tadeuszem Konwickim*, 1990, p. 96.

336. Witold Bereś and Krzysztof Burnetko, *Andrzej Wajda. Podejrzany* (Warsaw: Agora SA, 2013), p. 21.

337. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Yet the reason why Wajda is still a target of political dispute does not apply only to his extra-textual activities, but to the ambiguity of his films as well.<sup>338</sup> As I will demonstrate in the latter part of this chapter, the cinematic vagueness of the tension between “communist ideology” (USSR) and a “national recovery project” (Poland) is very notable. But for those interested in cherishing Polish mythology, the ambiguity of Wajda’s art lay elsewhere: namely, in the question of whether his films really celebrated Polish national identity and tragic history, or, rather, undermined it. For critics and viewers, who, very often, were themselves the participants in the war events depicted by Wajda, it was disheartening to see Wajda’s protagonists (war heroes?) in pitiful conditions, which supposedly diminished their sacrifice and heroism. In the below pages I will also address this question in my close analysis of Wajda’s films, *A Generation*, *Kanal*, *Ashes and Diamonds* and *Innocent Sorcerers*.

While the dispute over whether Wajda was or was not close to the communist government is still worth our attention, it is more productive to inquire why and at what point the filmmaker secured his position as a national advocate similar to the Romantic *wieszcz*. I suggest that the process was a result of both Wajda himself and the media. Even in his speech at the Academy Awards ceremony in 2000, Wajda focused on the political impact of his films rather than the cinematography itself. What is more, he immediately highlighted that the Oscar was not his own success, but the success of Polish cinema in general. He then does not represent himself as an individual artist (*auteur*) but rather as a “humble” servant contributing to an idea greater than his artistic “I,” i.e. Polish culture as a whole. Wajda stated:

I accept this great honor not as a personal tribute, but as a tribute to Polish cinema as a whole. The subject of many of our films was the war, the atrocities of Nazism, and the tragedies brought by communism. This is why today I thank the

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338. Political attacks on Wajda increased significantly after the Law and Justice Party (PiS) won the parliamentary elections in Poland in 2015. The party believes that Wajda depicts AK soldiers in a degrading way, and they criticize the fact that he made a film about Lech Wałęsa, who – as they assert – is a former communist spy. See: “Awantura o honorowe obywatelstwo Gdańska dla Wajdy. PiS bojkotuje projekt PO,” accessed July 3, 2016, <http://www.tvp.info/23790475/>.

American friends of Poland and my compatriots for helping my country return to the family of democratic nations, rejoin Western civilization, its institutions and security structures.<sup>339</sup>

Leaving aside the fact that Wajda's speech appeared slightly outdated, as it had been over ten years since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and fifty five years since the end of WWII, his words are very emblematic of the way Polish artists represent and position their work. Wajda not only stresses the collective character of his art (he says "our films"), but also brings to the fore the idea that cinematic productions have (and should have) an impact in shaping politics. In yet another contemporary interview, Wajda openly calls himself the Jan Matejko of Polish filmmaking.<sup>340</sup> Matejko, who is perhaps the most popular Polish painter, gained recognition through his large-scale historical paintings depicting crucial moments from Polish history. By positioning himself next to Matejko, Wajda consciously subscribes to the grand, national recovery project also represented by Mickiewicz.

While Wajda's dedication to building a national mythology and his perpetuation of the legacy of Romantic nation-building may seem natural for him from the perspective of his long life and career, it is somewhat surprising how quickly in his life this process took place. Soon after the premiere of his second and third features, *Kanał* and *Ashes and Diamonds*, respectively, Wajda himself, along with the Polish and Western press, highlighted his authority as both assessor of Polish history and politics, and a "poet" of Polish cinema.

After the premiere of *Kanał*, in one of his interviews in 1956, Wajda stated clearly which topics were most appealing for him as a filmmaker. He said: "I am most interested in our typical national features, which, to a greater or lesser extent, are the

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339. *Jane Fonda Presents an Honorary Oscar to Andrzej Wajda*, accessed February 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rImCpUzwGx0>.

340. *Jan Matejko's Heritage - Part 2*, Web of Stories, accessed February 4, 2016, <http://www.webofstories.com/play/andrzej.wajda/36>.



psychological foundation of our history.”<sup>341</sup> This may sound like a grandiose field of interest for a thirty-year old filmmaker. But in fact, when we look back on his artistic achievements, Wajda’s declaration turned out to be true. Early on, he was drawn by “big themes” and national questions, such as the relevance of the Warsaw Uprising (*Kanal*), the justification for uneven fights in the name of independence, or the Holocaust (*Samson, Landscape After the Battle*). In 1959, Zbigniew Gawrak, a Polish critic who attempted to summarize the common features of the Polish Film School, above all else stressed the fact that Polish filmmakers exhibited a “fighting spirit” in their films (*postawa walcząca*).<sup>342</sup> To support his claim, he quoted Pierre Billard, a French critic, who criticized the French New Wave filmmakers for their inability to openly manifest views advocating or rejecting any kind of moral order. Gawrak concluded: “Film history teaches us that the *postawa walcząca* can change immature artistic technique into art, while the lack of *postawa walcząca* turns the most perfect technique into cold craft.”<sup>343</sup> The quote not only praises engaged cinema represented best by Wajda, but also resembles the criticism of Juliusz Słowacki, whose crafty use of literary language was so flawless that it made his works supposedly devoid of any real feelings and passions. In other words, Wajda’s cinematic technique may have some flaws, but one can shut one’s eyes to minor defects if his films are much more than an exercise in pure art form.

In yet another review from the same year, Kazimierz Dębnicki explained how Wajda’s films served to incite “heroism and courage in a nation.” He defended Wajda from another critic’s accusation, where the latter stated that Wajda made harmful productions and sneered at true bravery. Dębnicki argued, however, that Wajda did

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341. “Interesują mnie szczególnie nasze charakterystyczne cechy narodowe, które w mniejszym, czy większym stopniu stanowią psychologiczne podłoże naszych dziejów,” T. Wojciechowska, “Kanały,” *Łódzki Ekspres Ilustrowany*, no. 46 (150) (September 30, 1956). (No page numbers - the article is held at the Wajda Archive in Krakow).

342. I found this article at the Wajda Archive in Kraków; there is no date clearly printed, only a handwritten date alongside the name of the journal with a question mark next to it. Judging from the article’s layout and films referenced, it is quite likely that the piece was indeed published in 1959 - perhaps even in 1958.

343. “Historia filmu uczy, że postawa walcząca potrafi zamienić niedojrzały warsztat w sztukę, a na odwrót, jej brak - najdoskonalszy warsztat zamieni w zimne rzemiosło,” Zbigniew Gawrak, “Po namyśle,” *Film*, 1959.

not mock or discredit heroism, but rather, he redirected our attention to a type of heroism that was purposeful, needed, and at the same time, still based on the very Polish idea of sacrifice and armed rebellion.<sup>344</sup> Understandably, not all critics shared Dębnicki's claims. In his review of *Kanał* in 1957, Czeczot attacked Wajda's newest production because, in his view, the film did not take the historical responsibility that a prototypical film about the Warsaw Uprising was expected to take. Czeczot claimed that an artistic vision in films was insignificant, and that only historical truth mattered, which in the case of *Kanał* Wajda supposedly skewed, as he portrayed Home Army soldiers as self-centered rather than as courageous youths. Czeczot concluded that one should not battle against the process of mythologizing people because, in fact, the participants of important historical events were indeed mythic figures.<sup>345</sup>

To investigate whether the reviews of Wajda's early works were flattering or not is not as significant as the fact that most of them highlighted the enormous role that Wajda's films had in shaping Poles' understanding of history and broad national themes. The reviews also stressed the social role that artists and their works must fulfill. In an interview from 1960, Wajda repeated how weighty the role of a filmmaker in Polish society was. When summarizing the achievements of the Polish Film School, he stated:

Undoubtedly, there were films made in Poland which were deeply engaged in the moral matters of today, and which were created on the basis of the conviction that film is not only entertainment but also a tool and means of sharing momentous issues with the public.<sup>346</sup>

In another interview published in 1958, Wajda declared:

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344. Kazimierz Dębnicki, "Potrzeba bohaterstwa," *Film*, 1958.

345. Z.G. Czeczot, "Film 'Kanał' czyli nieco o odpowiedzialności historycznej," *Ekran*, no. 9 (June 2, 1957).

346. "Niewątpliwie nakręono przecież u nas szereg obrazów głęboko zaangażowanych w moralną problematykę współczesności, wyrosłych z przekonania, że film jest nie tylko rozrywką, lecz narzędziem, środkiem przekazywania widzowi doniosłych problemów," Konrad Eberhardt, "Przekraczać barierę oczywistości..! Andrzej Wajda - w dyskusji o współczesności," *Ekran*, no. 10 (March 6, 1960), pp. 10-11.

... it is not worthwhile to make films about ordinary grey people; it would be a static attitude and we have to make an impact on the audience. If we are not able to educate the audience, we need to at least give it the great emotional experiences of unorthodox people.<sup>347</sup>

Wajda himself not only stressed the fact that he had made an impact through his films, but also that this impact had to apply to weighty matters of historical and moral importance. And in fact, it seems he got credit for this feat, which a rather curious article published in the 1960 issue of *Ekran* demonstrated. The text, entitled, “The Wajda Festivities,” described the anticipated fiftieth anniversary of the premiere of Wajda’s film *A Generation*, which was to happen in 2005. The unknown author announced the year 2005 to be “The Year of Wajda,” just like the year of 1956 was “The Year of Mickiewicz.”<sup>348</sup> The author envisioned all kinds of celebrations associated with that year: an international convention dedicated exclusively to Wajda’s art; “A Wajda Competition,” where aspiring filmmakers would submit their shorts (the jury would include Roman Polański and “Bunuel’s granddaughter”), as well as the “Wajda Exhibition” at the Wajda Museum. What’s more, the Wajda Museum would be located at the “Wajdówka,” a manor house that the filmmaker would receive “from the nation to thank him for the merits he brought to Polish culture.”<sup>349</sup> The short text was meant to be humorous, but it nevertheless surprises by the high esteem in which young Wajda was already held in 1960. Although other filmmakers of the Polish Film School period were also celebrated, none received similar acclaim. What is more, the panegyric text used a long list of names (directors, critics and scholars) who would supposedly contribute to the Wajda festivities. Real names increased the

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347. “... nie warto robić filmów o zwykłych, szarych ludziach; byłaby to postawa statyczna, a my musimy oddziaływać na widownię. Jeśli nie potrafimy jej wychować, dajmy jej chociaż oglądać wielkie przeżycia ludzi niezwykłych.” “Reżyser filmowy o sobie,” *Teatr i Film*, no. 4 (April 14, 1958), p. 24.

348. It is a common practice in Poland to dedicate entire year to a famous Polish artist. On the occasion of The Year of Mickiewicz in 1956, the journal *Film* announced that they were considering making a movie based on Mickiewicz’s life, but none of the suggestions they received were “worthy” of such a great poet as Mickiewicz. For more see Bolesław Michałek, “W sprawie filmu mickiewiczowskiego,” *Film*, no. 9 (March 4, 1956).

349. “Posiadłość, którą Andrzej Wajda otrzymał od narodu w uzaniu swych zasług dla kultury polskiej”. Unknown, “Uroczystości Wajdowskie w kraju i na świecie,” *Ekran*, no. 14 (April 3, 1960), p. 12.

seriousness of the text and, in fact, were the names of people who would professionally tie their lives to Wajda's some years later. Thus, the legend of Wajda had been already envisioned, if not established, in the early 60s.

Yet Wajda's growing reputation as the voice of Poland was constructed not only in local presses, but also internationally. Although the importance of the political message depicted in Wajda's films increased after he completed *Man of Marble* (*Człowiek z marmuru*, 1977) and *Man of Iron* (*Człowiek z żelaza*, 1981), Western critics hinted at his role as a national artist much earlier. What they also highlighted was the lyricism of Wajda's cinematic language, making him appear like a poet. In 1957, Chris Angeloglou, writing for *Varsity*, called *Ashes and Diamonds* "a film of meaning."<sup>350</sup> Besides beautiful lyricism and superb acting, above all, Angeloglou praised the film's emotional and intellectual depth in tackling important matters. In the same year, *Sight and Sound* printed an article by Gene Moskowitz discussing the shape of Polish cinema. Moskowitz (who visited and met with Polish filmmakers in Warsaw) praised directors such as Ford, Kawalerowicz and Munk but labeled only Wajda the "one true screen poet." The mastery of Wajda's style, Moskowitz added, was fully manifested not only through his technique, but above all through the humanistic character of his works, especially *Kanał*. He wrote: "[there is] an urgency in his [Wajda's] handling and feeling for people in crisis and he has made *the* [Moskowitz's emphasis] statement on the death struggle of Warsaw."<sup>351</sup>

The fact that Moskowitz complimented Wajda for making *the* statement about an event as traumatic and sensitive as the Warsaw Uprising elevated Wajda above skillful masters of cinema. For Moskowitz, Wajda was a filmmaker who was wise and who took a concrete stance on national matters. Similar opinions appeared in the French press. In 1958 a Polish film journal printed a two-page article summarizing the

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350. Chris Angeloglou, "Stark Realism and Star-Shells," *Varsity* 38, no. 5 (November 7, 1959).

351. Gene Moskowitz, "The Uneasy East: The Polish Cinema," *Sight and Sound* 27, no. 3 (Winter 1957), p. 136-40.

Western criticism of Wajda's film *Kanał*.<sup>352</sup> Claude Sergent raved about *Kanał*, stating that "it is not about photography, but about the truth." Andre Bazin asserted that the film is not pessimistic, but it rather is "a psychological national study, a kind of self-analysis." The journal *Le Combat* announced: "Wajda has the gift of a bard who finds the reflections of his epoch in one happening."<sup>353</sup> Not only is Wajda compared to a bard (similar to *wieszcz*) who speaks on behalf of "the Truth," but also an authority depicting "the truth" about Poland. In this context, the comparison of Wajda with Mickiewicz is an easy one to make – especially in light of Wajda's "poetic" use of cinematic language. Equating Wajda with poets further elevates his status, because in Polish culture poetry was traditionally the highest of arts.

Since Wajda's status as an advocate for Poland was concretized so early in his career, it was only expected that after the making of his later (more political) films, it would only increase. Although the events of Martial Law in Poland in the early 1980s and Wajda's 1981 film *Man of Iron* are beyond the scope of this project, it is extremely revealing to see how Wajda's status (and his own understanding of his role as *wieszcz*) developed in this later period. In the 1982 issue of *American Film*, J. Hoberman printed a special report titled "Film and Politics in Poland." The first sentences of the report are worth quoting in their entirety:

'I believe that in a society such as ours, the artist does help shape opinions, and can function as a kind of conscience for the nation. We can and should play a leading role.' So said Andrzej Wajda, Poland's foremost director, in a recent interview. The Soviet inclination to view art as a weapon, passed on at least in part to directors like Wajda, is no less influential when that weapon is turned against the Soviets themselves; ... [Wajda] does not consider his films neutral. 'I

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352. I found this article at the Wajda Archive in Krakow: as in the case of many others, the text did not have any bibliographical reference, but was most likely published in 1958 in either *Film* or *Ekran*. From all Western articles referenced in this Polish piece, I accessed one original piece (*Sight and Sound*) – it turned out that the Polish article translated the English piece faithfully. For that reason, I use the French comments translated in this Polish piece as a reliable source.

353. "Tu nie chodzi o fotografię, ale o prawdę," "Jest to studium psychologii narodowej, pewnego rodzaju samoanaliza ...," "Wajda posiada dar barda, który w jednym wydarzeniu znajduje refleks epoki ..." Unknown, "Na wschodzie coś nowego," 1958.

defend the weak. That's how I see my role, that's the tradition of the Polish romantic art of the nineteenth century to which I feel myself the heir and perpetuator.<sup>354</sup>

Wajda's words here are unequivocal: he is Mickiewicz's heir and he embraces his role as a *wieszcz*. This statement made in 1982 was not at all surprising or arrogant as Wajda's reputation as a Polish advocate started as early as the late 1950s. In the remaining part of the chapter, I will offer a close analysis of his early films in order to demonstrate why and how Wajda became this national filmmaker, who while feeding the Polish imagination, nevertheless appeased party officials, and yet retained the individuality of an *auteur*. Counterintuitively, Wajda employed different layers of cinematic language to make it work. By doing so, he contributed to the national recovery project, or rather, helped to create an "imagined community," to use Anderson's term.

### ***A Generation (Pokolenie, 1955)***

Wajda's cinematic debut is almost univocally cited as the herald of the emerging Polish Film School in the mid 1950s.<sup>355</sup> The general consensus on the novel quality of the film developed very quickly: in her monograph on Wajda's works (1969), Barbara Mruklik, supporting her earlier criticism, pointed out that *A Generation* played an important role in initiating a stylistic and narrative departure from the hegemony of socialist realism. Among the novel elements of Wajda's debut, Mruklik included: 1) a more complex plot, where characters are not clear-cut Soviet heroes (she calls them "Romantic heroes"); 2) poetic cinematic language based on visual metaphor (for example, the scene with the honking snow-white geese foreshadowing the failure of

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354. J. Hoberman, "Special Report: Film and Politics in Poland," *American Film*, February 1982, p. 58.

355. Although different scholars read *A Generation* in different ways – compare, for example, Marek Haltof's with Janina Falkowska's interpretations – there is a general agreement that Wajda's debut constitutes one of the key transitional films departing from socialist realist aesthetics.

the mission which leads to Jasio Krone's death); 3) unique filmic music never before used in Polish film, i.e. non-symphonic melodies played by rustic instruments such as the ocarina.<sup>356</sup>

Mruklik's remarks, together with the fact that the whole film crew was made of newcomers, certainly demonstrate the unorthodox quality of *A Generation*. But to say that it is a film "... devoid of the routine/monotone and any pretense ... a genuine and dynamic film," is a bit of an overstatement.<sup>357</sup> Wajda's debut – to the great dissatisfaction of the later Solidarity leader Adam Michnik – remains largely a product of the Stalinist era. Michnik believes that the film not only depicts the proper ideological development of the main protagonist, but also shows that the communists were the only real patriots fighting against the Germans. The Home Army soldiers, by contrast, are mean and profit-driven.<sup>358</sup> The film nevertheless encountered various problems with the censors, and it took many months until it could be officially distributed.<sup>359</sup> In the end, it was possible only thanks to Aleksander Ford's personal intervention. I will argue that these contrasting reactions (is the film advocating communist ideology and aesthetics, or subverting it?) signal the way in which Wajda oscillates between aesthetic and thematic codes which can speak equally well to official communist authorities, Polish national sentiments, and Wajda's own artistic ego. To do so, I will first look at the ways in which the film embraces or defies official communist ideology. I will supplement my readings of *A Generation* with Wajda's opinions on the collaborative nature of the film-making process for this particular film, as it sheds more light on the notion of auteurism.

The plot of *A Generation* is rather simple: it is World War II, the year 1943; Stach, a provincial worker, becomes gradually attracted to a communist resistance

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356. Barbara Mruklik, *Andrzej Wajda* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1969), p. 22.

357. "film ... pozbawiony rutyny i jakiegokolwiek pozy, film szczery i pełen dynamiki", *Ibid.*, p. 14.

358. Adam Michnik, "Wstęp," in *Wajda - filmy*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1996), pp. 1-15.

359. Janina Falkowska, *Andrzej Wajda: History, Politics, and Nostalgia in Polish Cinema* (New York: Bergham Books, 2007), pp. 42-3.

fighter Dorota, whom he met through his communist work supervisor, Sekuła. Stach exhibits a lot of courage and determination and soon becomes Dorota's favorite and lover. Stach also "recruits" to the underground activities of the People's Guard (*Gwardia Ludowa*) Jasio Krone, a man seemingly interested only in "getting by," rather than in politics. Jasio first, after seeing how a Volksdeutch guard beats Stach, kills the German guard, and then heroically commits suicide when he is surrounded by a group of Germans. This experience, together with Dorota's capture by the Gestapo, leads to Stach's psychological development: from a naïve and oblivious boy he transforms into a politically aware comrade who will lead future groups of young communist fighters into action, or so the ending suggests.

On the surface level, then, the story is in line with official ideology, as it shows the transition of the main character from a naïve enthusiast, into a politically aware citizen. The fact that the movie is based on Bohdan Czeszko's novel describing the People's Guard resistance in 1942 is yet another reason why the party was open to the project and even commissioned the production of the film. Dorota, Sekuła and Stach all at some point deliver highly ideological lines which were supposed to educate the public about communist values. The most conspicuous example of this is the scene where Sekuła delivers a whole speech on workers who are exploited by money-driven capitalists. He says: "There was once a wise bearded man. His name was Karl Marx. He wrote that a worker was paid only as much as was necessary for him to recover his energy for labor."<sup>360</sup> The scene does not have the natural feel of a casual conversation between Sekuła and Stach; rather, it sounds as if the speech was one of those elements that had to be included in the cinematic picture or a "box that needed to be checked" in order to receive the party's approval. The close-ups of Sekuła's face display such

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360. "Był taki jeden mądry, brodaty człowiek. Nazywał się Karol Marks. On kiedyś napisał, że robotnikowi płaci się tylko tyle, aby mógł odnowić swoje siły do pracy." '5:40; Andrzej Wajda, *Pokolenie*, 1954, accessed 3/13/2016  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_mGLVmG5Okc&ebc=ANyPxKpwnlZLNwbEPbMLpaeSeZNziWIZ9ydgh-hEmU3LWQgt-v4s71i6WN8Mj91KYMJMiGYioc-cKEVbdSfBhyX9Q0wuHj2Y\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mGLVmG5Okc&ebc=ANyPxKpwnlZLNwbEPbMLpaeSeZNziWIZ9ydgh-hEmU3LWQgt-v4s71i6WN8Mj91KYMJMiGYioc-cKEVbdSfBhyX9Q0wuHj2Y_g).



elevated emotions that, to some degree, they can even look funny. Nevertheless, one has no doubts about what ideology the speech supports.

Another reason why *A Generation* fit well with communist ideology was Wajda's portrayal of AK soldiers and supporters, a basic requirement of most films at the time. In addition to the People's Guard there also appear Home Army underground fighters; they are, however, highly unsympathetic types, calculating and devoid of the genuine youthful idealism characteristic of Stach and his friends. The Berg brothers, for example, who are the owners of the workshop where Stach and Jasio are employed, make bunk beds and stretchers for the German Army. This could be regarded as fine, as it is only a front for their support of the Home Army, but they are so obsequious and subservient to the German officers who come to inspect the product that they immediately disgust the audience. The other two Home Army soldiers, Lt. Ziarno who works as the foreman at the Berg Brothers, and another unnamed officer, are similarly unpleasant types. Ziarno is mean and bossy toward the workers and, toward the end of the film, he tries to recover from Stach a revolver that he took from their stash in the workshop after he accidentally discovered it. None of the four characters representing AK is likeable or the least bit sympathetic.

Stach, his actions and psychology are yet another component of the film that fulfills communist expectations. Although critics argued that Tadeusz Łomnicki's performance as Stach also contributed to the non-socialist realist feel of the movie, I rather subscribe to Bolesław Michałek's opinion that: "disciplined, serious Stach is an intruder in Andrzej Wajda's artistic - if not philosophical - formation."<sup>361</sup> Despite Łomnicki's natural and novel acting, he remains a rather typical clear-cut, positive hero whose actions are never challenged by serious doubts. In sum, at first sight, the conventional plot, ideological scenes, negative portrayal of AK fighters, and the "positive hero" seem to exhibit all the necessary qualities to appease the state censors.

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361. "zdyscyplinowany, poważny Stach jest intruzem w formacji, jeśli nie filozoficznej, to artystycznej Andrzeja Wajdy"; Bolesław Michałek, *Szkice o filmie polskim* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1960), p. 77.

Yet, *A Generation* met many obstacles before it could finally be released. In a recent interview, about sixty years after the premiere of *A Generation*, Wajda recollected the authorities' biggest problem with the film. He claimed that, in fact, the most problematic scene for the authorities was the above dialogue between Stach and Sekuła, in Wajda's opinion the only ideological scene in the film. Wajda explained that the authorities feared that real workers watching *A Generation* would come to realize that they were also being robbed and exploited – but not by capitalists, as the film depicts, but rather by the communist state itself.<sup>362</sup> The party reasoned that Polish workers, who then lived in very poor conditions, would draw the parallel between the cinematic workers exploited by capitalists, and themselves, exploited by the current communist government. Indeed, the dialogue is lengthy and it goes into a great deal of detail about economic calculations that gives one enough time to ponder one's own salary and labor. In the end, the scene was not cut, but Aleksander Ford, Wajda's artistic supervisor, re-edited the movie without asking Wajda for his opinion. The movie became, to use Polański's words, who appeared in *A Generation* as an actor: "but a pale reflection of Wajda's original version."<sup>363</sup>

Among the issues with the film, Janina Falkowska, a film scholar, also includes the authorities' criticism of the brutality, shootings and killings, as these violent situations ended up occupying a more prominent place in the film than Stach's political activism.<sup>364</sup> In fact, to this day, Wajda mourns the loss of several particular scenes cut from *A Generation*, including a scene with a man carrying a sack of human heads with the hope of extracting and selling gold fillings.<sup>365</sup>

While the opinion that *A Generation* does not stress enough the importance of communist ideology is valid, there are reasons other than brutality and ambiguous Marxist teachings that make the film different from typical socialist realist pictures.

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362. *Ideology in A Generation - Part 34*, Web of Stories, accessed March 13, 2016, <http://www.webofstories.com/play/andrzej.wajda/34>.

363. Roman Polański, *Roman* (Warsaw, 1989), p. 89.

364. Falkowska, *Andrzej Wajda: History, Politics, and Nostalgia in Polish Cinema*, p. 42.

365. Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, p. 21.

Although Wajda dedicates most scenes to Stach and his story, it is Jasio Krone's personality and the imagery associated with him that stand out and make Jasio the central tragic figure. This troubled and hesitant character, who – just like literary Romantic protagonists such as Konrad Wallenrod and Konrad-Gustav – struggles within himself to comprehend the necessity of fighting, attracts all the cinematic attention. Jasio then, not Stach, is the heir of the Polish Romantic tradition, and thus becomes a figure that appeals to Polish patriots. What is more important is that he is not heroic in terms of plot, but Wajda associates him with imagery that makes him martyr-like. In short, through his depiction of the seemingly secondary hero, Jasio Krone, Wajda appeals not only to Poles and their tragic heroes, but also satisfies his own artistic ambitions.<sup>366</sup>

If we analyze Jasio's actions throughout the film, he comes across as somebody who is somewhat unstable and cannot be trusted immediately; he definitely is not a "typical hero." In the opening scenes, he is condescending, unhelpful and unsympathetic to Stach when the latter begins his work as an apprentice in the Bergs' workshop. In the next scene, Jasio walks past lampposts from which the German army has hung a number of Poles as a warning to the population; he walks up to one of these hanging bodies, reads the warning appended to the body, and hurries away, as if terrified by what he has seen. Then he declines to join the People's Guard, because he needs to look out for his aging and ill father and also because, by his own admission, he is a person who looks out for himself. The previous scene also suggests that he may simply be too afraid of German revenge if he engaged in any suspicious activity. What changes Jasio's mind is when he sees how Stach has been beaten by a Volksdeutch guard; he won't stand for a Pole being treated this way without trying to do something about it. It is significant that Jasio is never linked in any way to either the Home Army or to working-class solidarity, but rather to his strong patriotic feelings. Jasio's raging

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366. Wajda openly admits that he was not happy with the way *A Generation* was made. He partly blames this on the state officials who intervened heavily in the process of filming, but also on his own inexperience. He does, however, praise the scenes involving Jasio Krone, especially the suicide scene.

resentment of the Volksdeutch guard leads him to shooting the German in a pub, in "broad daylight," for which he is severely rebuked by Dorota, who takes his gun away from him. This causes the proud Jasio to quit the Guard. He rejoins out of remorse and guilt over his failure to offer help to his Jewish friend Abram. During one of the actions, Jasio and the boys are spotted by German soldiers; while other members run across an open clearing between buildings to take cover around the corner, it seems that Jasio can't muster the courage to make this dash across open space, so he runs in the opposite direction. Thus, it is not clear whether he runs elsewhere in order to distract the German soldiers from his comrades, or because he had no other choice at this point. Jasio's actions and motivations remain ambiguous throughout the film, which makes it difficult to pigeonhole him into any "camp." What is important is that, on the story level, he does not come across as a typical courageous hero.

Yet it is the striking imagery associated with Jasio that elevates him into a martyr-like figure, and, consequently, allows him to "take over" the plot. In his book on Polish film published in 1960, Bolesław Michałek argues that Jasio Krone dominates the film and becomes its central figure "against all the logic of the screenplay."<sup>367</sup> To explain how this happens, Michałek describes the psychology of the character and compares him to a Romantic hero: Jasio is suspicious, complex, hesitant, exceptionally sensitive, and experiences his surroundings in a very intense way. Beyond the analysis of Jasio's personality, Michałek only mentions how Wajda's cinematic style works to emphasize Jasio's prominent place in the film. But in fact, it is Wajda's visual language that decenters the viewers' attention from the main character, Stach, and directs it toward Jasio. Perhaps the most obvious example is the way in which Jasio is dressed in most of the scenes. While all other male protagonists are usually clothed in black, Jasio wears a long white coat [Fig. 5.1]. Visually, this tactic forces viewers' attention to his character, especially in the numerous group scenes

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<sup>367</sup>. This quote comes from Michałek's later book published in English in 1973. (Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, p. 20). Although Michałek makes exactly the same point regarding Jasio Krone's position in the film, he does not elaborate on the idea as much as he does in his earlier work, *Szkice o filmie polskim*.

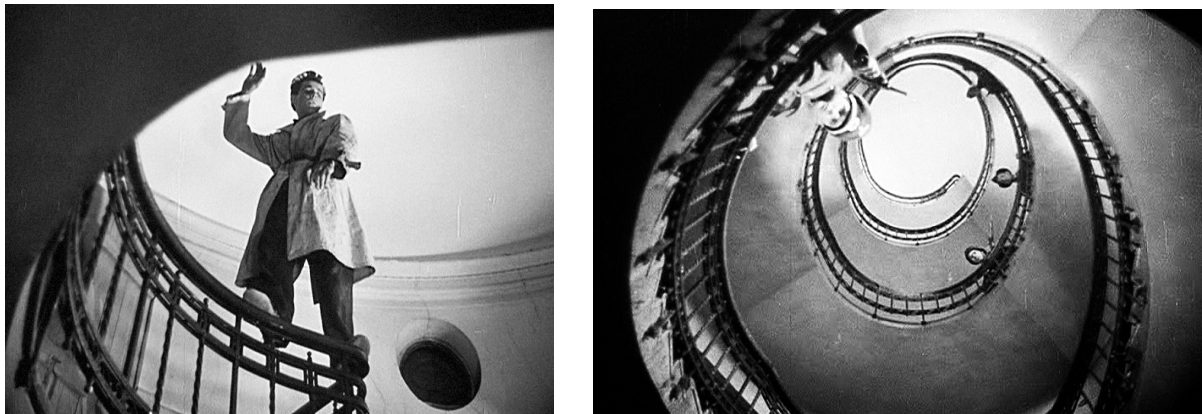
with Stach and the other boys dressed in black, and when he approaches the crowd watching the hanged Poles.



**Fig. 5.1: Jasio in his white coat**

In order to further highlight Jasio's dynamism, Wajda composes key scenes involving Jasio with uncommon visual effects. The most conspicuous example of this is the famous scene of Jasio's death. But the death scene itself, and Jasio's attempt to escape from it, is foreshadowed by a short incident: when Jasio tries to escape from the Germans, he runs into an old man carrying icons of the Virgin Mary. The scene itself is quite overwhelming, as the icons not only hang from the Man's neck, but are also attached in huge numbers to the wall. Jasio pauses and looks startled; he hides his gun quickly, as if ashamed in front of God, and nervously makes the sign of the cross. This not only emphasizes his respect for religion but, more importantly, anticipates the uncertain outcome of his run, as Catholics would often make the sign of the cross in threatening situations.

The scene, after foreshadowing death and establishing Jasio as a Catholic, climaxes in a more visually arresting moment. After a dramatic chase to escape from the German soldiers, Jasio eventually runs up the stairs of a tall building, only to realize that he is trapped at the top. Instead of letting the Germans shoot him, he decides to throw himself down the staircase. At the very moment Jasio decides to kill himself and climbs the stair rails, the camera shows him from below - this makes the protagonist dominate the whole frame space and gives him an air of (moral) superiority. Jasio's leap to death is shot from the bottom of the very high spiral staircase, which creates an almost a vertigo effect. Once Jasio's body reaches the ground, a few German soldiers' heads lean over the rail, looking at the dead man [Fig. 5.2]. The whole scene is intensely dramatic and elaborate; Jasio's death becomes the climax of the film, rather than remaining merely a subplot. Jasio is a martyr-figure, easy to associate with the Polish Romantic tradition.



**Fig. 5.2: Visually striking scene of Jasio's death**

Another scene in which Wajda employs powerful effects to accentuate Jasio's complexity and importance is when Jasio's Jewish friend Abram (who escaped from the ghetto) comes to him for help. Before Abram enters Jasio's apartment, the camera shows a crowd of people gathered in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary. They are all absorbed in collective remorse and singing. When Jasio sees Abram, and when a visible feeling of fear passes over his face, the religious song provides a thoughtful, diegetic

commentary. Jasio hesitates about what to do, but clearly shows compassion; however, at the very moment when fear overcomes him and when he tries to explain that helping Abram is too much for a simple civilian like himself, the song ends. The Catholic song “accompanying” Jasio’s refusal to help his Jewish friend may be read as an ironic commentary on how Christians comply (or do not comply) with the commandment of helping those in need.

However, Jasio’s reluctance to hide Abram is short-lived: he is just about to change his mind and help the Jew, when he realizes that Abram has already left his apartment. He runs after him into the street, but the Jew is nowhere to be found. In the subsequent scene, Wajda again uses a striking effect to underscore the gravity of Jasio’s decision; he shows the burning ghetto behind the tall wall and a lively amusement park in front of it. Jasio is framed against the backdrop of both the heavy smoke associated with death *and* the people laughing carelessly on a carousel; it is then that Jasio decides to rejoin Stach and help the fighters from the ghetto. Wajda makes us believe that Jasio regrets that he failed to help his friend in need, and thus starts his path to redemption. There are clearly Christian undertones here, another key element associated with the Polish Romantic tradition: oversensitive Jasio who redeems his sins by becoming a martyr. But the scene not only conveys the complexity of wartime in one frame (extermination of people alongside indifferent reactions and carelessness) but also seems to allude to Czesław Miłosz’s famous poem “Campo di Fiori” that compares the loneliness of those who die in the ghetto with the loneliness of Giordano Bruno burnt on Campo de’ Fiori Piazza. The poem concentrates on the indifference of passers-by (observers); its publication was banned in 1951 when Miłosz decided to stay abroad. Thus, Miłosz, a dissident, and a celebrated Polish artist critical of the communist regime, makes his subtle appearance in Wajda’s film.

The fact that Jasio decides to join the underground movement is crucial on two levels and, as mentioned in the chapter on Mickiewicz, it unites religious faith with patriotic obligation: 1) through the act of joining the underground resistance Jasio not only redeems his guilt toward his Jewish countrymen, but also 2) is ennobled amongst

his male friends, and by extension, among Polish society, as a freedom fighter. In short, in the character of Jasio, Wajda unifies the two most crucial figures representing a national Polish identity as initiated by Mickiewicz: that of a Catholic Pole, and that of a freedom fighter who sacrifices his life for others.

While the film owes its dramatic visual style to Wajda's individual sensitivity, critics and scholars described *A Generation* as a collective creation. Barbara Mruklik called it a "film of debuts," as it was not only the directorial debut of Wajda, but also the first film of cameraman Jerzy Lipman, the composer Andrzej Markowski, as well as of most of the actors, with the exception of Tadeusz Janczar (Jasio).<sup>368</sup> In Mruklik's opinion, this group of newcomers greatly contributed to the "fresh" feel of the movie. Bolesław Sulik wrote that *A Generation* was "very much a group venture, a joint enterprise by several young artists, all with Resistance connections back in the occupation days, all with rich memories of that time, but quite inexperienced as film makers."<sup>369</sup> Leaving aside that Wajda, on numerous occasions, admitted that he actually felt compelled to make war films because he sensed that he did not take part in war efforts at all, it is accurate to say that the inexperience of the young artists gave the movie a youthful feel.<sup>370</sup> Wajda himself admitted: "It is the film of our whole group."<sup>371</sup> This act of de-centering the director's role in the process of filmmaking, in the context of *A Generation*, has two significant consequences: first, it once again brings to the fore the idea that film, as Polish filmmakers and critics understood it under Communism, is a collective product and does not celebrate the director as its sole creator; second, the subject matter of *A Generation* becomes not only a cinematic manifesto of different newcomers, but also, a manifesto of the postwar generation as a whole. In fact, the novel on which the film is based was an important literary and

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368. "Pokolenie' było w ogóle filmem debiutów," Mruklik, *Andrzej Wajda*, p. 14.

369. Bolesław Sulik, "Introduction," in *Andrzej Wajda: Three Films* (London & New York: Lorrimer Publishing Limited, 1984), p. 8.

370. *My Luck during World War II - Part 24*, Web of Stories, accessed July 19, 2016, <http://www.webofstories.com/play/andrzej.wajda/24>.

371. "To jest film naszej całej grupy," *A Generation - Team*, Web of Stories, accessed March 23, 2016, ['3:14](http://www.webofstories.com/play/andrzej.wajda/44).



historical landmark and had significant influence on postwar youth and their experience of wartime occupation.<sup>372</sup> Although *A Generation* exhibited Wajda's distinctive style, manifested through striking visuals in the scenes with Jasio, which made his *auteur* reputation abroad, the film nevertheless was thought of as a collective creation: a creation that made some general statements about the young postwar generation.

### ***Kanał, 1956***

If *A Generation* made Wajda known within the Polish film industry, his next film, *Kanał*, established his name on an international scale. The film received the Special Jury Award in Cannes and was highly regarded in the foreign press. Wajda's cinematic style together with his fondness for "grand topics" became even more distinctive and recognizable. Yet Polish critics and scholars were far less enthusiastic, if not totally disappointed in the film. The trouble was that Wajda undertook the task of making the first film about the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. The gravity of depicting the Uprising, which resulted in a large number of deaths and the almost complete destruction of the Polish capital, cannot be underestimated for two major reasons: 1) according to official communist postwar propaganda, the Warsaw Uprising could not be mentioned in media or historical publications, and if absolutely necessary only in the most negative terms.<sup>373</sup> After 1956 it became possible to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of Poland's traumatic experience; this by no means meant honest historical discussion, but at least the topic was not totally erased from history. 2) In the Polish collective imagination and Polish history, the Uprising of '44 occupies a space similar to the Romantic upheavals of 1830 and 1863; they all share a sense of the heroic, if totally unsuccessful, battle in the name of liberation; they all ended in a large population loss

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372. Michałek, *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda*, p. 17.

373. Norman Davies, *Rising '44: The Battle for Warsaw* (Viking, 2003), pp. 509-76.

and a lowering of national morale; they all remain – and the rationale behind their outbreaks especially – controversial topics to this day. In short, artistic representations of the Uprising would always have serious consequences, as it was one of the most painful experiences of the war in Polish national memory. What is more, those who either survived the Uprising or lost their loved ones in the fight had very vivid memories of the event, which until 1956 had been (at least publicly) silenced.

The reason why the communist government did not want to allow for much representation and elaboration on the subject of the Warsaw Uprising was plain. When the uprising broke out, the intention of the Soviets (who had already established a provisional government of Poland in Lublin – the Polish Committee of National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*) – was to set up a general communist government under Soviet control rather than handing it to the Polish government-in-exile. On their side, the Home Army had long waited before launching a large-scale military action, as they had fewer arms than the Germans. When the Red Army started liberating Poland from the Germans from the East, it provided an opportunity for the Poles to organize a military operation, as Warsaw would soon be approached by the Soviets, which would cause the Germans to retreat. The Poles hoped to free the capital themselves, which would underscore Polish sovereignty before the Soviets could assume control. When the Red Army approached Warsaw, it did not aid Poles in defeating the Germans, which resulted in enormous human losses and a leveling of Warsaw to the ground; this paved the way for transforming Poland into a Soviet satellite-state. Thus, the Warsaw Uprising figured not only as a painful memory of huge consequences, but also as a tactical move by the Soviets' in their taking control of Poland.

The degree to which the Warsaw Uprising became a central event in shaping Polish national identity is still visible today. In 2004 the Warsaw Uprising Museum was opened to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event; in 2014, in order to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the premiere of the super-production *Warsaw 44* (*Miasto 44*, directed by Jan Komasa) took place at the National Stadium in Warsaw.

Thus, by deciding to make a film about a memory as epoch-making and traumatic as the Uprising of '44, Wajda, no matter the outcome, would pass to posterity as the first director who translated the event to the screen. In fact, the movie poster for *Kanal* included, to use Marek Hendrykowski's words, "an attractive, yet socially very obliging slogan "The first movie about the Warsaw Uprising.""<sup>374</sup> To highlight the general expectations with respect to cinematic representation of the Uprising, it is worth looking to Barbara Mruklik, who wrote: "The whole of Polish society waited for *Kanał*."<sup>375</sup> Therefore, Wajda took upon himself the role of a bard who would try to make sense of, arguably, the biggest Polish national trauma of the Second World War. Here, as with the case of *A Generation*, Wajda's need to simultaneously appease the communist censors, former AK fighters, and his own artistic ego, was evidenced in the film. Yet this time his balancing of these three different agendas had a dramatically different effect: it turned out that Wajda seemingly stripped the partisans of the Warsaw Uprising of valor, as he concentrated on their futile efforts and constant doubts, rather than explicit heroism. I will argue, however, that by this apparent de-heroicization of the Warsaw resistance, Wajda only reinforced the image of the Pole as martyr-hero which, in turn, fed the Polish national imagination.

In his portrayal of the Uprising, Wajda did not concentrate on the clear-cut glorification of the AK underground fighters who were behind the military efforts of '44. The film depicts the last moments of a small AK unit that, in order to survive, tries to move from one place to another through the sewer system. The group quickly disintegrates, which fragments the film into a few subplots: the wounded Lt. Korab tries to find his way out with the young woman fighter Stokrotka, only to discover that their way to the river and freedom is blocked by a sewer grating; a Composer loses his mind and wanders around the sewers aimlessly; Halinka, who is the lover of Lt. Mądry, commits suicide once she learns Mądry is married; Lt. Zadra and Sgt. Kula

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374. Don Fredericksen and Marek Hendrykowski, *Wajda's Kanal* (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2007), p. 24.

375. "Na KANAŁ czekało całe społeczeństwo polskie," Mruklik, *Andrzej Wajda*, p. 29.

are the only ones who make it alive, climbing out of the sewers, but when Kula confesses that he lied about the other partisans walking behind them, Zadra shoots him and returns to the sewer. The film ends with Zadra's stretched out hand holding a gun and disappearing into the sewer.

Although escaping through the Warsaw sewer system did occur during the uprising (and in the film its historical accuracy is based on a story by Jerzy Stefan Stawiński, whose life was saved in precisely that way), it appeared to be too humiliating for Polish audiences. Since the destruction of Warsaw was to some degree a symbolic destruction of Polish nationhood itself, the need to see the heroic "truth" of the event became more pivotal than accepting the fact that a cinematic work does not have to comply with that need. In his book on cinematic representations of trauma, Adam Lowenstein discusses the degree to which a cinematic representation can, and should, communicate trauma. While there is no definite answer to this, Lowenstein suggests that this communicative potential of visual representation should not be subordinated to historical responsibility, as that would defeat "the possibility of making trauma matter to those beyond its immediate point of impact."<sup>376</sup> After watching *Kanał* and reading foreign critics' reaction to it, one gets the impression that Wajda privileged the communicative function of his film over historical accuracy. In other words, *Kanał* simply was not "too Polish," which allowed it to successfully communicate war trauma beyond the scope of its immediate participants.

While the compliments paid to Wajda by foreign critics for *Kanał* were cited in an earlier section, it is precisely the fact that Westerners praised it that initially undermined the value of the film in its local context.<sup>377</sup> Certainly, communist ideology, which would generally be in opposition to Western opinion, may be behind

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376. Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 5.

377. This was only an initial reaction. Once the film received the Special Jury Award at Cannes, *Kanał*'s reputation in Poland drastically improved. Wajda himself admits that Polish critics were so upset with his film that had he not received the Award, he would not have had another chance to make a film.

this criticism; yet, there is something else that made Poles (both viewers and critics) condemn foreign admiration, i.e. the conviction that there were huge differences between Western and Polish war experiences. In other words, it seemed that French and English critics celebrated Wajda's film despite his ambiguous portrayal of Polish heroism due to the West's complete lack of understanding (or empathy) for what Poles had suffered. In an extensive 1957 article featuring readers' reviews of *Kanał*, Stanisław Szantler bluntly attacked Western critics who appreciated the lyricism of Wajda's style; Szantler wrote that the foreigners "didn't get it" because "they never took part in similar fights and they had no clue what a man could and could not feel in the position of the protagonists from *Kanał*."<sup>378</sup> Szantler then added that Polish films were becoming "less and less Polish," and that the "Polish subject serves only as a pretext for a cinematic exercise devoid of any national element."<sup>379</sup> Not only is Szantler's text very impassioned, but it also resembles, once again, the tendency to criticize work that is an exercise in "pure form," a criticism that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century removed Słowacki from the circle of celebrated artists. Szantler's text culminated in a final outraged cry that Wajda's portrayal of female AK soldiers in *Kanał* was modeled on "Western military sluts," while in reality, there was no eroticism within AK ranks during the Uprising.<sup>380</sup> Wajda's film, argued Szantler, made "our national sanctuary," i.e. the Warsaw Uprising, repugnant.

The text is definitely impassioned and far from objective, but it provides a glimpse into the opinions of the public. What is more, it was not an isolated claim. In the same issue of *Ekran*, another reader's opinion was printed – this time the author was a former commander of the AK unit during the Uprising, Józef Pawlak. His harsh condemnation of *Kanał* echoed the previous reader's criticism, and was similarly

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378. "... oni [krytycy] nie brali udziału w podobnych walkach i nie mają pojęcia o tym, co człowiek może i czego nie może przeżywać w sytuacji bohaterów 'Kanału,'" Stanisław Szantler, Józef Pawlak, and Aleksander A., "Dyskusja o 'Kanał' nadal trwa," *Ekran*, no. 19 (August 18, 1957), pp. 10-11.

379. "polskie' filmy są coraz mniej polskie ... polska tematyka służy komuś tylko za pretekst do warsztatowej faktury, wyzutej z jakichkolwiek pierwiastków narodowych," *Ibid*.

380. "... dziewczęta są modelowane na wzór wojskowych dziwek zachodnich," *Ibid*.

emotional. Pawlak wrote: “The portrayal of the female partisans in *Kanał* as the leaders’ and soldiers’ lovers is not only a historical falsity, but also an injustice to hundreds of thousands of noble Polish women from the Uprising as well as other conspiracy units.”<sup>381</sup>

Although this concern for a just and heroic depiction of female AK soldiers sounded fair, it was not really the women and their legacy that either reader had a problem with. Rather, it was the conviction that Polish AK soldiers could not have cared less about love, women and sex during the war, as they were too preoccupied with their military activities. The reason I read these opinions as such is implied by a third reader’s remarks printed in *Ekran*. The author, A. Aleksander, declares in the title that he is in favor of *Kanał*. Yet he adds a short post-script to his text, where he admits that since he is Polish, he too has his own “sanctuaries and temples” which he would defend. He specifies this by saying that he had read Konwicki’s novel *Marshes* based on Konwicki’s recollections of the time he spent within an AK unit in the Lithuanian forests. The reading made A. Aleksander so upset that he had promised himself that if he met “this gentleman [Konwicki] on a dark street then... then let the militia worry about the consequences.”<sup>382</sup> This direct threat was made for a reason: indeed, Konwicki’s novel was not particularly liked among former AK soldiers, as his account of them was devoid of heroic determination and zeal to fight. Although *Marshes* was not really condemning, but rather emphasizes the complexity of AK units, Konwicki definitely highlighted the role that young female partisans played in battle: according to him oftentimes, it was not the dedication to freedom, but rather love (or the urge to show off) toward a unit girl that would determine a young man’s decision to join the AK. Even more provocatively, in *Marshes*, Konwicki does not shy away from describing more horrifying instances related to physicality. One of the most agonizing sections of the book is the scene where an AK commander rapes a

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381. “Przedstawienie dziewcząt biorących udział w akcji filmu ‘Kanał’ jako kochanek dowódców i żołnierzy, to nie tylko fałsz historyczny, lecz krzywda wyrządzona tym dziesiątkom tysięcy szlachetnych Polek zarówno z powstania jak i z terenowych oddziałów partyzanckich czy konspiracyjnych,” Ibid.

382. “Przyrzekam, że gdy spotkam tego pana w ciemnej ulicy, to ... Niech się wtedy milicja martwi,” Ibid.

twelve-year old girl, basically in the same room where her peasant parents and his AK subordinates are. Many years later, in an interview, Konwicki admitted that he had really witnessed a similar scene and how that experience had a very profound impact on him.<sup>383</sup> In short, by illustrating female AK partisans in a more bodily fashion, Wajda touched on sensitive topics that conflicted with national myths. Paradoxically, patriotic Polish circles, just like Soviet official propaganda, wanted to see an idealized reality rather than historical truth. Wajda was attacked by Polish patriots because his characters seemingly did not resemble heroes made of steel. However, as was the case with *A Generation*, Wajda cleverly used cinematic techniques to accentuate the heroism of the partisans without getting into trouble with the communist authorities.

*Kanał* indeed portrays two female characters, Stokrotka (Daisy) and Halinka, as women who follow their beloved soldiers. But while Halinka is not a psychologically developed protagonist, Stokrotka definitely stands out as a strong and self-confident character, if slightly rude and ironic. She is in love with Korab, a brave young man who early in the film is shot after he successfully prevents a German attack on an AK hiding spot. Despite Korab's serious wound, Stokrotka is the one who drags the boy around the dark city sewers in hopes of finding an exit. It is precisely the episode with Korab and Stokrotka that resists the accusation that Wajda supposedly reduced Uprising participants to unrealistic lunatics. While the plot lacks one prominent protagonist, as it is equally divided between groups of partisans who eventually take different paths in the Warsaw sewers, Wajda accentuates Korab's place in the screenplay in a similar way as he does with Jasio Krone in *A Generation*. Although the group of AK soldiers from *Kanał* may not resemble the statuesque heroes that local critics demanded, through clever use of cinematic techniques, Wajda positions Korab as a symbol of Polish national martyrdom.

First of all, Korab, like Jasio Krone (both are played by the same actor, Tadeusz Janczar) is shown in a distinctively white shirt and pants throughout the first part of

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383. Stanislaw Nowicki, *Pół wieku czyścica. Rozmowy z Tadeuszem Konwickim* (London: Aneks, 1986), pp. 65-6.

the film (perhaps even too white, given the explosions happening around him). White clothing visually highlights his position among the other fighters, who are dressed in dark uniforms. What is more, unlike other protagonists, i.e. lieutenants Zadra and Mądry, sergeant Kula, and the Composer, Korab transmits a youthful and flamboyant carelessness when it comes to risking his life on the battleground. He is visibly younger than the rest of the soldiers, who are married and more cautious. This air of impulsiveness combined with his bravery immediately draws the viewers' sympathy toward him. The fact that Korab is also the lover of the most attractive and defiant girl in the unit, Stokrotka, positions him, and by extension Stokrotka, in the very center of the plot.

This dominant position of Korab and Stokrotka almost “against all logic of the screenplay,” to use Michałek’s words again, bothered Wajda himself. His idea for *Kanał* was to make a film depicting a particular group of people and their psychological state; he did not want to focus on one particular character. Although one cannot deny that, indeed, in *Kanał* there is a collective protagonist, Wajda realized already at the stage of working on the script that it is Korab and Stokrotka who take the lead. In his notes from 1956, Wajda wrote that those who had read the script remembered only Korab and Stokrotka, while they confused the rest of the protagonists with one another.<sup>384</sup> A few months later, he added that the end of the film, when lieutenant Zadra descends into the sewer leaving behind an empty plaza in a destroyed Warsaw, should be different. Wajda noted: “There is a mistake at the end of the film. For the viewer, the subplot Stokrotka-Korab is much more important; their end is the film’s end. Besides this, the bars ending the film would signify something more than the empty plaza.”<sup>385</sup> Although Wajda eventually decided to finish the film with Zadra’s storyline, the leader of the AK group, that by no means diverted attention from the couple. The reason why this happened is the above-

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384. Andrzej Wajda, “Z notatnika reżysera,” *Teatr i Film*, no. 1 (11) (July 1957), p. 15.

385. “Zakończenie filmu ma błąd, dla widza jest o wiele bliższy wątek Stokrotka-Korab, ich koniec jest końcem filmu - poza tym krata kończąca całość jest czymś więcej, niż pusty plac,” *Ibid*.



mentioned scene with the grating: the metal bars preventing Korab and Stokrotka's exit from the sewer. What is also important, however, is that the actual end with Zadra also promotes and perpetuates the legacy of Romantic tradition, and appears to be less neutral than the Stokrotka-Korab subplot.

The importance of the scene with the sewer grating, like the significance of Jasio Krone's dramatic death scene in *A Generation*, becomes the climax of the whole narrative plot. In other words, once again Wajda uses his striking visual style to subvert the general apparent meaning of the story: the actions of the Uprising participants, which indeed appear less heroic than the postwar Polish viewers wanted them to be, become secondary to the climatic scene involving Korab and Stokrotka. Wajda himself admitted that in 1958: "I think that ... a film is always created around a certain image, a concrete scene. ... In *Kanał* the most suggestive scene of all was the scene where the two protagonists encounter the bars in their search for an exit from the sewers."<sup>386</sup> But the power of this image does not lie only in its symbolism; what is crucial here is the fact that when Stokrotka approaches the bars which symbolize her death, the camera pans outside the sewer, showing the Vistula river and its opposite bank. Everyone in the mid-1950s would know what enormous meaning that opposite bank had: it was there, during the Uprising, that the Red Army stopped its march, condemning the Polish partisans and civilian population of Warsaw to certain death. The scene with the grating, then, is a powerful commentary on what Wajda could not openly say or show in *Kanał*: the widespread belief among non-Communist Poles that the senseless deaths in the Warsaw sewers of Stokrotka, Korab, and others was not so much the result of an absurd uprising but, to a large extent, the result of deliberate Soviet inaction.

Wajda highlights Korab's unique position in *Kanał*'s plot in yet another way: he frames the very moment when Korab is shot, which eventually leads to his slow death,

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386. "Myślę ... że film powstaje zawsze wokół jakiegoś obrazu, jakiejś sceny. ... W 'Kanał' najwymowniejsza dla mnie była scena, w której dwójka bohaterów, szukając wyjścia z kanału, wpada na kratę," Andrzej Wajda o sobie we francuskim piśmie, "Teatr i Film, no. 18 (2) (March 1958), p. 32.

on a graveyard. The prominent use of Christian iconography has become Wajda's authorial signature, especially after his third film *Ashes and Diamonds*, and had already been a prominent part of *A Generation*. In *Kanal*, Wajda uses Christian crosses to comment on and foreshadow Korab's fatal end like as he did with Jasio: Korab will die after preventing Germans from destroying an AK hiding spot, and his death is framed as Christian martyrdom. Once Korab is shot, Lieutenant Mądry tries to carry him away from the dangerous area. But Korab pushes him back, as if showing how capable of walking on his own he is, only to stumble around graves with crosses, and eventually falling on one of them. The very moment of Korab's death, too, involves religious imagery: when he and Stokrotka reach the bars of the sewer, the woman holds Korab's body in a similar pose to that of Michelangelo's *Pieta* [Fig. 5.3]. Wajda's strategy of emphasizing the key Korab-related plot by juxtaposing Christian symbols with Korab's brave (if careless) deeds makes him - next to Zadra - the most central and heroic protagonist. In other words, while on the surface level the film may have undermined the heroism and the ultimate sacrifices of the Uprising participants, Wajda once again managed to carve a space for an additional reading that would escape the authorities and thus satisfy the national imagination. He did so by employing similar strategies to those he employed in *A Generation*.



Fig. 5.3: Stokrota holding Korab's body

The subplot involving Zadra and Kula, although visually and narratively less prominent than that with Korab, also serves Wajda as a way to pay homage to Polish national myths. Here, he employs a different strategy: he puts in Zadra's mouth words that are very critical of Polish sacrificial behaviors, but he makes him act in contrast to his statements, i.e., exactly in line with Polish martyrdom. At the beginning of the film, Zadra comes across as a somewhat stern and cynical character. When faced with Lt. Gustaw, who wants them to fight till the end – Gustaw uses a popular slogan: “The future generations will remember us as heroes. We won't let them take us alive” – Zadra cynically responds: “Exactly. That's the Polish way.”<sup>387</sup> Soon after he adds: “We fight with pistols and grenades against tanks and planes. When will we wisen up?”, which was yet another critical comment about Poles who engage in armed rebellion against an enemy that has far more advanced military equipment than do the Polish

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387. “Ale będą nas czcić przyszłe pokolenia. Nie damy się żywcem. –Właśnie. Po polsku,” Andrzej Wajda, *Kanał*, 1956, '7:55.

forces.<sup>388</sup> Despite his words, he nevertheless acts as a man who fights till the end and who is guided by a strong sense of responsibility for his people. Although Zadra knows early on that it may be the last hours of his unit, he tries to keep his morale up for others, as a true leader would. Thus, at the end of the film, when Zadra makes it outside the sewers, and he learns from Kula that Kula lied to him about the others who were not, in fact, right behind them (Kula did not want to turn back to find them), Zadra shoots Kula, as he feels Kula is a traitor and a coward. Zadra feverishly repeats: “My unit, my unit,” as he feels that the death of so many of his people is partly his fault. He decides to return to the sewer, a scene that Wajda makes very deliberate. When Zadra descends into the sewer, what we see is his stretched hand with a gun pointing to the sky [Fig. 5.4]. It is not an act of surrender or desperation, but rather a promise of future fighting. Zadra, then, although seemingly critical of the Polish Romantic myths, is the one who carries (and will carry, as he survived) this tradition forward.

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388. “Z pistoletami i granatami na czołgi i samoloty. Kiedy my nabierzemy rozumu?” Ibid., '10:12.



**Fig. 5.4: Promise for the future fight: Zadra descending into the sewer**

Yet scenes with Zadra and Korab were too subtle to satisfy Polish patriotic circles. While this time Wajda did not have much trouble with official authorities, he was heavily criticized by local patriots, as they saw his film as an anti-heroic production; they seemed to forget that from the communist point of view, the fighters depicted are ideologically on the wrong side and cannot be portrayed positively in a communist-era film. Not only does this show the contradictory expectations both groups had, but also, how complex it became to satisfy both agendas within one work of art. One cannot underestimate the importance of a cinematic depiction of the Warsaw Uprising for Poles – in fact, it came to the point where both Wajda and Stawiński had to explain in the press what their intentions were with *Kanal*.<sup>389</sup> Wajda, trying to face the criticism, wrote in 1957: “... the content of the film is not a historical fresco but rather the experiences of a specific group of people. This is the only way to interpret and judge the film, provided one wants to stay in line with the authors’

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389. Fredericksen and Hendrykowski, *Wajda's Kanal*, pp. 34-5.

intentions.”<sup>390</sup> Many years later, Wajda acknowledged the enormous pressure under which he found himself after *Kanal*'s premiere; he admitted that it was an incredibly difficult moment in his life, and if it were not for the Cannes Award, he could not have continued his artistic career. On top of that, due to the anxiety and stress that the film engendered, Wajda, after its completion, had to go to a sanatorium to cure an intestinal illness.<sup>391</sup>

Wajda's above quote is important on an additional level: Wajda spoke about the intentions of “the authors” – not only his, the director's. As was the case with *A Generation*, he felt that the screenwriter was no less of an author than himself, an idea distant from Western notions of *auteur*. To the list of authors for *Kanal* Marek Hendrykowski, a film historian, added even Warsaw's inhabitants who helped in the scenes shot on location. This notion of the individual serving the collective once again turns us back to Romanticism; Marek Hendrykowski aptly put it when he wrote: “Wajda utilized Romanticism's concept of art, of art being a special form of activity. Of art being something creative *and* authentic: both in relation to the presented reality, and to the union of feelings that connect the author with the viewer.”<sup>392</sup> This imaginary union not only brings us back to Anderson's concept of an imagined community, but also reinforces the idea that an artist should speak on behalf of the collective community.

### ***Ashes and Diamonds (Popiół i diament, 1958)***

As early as 1960, Bolesław Michałek wrote about Wajda: “I think that Wajda is equipped with a kind of imagination that more easily absorbs from the world that

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390. “... treścią filmu nie jest fresk historyczny lecz przeżycia konkretnej grupy ludzi. I tylko tak film ten można oceniać i analizować, jeżeli chce się być w zgodzie z intencją autorów.” Wajda, “Z notatnika reżysera.” 16.

391. *Kanal in Cannes - Part 51*, Web of Stories, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.webofstories.com/play/andrzej.wajda/51>.

392. Fredericksen and Hendrykowski, *Wajda's Kanal*, p. 65.

which is heroic and romantic rather than that which is skeptical and rational.”<sup>393</sup> As previously demonstrated, heroic and romantic features were present in *A Generation* and *Kanal* but were much more prevalent in Wajda’s third film. Just like his previous films, this one was also based on a well-known novel, part of mandatory school reading at the time, with Jerzy Andrzejewski credited for the screenplay. Similarly to Wajda’s first two films, *Ashes and Diamonds* also provoked broad national debates as, once again, the film dealt with a topic of great significance: it depicts the very first day of Poland’s liberation in 1945 and shows the political turmoil of that time. The film is set in the part of Poland that was liberated by the Soviets (the provisional Soviet-controlled government in Lublin had been already established), who want to organize Poland into a communist country. They are setting up their cadres in Polish cities and towns at sites where elements of the AK try to create disruption using radical means such as assassination. Thus, the clear historical background in *Ashes and Diamonds* required Wajda to call the Home Army by its name (in *Kanal* the phrase “Home Army” is never mentioned, but it is clear who the partisans are).

Portraying the AK in a positive light was possible only by portraying communist characters equally well. As was the case with Wajda’s former films, I will argue that the expressive power of *Ashes and Diamonds* comes from its inherent oscillation between the two incompatible ideological imperatives represented by the then-current communist government and the pro-democratic Polish underground negotiated by Wajda’s authorial cinematic style. Wajda’s effort to satisfy all three agendas (his personal one included) resulted in a powerful tension within his diegetic worlds, a film tension that was at the same time characteristic of the historical context of the time in which he lived and worked. To put it differently, Wajda’s films in some sense mirrored the very climate in which artists since the 19<sup>th</sup> century produced their creations; the style of Wajda’s productions, their visible mixture of elements that oftentimes clashed with one another, are in themselves a meta-commentary on the act

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393. “Myślę, że Wajda wyposażony jest w wyobraźnię, która łatwiej wchłania z obrazu świata to, co jest heroiczne, romantyczne – niż to, co sceptyczne i racjonalne,” Michałek, *Szkice o filmie polskim*, p. 83.

of creating under communism. While Wajda's attempt to satisfy all three agendas in *A Generation* resulted in a clearly stylistically and thematically uneven production, *Ashes and Diamonds* became an example of balanced compromise between external pressures, and his own artistic self. By playing cleverly with Polish national and cultural tropes, and at the same time satisfying the suspicious communist censors, Wajda was hailed as *the* national filmmaker, whose role was close to the one Mickiewicz had filled over a century earlier.

While *Ashes and Diamonds* certainly deals with a "grand theme," it nevertheless skillfully mixes gravity, humor and romance, while avoiding unnecessary pathos. The plot is concise and full of dramatic moments. The main protagonist, Maciek Chełmicki, is an AK member who is assigned to kill Szczuka, a communist official, on the first day of Poland's liberation in 1945. Chełmicki and his companion mistakenly kill two innocent people instead, and their mission to assassinate Szczuka must take place at a small town hotel where the official stays for a night. On the evening before completing his "assignment," Maciek falls in love with the hotel's bartender; their flirtatious conversation culminates in intimate moments in Maciek's hotel room and symbolic wandering around the town's ruins. Under the influence of his infatuation, Maciek starts questioning the purpose of his fight, which, as he reasons, should not continue now that the war is over. Eventually, pushed by his sense of patriotic responsibility and peer pressure Maciek kills Szczuka at dawn, and a few moments afterward, dies at the hands of patrolling soldiers.

Wajda intensifies the tragedy of Maciek's situation on many levels: private happiness versus the obligation to fight; inaction versus action; and loyalty towards his fellow AK members versus his own self-interest. Thanks to this multi-layered complexity, communicated and intensified by a decorative and dramatic cinematic style, Wajda's film was immediately described by Polish critics as "a masterpiece,"



“a work of genius,” and “a groundbreaking film.”<sup>394</sup> The extent to which the film became an object of accolades is also evident from the numerous international reviews appearing after its premiere, and later on (to this day!) the books dedicated to its history and analysis. Krzysztof Kornacki’s monumental 451-page monograph, *Andrzej Wajda’s Ashes and Diamonds* (2011), which includes extremely detailed descriptions of the stages of filming and its critical reception, is the best demonstration of the film’s position in the history of Polish cinema. The film became the fundamental confirmation of Wajda’s artistry, and from then on, each of his films would be awaited and advertised broadly with anticipation reminiscent of Mickiewicz’s works published after 1830.<sup>395</sup> The reason there has been so much research about and interest in *Ashes and Diamonds* is not only its artistic significance, but also the many interesting extra-textual factors that helped make the film’s reputation. These extra-textual circumstances, just like the finished film itself, were determined by the fact that Wajda had to, once again, cleverly play with the state authorities’ expectations and Polish national sensitivities.

After *Kanal*, Wajda seemed to be “a safe man” for the communist authorities: not only did his previous film manage to avoid open commentary on themes not in line with the communist interpretation of history, but it also (thanks to global distribution) brought considerable income to the Polish film industry. Jerzy Andrzejewski’s novel *Ashes and Diamonds*, which won the most prestigious state awards for its positive depiction of communist values, had long been considered for a film project by the authorities. This gave Wajda a green light to start work on the production. In fact, the script written by Andrzejewski himself (which greatly differed from his original book) quickly was approved by the censorship. The completed film, however, turned out to be so ambiguous, so hard to ideologically pigeonhole, that it

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394. Krzysztof Kornacki, *Popiół i diament Andrzeja Wajdy* (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2011), pp. 346-7.

395. In fact, one of the most relevant topics in Polish émigré circles in Paris (where Mickiewicz lived) was when Mickiewicz would restart writing again. His artistic silence throughout the last years of his life was greatly lamented, and any signs of his breaking away from this silence was greatly anticipated.

was only thanks to Andrzejewski's great esteem and connections that Wajda could save the project in its current form.<sup>396</sup> Wajda used his elaborate cinematic style to make even the most clear-cut "pro-communist elements" of the film seem ambiguous enough to open up a space for contradictory readings.

Cleverly enough, Wajda starts the film with a scene where Maciek Chełmicki assassinates two workers in a very cold-blooded fashion. That immediately makes him appear to be a villain, or at least a morally suspicious character, rather than "the good guy." What quickly follows is the arrival of the communist official, Szczuka, for whom Chełmicki's bullets were destined. The middle-aged limping Szczuka, although he strikes one as far less energetic than his would-be assassin, is by no means a stiff and rigorous party official. In fact, his first onscreen appearance establishes him as a wise and sympathetic figure who shows compassion for the two dead men. Right there, Wajda and Andrzejewski include Szczuka's ideological speech on being good communists and building a future Poland. In terms of both style and content, the whole scene resembles socialist realist productions. The camera works to intensify this association with socialist realism; when Szczuka speaks, he is shot from below, making his figure seem monumental and adding to his authority. By making this initial division between Maciek-the-assassin and Szczuka-the-wise man, Wajda appeased the communist authorities. Later on in the film, Szczuka says nothing that could be construed as against official ideology. It is what he does *not* say, and what Wajda shows through cinematic imagery, that carry great ambiguity and may suggest Wajda's genuine sympathy toward Szczuka.

Although Szczuka definitely is a likeable character, he did not become the party's model figure. First of all, he lacks the ideological zeal that would be appropriate for a man who represents the "new world order" in Poland. Instead, he is not only a balanced and calm man, but he is also married to a woman from the intelligentsia. His authority as the person who is supposed to pave the way for the bright Polish socialist

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396. *First Screening of Ashes and Diamonds - Part 66*, Web of Stories, accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.webofstories.com/playAll/andrzej.wajda?sId=13607>.

future is further diminished by his clear sympathy and understanding for all young Poles who were AK soldiers during the war; what is more, his own son, seventeen year-old Marek, is a fierce AK fighter, more similar to Maciek than to his own father. Szczuka's overtly good-natured personality did not pass unnoticed by censors, but at the same time bore no definite anti-communist features which could be cut, as Wajda cleverly attenuates all of Szczuka's seemingly threatening qualities: it is true that his son is an AK member, but he was raised by Szczuka's sister-in-law against Szczuka's will when the latter was in Russia.<sup>397</sup> It is also true that Szczuka lacks youthful energy, but he is definitely not a static character, as he is the one who, unlike Maciek, clearly defines and actively pursues goals for the future.<sup>398</sup>

There is one more characteristic of Szczuka that makes him an ideologically appropriate figure, but simultaneously distances him from the communists who took power in postwar Poland. Szczuka is representative of the pre-war communists who had fought in the Spanish Civil War. Wajda slyly alludes to this in a scene where the local communist comes to Szczuka's hotel room with a gramophone and plays a revolutionary Spanish Civil War song. They both sink into reminiscences of the past, but do not discuss it much – leaving their clear nostalgia for the audience to interpret freely. Many years later, already in a democratic Poland, Wajda admitted that creating the profile of the key representative of communist ideology in *Ashes and Diamonds* was his and Andrzejewski's key concern. Eventually, Wajda decided to make him a former Spanish Civil War soldier as that had more meaning. Wajda admitted: "He [Szczuka] wasn't one of those communists who came here [to Poland] from the Soviet Union and imposed that reality but he was a man of ideas who was also [like Maciek] able to risk his life in the name of his beliefs."<sup>399</sup> Wajda's statement suggests that he

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397. Ś. W., "Popiół i diament," *Film na Świecie*, no. 45 (November 9, 1958), p. 4.

398. Ernest Bryll, "W cieniu antycznego fatum," *Ekran*, no. 49 (December 7, 1958), p. 6.

399. "To nie był właśnie ten ze Związku Radzieckiego komunista, który przychodzi tutaj i narzuca tą rzeczywistość, tylko to jest jakby człowiek idei, który jest w stanie rzucić i swoje życie tak samo w imię tych przekonań, które niesie ze sobą," *The Communist in Ashes and Diamonds - Part 64*, Web of Stories, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.webofstories.com/playAll/andrzej.wajda?sId=13605,'2:56>.

not only wanted to appease communist censors, but also to show that they were, in fact, dedicated communists whose faith in a better future was not much different than that of AK members, only stemming from a different ideology.

Indeed, the parallel that Wajda draws between Szczuka and Maciek applies not only to both characters' willingness to die "for a cause." The way in which they are both trapped in the chaotic reality of the newly reestablished state (on both a political and private level) is yet another, much broader, similarity between the characters. Maciek questions his involvement in AK activities because of his love for Krystyna, the barmaid. Similarly, Szczuka does not categorically condemn AK members because his own son Marek is one of them. In a way, Szczuka dies not because of his dedication to communist ideology, but because he chooses to help his son: when he learns that Marek has been found, he does not wait for a car, but hurries to walk unprotected instead. It is at this time that Maciek has his last chance to assassinate him, and does so. In short, Wajda, instead of making them antagonists, makes them share similar dilemmas (under the cover of different ideologies). Ernest Bryll in his 1958 review of the film noticed these analogies concluding:

If one of the two protagonists didn't die, the audience would treat the surviving one like a traitor. ... The absolute moral purity of both characters, the necessity to condense them both almost entirely to the form of the pure ideas themselves demands that both be eliminated.<sup>400</sup>

Significantly, Herbert Eagle investigates these striking parallels on the level of cinematic "rhymes," tracing visual correspondences between Maciek and Szczuka. One of them involves two scenes with both protagonists and their fellow comrades. The above-mentioned scene where Szczuka, along with his friend Podgórski nostalgically recall the past over a glass of wine is "rhymed" with the scene where Maciek and Andrzej talk about their underground past over shot glasses. Both scenes

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400. "Gdyby którykolwiek z dwu głównych bohaterów dramatu został przy życiu, widownia potraktowałaby go jak zdrajcę. ... Absolutna moralna czystość bohaterów, konieczność wyabstrahowania ich prawie do rangi czystych działających idei - żąda unicestwienia obu." Bryll, "W cieniu antycznego fatum."

involve nostalgic feelings for a happier past where enemies were not only easily identifiable but also the same – the Nazis. Both, Maciek and Szczuka, a participant in the Spanish Civil War, fought against Nazism. The scene with Szczuka is accompanied by a Spanish Civil War song (“Si me quieres escribir”) while the one with Maciek by a Polish war song (“Red Poppies of Monte Cassino,” to which I will turn below). Each song is a kind of anthem.<sup>401</sup>

The ideological ambiguity of Szczuka, then, was that he was compared to Maciek on both a visual and thematic level. If Szczuka is to be taken as the morally superior character – the authorities reasoned – he cannot be paralleled with Maciek, whose deeds are highly suspicious. Not only does Maciek kill easily but he also does not show any clear motivation for doing so. Despite Maciek’s questionable actions, however, there is something about him, something about his restlessness and youthful vigor, something about his face hidden behind dark glasses, that make him the most tragic figure of the film. It is this inherent incertitude, not verbalized but rather manifested through Cybulski’s acting style, that made *Ashes and Diamonds* equivocal yet impossible to censor. It is the character of Maciek who, while escaping communist censorship, carried forward not only the Romantic tradition but also the sum of complexities that the postwar Polish generation faced.

Zbigniew Cybulski’s interpretation of Maciek is perhaps the most visible way in which Maciek’s on-screen persona is associated with Romantic figures. Cybulski as Maciek is restless, as if in constant motion; even when he spends seemingly calm moments with Krystyna, he behaves as if he were not really there, or rather, as if every harmonious minute were overshadowed by overwhelming feelings of internal struggle. As noted in the first chapter, this model of a restless, emotionally unstable character was characteristic not only of Mickiewicz’s works (Gustav-Conrad from *Forefathers Eve*) but also of Romanticism as a whole. Using his somewhat “unstable,” spontaneous acting (the type of acting that makes viewers unsure of the protagonist’s

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401. Herbert Eagle, “Andrzej Wajda: Film Language and the Artist’s Truth,” *Cross Currents* 1 (1982), pp. 339–52.

next steps), Cybulski brings this general link with Romantic heroes to the fore. A historian of Polish film, Tadeusz Lubelski summarizes Cybulski's acting:

Cybulski as Maciek was somebody from the moon, somebody not of this world but at the same time his posture reminded one of a street hooligan; he emitted the charm of a Romantic rebel but at the same time he was like a "golden boy" from a student club.<sup>402</sup>

The restlessness and ambivalence of Cybulski's gestures and poses work particularly well to further highlight the major conflict of Romanticism: love for a woman versus love for one's motherland. And just as these two aspects cannot be reconciled in Mickiewicz's works, so they remain unresolved in Wajda's film. What Wajda changes, however, is that he questions the purpose of Maciek's decision to be faithful to Poland, rather than to a pretty barmaid. Maciek's death at the end of the film does not give an impression that he dies for a noble cause, as was the case in Mickiewicz's works. Rather, his death is met with deep sadness as Maciek dies on the very day when the rest of Poland celebrates freedom. As Paul Coates notes: "Wajda's vision of war may be dark, but it breathes existential glamour, and his protagonists go down fighting, dying with their boots on."<sup>403</sup> In sum, Wajda does question the purpose of dying but not to the extent where he would deny its tragic beauty.

Indeed, the fact that Maciek's death is questioned (just like the seemingly disgraceful death of partisans in *Kanal*) does not diminish his heroism. Instead, it makes Maciek's character more tragic – and thus more heroic. The moment of his death (when the last convulsions pass through his body laid on a trash heap) became a widely discussed and criticized scene. Some critics read it in line with the Marxist/Trotskyist idea of dying on the trash heap of history. Such a reading would diminish the very purpose and sacredness of Maciek's (and all perished freedom

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402. "Cybulski jako Maciek był kimś księżycowym, nie z tego świata, a zarazem przypominał sylwetką mijanego na ulicy chuligana; wnosił z sobą czar romantycznego buntownika, a równocześnie – sposób bycia „złotego młodzieńca” z klubu studenckiego." Tadeusz Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego* (Katowice: Videograf II, 2009), p. 188.

403. Paul Coates, *The Red and the White. The Cinema of People's Poland* (London: Wallflower, 2005), p. 154.

fighters') struggle and sacrifice. Symbolically, it would also mean the end of the Romantic tradition, which celebrated ultimate sacrifice and elevated it to the status of utmost heroism. Tadeusz Lubelski, however, rightly argues that Maciek's death (which happened precisely because he chose to believe in Romantic ideals of sacrifice) signifies its continuation; *Ashes and Diamonds* does not offer any alternative "patriotism," and thus carries forward the Romantic ideal of sacrifice.<sup>404</sup>

Maciek-Cybulski's death, then, signifies the lack of other alternatives to replace this Romantic ethos. What is key here is that Wajda consciously makes this statement applicable to then-contemporary Poland (1958), rather than to the actual diegetic time of 1945. The strategy of blurring the lines between Maciek-the fictional protagonist and Cybulski-the actor aids Wajda in creating an almost "mythical" space that could exist in any time. There is a famous anecdote that on the very first day of shooting Cybulski refused to wear the specially prepared costume from 1945 and insisted on acting in his own clothes.<sup>405</sup> Certainly, Wajda and Cybulski's idea to make the film accessible to their public of the time increased the incredible popularity of the production. But it also had deeper consequences for Wajda as an artist: not only did he solidify his reputation as a filmmaker who openly encourages actors to take an active part in the creative process, but he also reinforced his status as *the* national filmmaker, who depicts grand statements about Polish history and culture. It is because of this that Wajda, unlike Konwicki, could not be an *auteur* in its Western sense. He is closer to the notion of *wieszcz* who through his artistic works carries forward grand statements about Poland and its tradition.

In order to make these ambitious affirmations, Wajda employs and develops his ornamental, "dramatic" cinematic style. As was the case in *Kanal* and *A Generation*, Wajda utilizes the most striking cinematic language in the scenes that are related to the notion of Polishness and Polish tradition. One such scene is when Maciek-Cybulski lights several shot glasses accompanied by a name, each symbolizing a dead

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404. Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego*, p. 189.

405. Even from today's perspective Maciek-Cybulski appears surprisingly "modern." *Ibid.*, p. 188.

fellow-partisan [Fig. 5.5]. This spontaneous commemoration of the dead not only refers to the tradition of *All Souls' Day* (thus, Mickiewicz's *dziady*), but also underlines the idea that those who sacrificed their lives for Polish freedom should not remain nameless soldiers. The scene, then, calls for preserving national memory: behind each of these names/nicknames pronounced by Maciek-Cybulski hides a figure similarly tragic to Maciek. The fact that this symbolic funeral takes place exactly at the moment when the protagonist Hanka Lewicka sings a mournful song, "Red Poppies of Monte Cassino," further increases the gravity of the scene.

The song tells the story of Polish soldiers who marched under the leadership of General Władysław Anders from the USSR to Western Europe via Iran, and perished during the Battle of Monte Cassino in Italy in 1944. The red poppies symbolize their blood and the sacrifice they made during the battles of WWII. As in *A Generation* Wajda uses diegetic music to aid his visually compelling scene. Adding a meaningful soundtrack about Polish soldiers who die in the battle of Monte Cassino "thickens" the metaphorical layers of the scene and makes it one of the few "climaxes" of the movie. It does not matter that Maciek-Cybulski questions the purpose of his friends' death; more than anything he celebrates that sense of camaraderie; the sense of a clear-cut world where it was obvious who was "us" and who was "the enemy." By extension, it is this scene - reminiscent of Mickiewicz's *dziady* - that emanates nostalgia for the Romantic tradition.





**Fig. 5.5: Maciek and Andrzej in the iconic scene with shot glasses**

Another visually striking scene that works to manifest both Wajda's distinctive cinematic style and the core of Polish values is the scene where Maciek-Cybulski wanders around the ruins with Krystyna. Not only do they read the inscription on the wall that is a citation from the late-Romantic writer Cyprian Kamil Norwid, but they also are visually framed by a huge, upside-down cross with Christ, a prominent symbol in Polish culture [Fig. 5.6].



Fig. 5.6: Maciek and Krystyna separated (embraced?) by the swaying cross

The cracking noise of the swaying cross interrupts Maciek and Krystyna's conversation, as if reminding them that making plans in a world where values have lost their proper place may be somewhat premature. On the one hand, the cross, which dominates the frame, can be read as an element separating the two protagonists. On the other hand, the stretched arms of the Christ figure could suggest an embrace rather than a division. Just as with the death of Maciek-Cybulski, Wajda promotes a continuation of the Romantic legacy – the swaying cross, although turned upside down, remains there, hanging.

There are many more scenes in *Ashes and Diamonds* where Wajda demonstrates his visual authorial style. Suffice it to say that Wajda manages to manifest his virtuosity and promote Romantic values while simultaneously appeasing communist authorities. This mix that resulted in a subtle stylistic unevenness (not as notable as in *A Generation*), and is something that local critics quickly noticed. In her 1958 review, Alicja Helman praised Wajda's mastery, but at the same stressed that his style was not "uniform" throughout the film: "The excess and richness of Wajda's formalistic means

reaches its heights in *Ashes and Diamonds* – leading on the one hand to sophisticated, breathtaking mastery and on the other to significant stylistic unevenness ...”<sup>406</sup> While she was right to point out this kind of aesthetic inconsistency in *Ashes and Diamonds*, she did not explain convincingly why this was the case. Helman interprets these stylistic discrepancies within Wajda’s cinematic work as Wajda’s need to incite the “shock of emotion” (as she calls it) in the viewers. I argue, rather, that it is Wajda’s attempt to satisfy two antagonistic ideological agendas with his own artistic sensitivity that engendered his uneven cinematic language. The next film I analyze departs completely from Wajda’s previous works, and it will serve as the last case study to demonstrate his role as *wieszcz*, rather than as *auteur*.

### ***Innocent Sorcerers (Niewinni czarodzieje, 1960)***

Only one year after the premiere of *Innocent Sorcerers*, Wajda stated in an interview with Stanisław Janicki: “I don’t like *Innocent Sorcerers*. The long exposition in the film is unnecessary. ... not to mention the ending, which is supposed to be entirely different.”<sup>407</sup> Indeed, the film is so dissimilar from Wajda’s previous projects that his own dissatisfaction with it may suggest that the movie was not in line with his “artistic I.”<sup>408</sup> *Innocent Sorcerers*, then, serves here as a case study to demonstrate (by contrast) how Wajda had already established his role as a filmmaker of grand, national themes, and how detouring from that “path” resulted in a production devoid of

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406. “Przepych i bogactwo środków formalnych Wajdy dochodzi w ‘Popiele i diamentach’ do szczytu, prowadząc z jednej strony (niekiedy) do wyrafinowanego, zapierającego dech mistrzostwa, a z drugiej do dużej niejednorodności stylistycznej o czasem nazbyt wyraźnych parantelach,” “szok wzruszenia,” Alicja Helman, “Rok sumuje się doświadczeniami,” *Ekran*, no. 51 (December 31, 1958), p. 7.

407. “Nie lubię ‘Niewinnych czarodziejów.’ Olbrzymia ekspozycja w tym filmie jest chyba w ogóle niepotrzebna, ... nie mówiąc o zakończeniu, które miało być inne.” Wanda Wertenstein, *Wajda mówi o sobie: wywiady i teksty* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1991), p. 32.

408. After *Ashes and Diamonds*, and before *Innocent Sorcerers*, Wajda completed one more film, *Lotna*. As in his first three features, *Lotna* also deals with the war theme and depicts the first days of September 1939, when Polish cavalry met on the battlefield with German tanks. The film was not very successful one, though it did remain in line with Wajda’s favorite subjects.

compelling tensions. *Innocent Sorcerers* - unlike Wajda's previous three films - does not build its expressive power on oscillating between two contrasting ideological imperatives, as the subject matter of the film is lightweight. This significantly weakens the film's force. At that point, Wajda's position (like Mickiewicz's over one century earlier) was tied to the idea of being the bard of Polish themes, communicated through smooth maneuvering between contradictory expectations of both the authorities and the Polish nationalists. In *Innocent Sorcerers*, Wajda could not embrace that role.

The first atypical element of *Innocent Sorcerers* is its simple if not colorless plot. Andrzej (aka Bazyli) is a young medical doctor who dedicates his spare time to playing in a jazz band and seducing women. He lives on his own in a Warsaw apartment and acts as somebody independent and rather blasé, as his cold treatment of a girl named Mirka indicates. One night in the club Manekin, Andrzej tries to help his friend pick up a girl, but ends up with her in his own apartment instead. Between Andrzej and the girl (who calls herself "Pelagia") there begins a flirtatious game that continues until the morning. There is a moment when Andrzej realizes that perhaps this time he may fall in love with the intelligent and imaginative Pelagia, but they both "miss the moment" to really admit that to themselves. At dawn Pelagia leaves, unstopped by Andrzej, but then returns to his apartment. This is how the movie ends. This uneventful storyline, although filled with intelligent and lively dialogues, strikes the viewer not only by its simplicity but - in light of Wajda's earliest films - by a much poorer level of psychological complexity. The film is closer to the French New Wave productions such as Godard's *Breathless* (1960) than to what has already come to be known as a "Wajda film." This is not to say that an artist should not go beyond his/her most familiar and favorite topics, but rather to highlight that *Innocent Sorcerers* reflects a visible distance that Wajda as filmmaker took toward his main protagonists. Wajda is clearly unfamiliar not only with the idea of "common characters" (as discussed earlier), but with the "new wave" cinematic language which he utilizes to frame Pelagia and Bazyli.

In his book on Polish film, Stanisław Janicki writes that although in *Innocent Sorcerers* Wajda moved very far from his previous productions, he nevertheless remained faithful to his protagonists.<sup>409</sup> This hardly seems to be the case as the only shared factor between the two protagonists and Maciek Chełmicki, Korab, Stokrotka, Stach and Dorota, is that they are all young. There is a certain lightness about Pelagia and Bazyli that prevents us from taking their actions seriously. First of all, Wajda does not place them during wartime or another extremely difficult historical time, but he makes them preoccupied with simple, commonplace things that all young people enjoy. What makes the couple more insincere, though – especially when compared to Wajda’s previous protagonists – is the role-playing game they consciously decide to take part in. The issue is that their game has only some unspoken sensual pleasure at stake – the couple address each other using nicknames, they even write “a script for a night,” including positions such as “to kiss” and “go to bed,” and behave in a way they would not normally behave [Fig. 5.7]. There is a somewhat ironic shift here: while the nicknames Pelagia and Bazyli work as a mask or as flirtatious props, Wajda’s previous heroes Korab, Stokrotka, Stach, and some deceased partisans, whose names Maciek pronounces over the shot glasses, use their nicknames in order to protect their lives. Pelagia’s and Bazyli’s “fake identity” game, in the Polish-Wajda context, comes across as silly, trivial, and only necessitated by boredom, rather than any real need.

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409. Stanisław Janicki, *Film polski od A do Z*, 3rd ed. (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1977), p. 68.



**Fig. 5.7: Pelagia playing a “fake identity” game**

Unlike Wajda’s previous (and later) characters, the couple from *Innocent Sorcerers* has nothing of the Romantic emotional fever and internal doubt. What they take from the Romantic tradition is only the title, which (again!) directly refers to Mickiewicz’s lines from *Forefathers Eve I*. In this text, Mickiewicz uses the phrase to describe the type of people who avoid taking responsibility, and who hide in a fantasy world, as they fear the disappointments of real life. Although Wajda’s title seems a direct connection to Romanticism, it takes from Mickiewicz what is not his “signature” writing element. For Mickiewicz, “innocent sorcerers” still signify heroes, just up-and-coming ones – before their psychological transformation (i.e., before becoming fully rounded human beings). For example, they signify Gustav before he turns into the politically active and patriotic Konrad. Wajda’s protagonists, too, appear to be “pre- transformation” heroes, the type of characters that – as yet – have neither goals nor serious thoughts about life.

Surprisingly enough, contrary to his disposition, Wajda consciously decided to make this film about “common people” early on. One year before the premiere of *Innocent Sorcerers* he confessed in an interview:

[My protagonists] are ordinary people, the thousands of which we meet on every street. They don't stand out. They are common thus their problems are common, everyday and ordinary. ... they are completely different from all these heroes that I preoccupied myself with so far, and will preoccupy myself with in the future.<sup>410</sup>

Wajda's awareness that his characters depart from his “favorite” ones comes across here as some kind of experiment that he may not continue, as he will return to his “usual” characters in the future. But his venture into an unknown field of a new type of protagonist cannot be explained only by Wajda's desire to experiment. Rather, it was also dictated by his strong belief in a film's collaborative nature. In other words, Wajda agreed on making a film distant from his artistic inclinations because – unlike French *auteurs* – he believed a movie was a joint effort.

First of all, Wajda made no secret of the fact that he did not work on the screenplay of *Innocent Sorcerers* at all, as that was the job of Jerzy Andrzejewski and a young poet and boxer, Jerzy Skolimowski.<sup>411</sup> His earlier collaboration with Andrzejewski proved to be very fruitful, but this time was different. As Andrzejewski himself openly admitted: “for the first time I consider this script my personal work for a film.”<sup>412</sup> More so, Wajda quickly understood that the dialogues Andrzejewski and Skolimowski wrote were too literary, and too distant from his own taste. What best summarizes Wajda's uncertainty about the project is the note he left in his planner a few weeks before the shooting in 1959: “I still do not see this film. If only I could not

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410. “Zwykłymi ludźmi, takimi, jakich tysiące spotykamy na każdym kroku. Nie wyróżniają się niczym. Są zwyczajni, a więc i sprawy, które przeżywają, także są zwyczajne, ludzkie, codzienne. ... są zupełnie różni od tych wszystkich, którymi się dotychczas zajmowałem i będę się zajmował w przyszłości”, “Niewinni czarodzieje (reportaż z nowego filmu Andrzeja Wajdy),” *Ekran*, no. 36 (September 6, 1959), p. 5.

411. Andrzej Wajda, *Wajda. Filmy*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1996), p. 99.

412. “Po raz pierwszy utwór ten uważam za swoją osobistą twórczość dla filmu ...,” *Ibid.*

make it, it would be a load off my mind... When I think that I could make children's crusade [Wajda's later film *Gates to Paradise*, 1968] or *Spring to Come* instead, I want to cry."<sup>413</sup> Wajda not only admitted early on that he did not "feel" *Innocent Sorcerers*, but also that he would rather direct films based on classics of the Polish literary canon focused on grand themes.

Perhaps paradoxically, Wajda's openness in collaborating with writers resulted in a film that, in its style and subject matter, was closer to the flagships of the French New Wave [Fig. 5.8]. To put it differently, Wajda created a "new wave" type of film only by passing a lot of artistic freedom to his collaborators, which included the actor Tadeusz Łomnicki. The French filmmakers, in contrast, advocated the idea of a film as the sole creation of a director. The dialogues from *Innocent Sorcerers*, as well as its cinematic style, look like they were taken straight from a *nouvelle vague* production. Many elements of the film follow the "rules" of French New Wave filmmaking: most of the movie is shot on location, in Bazyli's tiny apartment. The camerawork is seamless and lacks any striking visual effects; although the two protagonists behave in a rather theatrical manner, the framing gets closer to a documentary-style objectivity focused on capturing "the real" nuances between the couple. The city works here as an important backdrop, which adds to the overall feel that Bazyli and Pelagia are just ordinary people walking spontaneously around Warsaw on a regular Saturday night. In short, *Innocent Sorcerers*, which in spirit was far from Wajda's artistic sensitivity, paradoxically turned out to be his most "European" and "new wave" production, close to what was advocated by French *auteurs*.

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413. "Ciągłe nie widzę tego filmu. Gdybym mógł go nie robić, kamień spadłby mi z serca... Gdy sobie pomyślę, że mógłbym realizować dziecięcą krucjatę lub 'Przedwiośnie,' płakać mi się chce." Ibid., p. 101.





Fig. 5.8: Bored group of youngsters reminiscent of the French New Wave films

What is perhaps surprising is that the film was met – despite its apolitical plot – with considerable objections from the authorities. They saw it as bourgeois and promoting nihilism among youth. In fact, Bazyli, who likes good American cigarettes and elastic socks, is a citizen interested only in his selfish pleasures. His dedication to the medical profession is rather superficial, and it looks like his days pass by unproductively. Because of this features, the early Polish reviews of *Innocent Sorcerers* mirror the reviews of the French New Wave discussions cited in Chapter 3. This time, Polish critics also wrote about the “social harm” that the movie could cause among youth, as it did not promote meaningful values<sup>414</sup>; others condemned the film because it supposedly followed the fashion for nudity.<sup>415</sup> Communist officials thought along

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414. Janusz Wilhemi, “Niewinni czarodzieje,” *Trybuna Ludu*, December 23, 1960, p. 5.

415. Jerzy Płażewski, *Przegląd Kulturalny*, January 1961, p. 8.

similar lines, and their views eventually shaped the final scene – they insisted on including an uplifting “happy ending” (Pelagia returns to Bazyli), suggesting the couple’s future relationship.<sup>416</sup> But even with Wajda’s original idea for the ending, the movie would not change significantly.<sup>417</sup> The key point was that it was not made in line with Wajda’s fascinations. As he himself admitted about *Innocent Sorcerers*: “I immersed myself in a world which wasn’t really mine.”<sup>418</sup> The irony is that *Innocent Sorcerers* from the very beginning seemed to be a “politically safe” movie, and serious obstacles caused by the authorities were not something Wajda expected. At this point, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Wajda’s creativity reached its heights each time he assumed the presence of two obligatory viewers: the communist authorities and Polish patriots. Taking their presence into account was most tangible in those films in which he depicted grand, national themes.

## **Conclusion**

As discussed in this chapter, Wajda was aware of his role as a spokesman for the Polish cause, and he cherished that position. The discussion of his political activities (he was a member of the Solidarity movement and a member of Parliament after 1989) is beyond the scope of this project, but it also adds to his position as one that mirrors that of Mickiewicz in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wajda’s most important works – like Mickiewicz’s – are those that deal with questions of national importance, i.e. Polish history and identity. He utilized his striking ornamental style to concentrate on the most “Romantic” elements of his films – skillfully oscillating between the regime’s expectations, respect for the freedom-fighting Polish tradition, and his own artistic impulses. It is through this mixture of different expectations, which are reflected in

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416. Wajda, *Wajda. Filmy*, pp. 99-101.

417. Wajda wanted to end the movie with a close up of Pelagia sitting in a classroom filled with several nearly identical girls. His other idea was to end the movie after Pelagia left Bazyli’s apartment.

418. “...zanurzyłem się w jakiś świat, który nie do końca był moim światem,” *Another Film - Part 82*, Web of Stories, accessed June 29, 2016, <http://www.webofstories.com/play/andrzej.wajda/82>.

his visual style, that he managed to create strikingly ambivalent works. On numerous occasions Wajda highlighted his link to Romanticism, but these connections go well beyond cinematic references; above all, they apply to his extratextual role as a national bard. Tellingly, on the title page of a huge two-volume album dedicated to his works, Wajda quoted a poem by a Romantic French writer Alfred de Musse (written in 1861):

Oh, valiant Poland! Until you show  
disasters more dreadful than those we've seen,  
and until your strength – oh, Poland! – won't make us keen  
our faces shall always with indifference glow.  
This is your time, heroes! – but fight alone,  
Helping is not Europe's thing, it's clear,  
As it prefers delights sleeker than fear,  
So fight or perish – oh, Poland – we're like stone.<sup>419</sup>

The poem not only refers to Romanticism and the November Uprising of 1830, but, above all, promotes the idea that Poland should be a leader in saving Europe's morality. Since his first feature film, *A Generation*, Wajda's art has carried forward this notion; a notion that in the current 2016 political situation has been dramatically mis-appropriated for propaganda reasons by the right-wing government. But that is another research project.

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419. "Dopóki mężna Polsko Ty nam nie pokażesz/ Jakiejś klęski straszliwszej, niż wszystkie co były, / Aby nas – Polsko – zbudzić, nie znajdziesz ty siły, / Obojętności z twarzy jeszcze nam nie zmażesz. / Wasz czas bohaterowie – ale walczcie sami, / Europa nie bywa skora do pomocy, / Woli gładsze podniety, co nie straszą w nocy, / Więc walcz albo giń Polsko – myśmy zblazowani." Wajda, *Wajda. Filmy*. 2. Translated from French to Polish by Stanisław Marczak-Oborski.

## Conclusion

In October 2015, as was the case for a few previous years, a theatre show organized within the annual Poetry Night took place on the market square in Kraków. That year, the esteemed street theater troupe KTO, under the direction of its long serving head Jerzy Zoń, performed an interpretation of Ignacy Krasicki's text *War of the Monks* (*Monachomachia, czyli wojna mnichów, 1778*) adapted by a prominent poet, Bronisław Maj. As before, the Zoń-Maj duet created a thought-provoking spectacle, using the main theme from the source text (battle between Carmelites and Dominicans) as commentary for the present-day division within Polish society and politics. Yet the 2015 Poetry Night ended in something more than only a critical response in artistic circles – both artists, Zoń and Maj, were charged with offending religious and patriotic feelings. What outraged conservative politicians about the spectacle the most was the adaptation of a well-known partisan melody to new lyrics advocating a love for money, as well as the “shameful” use of an aspergillum and religious habits (which the actors wore).<sup>420</sup> The court case served as a clear warning to other artists: those who criticize or use Polish symbols other than in a celebratory way will be penalized. After the 2015 spectacle, the Poetry Night was not simply discontinued, but the authorities used “a communist style strategy,” to use Maj's words, in order to avoid potential future controversies – the Poetry Night was quietly incorporated into another festival, soon becoming nothing but a marginal happening.<sup>421</sup>

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420. “Bronisław Maj i Jerzy Zoń przesłuchani w sprawie Neomonachomachii,” *krakow.wyborcza.pl*, accessed August 31, 2016, <http://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/1,44425,19705065,bronislaw-maj-i-jerzy-zon-przesluchani-w-sprawie-neomonachomachii.html>.

421. Maj used this phrase during our conversation on 06/05/2016 at the Nowa Prowincja café in Kraków.

The charges brought against the two artists, who were outspoken critics of the communist regime in the 1980s, is a particularly revealing instance of how artists in Poland to this day are expected to applaud the government's policies and take an uncritical perspective on Poland. While this type of "contribution" is not surprising in many – especially totalitarian – countries, in Poland, the pressure placed on artists' shoulders to shape national Polish identity has predominantly come from circles striving for independence. In other words, as I argue in my thesis, Polish artists were and continue to be expected to serve as the voice of the nation, aimed against external forces occupying Poland (or what is perceived as an external threat). In the current democratic period, marked by the rule of the Law and Justice party, however, there have been significant changes in the ways in which this long tradition of nurturing "Polishness" is employed. While this nurturing attitude may have had positive impact on the nation's preservation in times of foreign occupation, it has turned into an oppressive doctrine in times of supposed democracy in 2015. Celebrating sacrifice, emphasizing Poland's unique role in history-making, as well as tightening bonds between the Catholic Church and the state, each became foundational to the official political line of the ruling party, actively discouraging unorthodox creative experiment. The party's reform to reshape the educational system, rewrite the nation's teaching program, and produce films celebrating Mickiewicz-style themes led to situations in which the Romantic tradition – or rather its caricature – would become the only official doctrine.<sup>422</sup>

Certainly, Mickiewicz is not to blame here, but his works serve today as the greatest source for realizing what the "Polish spirit" is. The overwhelming popularity of the national myths that he created not only solidified Poles' penchant for sacrifice, but also resulted in rigid rules imposed on artistic creation. As I argued in my first chapter, Juliusz Słowacki's desperate longing for recognition and his rivalry with

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422. Two most notable cinematic examples of this are *Smoleńsk* (directed by Antoni Krauze, 2016), and *The Story of Rój* (*Historia Roja, czyli w ziemi lepiej słyhać*, directed by Jerzy Zalewski, 2016). Both films enjoyed the open support of the ruling party and were supposed to advance its narratives of patriotic sacrifice and Poland as a victim of Russian conspiracy.

Mickiewicz initiated the situation where daring or critical reference to what was/is considered “sacred” for Poles was met with a harsh response. The Interwar period, which brought Poland independence, did not provide a significant break from this trend, and emerging groups of film artists and critics were no exception. Karol Irzykowski, Poland’s most notable interwar film critic, grappled with resolving the tension between art-for-art’s-sake represented by French theorists such as Jean Epstein and Louis Delluc and socially-committed cinema advocated by Soviet Constructivism. Interwar filmmakers such as the Themersons, subscribing to their own fascination with film’s unexplored possibilities, eventually gave in to the idea that film should fulfill specific utilitarian roles.

Although the period of Polish independence certainly offered much obligation-free experimental potential, with the worsening of the political situation in the late 1920s Polish artists started leaning towards more pragmatic approaches to the arts. The popularity of Soviet Constructivism, together with Mickiewicz’s legacy, resulted in oscillation between that which was free and individual, and that which was collectively useful. Artists, then, turned into advocates, which became even more apparent in postwar Polish film. This legacy of artists’ active engagement in politics is partly the reason why postwar Polish film criticism did not adapt the French term *auteur* uncritically but rather tailored it to fit the Polish context. These differences and nuances between the French and Polish understanding of the term are explored in Chapter Three, while my last two chapters offer close reading of early films by Wajda and Konwicki. I argue that both artists’ continuous oscillation between what was expected of them and what they themselves strived to acknowledge not only provided a link between pre- and post-war cinema, but also shaped the works of most notable filmmakers of the Polish Film School. As much as Konwicki and Wajda were able to manifest their distinctive cinematic styles (each in his own particular way), they were both caught between grand statements about Polish cultural heritage and identity, on the one hand, and the dictates of the communist state on the other. In the end, while

they both questioned the usefulness of Romantic nation-building, they also reinforced its authority.

There is one more important fact to consider here, i.e., how Wajda and Konwicki's "in-betweenness" influenced their distinctive visual styles, as well as advanced the personal philosophies and views each of them manifested in their art. One of the outcomes of this dynamic was Wajda's stylistic unevenness in his earliest films: striking visuals alongside socialist realist style scenes. Yet Wajda still managed to carve a space for his decorative and dramatic cinematic language, which became his authorial signature. He often fills his frame with an abundance of "props," or heavily symbolic artifacts, that produce striking effects packed with meanings and emotions (scenes with shot glasses, Jasio Krone running into a man selling icons, prominent Christian imagery, etc.). Although Wajda's tendency to decorate his scenes with utmost care for symbolic meaning is not always successful (see, for example *Lotna*, 1959, where the white mare imposes its clichéd symbolism at the most ridiculous moments), it is his reliance on visuals, rather than narrative novelty, that makes his style recognizable. On top of that, this pressure to satisfy two different political agendas resulted in shaping Wajda's individual attitudes in his films, which also came to define his reputation. As much as he had to include in his works elements that were in line with the communist party's ideology, in these works there is also a certain sympathy towards his "communists heroes." As I wrote in my discussion of Szczuka from *Ashes and Diamonds*, Wajda decided to create a character that represents dedication to pre-war leftist values instead of making Szczuka a typical apparatchik eager to build a socialist state no matter the costs. Similarly, in his later film, *Man of Marble*, he creates the character Mateusz Birkut, a worker and highly positive hero dedicated to a communist cause. What Wajda criticizes, then, is not people who believe in communism, but rather, distortions of the system itself. Thus, what his films manifest is above all dedication to the cause – a dedication largely inherited from Romanticism, but translatable to dedications that originate in different ideologies.

Konwicki's oscillation, too, resulted in a very distinctive cinematic style and complex worldview that penetrated his art. Unlike Wajda, he builds his authorial signature not through elaborate staging and striking imagery, but rather through unusual narration strategies where one scene does not logically follow from another, and where characters' motivations are often completely unclear. He also experiments with camera angles, and breaks the fourth wall, something very distant from Wajda's style. In advancing his personal worldview, Konwicki also differs from Wajda. First, he has always been open about his communist sympathies after the war, and made no secret of the fact that his early novels and film scripts were more favorable toward communists than toward the legacies of Romanticism. As I stated in Chapter Four, his attitude changed after 1956, when he understood how many crimes had been committed in the name of communism. From then on, although still skeptical of the Romantic ideal of sacrifice, he gradually displayed more and more affinity toward it. In other words, although Konwicki ironically deconstructs national myths (especially in *The Marshes* and *Somersault*), he does not criticise the Romantic tradition itself, but rather condemns the countless myths that emerged from it. Maria Janion has stated that Konwicki *is* a Romantic writer himself.<sup>423</sup> But while her conclusion largely follows from analyses of Konwicki's novels, I would argue that he also fits the Romantic paradigm of an artist-*wieszcz*. In tackling matters most important for Poles during his lifetime, he acted as the voice of the nation, a feature that united both Wajda and Konwicki, making each of them a *wieszcz*, rather than an *auteur* in the Western sense.

Wajda's thematic agenda is less decisive than that of Konwicki (i.e. Wajda questions Romantic tradition less, but is nonetheless sympathetic to the communist cause). This difference belies a key consequence with respect to Wajda's contemporary status in Polish culture. Since the rule of the Law and Justice Party in Parliament, Wajda's canonical status as a national cultural figure has been demoted to that of a

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423. Maria Janion, "Where the Marshes Are: Romantic Mediumism in the Novels of Tadeusz Konwicki," in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 14, 3, 1994, pp. 156-71.



“communist collaborator,” due to the fact that the Party viewed his successful career in People’s Poland as a sign of pro-communist sympathies. Wajda’s skepticism of the Romantic tradition (although much milder than Konwicki’s), together with his positive depictions of communists, have been deemed unpatriotic. This reversal not only evidences how reputation is constructed (which applies to Mickiewicz as well) but, more importantly, how artists figure as a kind of common good, or talent that can and should be used to increase national advancement and social benefit. I have focused on the postwar Polish Film School to view the processes behind these dynamics, how they impact an individual’s creative freedom, and how they are manifested through language (as the Polish use of the term *auteur* indicates). Yet the discussion should not end here, as the current political climate in Poland – somewhat mirroring the climate of the postwar period – once again demands that we revisit the legacy of Romantic nation-building and ponder in more detail how it may be (mis)appropriated to serve new political ideologies.

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