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DEATH OF A PRESIDENT (SMIERC PREZYDENTA)

1979. Director: Jerzy Kawalerowicz. Screenplay: Boleslaw Michalek. Cast: Zdzislaw Mrozewski, Marek Walczewski. Color. 144 minutes.

It is rare that a film can be called a "model" in any aspect of its art. *Death of a President* is a model twice over. It is a model of historical feature film presentation. It is also a model of scriptwriter's craftsmanship. It is obvious that each one reinforces the other, that is, each model is the complement of the other.

The film as far as can be determined is punctiliously and meticulously accurate in the presentation of all the major details, while at the same time it preserves and uses every liberty that must be allowed in order to construct a compelling drama.

In December of 1922, the National Assembly of Poland elected Gabriel Narutowicz as the first president of the Polish Republic. He was the candidate of the liberal and left groupings. At the outset, it did not appear that he was even a remote possibility for the presidency.

The complexities of assembling a majority are depicted with surprising clarity for a non-Polish audience as the movie develops. A number of groups agree to support Narutowicz. Groups on the right of the spectrum are offended by his selection and make plans to prevent his inauguration. The conflict moves from the assembly and the ministerial rooms to the streets of Warsaw. Nevertheless, Narutowicz is inaugurated.

Within a few days, visiting an art exhibition in Warsaw, the president is assassinated by a fanatic nationalist who was a painter and art critic. All of these facts are presented as a historical reconstruction.

But the film transcends historical reconstruction by virtue of the craftsmanship of scriptwriter Boleslaw Michalek. Michalek has taken an extraordinarily complicated few days in Polish history. He has taken the mind of the assassin, a mind which is outstanding for intellectualization and ideological rationalization, and using the device of testimony at a trial Michalek weaves the events of the time together with the motivations of the assassin. The device results in illuminating not simply the motivations of the assassin, it also results in illuminating the main strands of ideological conflict which gave energy to events but which ordinarily are so difficult to portray.

Working from Michalek's script, Kawalerowicz presents a combination of historical-political and psychological drama with relentless drive, steady efficiency and powerful compression. Between scriptwriter and director what is conveyed in terms of history and the mind of the assassin, as well as the establishment of a cogent atmosphere, is positively astounding. One can easily imagine that this film could have been a series for television. The skill of the creators has made it into a single forceful film.

After all is said and done, while this is indeed a film about a certain critical few days in Polish history, it is in its universality a film about ideological struggle, fanatic commitment, and articulation of fanaticism, and the drive to assassination, surely a subject not without interest in the United States.