REVISUALIZING TIMES PAST

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The utopia in great art is never the simple negation of the reality principle but its transcending preservation in which past and present cast their shadow on fulfilment. The authentic utopia is grounded in recollection. All reification is forgetting. Art fights reification by making the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance. Forgetting past suffering and past joy alleviates life under a repressive reality principle. In contrast, remembrance spurs the drive for the conquest of suffering and the permanance of joy... The horizon of history is still open. If the remembrance of things past would become a motive power in the struggle for changing the world, the struggle would be waged for a revolution hitherto suppressed in the previous historical revolutions (Herbert Marcuse, The Aesthetic Dimension, 1978).

Cinema offers us a singular opportunity to review ourselves. The moving, sounding image enables us to represent vividly and re-evaluate the historical events that have shaped us, that have made us what we are. It is a commonplace view that Western culture is more committed to such historical retrospection than its Eastern counterpart. This would certainly seem to be true of Western literature where censorship is presently at a minimum and the liberal idea of pluralistic expression more revered than ever. By contrast, the choice by contemporary authors in the East to explore the naked truths of their personal or collective past is often discouraged, if not squarely condemned as anti-socialist subversion. The number of exceptional Eastern writers still branded as ‘dissidents’ or forced into exile speaks for itself.

But can the same be said of Eastern cinema? The exciting and courageous work of Andrzej Wajda (Poland) and Andrei Tarkovsky (U.S.S.R.) suggests that cinema has sometimes been more critically outspoken in the East than in the West. (Though the recent clampdown in Poland may well bespeak an abrupt end to such outspokenness).

Wajda’s three most recent films (IFT) constitute a complex trilogy of cultural revision. In the first, Rough Treatment (the title’s literal translation being Without anaesthesia), Wajda charts the fall from official favour of a free-thinking media personality and author named Jacek (played by Zbigniew Zapasiewicz). Returning from a trip abroad the middle-aged Jacek discovers that his wife Eva (Ewa Dalkowska) is leaving him, for no ostensible reason other than a fainthearted attraction to a young journalist politically and culturally at odds with Jacek. The journalist dismisses Jacek as a ‘coffee-house oppositionist’ while envying his popular success with both T.V. viewers and students (Jacek lectures at the Warsaw Media School). Wajda deploys the film-within-film technique to portray the jealous competitor riveted to the

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T.V. screen whenever Jacek pronounces on contemporary writing in Poland (advertising significantly to the unwholesome silence of many young authors). Indeed one suspects that the aspirant’s main interest in Eva is that she is Jacek’s spouse; consumed by green-eyed possessiveness rather than genuine passion, he cruelly censures Jacek’s pleading letters to her.

But there is worse to come. Again without explanation, Jacek is deprived of his job in the Polish media. Wajda succeeds in evoking a terrifyingly Kafkaesque atmosphere as Jacek paces through the ‘castle’ of Warsaw media offices desperately seeking reasons for his dismissal. The world is suddenly absurd, upside down; nothing is but what is not. Jacek discovers he has been replaced by a subordinate lackey and that his liberal boss, Bronsky, has also been removed from power and reduced to a penurious scapegoat of State bureaucracy. Hurting further and faster downwards, Jacek is next informed that his university course has been cancelled. His students encourage him to resist the expulsion, but the dispirited Jacek chooses to ignore its ‘political’ implications and explains away the authorities’ decision as an unfortunate mix-up of timetables. Touched by the students’ concern, however, Jacek invites them to his flat where he resorts to the solace of the vodka bottle. Jacek waxes inarticulate and sleeps. His students ‘desert’ him one by one. But one nameless girl student (played by Krystyna Janda) decides to remain in silent vigil over her sleeping master. She insists on moving into Jacek’s apartment on a permanent basis and her very presence is a watchfulness, a witness, a conscience which keeps Jacek from anaesthetizing himself in alcohol and self-pity. The silent student compels Jacek to face up to his fall, to interrogate the raison-d’être of his destitution. This ‘conscientizing’ presence of the girl, together with Jacek’s earlier decision to have a tooth removed ‘without anaesthetic’, give the film its original title.

Wajda’s complex editing skilfully juxtaposes the student’s fidelity with Eva’s infidelity epitomized in her callous plea to the Polish courts to enforce divorce proceedings. Under normal circumstances, one supposes that Jacek would have complied. But emboldened by the student’s ineffable witness and shocked by the facile hypocrisy of the Polish legal system, Jacek resolves, at last, to say no. Though he bears ‘neither hate nor resentment’, he refuses to grant his wife the custody of their two daughters. The legal authorities warn him that his resistance is futile; and they are proved cruelly correct. Jacek loses the court case due to a battery of trumped-up charges – from the rape of Eva’s sister to the molesting of his girl student. Like Kafka’s accused in *The Trial*, he cannot comprehend the law of this nightmare-world laced with lies and complicity. One has the impression at times that even the conspiring accomplices themselves do not comprehend: they are victims of what seems to be a ‘motiveless malignity’, a suppression of truth.
bereft of why and wherefore. In a final sequence in which Wajda makes the pessimism of Euripides a euphemism, Jacek leaves the court in silence and returns to his flat where he is burnt to death several hours later in a gas-oven explosion. Wife and student confront each other as his charred body is wheeled into an ambulance. Eva is now speechless and repentant; the student is emotively distraught and, for the first time in the film, speaks. She openly expresses her feelings for Jacek and proclaims her belief that his death was not suicide but an accident. His death has given her voice.

Throughout the film Wajda sustains a tone of tragic ambiguity. The viewer cannot be sure, any more than Eva or the student, if Jacek’s demise is in fact an absurd misfortune, a wilful act of nihilistic despair or a last sacrificial gesture of passive resistance (reminiscent of Jan Polach’s self-immolation in 1968 in protest against the Soviet occupation of Prague). And even if he is a sacrificial victim, it is still impossible to tell whether he serves as a scapegoat of State intrigue or a hero in defiance of such intrigue. Either way, whisper Wajda’s unforgettable images, ‘Jacek is dead’.

In the second film of the trilogy, Man of Marble (released in 1976 two years before Rough Treatment but in fact a logical development of its theme), Wajda continues to investigate how the media, and by implication the arts, represent history. He shows that in Poland, as elsewhere, the media can be used with ease to propagate lies or with difficulty to uncover truth. Wajda himself — like the young film maker within his film — uses it to uncover truth. Blending documentary and fictional footage, Wajda boldly reopens some forbidden chapters of Poland’s recent past.

The girl student of Rough Treatment (Krystyna Janda) reappears here more uncompromising than ever. Her passive or impassive resistance has matured into open rebellion. She will speak and show the truth with all the means available to her. Transcending her former self-effacing silence, she is now christened, significantly, Agnieska (meaning ‘Lamb’, which Wajda’s overt use of religious symbolism may well intend as a reference to the notion of Christian ‘witness’ to truth). Agnieska has just graduated from the Warsaw media school and decides to devote her diploma project to an enigmatically forgotten war-hero of the fifties, named Mateusz Birkut (Jerzy Radziwilowicz). Birkut was a rural labourer apotheosized by the Polish State in a post-war propaganda campaign to glorify the emerging construction industry. His claim to fame in the historical farm-to-factory transition was his ability to lay more concrete bricks per minute than any of his fellow workers. The Polish Communist Party, unsure presumably about the propaganda potential of the German Marx or the Russian Lenin (not to mention the Georgian Stalin) in a fervently nationalist Poland, thought best to lionize one of their own. Birkut fitted the indigenous bill and was
instantly aggrandized in monster posters and even more monstrous marble busts (whence the film's title).

Unswerving in her fidelity to historical truth, Agnieszka picks up the residual threads of evidence — newspaper reportage, newsreel, marble statues locked away in government basements, etc. — until she eventually locates Birkut's fall from grace in the Nova Huta construction plant in the late fifties. But she cannot adequately substantiate her suspicions that his erasure from official history was for political reasons: Birkut had broken his State contract by showing that workers can think politically with their heads as well as build mechanically with their hands, (a favourite and recurring theme of Wajda's). Since Agnieszka cannot discover whatever became of Birkut after his banishment east of the propaganda Eden — and, needless to say, the authorities decline to co-operate with her inquiry — she cannot end her film. Finally, however, she learns from a media colleague that Birkut is dead but is survived by a son, Tomczyk (also played by Jerzy Radziwiłłowicz) now working in a Gdansk factory. Tomczyk is willing to reveal all the unsavoury facts about his father's downfall and the film concludes with Agnieszka striding through the corridors of power — the State media offices — with Tomczyk beside her, determined to extract permission from the authorities to end her film as it should end — with the reportage of truth. Though the film is typically Wajdaesque in its inconclusiveness (we do not know how the authorities will respond to her request) there is, at least, a hint of hope.

The third film of the trilogy, *Man of Iron* (1981), begins as *Man of Marble* ended — on a frail note of hope. The opening sequence pans from a young woman recording a poem of revolt for radio (the poem opens with the statement: 'There is hope if one believes / that the senses do not deceive'), to a group of loquacious housewives drafted in by the State to parrot grievances against the Gdansk strikers: 'What about civic duty? How will we feed our children or bring them to school without buses?', etc. Once again, Wajda's message is signal if subtly clear: the media — be it cinema, radio or the written word — can be deployed in either a creative or a conformist way. A rotund radio producer called Winkel hovers from one recording booth to the other; and one quickly gathers that he is under bureaucratic constraints to axe the rebellious poetess and broadcast the reactionary plaintives. Winkel is shown to be sweating over the decision, but he does his 'civic duty'.

So scrupulously duty-bound is poor Winkel that the broadcasting authorities, in collusion with the secret police, offer him a sizeable salary rise to research a radio programme discrediting one of the young strike leaders at Gdansk. The strike leader in question is none other than Birkut's son, Tomczyk. Also to recommend him to the authorities, Winkel is the reporter who covered the Gdynia strikes in 1970, during which, it ironically transpires, Birkut had been killed by riot police. As
each scene of Winkel's cowardly inquiry untolds, the plot thickens and twines, serving as an obverse mirror-image of Agnieszka's intrepid inquiry in Man of Marble.

Apart from his wage increase, Winkel also receives such perks as a car, a luxury hotel apartment, party-subventioned food and, significantly, a bottle of vodka! But his splendid isolation in the Gdansk hotel becomes too much for him and he gradually begins, almost despite himself, to identify with Tomczyk and the strikers. His first endurance test is the strikers' ban on alcohol (to which Winkel, like Jacek before him, is hopelessly addicted). Drink not religion, Wajda suggests, is the opium of the Polish people. To visually illustrate his point, there is a most amusing scene where the workers empty their vodka bottles as they enter the Gdansk shipyard for their daily Mass.

Winkel's sojourn in Gdansk becomes a rite of transition into the first circle of Polish resistance. His encounters with a conscientious media colleague and with Tomczyk's fellow-strikers serve to purgatively liberate him from his dual addiction to State-sponsored alcohol and compromise. Wajda's ingeniously intricate plot reaches its climax when Winkel's researches bring him face to face with Tomczyk's imprisoned wife — Agnieszka herself! In a highly-charged scene behind locked doors their imaginations unlock as they visually and verbally reconstruct the missing pieces of the historical puzzle they both set out — from different ends — to solve. Winkel is now compelled to remember his own betrayal: he recalls his previous meeting with Agnieszka some ten years earlier (1970) in the Warsaw Media Centre where he had tipped her off about Birkut's son but subsequently refused to resist the media's decision to expel her. Winkel's story thus turns tail and rejoins Agnieszka's unfinished story; Man of Iron becomes the hoped-for culmination of Man of Marble; it becomes a film within a film. Or to be more exact, Wajda's report on Winkel's report on Tomczyk continues Agnieszka's report on Birkut! History is reopened, narrated, liberated.

From this riveting confessional exchange, we learn that when Agnieszka and Tomczyk went to plead her cause with the director of the Warsaw media in 1970 (the concluding scene of Man of Marble), she was not only rebuffed but was peremptorily deprived of her film licence. As her memories are visually retold, we see Agnieszka returning to Gdynia with Tomczyk and attempting to use the only means left to her — a hand camera — to mount a display of photographs in Tomczyk's flat commemorating the resistance of Birkut and the Gdynia strikers. Even these efforts, however, are frustrated by the secret police. But the struggle against untruth unites Agnieszka (the intellectual) and Tomczyk (the worker) and their solidarity soon develops into love: their wedding ceremony is even presided over by Lech Walesa who, appearing in person, shyly offers them 'democratic' roses! They bear a child which Wajda celebrates as the hope-harbinger
of succeeding Polish generations. Indeed, there are several mythico-
mystical evocations of trinitarian symbolism with Agnieszka serving as
the creative-procreative spirit uniting father and son.

Agnieszka, revisualizing her past, converts Winkel to the cause of
truth. He resolves to take up the story where Agnieszka was obliged to
leave off. He hands in his resignation to the director of the media
station only to learn, as Jacek before him, that he has been replaced. He
then resolves to follow the Birkut-Tomczyk saga to the end, linking the
father’s Gdynia revolt with the son’s Gdansk revolt. Winkel eventually
receives permission to enter the strikers’ sanctuary in the Gdansk ship-
yard. With his incomparable sense of visual irony, Wajda contrasts the
strikers living in freedom inside the iron bars of the shipyard with those
outside the iron fence still suffering oppression. In the highly enter-
prising, if not always convincing, blend of historical documentary and
fictional recreation, Wajda charts the historic victory of the Solidarity
movement at Gdansk. With Agnieszka, Tomczyk and Winkel all present
and reconciled, interpolated newsreel shows Walesa sign the accord with
the Polish government. There is, however, a tragically prophetic
moment when one of the party bosses sneers: ‘It’s only a piece of
paper, that agreement!’ The film concludes with a poignant, muted shot
of Tomczyk and Agnieszka placing a cross on the spot in Gdynia where
Birkut had been ignominiously gunned down by police ten years
previously. (His original grave had been tampered with by the secret
police). Birkut comes to rest as his personal history — and Poland’s
collective history with it — is reclaimed from anonymity and oblivion.
The truth has passed full circle — from Birkut to Tomczyk to Agnieszka
to Winkel — reaching its ultimate and indelible expression in Wajda’s
Man of Iron. Indeed, all of Wajda’s characters can be seen in retrospect
to represent different variations of his own evolving consciousness.
Jacek’s anaesthetized death finds fulsome vindication in Wajda’s film
trilogy reincarnating as it does the solidarity of spirit which the State
media have censored. Recollection is thus shown to be the most radical
path to Utopia.

And yet one cannot simply ignore that Wajda made his trilogy not as
an exile propped up by the commercial interest of Western cinema
producers but as a resident Pole working with the resources of the
national film industry. Wajda’s work seems to testify that for
undaunted film-makers like Agnieszka (and by implication himself) it is
possible to represent artistically the censored truths of history, despite
the political constraints of State bureaucracy. Or should one say it was
possible. After the recent imposition of martial law in Poland Andrei
Wajda was one of the first intellectuals to be imprisoned.

Similar lessons are to be learnt from the films of Russian director
Andrei Tarkovsky (also shown at the IFT). His four major works
Andrei Rublev (1966), Solaris (1972), Mirror (1974) and Stalker
have one theme in common — the attempt to reappropriate the forgotten past of the Russian people. Tarkovsky shares Wajda’s conviction that cinema is at its engaging best when it employs its images as mirrors of history. Andrei Rublev retells the story of a fifteenth-century Russian monk and mystic whose sublime icon of the Trinity painted at the Zagorsk monastery was one of the major elements in the growing Russian self-awareness as a Christian nation, which culminated in the ‘Third Rome’ mystique and paved the way for the founding of the Russian nation. Solaris, employing the more metaphorical means of science fiction, reviews the recent history of Soviet space technology and warns against the danger of sacrificing one’s personal fidelities to the past to the impersonal progress of the future (the film’s protagonist is a space pilot who redisCOVERS his deceased wife living on an outerspace planet called Solaris). In fact, the journey into outerspace is cleverly construed as a long day’s journey into the inner and inescapable subconscious. In Mirror, Tarkovsky continues his exploration of the past deploying the ‘mirror’ held up to his own private biography to reflect the public history of his people. Like Wajda, Tarkovsky mixes newsreel, personal memory and fictional invention to relate an obsessive conviction, as archetypal as it is biblical, that the Son must remain faithful to the Father through the mediation of art, usually represented by the female Spirit. While in Andrei Rublev Tarkovsky explicitly invokes the icon of the Christian Trinity (which it was Rublev’s life-work to create and which is mystically illuminated in the film’s concluding sequence), in Solaris and Mirror, the Father-Spirit-Son relationship retains its Christian dimension (the pentecostal wind blowing where it wills in Mirror, the father and son reconciled through the resurrected wife-mother in Solaris) but is also translated onto a rich variety of other planes, personal and political. As I have dealt elsewhere with the theme of trinitarian ‘recollection’ in Tarkovsky’s first three films, I shall confine my comments here to his fourth and most recent work, Stalker.

Stalker commences and concludes with a haunting image of a child in a claustrophobic room using telekinetic powers to try to communicate with the world outside. (Interestingly, Mirror opened with a dumb child learning to talk.) In between these childhood sequences, the film follows the ritual passage of a Writer, a Professor and a Stalker — a spiritual guide or pathfinder — into the heart of darkness and wisdom which Tarkovsky calls the Zone. The Zone is a wasteland, fenced off by the military authorities and possessing mystical powers of beauty and horror — it is at once fascinans et tremendum. The empirical laws of the ordinary world are suspended here as the Writer (in search of artistic inspiration) and the Professor (in search of scientific truth) are led by the Stalker through an interminable subterranean tunnel (reminiscent of the cave in Forster’s Passage to India). Overcoming a host of physical and psychological tests — presumably part of a purgatory process — the
questing trinity eventually arrives at the Room in the centre of the mandalic Zone. The Room is said to harbour the secret of existence and confronts the expeditionaries with the truth about themselves and their society.

The film is replete with archetypal traces and cyphers which operate on at least three levels. Firstly, there is the psychic level where the quest functions as a voyage into the nocturnal unconscious of a private or collective past. One finds evidence for such a reading not only in the autobiographical tendencies of Tarkovsky's previous works or the childhood sequences which frame Stalker, but also in the director's recent statement that the film illustrates Pushkin's conviction that one must 'feel the source within oneself', adding that 'the source is a miracle that in normal language is impossible to discuss and dissect'. Secondly, the film operates at a political level with the Zone now functioning as a probationary labyrinth where the individual search for meaning in contemporary society is dramatically enacted. Thirdly, Stalker carries the universal significance of a mythic or biblical quest for a lost Eden, missing Grail or promised Utopia. This third level of mythico-religious meaning — manifest in such archetypal images as the demonic watch-dog, the flowering rod in the rock, the crown of thorns and the passage grave of life and death — transcends both the personal and political implications of the film communicating its oblique but liberating vision to all peoples and cultures.

Admittedly all such interpretations of Tarkovsky's work run the risk of 'murdering to dissect', and one should not forget Tarkovsky's own insistence that the 'miracle' can only be adequately expressed in the 'abnormal' language of the images themselves. Precisely as visual image, cinema can evoke a multiplicity of semantic reverberations irreducible to any one verbal equivalence. To isolate or privilege any single semantic strain is to traduce the fertile ambivalence, if not polyvalence, of Tarkovsky's images. Beckett made a similar point about his own work when he warned: 'no symbols where none intended'. By utilizing archetypal images as indeterminate traces rather than determinate symbols, art keeps communication open and refuses to resort to propaganda. Indeed Tarkovsky's refusal to manipulate or predetermine audience reactions to his films may, strangely, be one of the reasons why his work has remained uncensored by the Soviet authorities. The rich equivocity of visual recollection survives where the univocality of verbal recollection might well have been suppressed.

It is true that the films of Wajda and Tarkovsky have sometimes only received limited distribution. Mirror, made in 1974, was denied foreign distribution until 1978; Man of Marble was removed from the Polish cinemas after just two weeks during which time over a million people had queued to see it in Warsaw alone; Man of Iron had to be smuggled out of Poland for the Cannes festival. But the fact remains that these films, however suspect, do receive some sort of distribution; and
arguably a wider one than many independent films in the West. Furthermore, Wajda and Tarkovsky have been able to procure the technical and financial wherewithal to produce their work in the first place. It is difficult to think of many Western producers footing the bill of such an innovatory, difficult and patently uncommercial film as Stalker. And if Wajda’s films — Man of Iron in particular — have been enlisted into the ‘anti-socialist’ propaganda services of a certain Western press, this has not been the director’s intention; both he and Tarkovsky have stated that their primary interest is in the response of their own public (foreign acclaim being useful in so far as it enables them to continue their work at home).

I do not deny that for every Wajda and Tarkovsky who reaches the silver screen there are probably a dozen Eastern directors whose work is frustrated or banned. The critique of State censorship in Wajda’s trilogy speaks for itself. My point is rather that it is quite paradoxical how that region of our globe most notorious for its intolerance towards free and original expression, should have produced, and at times even promoted, two of the world’s most innovatory modern directors. Perhaps, ironically, the very difficulties encountered by filmmakers in communist countries foster an aesthetic inventiveness and devotion to truth now taken for granted by many directors in the West. Which is not to say that we in the West have no recent films devoted to the remembrance of things past. One could cite a host of such films ranging from Fellini’s autobiographical fantasies — Amarcord and City of Women — to Boorman’s excursions into the mythic unconscious — particularly in Excalibur. But these films tend, for reasons of commercial expediency, to focus on just one dimension of forgotten history — in Fellini’s case the personal, in Boorman’s the collective — rather than embrace the multifaceted depth of feeling which a cinematic evocation of the past can offer. They simply do not display that urgent obsession with fundamental questions which epitomizes the work of Wajda and Tarkovsky. Significantly a recent attempt by the English director, John McKenzie, to hold a critical mirror up to Britain’s not so hygienic political history — with its corrupt business dealings and its colonial complicity with I.R.A. violence — met with concerted opposition from home producers and distributors. The finished product is so camouflaged with saucy blood-letting and high-gear sensationalism that the original political satire is scarcely decipherable. Certainly none of these promising Western directors have been able to match the dexterous experimental craftsmanship or the complex profundity of vision achieved by both Wajda and Tarkovsky.

There is a lesson here somewhere.

FOOTNOTES