

## Document Citation

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## Danton

France/Poland, 1982

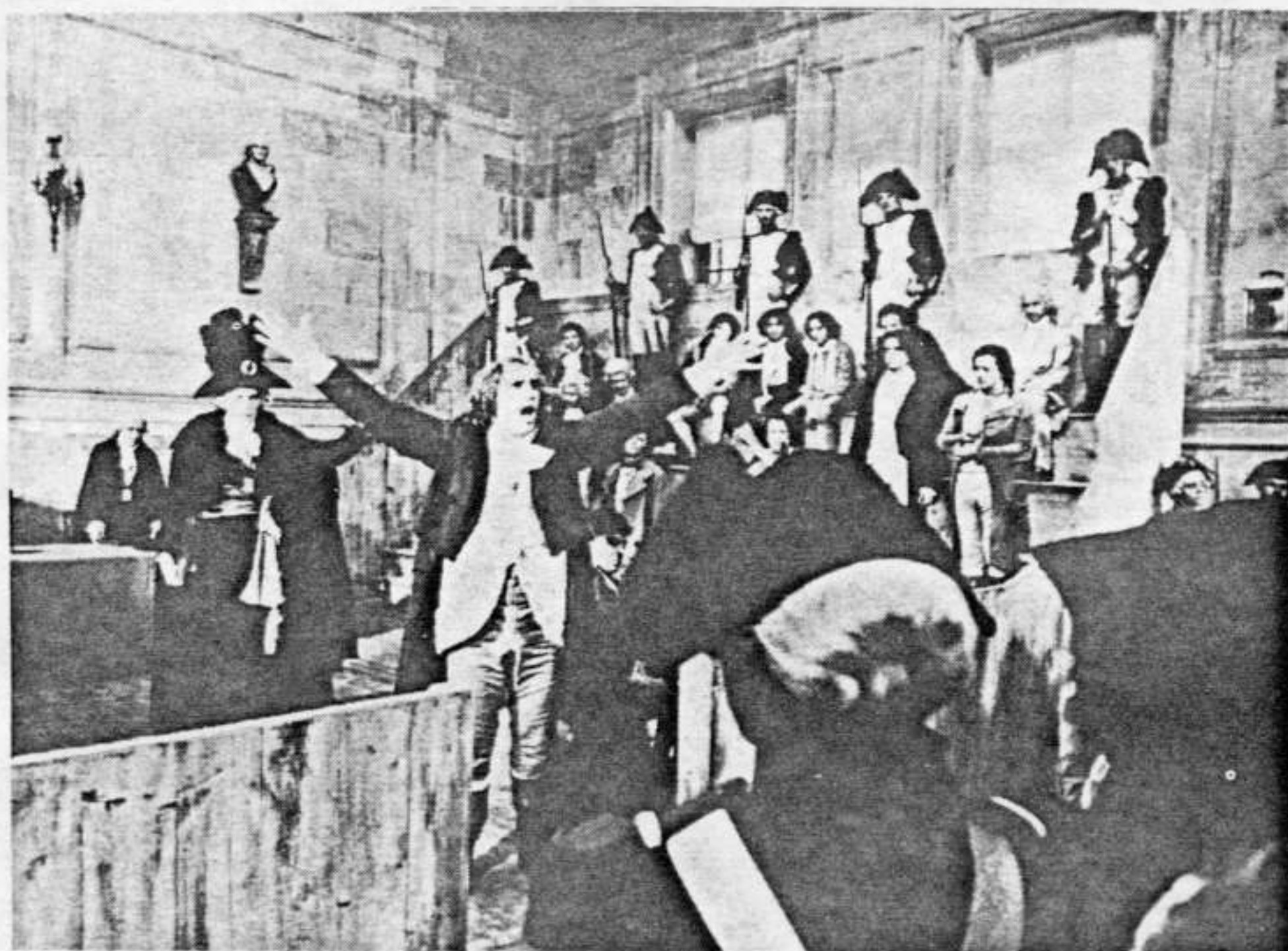
Director: Andrzej Wajda

*Cert*—PG. *dist*—Artificial Eye. *p.c*—Les Films du Losange (Paris)/Production Group X (Warsaw). For Gaumont/TFI Films/SFPC/TM. With the participation of the Ministry of Culture (Paris), Film Polski. In association with Les Films Molière. *exec. p*—Emmanuel Schlumberger. *p*—Margaret Menegoz, Barbara Pec-Slesicka. *p. sup*—Alain Depardieu. *p. managers*—Patrick Bordier; Jean-Marc Deschamps, Jean de Tregomain, Laurent Thierry. *asst. d*—Hugues de Laugardière, Krystyna Grochowicz; Michel Lisowski. *sc*—Jean-Claude Carrière. Based on the play *Afera Dantona* [The Danton Affair] by Stanislaw Przybyszewska. *sc. collaborators*—Andrzej Wajda, Agnieszka Holland, Boleslaw Michalek, Jacek Gasiorowski. *ph*—Igor Luther. In colour. *lighting*—Jean-Claude Lebras. *asst. camera*—Marian Sloboda; Guillaume Schiffman. *ed*—Halina Prugar-Ketling. *a.d*—Allan Starski, with the collaboration of Gilles Vaster. *set dec*—Maria Osiecka-Kuminek. *m*—Jean Prodromides, performed by The Philharmonic Orchestra of Warsaw, directed by Jan Pruszk; and the chorus of the Musical Society of Warsaw, directed by Maciej Jaśkiewicz. *cost. design*—Yvonne Sassinot de Nesle. *wardrobe*—Anne de Laugardière, Wiesława Starska, Fanny Yakubowicz. *make-up*—Jackie Reynal. *sd*—Jean-Pierre Ruh, Dominique Hennequin; Piotr Zawadzki. *sd. effects*—Zygmunt Nowak. *historical consultants*—Jan Baszkiewicz, Stefan Meller. *historical documentation*—Hervé Grandsart. *English adaptation*—A. Whitelaw, W. Byron. *subtitles*—Titra-Film. *l.p*—Gérard Depardieu (*Georges Danton*), Wojciech Pszoniak (*Maximilien de Robespierre*), Anne Alvaro (*Eléonore*), Roland Blanche (*Lacroix*), Patrice Chereau (*Camille Desmoulins*), Emmanuelle Debever (*Louison*), Krzysztof Globisz (*Amar*), Ronald Guttman (*Herman*), Gérard Hardy (*Tallien*), Tadeusz Huk (*Couthon*), Stéphane Jobert (*Panis*), Marian Kociniak (*Lindet*), Marek Kondrat (*Barère de Vieuzac*), Bogusław Linda (*Saint Just*), Alain Mace (*Héron*), Bernard Maître (*Legendre*), Lucien Melki (*Fabre D'Eglantine*), Serge Merlin (*Philippeaux*), Erwin Nowiaszak (*Colloot d'Herbois*), Leonard Pietraszak (*Carnot*), Roger Planchon (*Fouquier-Tinville*), Angel Sedgwick (*Eléonore's Brother*), Andrzej Seweryn (*Bourdon*), Franciszek Starowieyski (*David*), Jerzy Trela (*Billaud-Varenne*), Jacques Villeret (*Westermann*), Angela Winkler (*Lucile Desmoulins*), Jean-Loup Wolff (*Hérault de Seychelles*), Czesław Wollejko (*Vadier*), Wladimir Yordanoff (*Chief Guard*), Malgorzata Zajackowska (*Servant*), Szymon Zaleski (*Lebas*). 12,255 ft. 136 mins. *Subtitles*.

Georges Danton, member of the Committee of Public Safety and initiator of the 'Terror' with his friend Maximilien de Robespierre, returns uneasily to a starving Paris in November 1793 after a brief, self-imposed exile. Now tired of bloodshed, he proposes a negotiated peace with the enemies on France's borders, and campaigns for a new spirit of tolerance within the country. This horrifies the other members of the Committee, headed by Robespierre, who want outright victory for France and her Revolutionary government. Though hoping to win Danton and his supporters back to the principles that formerly united them, Robespierre permits the closing down of the newspaper controlled through Danton's ally Camille Desmoulins by the despised Chief of Secret Police, Héron. In return, Danton campaigns for Héron's arrest, and a conciliatory meeting called by Robespierre, at which Danton gets very drunk, only confirms the unbridgeable differences between the two men. Unable to win over Desmoulins, and influenced by rumours of a supposed Dantonist plot (in fact cooked up by the other Committee members), Robespierre agrees to have the Danton faction arrested. Confident of his powers of oratory and his political allies in the Convention, to which the Committee is answerable, Danton finds that he is to be allowed no voice in the Convention, that no record will be kept of the trial, and that reporters are excluded. Forbidden to call any witnesses, Danton and the other prisoners finally walk out in disgust and are declared guilty in their absence. As Danton's guillotined head is shown to the people, Robespierre despairingly rejects the suggestion that he can now declare himself dictator.

The temptation to see *Danton* in terms of Solidarity is unavoidable: the popular spokesman, loudly demanding a spotlight for his own protection, echoes the very public perils of Lech Wałęsa, while the inflexible authoritarian who seems bound to suppress him looks at first glance to be a perfect fit for Jaruzelski. Given Wajda's low level of acceptability among the present Polish régime, a film about martyrdom appears both timely and courageous, calculated to draw international attention to the potential misapplications of government in Warsaw. In fact, as Wajda has been the first to protest, courage doesn't enter into it too much; his film is based on a Polish play first performed in 1931, revived in 1967, and directed by Wajda himself at a Warsaw theatre in 1975. Such parallels as it may contain with events of the 1980s simply confirm the validity of the piece as a philosophical debate relating to the fortuitous (if cyclical) repetitions of history, applicable as much to current French politics (and duly applied, with some uproar, to the 1982 Socialist Party conference at Valence) as to the problems of Poland or anywhere else.

Perhaps a certain disinclination to relieve Wajda of agitprop responsibility, to believe that (like his own man of marble) he is a realist rather than a superhero, makes one initially reluctant to accept this film's tightrope balance. But like the painter David, seen in *Danton* faithfully annotating



Gérard Depardieu—a public gallery for the aggressively human.





*Wojciech Pszoniak—a private face for the inexpressibly incorrupt.*

and amending each stage of the French Revolution as it happens, his objective would be valueless if it were no more than the doubtful glory of the guillotine. David too had his skirmishes with the political parade as its heads rolled by, but when Napoleon arrived the artist was still there to paint him. And Wajda clearly intends to be another

survivor, with plenty to say and ample skill with which to say it.

"Thanks to this man, I have discovered morality, the highest conception of man". The writer of *The Danton Affair*, Stanislaw Przybyszewska, was obsessed with Robespierre to an extraordinary degree; her play was a celebration of "L'Incorruptible" that could only see his opponents as abject villains. With Jean-Claude Carrière (Buñuel's preferred screenwriter), Wajda has balanced this portrait of a paragon by rendering Danton aggressively human; the corrupt, greedy animal of the play has become, well, Gérard Depardieu, without whom Wajda felt the film couldn't be made. Depardieu's now familiar act of boorish, lovable human-ness, all belch and no braces, makes Danton capable of anything from glory to debauchery, but above all makes him recognisably fallible beside the chilling inflexibility of Robespierre. Both are idealists, both are right, both are doomed; Danton died in April, Robespierre in July, 1794. And just in case the friendly figure of Depardieu might sway us too much, Wajda opens and closes his film with the terrified anguish of Robespierre, a sick man sweating out his private nightmare. The playwright's passion has not been betrayed.

Wajda's French Revolution is a modest spectacle, owing nothing to Griffith or

Gance. Crowd scenes are few, and enclosed, with the result that the Convention sequences, with their packed assembly, make a vivid display of government in turmoil. The executions, seemingly unattended, are almost Bressonian matters of blades and blood in brief proximity. Instead, the film's power comes mostly from its faces and performances, an international cast with some uneasy dubbing for the Polish contingent (mostly Robespierrists, as it turns out), but with a fascinating complexity of expression dominated by the glassy, reptilian fervour of Wojciech Pszoniak as Robespierre, the part he has performed many times on stage. Where Depardieu, the screen actor, plays unashamedly to the gallery, Pszoniak is almost expressionless, with devastating effect. The symbolic gestures are left, a little uncomfortably, to Angela Winkler who, as Desmoulins' wife, is required to hold babies aloft, mediate frantically in doorways and, in the shadow of the guillotine, draw a scarlet thread across her throat. Narrative aside, the immediacy of the Terror is magnificently conveyed by the grim, metallic orchestrations of the soundtrack, which contrives to sound continually on the point of explosion. Its sustained notes destroy any prospect of complacency among Wajda's audiences that history has no bearing on the present.

PHILIP STRICK