

## Andrzej Wajda, the conscience keeper

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**Poland's greatest film-maker was 90**



THE life's work of Andrzej Wajda was to tell Poles forbidden truths about their country and explain simpler ones to foreigners. Neither should have been necessary. Nazis and communists smothered Poland in fear and lies. The country of Chopin, Conrad and Copernicus was cut off from the European cultural mainstream, to be patronised, misunderstood and forgotten.

He would have loved to make films about something else, to have dumped the tragic national themes and their well-worn symbols—sabres, white horses, red poppies—for something more exotic, such as “a handful of sexual symbols from a Freudian textbook”. But that was a luxury for film-makers in happier countries.

Since pictures were harder to censor than words, he set himself to making films that would evade the official scissors, giving his compatriots a chance to see, think and breathe freely, at least in the darkness of the cinema. At first, his work avoided direct confrontation. Instead he stuck to the rules while quietly subverting them, with bleak, anti-heroic films that could be seen as stories about people, not dangerous ideas. A favourite image in the early work was a lit match burning away a glass of alcohol: nothing to the censors but, to him, idealism evaporating in the war.

The closing scene of his greatest early work, “Ashes and Diamonds” (1958), showed an anti-communist guerrilla dying on a rubbish dump after botching an assassination—an image as powerful as those of Goya or Delacroix. That grim end, he knew, would make the censors glad, but audiences would ask themselves: “What kind of system is this that forces such a sympathetic lad to die on a garbage heap?” In an earlier film, “Kanal” (1956), young soldiers in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 perished hopelessly in the city’s sewers. He did not say explicitly that the Soviet Red Army callously stood by while Nazis crushed the flower of the resistance—but no Pole needed reminding of that.

### **Double vision**

As a young man he went to art school in Cracow, and film-making remained a second-choice career. Film, for him, had to be based on painting, especially the tortured victim-figures of his idol Andrzej Wroblewski, who had recorded the Nazi occupation. Mr Wajda’s 40 films became his own great mural of Polish misfortunes. And since the good Lord had given him two eyes, one to look into the camera and the other to notice what was going on around him, he managed to make history, too. His work subtly undermined communism’s grip on Polish life; audiences could see that the system was based on lies, and could be outwitted.

Only after martial law was declared in 1981 did the authorities crack down. Mr Wajda’s “Man of Iron”, about the Gdansk shipyard strike of 1980, had just won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, and he was increasingly caught up in the Solidarity movement; 22 years later his production company made a biopic of his close friend Lech Walesa, its founder. The prize saved him from prison, but the government shut down the company.

Pigeonholing him was hard. His films were realistic and romantic, classic and innovative; his baroque leanings became starker as he matured. Little of himself was allowed to show. Only “The Birch Wood” (1970) was an indulgence, and he felt guilty to be out in nature, watching leaves unfurl, while Poland was dying; but lyricism could leaven the relentlessly political.

Optimistic by nature, a man of winning smiles, he still firmly expected to die in the communist system, and was astonished when freedom came. Modest in manners, he was also utterly confident. It was not arrogance, but a statement of fact, when he said he was the only director who could make a film about the “unhealed wound” of Katyn, the secret Soviet massacre in 1940 of 20,000 Polish officers. His father Jakub, a cavalry officer, was one of those murdered; he never forgot his mother’s desperate search for news of her missing husband. Under communism the topic had been taboo, for the butchery was followed by a lie: that it had been the work of the Nazis.

After 1989, when Poles began to gorge on Western culture, Mr Wajda would not hear a word against the American films he so admired. But he worried that Polish cinema, “born only to speak about the disasters of our nation”, was now unfashionable and unnecessary. He fretted, too, that Western audiences found his subject matter “as antediluvian as the battle for workers’ rights in England in the time of Karl Marx”. Groundless fears: four of his films were nominated for Academy Awards.

Among them was “Katyn”. The harrowing film was a great success, especially as it coincided with fresh worries about Russian mendacity and menace. History may sometimes seem optional in Poland; geography shapes its destiny. As he received an honorary Oscar in 2000, Mr Wajda admitted how distant and unknown Poland was; but his work could not stray from it, nor would he happily make films anywhere else. “I think I have things to say,” he declared once. “But they are only important if I say them from Poland.”

**Correction (November 2nd):** Our obituary of Andrzej Wajda (October 29th) claimed that Mr Wajda was the maker of “Interrogation” (1982); his company produced it, but it was Ryszard Bugajski's film. Our apologies.