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NOTHING SO PLEASES A CRITIC AS the chance to draw a solemn breath and pronounce a film "important." Often movies no more than marginally worthy are so designated, but Man of Iron is different. This is a truly significant film, in many ways the most momentous piece of political cinema of the postwar years. Yet importance doesn't necessarily correlate with quality, and *Man of Iron*, for all its irreproachable value, is, paradoxically, not a very good film.

Man of Iron is a long (well over two hours), complex work, a half-fictionalized, half-documentary look at events in Poland leading up to the successful August 1980 strike of the Gdansk shipyard workers and the accompanying official recognition of Solidarity. The film marks a watershed moment in the history of Poland as well as in the career of its director, Andrzej Wajda, and its themes and concerns take on inexpressibly greater poignance now that the country is ruled by martial law.

Wajda made his reputation as Poland's premier director in the 1950s via a trio of features (*A Generation*, *Kanal*, *Ashes and Diamonds*) about the bleak heroism of despairing, existential youth, but none of his later films made a major impact on the West until *Man of Marble*—a fascinating dissection of Poland under Stalinist rule that shares many of its main characters with *Man of Iron*—was released in 1977.

The man of marble is a young worker of the 1950s named Birkut, a naive eager beaver who is turned into a Stakhanovite hero of labor by the Polish government only to fall into disfavor and disappear. Wajda's film, which he admits was influenced by his admiration for *Citizen Kane*, follows a 1970s filmmaker named Agnieszka as she uncovers Birkut's story and in the process discovers Birkut's son, Tomczyk. Wajda's original ending apparently implied that Birkut had been killed in the Gdansk riots of 1970, a major clash that prefigured the 1980 confrontation, but the government wouldn't allow that, so *Man of Marble* concludes on an abrupt, open-ended note, with the fate of its principal characters very much up in the air.

Man of Iron (the title refers to Tomczyk this time) is not so much a sequel to *Man of Marble* as a continuation. The time is 1980, the Gdansk workers are once again on strike, and Tomczyk, now married to Agnieszka, is one of Solidarity's leaders. Wajda and screenwriter Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski return to the *Citizen Kane* format, but with a twist. The reporter this time is not the truth-seeking Agnieszka but a weaselly radio man named Winkel, whose assignment is to smear Tomczyk and thus by implication blacken Solidarity's reputation as well.

Of course, nothing of the sort happens. Winkel, whether he likes it or not, is shown the truth about events in Poland, a truth that in its particulars is as engrossing for American audiences as it proves to be for that nervous man. In *Man of Iron* Wajda finally includes the fictional scenes of Birkut's death at the hands of Polish troops, as well as authentic, previously suppressed documentary footage of tanks in the streets and police beatings during the 1970 Gdansk rising. Made almost simultaneously with the recent Gdansk events, *Man of Iron* is an incomparable record of the exultation of those days, even managing a cameo appearance by Lech Walesa as a witness at the Tomczyk-Agnieszka wedding.

Yet as unique and invaluable as this film is from the standpoint of information, as cinema it has, aside from its lack of accessibility to those who haven't seen *Man of Marble*, some very serious flaws. Wajda abandoned even a pretense of distance here; his is a zealous, partisan film, all cardboard heroes and villains, in which the noble workers sit home and peel potatoes while the evil party functionaries stuff their faces at fancy restaurants. Poor Winkel, the classic traitor to his class, is portrayed as an alcoholic worm who, like a character in a medieval morality play, suffers physically from the evil he is supposed to do.

Wajda's hero worshipping is most blatant in the character of Tomczyk, a worker paragon whose only hint of a blemish is the benign neglect of his sniveling mother for the greater glory of the cause. The respected Polish critic Krzystof Teplitz was disturbed by just this ideological one-sidedness when he said of *Man of Iron*, "In its deepest roots, it is a Soviet film—a perfect example of socialist realism from a different side. It is not a human story. It is a story about the good Bolshevik fighting the bad czarist system, only the good guys are called Solidarity and the bad ones are the Polish government." Jacek Kuron, a leading Polish dissident, said the film was "like a touched-up wedding portrait—the way we imagine ourselves at the moment of our wedding, even more beautiful than we really were." Ideologically correct but dramatically a real snore.

Yet though it deserves rebuke, criticizing *Man of Iron* is now almost beside the point. This film has become that rare phenomenon, a piece of living history, and what is most striking about it after the fall are the hints of a not so happy future the filmmakers prophetically included. A Communist party hawk tells Winkel, "They've forgotten the basic rule—we're not here to share power." Someone else chimes in later, "The government must crush them. Can you see the party backing down?" And the hawk ends the film by announcing that the Gdansk agreements will prove worthless. Prophetic words, but *Man of Iron* tries to go them one better. "We're bound to win, if not this time then the next," a kindly granny says in a speech that seems closest to Wajda's own thoughts. "I know there has to be justice. No lie can hold up forever."