

Polish film and theatre director Andrzej Wajda dead at 90

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14 October 2016

Film and theatre director Andrzej Wajda, one of the most prominent figures in postwar Polish cultural life, died in Warsaw on October 9 at the age of 90. Wajda died from pulmonary failure.

Born in a small city in northeastern Poland in 1926, Wajda began his filmmaking career in the 1950s with a series of works dealing with key historical events of the twentieth century—World War II, the Holocaust and the postwar Stalinist era. His films belong to the canon of Polish and European cinema and made a great impact on his contemporaries as well as subsequent generations.

In his home country, Wajda is regarded as one of the most respected and significant “documentarians” of his time. Rejecting the restraints of Stalinist “Socialist Realism,” he promoted a revival of symbolism in the spirit of the country’s nineteenth century Romantic traditions. Together with such prominent figures as Wojciech Has, Andrzej Munk and Kazimierz Kutz, he was a driving force behind the movement later known as the “Polish Film School.”

Many of Wajda’s earlier movies, including *A Generation* (1954), *Kana*? (1956) and *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), were honest and valuable attempts to portray the complexity of Polish contemporary history and politics. His last films, however, increasingly resembled state-commissioned propaganda. This regrettable decline of a very talented artist was bound up with Wajda’s own political outlook in relation to the broader historical developments in postwar Poland.

Wajda belonged to a generation born between the imperialist world wars. Those who survived World War II experienced both fascism and Stalinism. Many artists, including Wajda, were attracted for a time to socialism and Marxism. However, they faced the difficulty of having to overcome both the Stalinist and nationalist ideological pressures of their time. After a brief encounter with the anti-Nazi, pro-bourgeois republic resistance movement of the Home Army (AK), young Andrzej lived through the war in provincial Radom and later in Krakow, relatively untouched by the German occupation.

His father, Jakób, a lieutenant in the Polish army, went missing in September 1939 and was later declared to have been shot by Soviet forces in mysterious circumstances. The trauma of his father’s disappearance had lasting consequences for Wajda, which he finally sought to lay to rest much later in his career with his film *Katy*? (2007). After the Second World War, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, and, in 1950, at the famed Łódź Film School. In 1948, he joined the ruling Stalinist PPR (Polish Workers’ Party).

At the time, Wajda believed that artists and intellectuals needed to support the ongoing social and political transformation of his country. When applying for entry to the Łódź Film School in 1950 (the school’s alumni include Roman Polański and Krzysztof Kieślowski), he wrote: “Beside talent and a sense of reality, a film director must have a Marxist attitude towards life and art.”

In line with these convictions, Wajda made his directing debut with *Generation* (1954), a black-and-white feature about young Communist

partisans in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. The partisans are presented in a positive light as opposed to the forces of the pro-bourgeois AK. Inspired by Italian neorealism, well acted and directed, the film shows young, often teenage men and women faced with extreme situations and dramatic choices under conditions of war.

The second part of Wajda’s famous war trilogy, and perhaps the best, was *Canal*. Here Wajda masterfully recreates the last days in the lives of several Warsaw uprising fighters who attempt to make their way through the city’s sewer system. Awarded the Silver Palm at the Cannes Film Festival, *Canal* is an innovative masterpiece of anti-war cinema blending realism with suspense, and using innovative sound and light effects. The film was not received favourably in Poland. The futile death of the uprising’s heroes, covered in dirt and excrement, did not correspond to the idealised picture of the nation’s martyrs.

Ashes and Diamonds, the third film in the trilogy, was one of the most controversial and discussed films in Polish cinema history. Featuring the talented Zbigniew Cybulski (often referred to as “the Polish James Dean”), Wajda’s film deals with the postwar efforts of the anti-communist AK partisans who were ordered to assassinate pro-Soviet government officials. Wajda skillfully depicts the tragedy of Maciek (Cybulski), who experiences doubts before killing a man, a Communist official, he personally knows. The ambiguity of the film’s plot provoked both criticism and praise, but it is clear that Wajda’s sympathies lie with Maciek. Wajda uses the film to portray his own tragic generation of romantic war heroes through the “mythical” depiction of one day in the life of a tragic character who dies on the “scrapheap of history.”

Controversy surrounded Wajda’s attitude towards national symbols and heroes. *Lotna* (1959) took a heavy beating from nationalistic circles for its alleged ahistorical treatment of the September campaign (Hitler’s invasion of Poland in 1939), when the Polish cavalry on horses launched an attack on German tanks. With this film, as in the case of *Generation*, Wajda was widely criticised by some for accommodating himself to the Stalinist regime.

The release of *The Ashes* in 1965 once again unleashed a fierce debate on the treatment of Polish history. Wajda was attacked by the critics and nationalist circles for presenting that history in an unflattering light. Set during the Napoleonic wars, the film touches on the sensitive subject of the role of Polish soldiers in suppressing the independence movements of other nations while fighting at the side of Napoleon’s army for Poland’s own independence.

Wajda paid a tribute in 1968 to Cybulski, one of his favorite actors, who died tragically in an accident at the age of 40, with a highly personal film, *Everything For Sale*, featuring his wife of the time, Beata Tyszkiewicz.

In 1975 Wajda directed one of his most memorable works, *The Promised Land*. Based on the novel by the Nobel Prize winner Władysław Reymont and considered one of the finest Polish films, it recreates the harsh environment of early capitalism in nineteenth century Łódź, an industrial town. Following the story of three friends: the Polish

Karol Borowiecki, the German Maks Baum and the Jewish Moryc Welt, who jointly want to establish a textile factory, the movie exposes the crudity and brutality associated with the ruthless pursuit of profit.

The mid-1970s also witnessed a change in Wajda's attitude towards the Stalinist establishment. He began to criticise the bureaucratic regime for strangling the artistic and political expression of his generation and released his first "anti-Stalinist" film, *Man of Marble* (1976). The film tells the story of a "model" worker, bricklayer Mateusz Birkut, during the 1950s, shown through the investigative lens of a young female reporter, Agnieszka. The reporter uncovers the bitter truth behind Birkut's famous feat of laying 30,000 bricks during one shift and the tragic fate of a young worker of peasant origin who, after embracing "Communism," is destroyed by the very system he had supported.

Man of Marble conveys the mood of growing popular discontent. The film also presciently anticipates the future development of the Solidarity union movement by ending with a scene in which Agnieszka finally manages to meet Maciek, Birkut's son, in front of the gates of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk (where workers stage a historic strike in 1980, precipitating a major crisis for the Stalinist officialdom). Wajda's *Man of Iron* (1981) picks up where the previous film left off, and documents the birth of Solidarity in 1981 (with a cameo performance by Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa).

Following the implementation of martial law and the crushing of the strike movement in December 1981 by the Polish Stalinist government of Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, Wajda filmed his *Danton* (1983) in Paris. The movie, with a script by Jean-Claude Carrière, examines the events in post-revolutionary France in 1794. Gerard Depardieu, in a remarkable performance, plays Danton, a highly popular figure, who faces trial and execution as a traitor to the Revolution. The film clearly is meant to address both the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalinism, as well as the situation in contemporary Poland.

Before hiring Depardieu, Wajda invited him to the Gdańsk shipyard to have him see "the inhumanely tired face of revolution that suddenly falls asleep dreaming a dream that cannot be realised."

In 1990, the director returned to the theme of the Holocaust in *Korczak*. Filmed in black-and-white, the movie tells the story of the well-known Polish-Jewish doctor, writer and pedagogue Janusz Korczak (Wojciech Pszoniak). This author of well-loved books for children became another victim of the Holocaust. Wajda's moving film portrays Korczak's struggle to save the children at his orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto and their last march to the gas chambers in Treblinka.

Following the collapse of the Stalinist regime and the re-establishment of capitalism in Poland, Wajda entered politics and served as a senator for Solidarity between 1989 and 1991, during Walesa's term as president. From 1992 to 1994, Wajda was chairman of Poland's Cultural Council, playing an active role in politics and encouraging the revival of nationalism. He became a member of the pro-capitalist Democratic Union (1990-1994), acting as a vocal proponent of the pro-European Union Civic Platform (PO). He also became a co-owner of one of the most influential newspapers, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, notorious for beating the drum for war with Russia.

Wajda consciously turned at this time to Poland's national literary heritage. He directed a large-scale version of *Pan Tadeusz* (1998), based on the epic poem—published in 1834—by Adam Mickiewicz, as well as *The Revenge* (2002), with an excellent role for Roman Polanski, based on another work, a comedy by Aleksander Fredro written in 1833, that is also mandatory reading for Polish students.

In 2007, at the age of 81, Wajda completed his film *Katyń* dealing with the killing of an estimated 22,000 Polish officers and intellectuals by Soviet troops in early 1940. Katyń is a town near Smolensk in Russia where most of the executions took place. Wajda's father was executed, as part of the same operation, in an NKVD prison in Kharkiv in the Ukraine.

For decades, any discussion of the slaughter carried out in Katyń was forbidden in postwar Stalinist Poland, while in the Soviet Union itself, blame for the atrocity was laid on German troops following the breach of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact by Hitler.

Wajda's film is the first cinematic attempt to deal with this tragic event, and it is deeply flawed. In a succession of scenes, the filmmaker presents in dramatic form all the themes of contemporary Polish nationalism—the danger of Poland's being overrun from Germany in the west and the Soviet Union or Russia in the east; the role of the Catholic Church in Poland, heroically intervening on behalf of the "Christ amongst nations"; and the quasi-democratic qualms of an elite Polish cavalry officer in 1939, whose first thought, according to Wajda, is that his enemy does not adhere to the Geneva conventions. Wajda denied his film was anti-Russian, although all of the Soviet figures portrayed in the film—with one notable exception—are thugs and brutes.

Even more troublesome than *Katyń* is the final part of Wajda's Solidarity trilogy, *Wałęsa: Man of Hope* (2012). Made in a response to mounting criticism of Solidarity and Wałęsa, who was accused of having collaborated with the Stalinists, *Man of Hope* is a shameful propaganda piece marking two decades since the restoration of capitalism in Poland. It also represents the director's rather desperate attempt to restore Wałęsa's reputation as a national hero.

The film's "happy ending" features Wałęsa paying a vassal's tribute to the imperialist powers, falsely labelling the reinstatement of capitalism in Poland and the looting of the country's state assets as the "road to freedom."

Wajda was not alone in his disorientation. It is difficult to think of more than a handful of Eastern European or Soviet/Russian intellectuals who responded to the restoration of capitalism in 1989-1991 in a critical or even thoughtful manner. Cut off by Stalinism from genuine left-wing thought, accepting the regimes' and the Western bourgeoisie's claim that Stalinist rule represented a form of "socialism" or "communism," and having campaigned for decades around the empty, abstract slogan of "democracy," the artists in particular virtually to a man or woman succumbed to the imperialists' siren song.

Wajda's prostration before political reaction found vivid expression in his embrace of the fascistic coup in Ukraine. In remarks preceding the premiere of *Wałęsa: Man of Hope* on Ukrainian television in April 2014, Wajda commented: "Dear friends, in all that you're going through, perhaps you'll be curious to know how we, creating Solidarity under Lech Walesa's leadership, regained freedom, became a free nation. ... I am deeply convinced that you will win. I wish you this victory from the bottom of my heart. Long live free Ukraine!"

Wajda's final film, *Afterimage* (2016), treats the last years in the life of avant-garde artist Władysław Strzemiński (Bogusław Linda) in postwar Poland. Strzemiński identified with revolutionary movements in art and politics in the 1920s. Now, he rejects "Socialist Realism" and pursues his own artistic path. The Polish Stalinist officials fear and oppress him, kicking him out of the artists' association and depriving him of making a living. He dies in 1952.

In one of his final interviews, Wajda indicated that he wished "to warn against government intervention in the affairs of art." The Law and Justice (PiS) government's brutal intrusion into Poland's artistic life, which began soon after the far-right party took power in 2015, troubled Wajda. But his warning, especially in light of his own recent history, which helped these reactionary forces come to power, is a matter of too little, too late:

"We are now facing attempts by the authorities to intervene in art. They talk about what national art should be or what it shouldn't be. I've made a film about the events of the past, with the message that interference in art is not a task for the authorities. It is a job of the artists, not the government."

In our review of Wajda's *Katy*?, we noted as a conclusion: "Wajda is intent on reviving a national tradition—as the reviewer for the *New York Times* put it, 'Katy' is deliberately intended to inspire patriotism in the most positive sense of the word.' However, both the global integration of world capitalism and the venality of the Polish bourgeoisie render any independent Polish national development impossible. Nothing could be more indicative of the reactionary dead-end of Polish nationalism today than the fact that in its efforts to evade German influence from the west and Russian influence from the east, the Polish ruling elite has increasingly looked for support from the White House in Washington.

"During the postwar period many of Andrzej Wajda's films provided genuine insights into the workings of both Stalinist and Nazi totalitarianism. His films dealt with the possibility and necessity of opposition to oppressive regimes. As such his work offered a genuine starting point for a revival of culture and film in Poland. Now, however, the development of culture in Poland and elsewhere can only take place in hostile opposition to the film director's espousal of nationalism and uncritical embrace of the free market economy."



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