

## **Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* (1976) and *Man of Iron* (1981): History and Film, Documents and Propaganda, Heroes and Memory**

Wajda's twin films, *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, tell the multi-generational story of Polish struggle for freedom and justice in the post-WWII era ending in the 1980s with the Solidarity movement. The two films approach the topic by examining the story of a lead worker, Mateusz Birkut, who is made a Socialist star, only to find himself defeated by the corrupt governmental system, and his son, Maciej Tomczyk, who continues his father's struggle through the student strike of 1968 and the Solidarity strikes of 1980. However, the films approach their stories not directly but through the quest of two different television/film reporters, Agnieszka and Winkel, to uncover the truth about them. Wajda mixes together a number of different film modes in order to help us sense the complexity of film's relationship to the past, especially in regards to governmental censorship and propaganda.

- Actual film footage from the periods
- Fictional unused footage from the Socialist period
- Fictional documentaries from the Socialist period
- Extended flashbacks that recall the memories of individuals involved with both stories
- Fictional inclusion of two real individuals, Lech Wałęsa and Anna Walentynowicz, playing themselves at a wedding
- The mode of the biopic
- The narrative frame of media culture

In short, Wajda's films purport to reconstruct real truths about the actual past using a fictional story of a father and son, while framing them within the struggle for media to come to terms with the actual past through interviewees' memory even as they seek the truth underneath the official story of state-controlled documentaries. This is somewhat further complicated when we recognize that all history to some extent must build its narrative of events around a selective use of historical facts, crafting a plot with characters and analyzing causes with certain directions. Films that set out to reflect history, whether documentaries or feature films, even if they are not simple costume dramas, must compress or condense information about the past, may have to displace or alter events to help structure their plots, and may have to reflect in dialogue or composite characters what took place in other manners in the actual events.

### Discussion Questions

- How would you compare Birkut with his son Maciej (played by the same actor)? Do they represent different periods in Polish history? Different generations?
- How would you describe the changes in Agnieszka between the two films? Why does this happen? Do you find yourself preferring one version of her over another? Why and/or why not?
- How much trust should be placed in the various interviews/memories of each film?
- How would you describe the changes that happen to the other characters? What do they reveal about them?

