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## ANDRZEJ WAJDA'S **MAN OF MARBLE**

A New Yorker Films Release © 1981

### A Polish Fallen Idol

**W**hen Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* was first shown in Poland four years ago it caused a political sensation. Wajda had tried for over a decade to get permission to make this film, which is both critical of Poland's Stalinist past and full of none-too-concealed barbs at the current state of media censorship. Not surprisingly, the official censors handed down edicts on what the press could and could not write about it, and a key sequence was removed. The workers' strikes of the past year have only increased "Man of Marble's" impact. But it would be a disservice to suggest that the film's only interest is as a mirror of Polish political discontent. For Wajda, who has been prominent on the international film scene since "Kanal" and "Ashes and Diamonds," "Man of Marble" is a kind of summation and self-critique that raises powerful questions about the filmmaker's role in political persuasion.

Wajda's subject is mythmaking, and his structure, at once epic and prismatic, bears striking similarities to "Citizen Kane." An ambitious, frenetic young film student named Agnieszka (Krystyna Janda) wants to make her diploma film about a model worker of the '50s—one Mateusz Birkut (Jerzy Radziwilowicz), a naïve bricklayer whose heroic profile and efficient working methods once made him, briefly, a "star"

of socialist propaganda films, a figure cast in Stalinist marble. What became of him? Agnieszka and her crew piece together his story from old newsreels and discarded propaganda footage and by interviewing those who knew Birkut. A smug, well-fed film director recalls how he "created" Birkut when he filmed a marathon bricklaying ordeal on the site of a model city. A former party spy, who was assigned to follow Birkut as he traveled from town to town giving demonstrations of bricklaying, tells of the "accident" that began the hero's downfall—a red-hot brick deliberately passed to Birkut that permanently disfigured his hands. Agnieszka learns that when Birkut's friend Witek was framed on trumped-up political charges for the crime, Birkut protested. Naïve, idealistic, he ran into the bureaucracy that created him, and when he became a nuisance his posters were defaced, his wife was pressured to denounce him, and he was jailed as a spy himself.

**Note of Hope:** As the filmmaker pieces together this shattering story, she runs into parallel pressures herself. Why are you interested in this obscure fallen idol? Why don't you make a film about the marvelous new steelworks now being run by Birkut's "rehabilitated" friend, Witek? Eventually Agnieszka's camera and funds are taken from her and she must decide whether or

not to pursue the truth. Agnieszka is anything but an ingratiating heroine, and Wajda makes clear that she (as well as the medium itself) has the same potential for corruption we have seen in the old director who first exploited Birkut. Nor does he exclude himself from criticism: in the credits of a simulated '50s propaganda film he lists himself as "assistant director"—he knows how easily an artist can become a political hack. Yet the film ends on a note of hope that Agnieszka will not lose her own passionate, if strident, conviction.

"Man of Marble" is a key film in recent Polish cinema, but it is something less than a satisfying dramatic experience. Overlong at 160 minutes, it raises knotty, fascinating themes but ultimately tells us less than we need to know about its central characters. Birkut himself never emerges as a wholly realized man: Wajda's image of him as a holy dupe is not so far removed from the sanctimony of his "official" public image. Nonetheless, the film is a daring portrait of a culture searching its conscience. The worms Wajda unearths in Poland's recent past are not only the crimes of a deposed Stalinist regime, but the opportunism and treachery that lurk in human nature.

DAVID ANSEN

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