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Confronting the Past. Trauma, History and Memory in Wajda's film

“To live further, one has to forget; in order to forget, one has to reinforce one's experience, one's life story, the whole past which is left behind.”[1] These are Andrzej Wajda's own words on the importance of history and memory, in reflecting on his 1958 film *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*) about the end of WW II in May 1945. The quote points to why history, in the sense of both distant history and national heritage culture and more contemporary, modern history, has played such an important role in Wajda's films, but it also brings to mind why history in general is such a powerful and imaginative dimension of filmmaking in general. Both researchers working with memory and transitivity between the past and present as well as cognitive sociologists often point to the fact that our social imagination, the mental frameworks we use to interpret reality, influence both the way we process present experiences and the way we remember the past.

In a work by the American sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes. An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology* (1997), the author describes the general mechanism in social cognition and what we remember as being dependent on our mental horizon. Mental horizons, framings and prototypical exemplars “literally impose visual closure on our physical surroundings, they basically ‘close’ our minds by helping delineate what we consider relevant.”[2] Visual narratives like film can have a strong influence on our mental framework by opening up closed or unknown areas of memory and history, and in Zerubavel's theory, changes in the frameworks of historical memory can also change our perception of the present:

Not only does our social environment influence the way we mentally process the present, it also affects the way we remember the past. Like the present, the past is to some extent also part of a social reality that, while far from being absolutely objective, nonetheless transcends our own subjectivity and is shared by others around us ... Remembrance is not just a spontaneous, personal act, it also happens to be regulated by ... social rules of remembrance that tell us quite specifically what we should remember and what we must forget ... mnemonic traditions affect our

[1] A. Wajda, *Moje notatki z historii*, “Kwartalnik Filmowy” no. 15–16, 1996/1997, pp. 7–21. Translation quoted from J. Falkowska, *Andrzej Wajda. History, Politics and Nostalgia in Polish Cinema*, New York–Oxford 2007, p. 53.

[2] E. Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes. An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 1997/1999, p. 37.

memory even more significantly by prompting us to adopt a particular cognitive 'bias' that leads us to remember certain things but not others.[3]

This particular dialectic between past, present and what a given community or culture considers to be within 'official' history and memory is universal for all societies. But the tension between what is inside and outside of memory and official history varies from country to country and historically. For a society like Poland, history since WW II can be characterized as a minefield of explosive zones, with fundamental shifts in regimes, political ideologies and the cultural atmosphere. Many of Wajda's films address these explosive history and memory zones, providing visualizations of sensitive points and experiences in recent Polish history. Even when he has dived deeper into older Polish history, he has often addressed contemporary issues or made a symbolic intervention into present reality, where he could not speak openly. Wajda's historical films therefore enter into critical dialogue with strong, collective mnemonic traditions, they deal with mental horizons that can potentially change or open our perception of the past and present. In doing this, Wajda's films also choose filmic discourses and perspectives on the past that are open for debate and participate in an ongoing battle of interpretation.

Seeing the past: film and history

Film is, as has already been indicated, a powerful medium for the visual representation of the past and for putting historical themes and questions of memory and history on the individual and collective public agenda. Looking at European cinema production since 1945, it seems that WW II is still going on in our minds and in the cinema, and directors, like Wajda, keep returning to this crucial period in contemporary history. But we can also see a very strong trend in film stories now beginning to hit the screens dealing with the communist period. There is a need to come to terms with this recent past in German cinema,[4] and on the Western side of the iron curtain the very fact that films now dig this past up can confirm or completely change our Western concept of how life over there in fact was. History as such, both on the big and the small screen, and the return to defining national moments of history, is strong in, for instance, the British heritage tradition[5] or in a nation like Denmark, where the events of around 1864 are still given a lot of attention.[6]

[3] Ibidem, p. 81 and 88.

[4] See for instance I. Bondebjerg, *Coming to Terms with the Past: Post-1989 Strategies in German Film Culture*, "Studies in Eastern European Cinema" 2010, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 29–42.

[5] The British researcher Andrew Higson has written extensively on the heritage genre, for instance, A. Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema. Costume Drama Since 1980*, Oxford 2003.

[6] Like in many European nations, public service broadcasters often use historical series to attract a large, national audience. In Denmark, this has been the case with DR (the main PBS station) and series like *Matador* (1978–1981), a 24-part series on life in Denmark from 1930–1947, or the follow up, *Kroniken* (2005–2007), following life in the post-war period. These series have been seen by millions of Danes, and have become part of public memory. DR is now pro-

Robert Rosenstone, in *History on Film – Film on History* (2006)[7], discusses some of the basic reasons for the ability of films to stimulate the feeling for history as live experience. First of all, films can recreate the past as a living reality, so that we get a direct sense of how it was ‘to live then’. History classes or reading history books seldom give us this live dimension, this possibility of feeling and experiencing the past. The personification and dramatization of historical realities and conflicts help vitalize historical knowledge and create memory tracks. The way historical films recreate historical events and circumstances is very often highly contested and discussed both by historians and the audience, but the nature of combining historical reality with fiction is precisely to create structures of identification and emotion and insert them into a semi-factual historical reality. A historical fiction film is not a documentary, it is not historical journalism or teaching: it is drama, it is fiction. But historical dramas are important because of the link they can create between structural, large scale history and the history of everyday life.

The discussion that often accompanies a historical film about whether it is a true and factually correct representation of historical reality is natural and not very different from discussions following a contemporary drama about whether the film is a realistic depiction of the theme, the characters and the milieu portrayed in the film. Even though we as audience have a basic need to be able to experience the film as either a documentary, with a more direct relation to reality, or as a fiction film, with a much more indirect and hypothetic relation to reality,[8] we always react to films by bringing our real experiences and emotions with us. In our experience of and response to films, we cannot let go of the need to interact with the film based on the same kind of cognitive and emotional structures that frame our interaction with reality. We bring our reality with us to the cinema, so even though we know that this is film and fiction, the ‘reality-test’ stays important.

Historical films are important, despite the fact that we may find some of them controversial in the way they depict and represent reality, for other reasons having to do with the role of emotions in memory storage and activation. Theories of memory[9] make a distinction between short-term memory and long-term memory, and these theories indicate that activation of memory is strongly enhanced when memory-data are stored through condensed narrative images and stories. Therefore, images in the form of narratives give a stronger inten-

ducing a large historical series around one of the largest, traumatic events in Danish history – the loss of large parts of the country to Germany in the war in 1864.

[7] R. Rosenstone, *History on Film – Film on History*, Harlow 2006.

[8] Theories of different ways of relating to reality in fiction and non-fiction are discussed on a cognitive,

theoretical basis in, for instance, C. Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, Cambridge 1997.

[9] Memory theory is discussed in Zerubavel’s previously mentioned book (see note 2), pp. 81–100, but a broader discussion of social cognition and forms of memory can also be found in S. Fiske & S. Taylor, *Social Cognition*, New York 1991, pp. 295–346.

sity in memory patterns, and this makes them easier to activate and recall. It is also quite clear that we can much more easily recall events if there is some kind of direct connection between personal memory and experience, and the more general memory data. So the intensity of memories, the way in which historical data is experienced, the amount of emotional embedding, either as traumatic or highly positive images and narratives, can greatly influence our memory and the way we relate to the past.

Historical films can make us not just see the past, but they can give us a feeling of living in a past reality; they can connect reality and emotions through processes of narrative identification. In creating this historical memory, films activate processes and structures that influence what Zerubavel has called 'memory transitivity',[10] the social and cultural process through which society and communities create an understanding of the past and the present and the connection between them. Memory transitivity makes possible individual and collective transport of memory from group to group and from generation to generation. But in doing so, films can also challenge and change memory and mental frameworks on the past and the present. Zerubavel calls this the mental shifting function, referring to films, media events or real historical events that can change the way we look at things. One example would be Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006, Germany), which deals with life behind the iron curtain in a way that clearly changed the concepts held by many Europeans, by combining a story of authoritarian suppression with a universal dimension of human compassion. Another example could be Ken Loach's highly dramatic and emotional story of all sides of the Irish conflict, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2007) or Rachid Bouchareb's strong story, *Days of Glory* (2006) of the forgotten and not recognized African/Arab soldiers who fought during WW II. All these films dig into and unfold a controversial historical reality that was not on the agenda previously and serve as a trigger of memory shifting away from the official social memory.

Historical film genres

Historical films come in many forms, and these forms decide about the specific framing and staging of history in them. Wajda has used all the most important of these forms in his many historical films. Historical films are by definition often very closely linked to factual, historical events and characters, although they may also focus on the broader dimensions of history, including the life of ordinary people and everyday life. Frequently, historical films are adaptations of novels, poems or plays with an important function as historical, symbolic markers that link the film to a historical and cultural national canon. But this kind of relation between national history, culture and histori-

[10] See Zerubavel, op. cit., p. 93 f.

cal films is probably most characteristic for the *heritage film* and the *historical biopic*. Heritage films are especially seen as a British film genre, based on the numerous and very popular films based on classical literature, portraying life in a premodern era with strong class differences, a rural landscape and a culture dominated by the upper classes living on huge estates. But, in fact, this type of historical film is very universal and can be found in most countries in one form or the other, and both Wajda and Polish film in general have contributed significantly to this tradition.

According to both Dina Iordanova (2003) and Marek Haltof (2011), historical films based on literary adaptations have been extremely popular with audiences in Poland since the 1920s, and Iordanova even goes so far as to see Poland as one of the major heritage film producers in Europe, alongside the UK and France: “if one looks at the wider European context, Poland’s record in producing heritage films may yield only to France and Britain.”^[11] Iordanova rather ironically argues, while discussing the very romantic heritage of Wajda’s *Pan Tadeusz* (1999), that these films often “feature a dashing blue-eyed blonde-moustached romantic hero, proudly riding a stallion ... he is devotedly committed to the cause of Polish national liberation, driving back hordes of invading enemies.”^[12] In Wajda’s production, heritage films based on well-known literary classics play a major role, and already a film like *Ashes (Popioły)*, 1965), based on a novel by Stefan Żeromski, has many similarities with the British-French heritage tradition. It deals with the period of the Napoleonic wars, combines a plot directed towards the national-political situation and life among the aristocrats in Poland, and is a story of the fight for freedom and national identity combined with an emotional look at the past.^[13] Even further back in time is *Gates to Paradise (Bramy raju)*, 1968), a story based on a novel by Jerzy Andrzejewski about Poland in the 13th century during the crusades and the many migrants, among them homeless children, who were forced on the move by war and bad times. But perhaps Wajda’s ultimate contribution to the heritage film is *Pan Tadeusz* (1999), based on the classical, national poem by Adam Mickiewicz and featuring a very broad depiction of Polish history around 1811–1812 – a film we shall return to in more detail.

Heritage films are sometimes considered to be almost inherently conservative, nostalgic and reactionary. We have already heard Dina Iordanova’s ironic remarks on the genre, and the Polish-British researcher Ewa Mazierska has renounced Polish heritage films with the following characteristic:

Polish heritage films typically create an image of Poland in days gone by as a feudal and patriarchal society ... on a whole, Polish heritage cinema, in

[11] D. Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe. The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*, London 2003, p. 49 f.

[12] Ibidem, p. 50.

[13] See also Falkowska, op. cit., p. 99.

common with the majority of artifacts and institutions which are born out of nostalgia, promotes a conservative, reactionary ideology.[14]

History and historical plots can be used for numerous purposes, and films can of course also express different views and ideologies. There is no doubt that films dealing with historical conflicts, periods and forms of life – just like all other films – can appeal to different emotional and cognitive layers of reception. Recreating and reliving past events will most certainly contain elements of nostalgia, just as seeing yourself and your family in the past tense will evoke these kinds of feelings. But unless the film paints everything in bright romantic colours and avoids the conflicts and tensions present in the past, there is no reason to perceive heritage films as inherently nostalgic and reactionary.

This is clearly a view presented in Andrew Higson's many writings on the British heritage genre, where he points out how the 'heritage industry' – not just in films, but also in promotion of UK as a holiday place – has a dimension of nostalgic longing for the rural and glorious past. But he also clearly points to the embedded conflict between this more nostalgic imagination of the past and the strong social and cultural class conflicts in those premodern societies:

On the one hand, heritage films seem to present a very conventional version of the national past, a view from above, conservative, upper class, patriarchal; on the other hand they often seem to move marginalized groups of history to the narrative centre.[15]

In Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), for instance, you may find a certain nostalgia in the beauty of the past landscapes, but as a heritage film this is also a film that deals with female life and problems in a rather realistic and critical way, as does Merchant and Ivory's adaptation of Forster's classical novel *Howards End* (1992). Furthermore, if we follow the heritage genre into modern BBC-series like *Downton Abbey* (2010–11), it becomes quite clear that this look into a strongly class-ruled upper class estate and life is really about the transformations of modern Britain from past to present, with all classes spread out and represented. Heritage films, like other films, can be a framework for the unfolding of many narratives and ways of portraying the past.

Heritage films are normally defined by a broader period picture and gallery of characters representing society as a whole. The *historical biopic* is a subcategory of the historical film which can have heritage dimensions, but where the portrait of a key historical figure defines the plot and narrative of the film much more directly. This type

[14] Quoted from E. Mazierska, *In the Land of Noble Knights and Mute Princesses: Polish Heritage Cinema*, "Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television" 2001, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 167–182.

[15] Quoted from Higson, op. cit., p. 28.

of film does not have a central place in Wajda's film, but *Danton* (1983) – to which we shall also return – is interesting, both because there is a clear connection to two more contemporary films, *Man of Marble* (*Człowiek z marmuru*, 1977) and *Man of Iron* (*Człowiek z żelaza*, 1981), and because it is an example of use of a foreign, historical figure to comment on the contemporary situation in Poland in an especially difficult time. A controversial figure from the French revolution and a film made in France – because of the increased censorship in Poland in the early 1980s – is used as a way to indirectly comment on the situation in Poland, and to support the key figures of the Solidarity movement. As we shall see, this was done in a way that was quite out of tune with the French interpretation of the historic main character, but served the contemporary message to Poland very well. It is an interesting case about how history can be used to activate emotional and ideological sentiments.

Not all historical films reach far back in history, nor are they based on national, literary classics. In fact most historical films seem to deal with rather recent historical events, events that may still be controversial and closer to the contemporary, public agenda and memory. I will call this form of historical film *historical drama*, and the only really important thing separating this form from drama in general is the historical nature of the plot. Historical dramas, and certainly this is the case with Wajda's use of this genre, are often extremely realistic, bordering on the documentary in the way they portray historical reality. Furthermore, they have a strong leaning towards a critical position. These films often want to reveal the true story behind a historical period or event that the filmmaker feels is not part of the official understanding of history. Wajda's film *Katyn* (2007) unravels one of the most gruesome and contested events during the occupation of Poland in WW II, and even though the truth may have been known by many by the time the film came out, it was still a traumatic event and something one could not speak openly about before 1989. Furthermore, by telling this story with a full measure of realism and emotional drama, the historical fact and truth told is lifted back into the memory of new generations of Poles. The film is only one of many historical films by Wajda dealing with Polish WW II history.

Many historical dramas deal with quite recent and very traumatic and contested events, but films like this can also go back further in time. In Edward Zwick's American film *Glory* (1989), we once more return to the grand heritage period of American films, the period around the American civil war. But this time the story is told in a raw, documentary and realistic form, and the theme is the scandalous treatment of black American soldiers during this war. The historical theme of the film rings through to contemporary America and a formal racial equality with a lot of skeletons in the cupboard. Historical dramas are dominated by realism and a critical, documentary approach to history, but realism is not the only style in historical

drama. Especially in European historical drama, we find many more expressive and experimental forms. This is the case with, for instance, the Spanish film by Guillermo del Toro, *Pan's Labyrinth* (*El laberinto del fauno*, 2006), where the mixture of the cruel reality of fascist suppression seen through the eyes of a young girl is mixed with a surreal fantasy world of mythical creatures that intervene with the historical reality.

Between nostalgia and historical realism: Wajda's heritage films

Wajda's contributions to Polish heritage film have the same kind of complexity and built-in contradiction between a tendency to show and celebrate the cultures and landscapes of the past, the emotional grandeur and idealism behind those events, places and characters that formed Polish history and the tendency towards realism and a critique of contemporary society through a historical narrative. In two early films already mentioned, *Ashes* and *Gates to Paradise*, it is not too difficult to see why Wajda in the middle of communist Poland wanted to go back in history and draw on stories of the Polish aristocracy during the Napoleon wars, fighting for freedom and autonomy for a divided nation, or draw on the story of a country torn apart with people wanting to migrate. In his perhaps most realistic historical heritage film, *The Promised Land* (*Ziemia obiecana*, 1974) – nominated for an Oscar for best foreign film – about the industrial revolution and the breakthrough of capitalism in the Łódź region around the year 1900, he pays tribute to the big European social novels by Dickens, Balzac and Zola.

It is a story of the birth of capitalism seen from the point of view of three entrepreneurs, and the film has a tendency to strong documentary realism in the way it portrays the Darwinistic powers of capitalism and the suppression of working class people. As a film from the communist period, it has some correspondence with the official notion of socialist realism, but capitalist repression of workers historically can also be read allegorically as a contemporary allusion. However, even though the film is to some degree compatible with the themes and principles of socialist realism, the film style is much more expressive and subverts and undermines its official doctrines, with impressionistic, expressionistic and symbolic elements:

Wajda endowed his narrative with phantasmagorical element ... in the realistic space of the city a mythical reality is born ... The inhabitants of the promised land live in the space of authentic reality, but their story grows beyond the realism of description and narrative, taking on precisely the shape of myth and parable.[16]

It is well documented that Wajda often had problems with censorship in Poland and that the double strength of an authoritarian communist system and the Catholic Church indeed presented a challenge to free

[16] E. Nurczynska-Fidelska, *Andrzej Wajda's Vision of 'The Promised Land'*, in J. Orr & E. Ostrowska

(eds.), *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda. The Art of Irony and Defiance*, London 2003, p. 154.

artistic expression. But as Paul Coates has documented in his book *The Red and the White. The Cinema of People's Poland*, the communist regime was eager to use Wajda's fame abroad as part of his propaganda value. In the censor's report on *The Promised Land*, an anonymous censor points to the usefulness of the film, particularly for young people, as "a good lesson in our way of thinking." [17] The argument for this is not that Wajda is seen as 'one of ours' as a person or film director, but that the film deals with the birth of capitalism from a point of view that can evoke the concepts of historical materialism, and that the censor sees the film as expressing a class point of view, and providing a sense of solidarity with the working class representatives in the film.

The Promised Land is the historical film by Wajda which is closest to some of his more contemporary films or historical dramas dealing the period around WW II. It is a film that mixes elements of the critical historical drama and the heritage film and pays tribute to the long European tradition of realism. The contrast between the rich classes, the new capitalist aristocracy and their mansions, and the smoking chimneys and dirty streets and houses of the workers is something you can almost smell and sense from the first shots of the film. Here, heritage certainly does not mean supporting a nostalgic image of a patriarchal society.

A much stronger leaning towards the classical forms of heritage film can be observed in what might be called the ultimate modern Polish heritage film, *Pan Tadeusz*. The fact that it was part of Wajda's ambition is obvious due to the fact that the film is based on Adam Mickiewicz's classic national poem, perhaps the most well-known Polish national text, and that Mickiewicz is represented by an actor reading parts of the poem and narrating on and off screen. As Wajda has pointed out himself:

This project was incomparably more difficult than anything I had done so far. It is much easier to adapt a realistic novel, such as *The Land of Promise*, for big cities, events, characters, passions, are the element on which film thrives. Nature on the screen, on the other hand, often reveals its banal aspect.

In my film the images of nature are background only; what I wanted was to resurrect the climate of the "land of childhood". We aimed to create the loveliest scenes, evoking the poetic world of *Pan Tadeusz* – hence the image of spring and birds, flying over an army, marching to its doom ... in the scene *The Year 1812*.

The real heroes are those Polish characters which participated in the downfall of the Republic. They were portrayed in just such a way, sending shivers down our spines, as images of Polish vices, terrifying but perfect in their artistic form. [18]

The film clearly uses the beauty of Polish landscapes to activate national, emotional feelings and it encompasses a broad representation of

[17] Quoted from P. Coates, *The Red & The White. The Cinema of People's Poland*, London 2005, p. 113.

[18] <http://www.wajda.pl/en/filmy/film34.html> [accessed April 4, 2011].

classes, characters and historical references to the nationally problematic years 1811–1812. The film revolves around conflicts both with external forces and between two families representing different strategies for Poland, and ends with reconciliation between the two opposing Polish families and tendencies. The film has a clear, contemporary message by way of its historical plot and narrative, a message to a post-communist Poland looking for a new place and identity in Europe and the world. Focusing on the quest for sovereign nationhood with Russia, Prussia, Austria and France playing a role, placing strong emphasis on social differences and certain dimensions of the transition from a feudal society to a more modern, national democracy, the film deals indirectly with a new Poland that has gained its democratic freedom but is still struggling to find its way. The film was hugely popular at national box offices, but had no success abroad.

Wajda's own public comments about the film underline his wish to lift Mickiewicz's historical poem into a contemporary context:

Above all I'd like to show in this film the things that seem most important in Adam Mickiewicz's work – our past and our history. We don't care to remember that the image of our national character painted in *Pan Tadeusz* is not merely ironic but quite malicious. It is an image of Poles who do something first and think later. Today I observe a similar situation; so I feel that after almost ten years of freedom the time has come for us to answer the questions: where do we come from? who are we? and where are we going for?[19]

Pan Tadeusz is a post-communist heritage film, representing a much wider interpretation of the past than allowed before 1989, but at the same time it has elements of nostalgic nation building. Among Wajda's historical films, this one bears the strongest similarity to the British heritage tradition. The romantic landscapes and the romantic triangle of Tadeusz, Telimena and Zosia, as well as the strong emotional background of a pastoral, bygone everyday life in Poland, play into the bigger historical plot. The image of the past as a lived reality and the impressive large scale scenes of battles and historical events add to the film's quality as a heritage film. But as also remarked by Falkowska,[20] the film came at a time in Polish history where a celebration of the period just after the fall of communism was eagerly awaited by the majority of Poles and seen as a positive comment to Poland's entering EU a few years later and thus confirming a certain national identity. Both the way Wajda has talked about the film himself and the way the film was discussed and received show that historical film and even heritage films dealing with a long gone past is a way of reframing, representing or re-interpreting the past as part of the present. Activating the past often serves as a mental frame changer in terms of perspec-

[19] <http://www.wajda.pl/en/filmy/film34.html> [accessed April 4, 2011].

[20] See Falkowska, op. cit., p. 254. This is not a direct quotation, but my own version of Falkowska's interpretation.

tives on the present. As already pointed out, history, tradition and images of the public and private past are important for our cognitive and emotional modes of experience, providing a comparative 'mirror effect' that can be of significance. Speaking about conflicts and controversies in the national, historical past may serve as a very direct argument relating to a specific situation in contemporary society. *Pan Tadeusz* clearly does that. The fact that the film deals with both internal and external conflicts in a historical perspective relates to Poland's present situation and the huge ideological differences within Poland between conservative, Catholic and nationalistic tendencies and a more open, centre-left European position. The tendencies we see in Polish society and culture between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, between the right wing and centre-left are positions we see all over Europe in many different countries. It is a fight about the future development and the very soul of the European project.

Using history to speak about the present was perhaps even more important as a strategy during communism, where it could be difficult to speak directly about the present in a critical voice. This was never more clear in Wajda's films than in his historical biopic *Danton* (1983), shot in France. The film was to be made in Poland, but martial law prevented it, and the film had to be made in Paris, financed by Gaumont. But even though the film is a portrait of one of the heroes of the French revolution, and the film does follow the factual events to a certain degree, it is much more of an emotional intervention in the Polish political situation in the early 1980s. Wajda – against most interpretations of the historical Danton – paints a picture of a man of the people, an ideal democrat, in such a way that no observer could miss associating him with Lech Wałęsa and the Independent Self-governing Trade Union "Solidarity". Robespierre, on the other hand, becomes a man corrupted by power, just as Wojciech Jaruzelski was viewed by the Polish opposition.

Wajda has never publicly admitted this direct parallel. He mostly sees the film as a general comment to how revolutionary movements are often eaten up by internal struggle and the same kind of corruption and misuse of power that brought them to power in the first instance. In that sense, the film has a universal plot and meaning, and is not exclusively about the Polish situation. Nevertheless, the portrait of Robespierre is in line with the way many Poles saw him: a stone-faced man that acted brutally, while claiming to act in the service of a higher cause.[21] Depardieu's Danton, on the other hand, has all the charisma and vitality of Wałęsa, who opposed the direction the revolution had taken and demanded respect for the voice of the people. In France, reviews of the film were rather critical, and many pointed out that the black-white image of Robespierre and Danton was out of tune

The critical confrontation with history

[21] See also Falkowska, op. cit., p. 196 ff.

with reality. The film is thus clearly an example of Wajda's use of history and historical figures for contemporary purposes. Contrary to historical documentary, it is a strongly emotional, fictional intervention into a very problematic and difficult situation of Poland.

Danton was not about telling an untold truth about historical events; it was about using a historical reality to criticise the present. Most of Wajda's critical historical dramas, however, aim at telling a story about the recent past that has not been told in the right way or has been directly censored. Quite many of Wajda's historical films focus on Polish WW II history because a relevant part of Polish post-war history was formed by the things that happened at that time. His first breakthrough as a filmmaker, *A Generation* (*Pokolenie*, 1955), already deals with this period, while *Kanal* (*Kanał*, 1957) was criticized by the communist party for pointing out that the brutal slaughter of the Warsaw uprising was not just the work of the Germans but also of the passive Red Army. In *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), which takes place on one day, May 8 1945, Wajda continues this line of films with a strong realistic and emotional tone, clearly dealing with a young generation who did not get the Poland they were fighting for. This theme is continued in *Lotna* (1959) and the much later *Landscape after the Battle* (*Krajobraz po bitwie*, 1970).

But criticism of what happened to Poland during and after WW II, which could not be open before 1989, was dramatically enhanced in *Katyń* (2007), a strong and emotionally moving drama about the mass execution of Polish officers during WW II. In the Katyń massacre in 1940 the Secret Soviet Police (NKVD) murdered around 20,000 Polish soldiers taken as prisoners of war. The official Polish and Soviet explanation before 1989 was that Germans did it. Wajda has a very personal connection to this event, as his father, an officer in the Polish army, was among those murdered. It is therefore both one of the biggest lies of the communist regime and a historical truth with very personal and emotional dimensions Wajda is dealing with in this film.

The narrative of the film stretches from the event itself to the younger generations after the fall of communism trying to set things straight. But the whole historical incident is, of course, also an allegorical story of the lies of the communist regime as a whole, and a story of those who collaborated and those who tried to resist. The film combines elements of institutional history with images of how the institutions and people in charge reacted, using very personal and family stories. Thus, everyday history is intertwined with large-scale historical events. This is also clearly indicated in the way Wajda himself has commented on the film by referring to the personal background, but also to the fact that he wanted the film to be based on individual stories and historical facts that were verified by eyewitnesses and documents:

Katyń is a special film in my long career as a director. I never thought I would live to see the fall of the USSR, or that free Poland would provide

me with the opportunity to portray on the screen the crime and lies of Katyn.

While Stalin's crime deprived my father of life, my mother was touched by the lies and the hoping in vain for the return of her husband.

The creation of the screenplay about Katyn took several years. The long, arduous process of looking through huge quantities of individual recollections, diaries, and other mementos confirmed my determination to base this first film about Katyn on the facts these materials related. And this is how the film's opening scene on the bridge, as well as the one featuring Soviet soldiers defacing the Polish flag, came to be. Most of the incidents depicted on the screen actually happened and were reported by eye-witnesses.[22]

Wajda manages in the film to recreate a human drama not least through a number of female characters, wives, mothers, daughters, victims, and the emotional trauma is clearly revived and lived through once more, including the most terrible part – the killing of the many soldiers. From the film's opening scene, where a crowd at one end of a bridge is fleeing from the Soviets and another crowd at the other end is fleeing towards them from the Germans, the narrative contains powerful symbols of Polish history, even down to a detail like the image of a figure of Christ on a church, where only the arm is left. In the middle of this chaos, a woman and her daughter are looking for their husband and father. We do not see history from above, but are inserted directly into the middle of the chaos of everyday life through an individual perspective. About the film's recreation of historical events, and the social and political consequences of the murder of 20,000 soldiers, Wajda said:

While it is true that the details of the Katyn crime are now known, I couldn't omit, in this first film about the event, the image of death; death that met twenty thousand Polish officers. They were murdered, one at a time, a fact that was recorded in their personal files. This is evidence that the Soviet Union failed to recognize or respect any international standards, not even with regard to prisoners of war.

All the men who died did so as members of the Polish intelligentsia, and this paved the way for Stalin's subjugation of Poland.[23]

The image of Captain Andrzej's daughter shouting after her father as he is being dragged off, put on a train and later executed, is a strong closing to a very emotional and moving start of the film. The following cut, directly to Andrzej's parents in the German occupied zone and to a scene at the university in Kraków when Andrzej's father and his university colleagues are imprisoned and later sent to a work camp, underlines Wajda's emphasis on the execution of the Polish elite conducted by both the Germans and Soviet Union. The film's striving to tell the true story is underlined by scattered sequences in black and white, so that the fictional and documentary authenticity run hand in hand.

[22] <http://www.wajda.pl/en/filmy/katyn.html>
[accessed April 4, 2011].

[23] <http://www.wajda.pl/en/filmy/katyn.html>
[accessed April 4, 2011].

The strongest part of the film comes in the story of developments after 1945, when the Soviet-backed Polish communist regime takes over and the covering up continues. Anna, Andrzej's wife, finally learns that her husband died, but the real story and the documents proving it are preserved by people who had to risk their lives to do so, and those who miraculously survived and might tell the truth are not able to. In the last part of the film, we follow the story of Agnieszka, one of the survivors of the Warsaw uprising, very critical towards the system and sister to a person murdered in Katyń. Through her story and the story of the young Tadzio, also a representative of a new, critical generation, we experience the cruelty and suppression of the communist regime. They belong to the resistance against the communists, they fight for democracy and truth, and they both pay the price. In the last part of the film, the Catholic church is also shown as a supporter of the new regime, interested, first of all, in surviving. In the final scenes, we go back in time to 1940 in order to see the killing of the Polish soldiers, the true version of a war crime with very far-reaching consequences and both real and symbolic meaning.

Conclusion

Countries like Poland, going through tremendous and traumatic events since 1939, have a special need for not just contemporary, realistic films, but for confronting the historical past, both in the shorter term and in the *longue durée*. Wajda has always shown a double trend towards contemporary realism and historical drama. He speaks to the contemporary with two voices. Under communism he used history to speak about things he could not speak about in his contemporary films; after the liberation of Poland from yet another authoritarian regime, the historical is still important, but now as part of a much broader attempt to openly speak the truth (*Katyń*) or to use national history to speak about the present conflicts in a democratic Poland.

History on film is seldom just nostalgia and a longing for the past: certainly, the heritage film has nostalgic elements, but, in general, the past is always part of the present, and history needs to be constantly reframed and re-interpreted. Historical films, also the heritage film, have to be accepted as part of our universal need to understand our past and our individual and collective memories as part of our mental, cognitive and emotional luggage. Wajda's historical films, spanning both forms of heritage cinema and historical drama, belong to a strong European tradition; they may have elements of nostalgia, but they also recreate and reframe history through a contemporary perspective. Historical films and television series are not popular with the large audience just because they escape from a perhaps dull and problematic reality. They are popular because we need our memory in order to establish a continuity and understand where we come from. Memory is a deep cognitive, emotional and social dimension in all human beings, from our private lives to our social and collective memory.

Wajda's films and the whole tradition of European historical films is not just about celebrating the past or seeking a nostalgic trip back. It is also about using history for a better and more critical understanding of our common history and about those dimensions of history that divide us and point to different interpretations and ways of acting and developing our societies. Wajda's films remind us of not just the traumatic and controversial dimensions in Polish history, but of the crucial ways in which history is often used and activated as a part of our social, cultural and political present. They also remind us that the past is rarely just the past, and that it can have important consequences in terms of digging up hidden truths and conflicts. History is used and misused in contemporary societies for many purposes and by many groups, but historical films can help us negotiate those different concepts of history that lead to different concepts of the present.