Man of Marble
Człowiek z Marmuru

In its review of the time, the *New York Times* called Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* 'a Polish-style *Citizen Kane*'. On the face of it, this was an absurd comparison. One film was about a Polish bricklayer; the other a portrait of an immensely wealthy American newspaper tycoon. On closer scrutiny, however, the Kane comparison doesn't seem quite so strange. Both films are determinedly self-reflexive affairs in which a journalist or filmmaker investigates the life of a character and, in doing so, reveals many of the tensions and contradictions existing in the society that formed him. Also, both have similar narrative structures, making heavy use of flashbacks and newsreel footage.

As Wajda explained in a 2013 interview, *Man of Marble* was originally conceived in the early 1960s. A group of filmmakers and scriptwriters had met up and were exchanging stories when one of them mentioned a newspaper article about Nowa Huta, a socialist model city built in the 1950s and much celebrated by government propagandists. The article referred to someone turning up for work at the city's job centre; asked his profession, he said 'bricklayer'. The job-centre officers told him there were no vacancies for bricklayers as the city was already built – all the available jobs were at the local steelworks. The man walked off. After he'd left, the job-centre officials were troubled because he had looked so familiar. Eventually they realised that he had once been a 'model worker' and one of the faces of the construction of Nowa Huta – a socialist hero. Now, he was a forgotten man.

The film that Wajda finally made in 1976 was very different from the one that he and screenwriter Aleksander Scibor-Rylski had first conceived more than a decade before. Back then, the government had prevented them from shooting. Only later, when the reformist Edward Gierek became first secretary, did the authorities relent. As Wajda recalls, they were keen to see themselves on screen and curious to revisit the heady days of the 1950s.

Man of Marble is a film of its period. In its contemporary 1970s scenes, we are in a world of denim, flares and booming synth music. Anyone expecting an austere Polish arthouse movie will be disconcerted by its opening scenes, which play like something out of ITV's *The Professionals*. The most important change in the updating of the original project is the foregrounding of the role of Agnieszka (Krystyna Janda), the headstrong young filmmaker who decides to make a documentary about Mateusz Birkut (Jerzy Radziwilowicz), a (fictional) heroic worker who famously laid more than 28,000 bricks during an eight-hour session.

Janda claimed that the inspiration for her character was the poet, songwriter and filmmaker Agnieszka Osiecka. She also talks of how her role was expanded during shooting until she became as much the protagonist as Birkut himself. 'The role kept growing while we were shooting. It wasn't written down.' Wajda clearly intends her as an emblematic figure, representative of a new, younger generation ready to question the myths of Soviet socialism.

Man of Marble is a complex film that, seen decades later, has added layers of resonance. On its original release, Wajda was providing Polish audiences with an opportunity to look back at the 1950s. As he observes – and the censors couldn't help but notice too – he was exposing a fundamental contradiction about the communist system in Poland. The film revealed how badly workers such as Birkut were treated by a state that was supposed to have their best interests at heart. *Man of Marble* is itself now part of the history it was dramatising. The film, as Wajda puts it, offered a preview of Solidarity: Birkut is a forerunner of the characters who stood up against the state during the heady days of the strikes at the Gdansk shipyard during the early 1980s (events dramatised in Wajda's 1981 film *Man of Iron*).

Agnieszka Holland worked uncredited as an assistant director on the film, and the authorities were wary of her because of her family's attritional relationship with the government. (Her father died in suspicious circumstances following a police

Andrzej Wajda:
Portraits of History and Humanity

The Solidarity Trilogy: Man of Marble
Człowiek z marmuru
Mon 16 Feb 17:50; Sun 1 Mar 12:10
Rough Treatment Bez znieczulenia
Tue 17 Feb 20:30; Mon 9 Mar 20:20 (+ intro by film
critic and scholar Michał Oleszczyk)
Everything for Sale Wszystko na sprzedaż
Thu 19 Feb 20:30
Innocent Sorcerers Niewinni czarodzieje
Fri 20 Feb 17:55
Hunting Flies Polowanie na muchy
Sat 21 Feb 17:40
The Wedding Wesele
Sat 21 Feb 20:50
The Solidarity Trilogy: Man of Iron
Człowiek z żelaza
Sun 22 Feb 12:00; Sun 1 Mar 15:00;
Sun 15 Mar 18:00
The Promised Land Ziemia obiecana
Sun 22 Feb 17:45; Wed 11 Mar 18:45 (+ Q&A with
actor Daniel Olbrychski)
The War Trilogy: Ashes and Diamonds
Popiół i Diament
Tue 24 Feb 20:50
The Maids of Wilko Panny z Wilka
Wed 25 Feb 20:45
The Conductor Dyrygent
Thu 26 Feb 20:55; Mon 9 Mar 17:50 (+ intro by film
critic and scholar Michał Oleszczyk)
The Ashes Popioły
Sat 28 Feb 16:25 (+ intro by writer Michael Brooke)
The Solidarity Trilogy: Wałęsa: Man of Hope
Wałęsa. Człowiek z nadziei
Sun 1 Mar 18:20; Mon 16 Mar 20:30
Korczak
Mon 2 Mar 19:10 (+ Q&A); Fri 13 Mar 20:45
Katyn Katyń
Thu 5 Mar 20:30; Tue 10 Mar 18:15 (+ pre-recorded
intro by film critic Carmen Gray)
Afterimage Powidoki
Thu 12 Mar 18:20; Wed 18 Mar 20:40

With thanks to
Marlena Łukasiak, Michał Oleszczyk,
Jędrzej Sabliński

Presented with the ICA and Ciné Lumière, who will
also be hosting screenings of Wajda's works in
February and March

interrogation.) Holland shot one of the most poignant scenes in the film: the black-and-white newsreel interview with the young Birkut in which he is shown looking shyly at the camera as he is asked for his name and details. It's a scene that has the tenderness and intimacy of one of Krzysztof Kieslowski's vox pop documentaries, and it exemplifies what makes *Man of Marble* so special, namely its human dimension. If you want an insight into Polish society of the 1970s, Wajda provides it, but his film works equally well as a character study of a naive and decent young man betrayed by a government that once fêted him as a hero.

Geoffrey Macnab, *Sight and Sound*, August 2014

A contemporary review

The most succinct way to describe *Man of Marble* is as an East European *Citizen Kane*. Thematically, Andrzej Wajda's film is concerned with the mechanics of mythology: it explores the apparatus whereby a public image is created, modified and demolished, while simultaneously pursuing its own investigation into the reality behind the official myths. Like *Kane*, it is concerned with the power of the media to manipulate and even to manufacture truth; but where Welles was conducting a many-levelled enquiry into the power of the press, the medium with which Wajda is centrally concerned is that of the motion picture. His film, even more than *Kane*, becomes a technical demonstration of his subject matter: its virtuoso style has a total thematic relevance. And, as with Welles, the political sensitivity of Wajda's theme has scarcely helped ingratiate him with those who control domestic film production.

Where *Kane* himself was an American archetype, essentially a self-made man and myth, Wajda's hero is, as befits a socialist society, a pure product of the state. His Mateusz Birkut (Jerzy Radziwilowicz) became a national hero during Poland's post-war reconstruction. Immortalised in marble and on canvas, he became a union delegate but fell from favour in 1952, when condemned to prison after publicly defending the fellow-worker, Witek, accused of sabotage following the accident in which Birkut's hands were irreparably burned. Released in 1956, the apparently rehabilitated Birkut had made a single (filmed) public appearance to plead for national unity in the 1957 elections before disappearing from sight. Some 20 years later, his fate arouses the insatiable curiosity of an ambitious young filmmaker, Agnieszka (Krystyna Janda). Initially camouflaged by her surface of Westernised sophistication, her basic ingenuousness will prove to be a quality which she and her elusive subject have in common.

Any implication that Wajda, by endorsing the stylistic preferences of his aggressive heroine ('Hand-held shots. Wide-angle lens. You've seen the latest American films, haven't you?'), is also suggesting that there's more truth and less manipulation with a mobile camera is neatly scotched within the film itself. The wide-angle shots of Burski's jet taxi-ing in to land are, as well as a political comment on the Americanisation of one of the film's more flagrant opportunists, also a timely demonstration of the ease with which the camera can inflate the significance of neutral events.

In emphasising that the *ars longa* maxim is particularly inapplicable to 'official' art, Wajda is, of course, also commenting on the ephemeral nature of political truths. His film explores the inextricable relationship between styles and politics, not merely through its own aesthetic but also through its treatment of time in relation to individuals. Many of his characters are juxtaposed with images of themselves 20 years before. The disgraced Witek is now a steel plant technocrat (whose works' helicopter justifies a stunning aerial shot); the party spy from the 1950s is rediscovered recruiting girls for nationalised striptease; the gymnast heroine whom Birkut married is revealed drinking herself to death (like the second Mrs Kane) in black market luxury. Only the dead or the very young appear immune from the opportunism that advances with age and blurs the clear lines of early character. Despite this, the final sequence of Agnieszka and Birkut's son marching along the TV corridors to liberate the newly suppressed truth marks *Man of Marble* as an ultimately optimistic film.

Jan Dawson, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1979

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