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Man of Marble
Directed by Andrzej Wajda
Screenplay by Aleksander Scibor-Rylski
Cinema Studio I

First, to get us into the right spirit, a quotation from the novel *The Yawning Heights*, by Alexander Zinoviev — an encyclopedic satire of totalitarianism:

"These days unlimited horizons are opening up for monumental sculpture," said Dauber, in an interview with the correspondent of sub-Ibanskian television. "Our remarkable scientists have invented a material which is to all intents and purposes everlasting, light, easily worked and readily available. It's called snotoplast. . . . You take ordinary snot which is produced in abundance by our literature, our film industry, our television, our press and other cultural activity in our society, and it is exposed to super-ultra-sound. This produces a highly fluid plasma which can assume any shape. So it is perfectly possible to make a sculpture half a mile high covering an area comparable with that supposedly once occupied by the legendary country of Italy. Incidentally, the rumours that traces of this mythical land have been discovered turned out to be false. In fact no Michelangelo ever actually existed. . . ."

"Splendid," said the interviewer from sub-Ibanskian television. "Our sculptors use turdotron for their busts and statues of our leaders. This is shit which has gone through two, three or more processes of refinement. It is quite remarkably strong, and wonderfully plastic. For instance, if you take a piece of turdotron 3 in your hands it tries of its own accord to take on the form of a leader — and so accurately that the leader immediately tries to mount a platform to make a speech. . . ."

There really are some ingenious people about, thought Dauber. . . . And yet we go on working with any old material. Marble. . . . Old-fashioned stuff.

Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* tells the story of a Polish peasant bricklayer who, during the Stalinist period of industrialization after World War II, was exalted as a worker-hero like the real-life Stakhanov in the Soviet Union, with his face on inspirational posters and an idealized marble statue of himself erected in the public square of a model socialist city. The movie is centered in the present — in the character of Agnieszka, a young woman filmmaker who wants to make a documentary for Polish TV about this one-time hero now obliterated from official history. She's heard about him — to her, she says, he's like "the knights of old" — but scenes involving him have been scissored from newsreels of the period (for "technical reasons" is the excuse), and whenever his name — Mateusz Birkut — is mentioned, people clam up or look shifty. Forget the Man of Marble, says her nervous TV producer. Marble is old hat. Why doesn't she do steel? There's a new steelworks that would make a much more exciting subject for a documentary. She reacts as if he'd suggested she do a documentary about snot.

She could do a documentary about the socialist miracle of a perpetual-motion electric dynamo if she pointed a camera at herself. Though Krystyna Janda, who plays Agnieszka, has the pasty, muffin-shaped face of a do-gooder (she resembles the British actress Angela Down, who was the socialist-minded Pankhurst sister, Sylvia, in the BBC-TV *Shoulder to Shoulder*), she comes on as if she'd taken a running start and a flying leap into the movie. In her first scene, a heated argument between her and the producer, he's trying to brush her off as she chases him down a long hall in the TV headquarters. (The camera tracking her down that hall becomes a motif: she has to travel a long way to reach her goal.) Her clothes make an aggressive statement: the high wooden-platform sandals, baggy-legged jeans and flapping blue-denim coat scream USA. And she's a tornado of intense gestures: throughout the movie she grinds her lips, rubs her nose, jabs her hands onto her hips, kicks doors closed behind her with one foot, throws her legs over chair arms, manhandles a huge duffle-bag full of heavy gear, gobbles fruit on the run, picks a weed from a construction site and gnaws on it, and pushes cigarets backhanded into her mouth. She must have learned her smoking style from '40s American movies, and just about the only cigaret routine she doesn't pull is Marie Dubois's choo-choo trick from *Jules and Jim*, with the lit end in her mouth.

This could be an irritating performance, but instead it's extremely enjoyable. Agnieszka anchors the movie in satire. She's a one-woman youthquake, USA-crazed. ("Hand-held camera," she instructs her aged cameraman, "no tripod. Wide-angle lens. You know — haven't you seen all the new American films?") Her mad drive is exaggerated, but it doesn't make her seem unreal; it draws you to her — perhaps because the historical material in the movie is less familiar. The rise and fall of the Stalin-era hero Birkut is shown in newsreels and flashbacks; Agnieszka provides the speeding transitions. Because you don't get too much of her, you're always happy to see her again. She's crucial to the movie's wonderful play of tone, which constantly refreshes itself.

The rare moments when Agnieszka subsides into stillness — when she gets her first look at Birkut on film and moves a lamp away so her reaction is hidden in shadow, or when she thinks the bureaucracy has beaten her and she curls up in her father's apartment on a couch too small for her — are all the more emotional and serious.

It's also possible that Wajda used the actress's performance as part of a game to outwit the Polish censors. If her gyrations struck them as merely crazy, her own anticensorship crusade wouldn't seem to pack as much punch as it does. Wajda worked for 13 years to get permission to make *Man of Marble*, finished in 1977. The Polish press was given official guidelines on what could be printed about it; Wajda was not allowed to receive the Polish critics' award or to enter the movie at Cannes (where it was shown anyway, at a commercial theater, and won the International Critics Prize for 1978). And even the version now being shown here for the first time is missing its original last scene.

Rumor has it that this scene referred to the Gdansk strikes and riots of 1970, in which many workers were killed. In a French interview Wajda said, "Agnieszka was trying in vain to find Birkut's tomb in a cemetery in Gdansk. . . . But it was not my purpose to hint that he might have died during the upheaval in 1970. Hence, the ending was not only a problem of censorship. Nineteen-seventy should not be referred to just in a short scene like that." To some viewers the ending now is mysterious; to me, it's misleading. Agnieszka has asked Birkut's grown son to help her find his father. She and the son then storm purposefully down that TV-headquarters hallway: I got the idea that Birkut was alive and well and rehabilitated under another name as the Polish Fred Silverman.

What's clear is that Wajda intends to contrast Agnieszka to Birkut. She's not nearly so pure (after interviewing Birkut's former wife, Agnieszka calls herself a "film ghoul"), but she'll probably survive better. Birkut's quiet idealism is as tough as her loud stubbornness, but he is hopelessly innocent. ("You're a paragon," said his wife when she left him, "and I'm dirt.") Played by Jerzy Radziwilowicz, Birkut has a pale fox-face and green eyes with the glassy, stunned yearning of John Travolta's. In the early newsreels he gazes with infatuation at his marble likeness, but he's no egotist — he just believes his own

myth: he really *is* the ideal worker who lays bricks faster than anybody so that poor people can be housed. The goodness he is praised for drags him down, drawing attention to him as an "individualist" — always suspect.

The old black-and-white newsreels and propaganda films of Birkut that Agnieszka unearths are treasures for us, too. Wajda has mixed archival footage from the '50s with his new inventions, creating wonderful satires of the form: its acres of female socialist gymnasts, its series of apartment doors magically swinging open onto a series of blissful little socialist families reading books to the strains of uplifting music. One of the authentic clips lists in its credits an assistant director named Andrzej Wajda — not a joke: he worked on that film in 1950.

The flashbacks — accounts of Birkut told to Agnieszka in interviews — are, like the present-day scenes, in color. Since she doesn't actually view them, as she does the newsreels, it's hard to know how much of their content she takes in. But that's a small flaw — the price of a more important structure. In *Citizen Kane* the mixture of newsreel and flashback worked to address the movie only to us, the audience; the irony was that at the end we knew much more than the reporter. Wajda is after something simpler and maybe, in his society, harder to achieve: just establishing the existence of the past. The movie is as much for the characters as it is for us. The interviewees are permitted to remember. Birkut is brought back from oblivion to the same plane of reality as Agnieszka, who seems alive enough for two but also acts as if she'll die if she can't find him. When she discovers a fragment of the monumental marble statue of Birkut in an off-limits museum storeroom, she sneaks in with a camera and films it while sitting astride the torso. The scene suggests lovemaking (an idea not lost on her male associates) but it's more like artificial respiration.