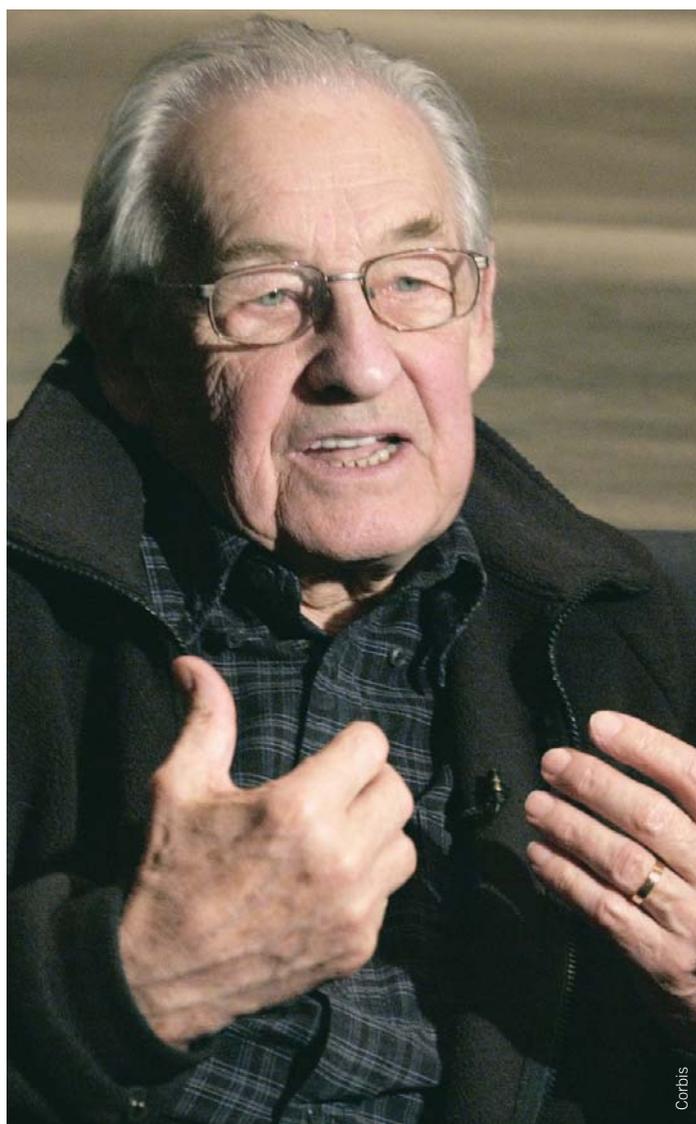


The title is *Post Mortem*, and it recounts the Katyn massacre, where thousands of Polish officials died at the hand of Stalin, a forbidden theme for many decades. With this new film, the director Andrzej Wajda shows how a people cannot live without considering their history. Just like individuals. He believes that the bond with the history and literature of one's own land continues to be very strong, as all his works show, starting with those of his prestigious beginnings

Wajda sends Poland to the cinema

CULTURE 2

by Fernando Orlandi



For Poles, the word Katyn evokes a terrible episode of recent history. After the division of the state agreed between Hitler and Stalin and ratified in the famous secret protocols of the so-called “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact”, Polish civilians and military personnel from the part of the country fallen under the control of the Red Army were imprisoned and sent to work camps. Stalin had been very clear with the men in his circle. On 7 September 1939 Georgi Dimitrov noted in his diary the cynical assessments of the head of the Kremlin: Poland “is a fascist State”; “what harm would it make if, as an effect of the defeat of Poland, we extended the socialist system to new territories and populations?” This is what would indeed happen at the end of the Second World War, when the logic underlying the agreement with Hitler would unfold on a vast scale in central-eastern Europe.

“This war”, Stalin had stated some time afterwards to certain leaders of Yugoslav communism, including Milovan Gilas, “is different from all the past wars; whoever occupies a territory also imposes his social system”. The Soviets would do anything to achieve this in Poland. The imprisoned officials of the armed forces, both on duty and in reserve, together with other employees of the State, were sent to three camps, in the vicinity of Kozelsk, Ostaskov and Starobelsk. Moscow did not recognise the prisoners as prisoners of war or apply



the Geneva Convention to them. A few months on, at the beginning of March 1940 the Soviet management took a decision that would remain a secret for decades, the details of which were only revealed after the fall of the USSR. Seven people (Stalin, Beriya, Kaganovich, Kalinin, Mikoyan, Molotov and Voroshilov) decided to liquidate the Polish official prisoners: 14,700 held in camps and another 11,000 who were in prisons in western Belarus and Ukraine.

Katyn

It is a crime and an atrocity with no comparison, known as the “Katyn massacre” because it occurred in a forest with that name. The mass graves were discovered by the Germans in the spring of 1943 after the alliance of Berlin and Moscow ended, and following the subsequent Nazi attack. A propaganda war was started but the Soviets never managed to convince the West. The last person who attempted to hide the terrible truth was Mikhail Gorbachev. For decades in Poland, the word Katyn was censored, even in specialist publications. Half-way through the Seventies, censorship

was eased, which in some cases allowed the massacre’s mention, but only in strict compliance with the lies stated in the *Big Soviet Encyclopaedia* (*Notka informacyjna*, no. 2, 14 January 1975, of Polish censorship). Unfortunately Vladimir Putin’s Russia has done a U-turn compared with that of Boris Yeltsin in accepting the historical responsibility, and the question today is one that contributes to poisoning relations between Moscow and Warsaw (see **east** no. 4 and 5).

Many literary essays have been dedicated to Katyn, but only a few artistic creations. The novelty is about to come from cinema. Last November the well-known Polish director Andrzej Wajda began shooting *Post Mortem*, a narrative of the Katyn massacre. The director said: “the question of the massacre of thousands of Polish officials carried out by Stalin’s police in Katyn has never been dealt with, except by Zbigniew Herbert (who speaks of it in his poem) and the composer Krzysztof Penderecki (*Polskie Requiem*). Polish directors have never expressed themselves, not on this massacre, nor on the insurrection of Warsaw, nor on Auschwitz. It needs to be done”. The film is

Poland's history and literature deeply influence Wajda's films, to the point that it can really be seen as a history of his country through images



The history of his Poland is a strong feature in all of Wajda's work, as in the film *Post Mortem*, where the director narrates the massacre of Katyn (above) as well as that of *Ash and Diamonds* (left)

now being shot and will be on screens this coming 17 September, a date chosen purposefully as it marks the day of the Soviet invasion in 1939.

History and autobiography

With this work Wajda does not only intend to provide a contribution to the history of Poland (and at the same time heavily attack the lies of communism), but also faces a personal issue. Wajda was 13 when the war broke out. His father, Jakub, was a young captain of the army, in the 72nd regiment of the infantry. Taken captive by the Soviets, he was among the victims of Katyn; he was 40 when he was assassinated. The war had broken out like an explosion in the life of this youth, everything had collapsed at once, the family had no news of the officer, their social status rapidly worsened and his mother had to work as a labourer.

It is certainly not by chance that in the film, based on the play by Andrzej Mularczyk, the point of view of women prevails. Women who waited for their loved ones, mothers and sisters who never saw their husbands, fiancés or brothers again; all details that directly recall the life the director experienced at a young age. In the film, explains Wajda, the Katyn massacre is the starting point to narrate the horrors, the uncertainties and fears witnessed by the officials' families. With no news of their loved ones, with the truth denied to them for decades: "This lie concerned many people and families and is part of their lives. The atrocious crime is only one scene, not the main subject, but something that united all these people in their hate, love, expectations and hope". The scriptwriter Andrzej Mularczyk anticipated that the film would begin in the present day, then retrospectively show how history affects certain decisions, how people in a certain moment are the victims of history and how this ineluctably marks their destiny: "the film shows how neither people nor society can live without reference to history, how today's events are

always connected to the past. This film shows how it is impossible to look to the future without showing respect for those who are no more”.

The history of Poland

The history of his Poland is a strong feature in all of Wajda's work. Born on 6 March 1926 in Suwalki, a village founded by Camaldolensian monks, today near the border with Lithuania, Wajda, producing works for the theatre and cinema, is one of the main spokesmen of the Polish school of cinema. He received the Academy Honorary Award in 2000 and the Honorary “Golden Bear” in 2006.

Right from the beginning his films have achieved notable acclaim. *Kanal* (1957) was awarded the special prize by the jury of the X Cannes festival, while the next, *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) received the Firpesci prize at the XX Venice festival. Having just graduated (1954) from the Lodz cinematography school, Wajda became the assistant to the director Aleksander Ford. He excelled and in the following year he directed *A Generation*, his first film. Wajda undoubtedly directs films that accurately and dramatically reflect Poland's history. The habits and destiny of his people are constantly at the centre of his work, closely connected to literature and benefiting from the co-operation of important intellectuals from his country. This was the case with Jerzy Andrzejewski for *Ashes and Diamonds*, Innocent Sorcerers and *Gates to Paradise*, Kazimierz Brandys for *Samson*, Bohdan Czeszko for *A Generation*, Janusz Glowacki for *Hunting Flies*, Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz for *The Birch Wood*, Tadeusz Konwicki for *A Chronicle of Amorous Incidents*, Stanislaw Lem for *Roly Roly Shadow*, Jerzy Stawinski for *Kanal* and *Love at Twenty*, and Wojciech Zurowski for *Lotna*.

His first three works constitute a kind of “wartime trilogy” in which the lesson of Italian neo-realism is understood (though *A Generation* had to underlie certain canons of socialist realism) even if marked by special features, such as the attempt to transfer the taste of US cinema to the Polish social context (including the use of an anti-hero actor, Zbigniew Cybulski, who became a type of Polish James Dean). These are bitter

works displaying a certain disillusionment at patriotism and the rhetorical language of wartime. But they are also mostly works already featuring a strong use of symbol and allegory.

In 1967 Cybulski, his favourite actor, lost his life in a train accident. His death deeply affected Wajda who, in the wake of the event, made *Everything for Sale* (1968). A film with strictly personal features (explicitly, the main character in the film is a director with the name of Andrzej) which marks a turning point in his artistic production. 1968 was a rather special year also in Poland. Under the communist management a fight was underway between the secretary of the Wladyslaw Gomulka party and the Minister for the Interior, Mieczyslaw Moczar, who wanted him removed, while at the University of Warsaw the students were seething. The presentation of *The Ancestors*, a drama by the nineteenth century poet Adam Mickiewicz, one of the most venerated writers in Polish, acted as a trigger. The production was suspended and an anti-semitic campaign launched, in a Poland nearly void of Jews. Repression of intellectuals ensued and in Czechoslovakia the Soviet military intervened.

Solidarity

Two of Wajda's works are particularly well-known. Those dedicated to the Poland of Stalinism and the birth of Solidarity, *The Man of Marble* (1976) and *The Man of Iron* (1981). In the latter, Lech Walesa, then a young labourer and leader of the independent trade union and the future president of Poland post-communism, played himself. The director's open political stance was punished by the authorities, which forced his production company to leave the market.

Upon the fall of communism, Wajda was

Pan Tadeusz (top) is set in the first years of the XVII century and is based on the poem of the same name in the verses by Adam Mickiewicz, while *Danton* (below) tells of France during the revolution, but refers to Poland. Wajda (seen here at the awards ceremony of the 2006 Berlin Festival) always had a significant relationship with history and literature



lected a senator and appointed as the artistic director of the Powszchny theatre in Warsaw. He continued making films, dealing again with the subject of the Second World War in *The Crowned-Eagle Ring* in 1993 and *The Holy Week* in 1996.

Poland's history and literature deeply influence his work, to the point that it can really be seen as a history of his country through images. *Ashes* (1965) is set at the end of the seventeen hundreds, while *Pan Tadeusz* (1999) in the first years of the following century (based on the poem of the same name in the verses by Adam Mickiewicz). *Danton* (1982) tells of France during the revolution, but refers to Poland, while *The Possessed* (1988) depicts Russia in the second half of the eighteen hundreds. *The Wedding* (1970, from the drama by Stanislaw Wyspianski) and *Promised Land* (1974), portray Poland at the beginning of the nineteen hundreds, in the years that preceded the rebirth of the country. Massimo Causo noted how "the figures of Wajda's cinema never stop struggling between the strong need to act, to determine their history and shape their world as opposed to their fatal destiny to be submitted to the events and the reality overwhelming them, leaving them drained of blood time after time, as if they were terrified by the uselessness of their actions". The director is deeply connected to the history of his country; in the background of this conception, the individual, the hero, his gestures and actions are silhouetted. The result of this action is disaster, observes Lorenzo Pompeo, "at least it is in his films, like *Ashes and Diamonds* and *Kanal*. Heroism is sterile and losing, since in the grand design of national history, destiny has already been set by a superior force". For this reason the tragic end of the hero, both in *Ashes and Diamonds* and *Landscape After the Battle* (1970), "occurs as a purely coincidental error that puts everything back in order". Also the death of the heroes in Wajda's films represents the last laugh: not a heroic end, but a joke of fate, a chance coincidence. Poland's history, from the end of *Reczpospolita* to the fall of the communist regime, is intimately connected to this notion of hero/anti-hero.