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# Cultural response to totalitarianism in select movies produced in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland between 1956 and 1989

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Cultural Response to Totalitarianism in Select Movies Produced in Czechoslovakia,  
Hungary and Poland between 1956 and 1989

by

Kazimierz Robak

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Dedication

To my wife Grażyna Walczak, my best friend, companion and love  
and to Olga, a wonderful daughter

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Hungary and Poland between 1956 and 1989.

Kazimierz Robak

ABSTRACT

This study examines resistance against totalitarian propaganda in select movies produced in regions subjected to Soviet-imposed totalitarian system.

From 1939 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central-Eastern Europe has experienced two of the most devastating and genocidal political systems in the history of the humankind. Nazism was destroyed with the end of WWII, and met widespread condemnation. Sovietism, commonly known as Communism, survived WWII and the Soviet totalitarian empire rose to the position of the world's second superpower. Effective and organized Soviet propaganda generated a new convincing image of Sovietism as a harmless, friendly and progressive system. In this situation, the extremely important role of maintaining moral consciousness has fallen to the artistic world, specifically film.

The scope of my thesis is to explore and analyze the responses to the Soviet totalitarianism in movies produced in European states of the Soviet bloc, between 1956 and 1989. My thesis aims to offer a critical reading of the chosen movies as well as their historical and political conditions. I point out how filmmakers articulated their resistance and analyze it in the context of national culture. The movies I chose to discuss express the reality of everyday life during the Soviet era. Their dissection reflects the mutual

influence of history and art in general and in the Soviet bloc in particular. Hence, I offer a reading of the past expressed in the subjective vision of the cinematographic art. Movies not only reflect certain fragments of the reality, they also play an important role in constructing a collective memory. Discussing them from this angle leads to an understanding of the current perception of the past in those countries.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Objectives

Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, for nearly half a century after WWII had to survive under the reins of post WWII Soviet totalitarianism. To preserve their national identity and resist a “new” history fabricated by the imposed system, they developed mechanisms and systems of resistance against omnipotent totalitarian propaganda and indoctrination. The cinema played extremely important role in this process.

The entire region of Central and Eastern Europe had a similar history, similar constraints and similar possibilities of development, dictated by their hegemon. One of the rules of the system was a revisionist history, which included erasing facts uncomfortable for the regime from history books and collective memory. The same rules applied to filmmaking. Because film is a form of art that reaches the widest audience, it also became an important weapon. By reaching practically everyone, it shaped the consciousness of the viewer very effectively. Some of the filmmakers decided to compromise, repeating the government approved format. Nonetheless, it was works by the directors who did not give into the regime but openly challenged it, opposed the propaganda, questioned the dogmas and by touching on the subjects omitted by the official propaganda, engagé movies forced the audience to think critically. The formation of such ideas as the Polish “cinema of moral anxiety” and the Czech and Slovak new wave films or the neosymbolism in Hungarian films was not an accident – it was a reaction of great artists to a situation that threatened national identity. At this critical

point, movie directors created a language of implications, which they used to communicate with audiences over the seemingly omnipotent censure. The artists won the battle – the widespread defiance started by “Solidarity” in 1980 would never have concluded in the overthrowing of the regime and full democratization in the years 1989-1990 if the art of film had not shaped the national consciousness and taught critical thinking.

The purpose of this work is to show the influence of historical events on the development of artistic opposition to the regime and the conditions that aided or hindered the production of films, which attacked the Soviet system. The political situation and the ebb and flow of cultural thaw were different in each satellite country but it is easiest to see the common denominator looking at the development of cinematography in three countries: Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. In each case, there was a threat of military intervention by the Soviet army, which only Poland managed to escape.

Biographies, monographs, critiques, and reviews of films by artists such as Stanisław Bareja, Miloš Forman, Jan Němec, István Szabó or Andrzej Wajda are in the hundreds if not thousands. Their films have been analyzed multiple times from many points of view. Research has been done on film techniques, editing, artistic value of screenplays and photographic work, aesthetic values and social and political involvement. However, a vast majority of these studies analyzed the works of these artists individually and separately. Attempts at a synthesis in relation to what connects these artists the most – the historical reality in which they were creating and their role in directing their viewer’s opinions against the totalitarian system and education of younger generation – are so far scarce in general and nonexistent on the academic research level.

This is why my work will not be concerned with things usually expected in the case of film analysis. There will be no formal analysis discussing techniques and innovative shots. There will be no artistic analysis, judging aesthetics frame by frame. Instead, I will give a description of how these films influenced collective memory, analyze their reverberation throughout the community, and describe the role they took in the establishment of national consciousness. This is the reason why I place Stanisław Bareja, creator of light comedies that critics often treat with contempt, in the same line as with the philosophers of film such as Wajda, Forman or Szabó. Film is a mass art – it was created for the masses and still relies mainly on mass reception. Even the greatest cinematic works, if they are not received widely enough, will remain known only to a small group of critics and connoisseurs while dying in collective consciousness. In film, unlike any other art form, the audience “votes with their legs,” that’s why it is important not only who made the film but also how many people saw it and what impact it had on the public, which often has nothing to do with reviews from critics.

This paper consists of four parts. In the current part, following the presentation of the goals and the character of my investigation, I explain the principal concepts used in the body of the text, and mention briefly the theoretical frames on which I support my hypothesis. I focus on the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. The second chapter presents a historical and political background of Soviet-imposed totalitarianism and its impact on cultural life in the Soviet bloc. In this part, I show how the satellite states manipulated the collective memory and how it affected the development of national movie industries in these countries. In the next chapter, “Response to Totalitarian Reality in Select Films,” I examine twelve movies produced in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland between 1956 and 1989. These films do not exhaust the topic of the cinematographic

counter-discourse in the shaping of collective consciousness, but are seen as examples of the response to the hegemonic discourse. In the conclusion, drawing on these analyses, I point out the relationship between history, memory and artistic expression in movies that dealt with the Soviet-imposed reality.

## 1.2. Main Concepts and Theoretical Frames

During the 20th century, western civilization had to deal with two totalitarian systems: Fascism and Sovietism.<sup>1</sup> Fascism formed in Italy and succeeded as a statewide system when Benito Mussolini assumed power in 1922 (Payne 110). Its extreme form as National Socialism (Nazism) became statewide when the NSDAP, under the rule of Hitler, won the election in Germany in 1933. The end of Fascism and Nazism came in 1945 in Europe, with the end of WWII (Payne 436).<sup>2</sup>

Sovietism in its primary form became a statewide system in 1917, after the success of the October revolution. Formally, it lasted until December 1991, until the collapse of the USSR. During these 74 years, it evolved many times, but it never stopped being a homicidal totalitarian system legalizing imperial politics of the USSR, both at home and abroad.

Among many definitions of Fascism and Sovietism, I back the one that was independently given by Hannah Arendt, a political theoretician, and Zbigniew Brzeziński, a

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<sup>1</sup> I use this term as an all-inclusive umbrella which covers Bolshevism, Marxism (Marxism-Leninism, Marxism-Stalinism etc.), Stalinism, Socialism, Communism, Real Communism, People's Democracy – because none of these by themselves covers the entirety of a system introduced, developed, backed and forced upon people, which was the main doctrine of the country known as the Soviet Union.

<sup>2</sup> The only fascist country, which survived past WWII in Europe, was Spain. It was neutral during the war, keeping its distance from the other countries of Western Europe, and began the process of defascization in 1942. It lasted until Francisco Franco's death in 1975, upon which the Bourbon monarchy was restored. (Payne 435) In Portugal, during the military dictatorship of Antonio Salazar installed in 1928 and active until the Carnation Revolution of 1974, Fascism played no role and "Salazar personally rejected the support of a fascist movement" (Payne 312-317).

political scientist, both of whom claim that Fascism and Sovietism are two sides of the totalitarian coin. Differences between them are far less significant<sup>3</sup> than similarities: a one-party system based on the dictatorship of a mass party and its charismatic leader, state control of economy, media and armed forces, terror, hatred based on the racist or social background executed by the secret political police (Arendt 389). The end of WWII, which brought about the end of Fascism, became simultaneously the beginning of a nearly half century long expansion of Sovietism. After the war, the USSR advanced to become a superpower, with the help of its American and British allies, and began an unpardonable ideological, military and territorial rivalry with the United States and other western democracies.

After WWII, societies of Central Europe were subjected to various and thorough changes. The war caused migrations and perturbations of demographic and social structures. In the postwar period, the Soviet occupants deepened these processes by deportations, relocations, and expulsions, and enforced promoting the lower classes by eradicating and physically exterminating the upper classes. They also commenced changing collective memory by teaching historical lies, promoting a version of the past most favorable to the USSR and the Soviet system or, in other words, by rewriting history. These efforts, planned in detail as a long and arduous campaign, were particularly dangerous for dominated nations. Memory – according to the French philosopher and sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs<sup>4</sup> – is a means of persistence, and if “to be” means to persist, then recollection always occurs within a group as a social act. In other words, human beings remember within the community. When

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<sup>3</sup> Among differences, there are: a model of economy (market versus centrally managed), nationalism versus Internationalism. Some features were opposed only theoretically, because of open lies hypocritically promoted by the Soviet system regardless a *fait accompli*: elitism and racism claimed by Nazis was counterbalanced by the officially propagated egalitarian slogans necessity of expansion hence the war was opposed by the Soviet principles of war for peace, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

these links are interrupted and possibilities of social acts are limited, controlled and regulated, the collective memory – hence national identity – is seriously endangered.

Censorship and careful selection of teachers on all levels left social sciences (among them history) was under strict government administration. Besides the past taught by the official history, however, there is also a past held in people's memory. The state-owned history could manipulate facts and events. Memory was later taken over and adapted by those who realized the seriousness of sustaining historical continuity and the dangers of manipulating it, filmmakers among them.

The change of the perception of memory and history was nothing out of the ordinary. In an influential study *Invention of Tradition*, published by two British historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger<sup>5</sup>, one can find arguments that the change of the perception of memory and history occurred with the beginning of modernity. Essays of many researchers included in the book show the strategies of the fabrication of collective memories. Their central idea is that many communities presume traditions that identify them as nations or groups, distinguish them from other groups and justify their existence and importance, but not all of these traditions are what they appear to be: many of them have been invented quite recently. In the Soviet Union – whose practices are not examined in Hobsbawm's book – such techniques were in use since 1917. The combination of powerful state propaganda, political terror, physical extermination of oppositionists and willful or obstructive individuals turned out to be successful in an ultimate result of reformulating official history and collective memory.

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<sup>5</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Historians, scientists, theoreticians and artists, or the “engineers of the human soul,” as Stalin referred to them, working under the control and for the totalitarian system, were openly fabricating convenient facts, misquoting sources, forging documents, retouching photographs, altering interpretations, according to actual political trends and currents. Creating history was turned into a state-run industry, using all means, media and methods.<sup>6</sup>

The state attempted to include the movie industry into its propagandistic machine. However, several filmmakers found ways of presenting a different approach to the forbidden past and the silenced present. By reflecting certain fragments of reality, movies played an important role in constructing collective memory in opposition to official Soviet historical narratives. They attempted to preserve facts and problems not used anywhere else (for instance re-discovering the history of the early 1950s in Wajda’s *Man of Marble*). In times when the Soviet system was imposing double standards and total control, watching movies could also be seen as learning the officially forbidden sense of national culture. In many cases, movies became tools opposing political and cultural domination of the tyrant.

The countries of the Soviet bloc gained full independence in the years 1989-1990. Through a natural and formal process (joining NATO and the EU), they became western democratic nations, causing a terminology debate. The west most often attaches the label of Eastern Europe to newly formed democracies. Most of the nations take the label of Central Europe, using as a boundary the reach and use of the Latin alphabet, which despite geography leaves Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in Central Europe but places like Belarus

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance: Montefiore, Simon Sebag. *Stalin – Court of the Red Tsar*. New York: Routledge 2005. Compare also with reality presented in the propaganda movie produced in the USSR: *USSR : Road to Happiness. The 60th Anniversary of the October Revolution 1917-1977 [Дорога к счастью]*. Dir. Valeriy Guryanov. Documentary Movies Studio in Leningrad & the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, 1977.

(geographically more to the west) in Eastern Europe. It is particularly hard to distinguish the boundaries especially since it depends on who is drawing them, a historian, a cultural theorist, politician or a linguist. “Most studies of Central Europe begin with the opening question ‘Where is Central Europe?’ while one book is even entitled *In Search of Central Europe*. The answer is clearly not self evident” (Hames, *The Cinema* 1). Either way, certain countries always belong to Central Europe: Czechoslovakia (and since 1992 Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary and Poland. Their fates are tightly intertwined for centuries, but it is not the purpose of this work to delve so deep into history. It is enough to remember that after WWII they became Soviet nations, on the east side of the Iron Curtain. Even after the fall of the USSR, these countries are seen by the international community as a sort of a block called the Visegrád Group<sup>7</sup> or the Visegrád Four, which joined them together through history, economy, geographical location and cultural ties.

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<sup>7</sup> named after the Hungarian town of Visegrád where the leaders of these countries met in 1991.

## 2. Totalitarian System and Cultural Life in the Soviet Bloc

### 2.1. Historical Background

The twentieth century, with the end of WWI in 1918, brought independence to the Czechs, Slovaks, Poles and Hungarians. Hungary, and the federated Czechoslovakia, came into being on the political map of Europe as emancipated ex-provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Poland was reborn on the lands, which from 1795 to 1918 belonged to her three occupants: Russia, Prussia and Austria.

During and before WWI Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland found themselves in opposite political camps. Hungary, embittered by the Trianon treaty of 1920, which caused it to lose access to the sea and left more than half of Hungarians and two thirds of Hungarian land outside of its borders, joined the coalition set up by Hitler's Germany. Czechoslovakia, after official permission from Great Britain and France signed in Munich in 1938, was given as loot to the third Reich: in March of 1939, Germany annexed the Czech territory and formed a fascist puppet government in Slovakia. WWII in Europe began with an attack on Poland: on September 1, 1939, Germany attacked from the west, on September 17,<sup>8</sup> USSR attacked from the east, and the German-Soviet "friendship border," set in October 1939, divided the territory of Poland in two.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the secret protocols of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact (The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact) signed on August 23, 1939.

The alliance of totalitarian countries (the Rome-Berlin Axis and the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact) led to the defeat of the democratic countries: by the end of 1940, continental Europe was divided into two spheres: fascist (dominated by the Nazi Germany) and Soviet. “Without the USA, the Allied Powers amounted to little more than a club for invalids [although] Churchill and Roosevelt signed the Atlantic Charter on 11 August [1941] [...] But the US Congress was still unwilling to enter the war” (Davies 1027-1028). German attack of the USSR in June of 1941 changed this division of power, since it moved the totalitarian USSR to the side of the democratic anti-Hitler coalition, which until Dec 8, 1941 (that is until the involvement of the US in WWII) was comprised only of Great Britain and the British Commonwealth and the underground armies of the occupied nations.

The participation of the USSR in the anti-Hitler coalition of the Allied Power had its price. For organizing the eastern front, which was to relieve the British and American troops in Western Europe and in Asia, Stalin demanded a division of wartime Europe and the establishment of a sphere of Soviet influence. These demands were partially accepted during the Teheran Conference of 1943<sup>9</sup> and officially signed in Yalta, in Feb 1945.<sup>10</sup> In Teheran Stalin wished and Churchill and Roosevelt gave him free rein in the USSR and allowed to set up puppet communist governments in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Baltic States, Romania, and other Eastern European countries. By signing the Yaltan Agreement, Churchill and FDR agreed to give Stalin part of the European continent east

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<sup>9</sup> The meeting between the heads of government of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union – Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin, respectively – held in Tehran, Iran between November 28 and December 1, 1943. (Davies 1036)

<sup>10</sup> The Yalta Conference: the meeting between F. D. Roosevelt, W. Churchill, and J. Stalin in Yalta, between February 4 and February 11, 1945. (Davies 1036)

of the Elbe River. In Yalta, it was established that Germany would be split into four occupied zones, citizens of the Soviet Union and of Yugoslavia were to be handed over to their respective countries, regardless of their consent. Nevertheless, most of all, Stalin obtained a significant sphere of influence as a buffer zone. In this process, the freedom of small nations was sacrificed for the sake of Western stability, which meant that Belarussians, Bulgarians, Czechs, Estonians, Hungarians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Rumanians, Slovaks, Southern Slavs, Ukrainians (c. 180 million) were turned into citizens of Soviet republics or satellite communist states dominated by the Soviet totalitarian regime.

In this way Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, separated from the rest of Europe by the Iron curtain found themselves first in the group of USSR satellite countries<sup>11</sup> and later in a Soviet-made military organization called the Warsaw Pact established in 1955 in Warsaw, Poland.

## 2.2. History, Resistance and Collective Memory

In practice, Soviet domination meant the dictatorship of a party organized according to the model the Bolshevik party, at first infiltrated by the Soviet apparatchiks and always at the full disposition and completely surrendered to the Soviet hegemony. This meant an array of processes and effects taken from the model standard in the USSR, such as the Soviet model of economy, based on a system of state ownership and central planning, where the only owner and sponsor of any industry or enterprise was the state. In the Soviet system, just like in all totalitarian systems, most of the areas of academic,

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<sup>11</sup> Formally, pro-Soviet parties took control of the government: Hungary – 1945, Poland – 1947, Czechoslovakia – 1948. Soviet army was already there since 1945.

public and cultural life were dominated by the standing ideology, and their development and even existence depended on whether they performed the function dictated by the pro-government propaganda.

This was especially evident in culture and education. Positions, from government officials to directors of academic centers and principals of schools, were filled with people according to the so-called “party key,” which meant members of the communist party or very rarely by people who had the full backing of the party. Censure was omnipotent, working preventively and repressively, reaching over every discipline of public life and any form of public communication. Official approval had to be attained not only for large circulation publication (press, books) and media meant for a mass audience (films or radio shows), but also for any practical publications (including obituaries) and public appearances.

Censorship was particularly severe in the first period of communist dictatorship, the Stalinist times. The smallest departure from the recommended line of action could cause anything from arrest, trial, torture, death sentence or a long-term prison sentence and at the very least an interdiction of working in one’s profession, often combined with an inability to be hired, which is very hurtful in a situation where the government monopolizes everything. The Stalinist period did not end in 1953 with the death of the dictator but lasted until 1956. This is when<sup>12</sup> Stalin’s successor Nikita Khrushchev, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, presented at a closed session of the Central Committee his famous Secret Speech denouncing the “cult of personality” that surrounded Stalin (although Khrushchev himself had no small part in cultivating it), and accusing

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<sup>12</sup> February 25, 1956. (Chruszczow 1)

Stalin of crimes committed during the Great Purges. The Soviet Communist party for years propagated that Stalin was a wise, peaceful and fair leader. Khrushchev's unexpected speech suddenly broke this policy and caused a phenomenon known as the thaw, which took a different course in each of the satellite countries. Its impact on the film industry will be discussed during a detailed analysis of each particular nation named in the title of this work.

Communist censorship reached over education, of course, especially in areas of humanities and social sciences. The new authority, regardless of the thaw or periods of relatively less strict vigilance, even in Gorbachev's time, wanted to raise subsequent generations on doctrines approved by the Politburo in Moscow. Literature curriculums were revised, removing works uncomfortable for the communists because they proposed or even mentioned an existence of social ideologies opposed to the ideas of Bolshevik totalitarianism. Names of authors who emigrated or printed texts for underground circulation outside of the state censorship were permanently crossed off. Józef Tejchma, an apparatchik and Minister of Culture in Poland between 1974 and 1978, recalls in his memoirs Moscow's intervention when the Polish Radio broadcast music played by Mstislav Rostropovich, considered to be one of the greatest cellists of the 20th century, who at the same time was blacklisted in the USSR as a traitor, a dissident and an immigrant (Tejchma, *Pożegnanie* 106).

History was re-written: the basic idea was to emphasize the sympathy and endorsement of the USSR from its beginning, as a state, which allowed for the ideas of freedom, equality and social justice. Authors of new school textbooks of the 19th and 20th century exaggerated and almost caricaturized the role of worker movements and the

communist party, demonized the divide between the working masses and the ruling bourgeoisie, formed new ideas such as “democracy,” to which they attached the adjective “people’s,” forming a dogma of a democracy which existed only in the Soviet system.

Rewriting textbooks was a hard task when it came to countries such as Poland. In its most recent history, Poland experienced 123 years of Russian occupation, a war to preserve its newly won independence from the Red Army in 1919-1920, the aggression of September 17, 1939 breaking the Soviet-Polish Non-Aggression Pact signed in 1932, the annexation of one third of Polish territories in the east by the USSR, displacing nearly 2 million people from the occupied territories to camps in subarctic Siberia or deserts in Central Asia (about 60% of the dislodged died in the first year), and the murders on Stalin’s orders of about 25,000 Polish military officers taken as POWs in 1939 known as the Katyń Massacre.<sup>13</sup>

The new history of Poland according to the Soviet formula dealt with troubling issues in simple ways, following the pattern of “immemorial Polish-Russian brotherhood.” The Polish partition was created by the czarist government, which treated Russians much worse than Poles, and was overthrown in 1917, due to the proper and just wrath of the nation. Lenin, the leader of the victorious Bolshevik revolution, issued a decree of independence declaring the law of self-determination of all nations subdued by the Czarist regime. By doing so, according to the Soviet interpretation, Poland regained its existence as a nation thanks to the Bolshevik party and her leader, and not because of decisions

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<sup>13</sup> In reality, 4410 Polish prisoners kept in a camp in Kozielsk died in Katyń in April 1940. The graves of about 10,000 Polish POWs from camps in Ostashkovo and Starobielsk were discovered in 1991 near the towns of Kharkov and Mednoye. The traces of the nearly 10,000 other prisoners have still not been found. (Davies 1004-1005; see also: Sanford, G. *Katyn and the Soviet massacre of 1940*; Cienicala, A., ed. *Katyn : a crime without punishment*.)

approved during the Paris Conference of 1919. The attack of the Red Army on the independent nations of Ukraine and Poland, aimed to convert them into Soviet republics (actually the war of 1919-1920, where Poland allied with Ukraine and Belarus fought against the aggression of Bolshevik Russia), was treated by the USSR propaganda machine as a defense against an attack launched by ungrateful, imperialistic and rabidly anti-Soviet Polish landlords and as an offering of help to the Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian workers and peasants exploited by the same Polish landlords who attacked “the First State of Workers and Peasants” (the landlords were only Polish, because only Poland succeeded in the fight for independence and Belarus and Ukraine were turned into Soviet republics). At the same time, the defeat of the Bolsheviks and the Red Army in Kiev, which was caused in early 1920 by the allied Polish and Ukrainian troops, was spun by USSR propaganda as an occupation of the Ukrainian capital by an occupying army of bourgeois Poland.<sup>14</sup>

The aggression of the USSR on Poland on September 17, 1939, as portrayed according to the Kremlin rules after WWII,<sup>15</sup> showed it as a safeguard against Hitler’s occupation of lands populated by Ukrainians and Belarusians. There was of course no mention of the border between Germany and the USSR, which was agreed upon in the German Soviet non-aggression pact (the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact) of September 23, 1939, where it was called the border of friendship or of the joint victory parade of the Soviet and German armies in Brest Litovsk in October 1939 (Davies 1001). In itself, “the Ribbentrop-

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<sup>14</sup> Using the same reasoning one can say that in 1944, the occupation forces of Great Britain and USA conquered and occupied France.

<sup>15</sup> “Nazi and Soviet propaganda worked in unison, and at full blast. [...] Pravda announced that ‘German-Soviet friendship is now established forever’” (Davies 1003). On October 31, 1939, the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov speaking about Poland and the September invasion said: “A short blow by the German army, and subsequently by the Red Army, was enough for nothing to be left of this ugly creature of the Treaty of Versailles”. (Moynihan 93, Tucker 612).

Molotov pact was to be justified on the grounds that it gave the Soviet Union time to construct its defences” (Davies 1000). No one discussed the nonsensical meaning of the statement in the light of the fact of a quick German military success in the first year of war with the USSR.

Polish history textbooks for high schools, even in editions from 1987 – nearly two years before complete independence – made it clear that the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was necessary for Soviet national security. The existence of the secret protocol with agreement of the partition of Poland between the Third Reich and the USSR – according to the official version – was suggested only by the unfriendly to the USSR Western historians, while the Soviet side firmly denied it. The quick defeat of Poland was linked to the appeasement politics of Britain and France and not Soviet aggression of September 17, 1939.<sup>16</sup>

Until 1990, the Katyń massacre was announced officially a crime committed by the army of Hitler’s Germany in 1942. In practice, though unofficially, the Katyń massacre was classed “as an event which could not be mentioned, even to blame the Nazis. Possession of *Lista Katyńska*, a roll call of the victims published abroad, was a criminal offence” (Davies 1005).<sup>17</sup>

In all countries of the Soviet bloc, the Stalinist times were treated similarly: after a short period of the thaw, the official propaganda (which meant practically every publication in every medium) was simply silent about any crimes committed before 1956. In “The Road to Happiness,” an hour-long Soviet documentary, produced to celebrate the 60th

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<sup>16</sup> See: Szaflik, Józef Ryszard. *Historia Polski 1939-1947*. [History of Poland 1939-1947] Warszawa : Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> See: Buszko, Józef. *Historia Polski, 1864-1948* [History of Poland (part 4:) 1864-1948]. Warszawa : PWN 1978. In this four volume academic textbook, written by professors of history from the Jagiellonian University, and published in 50,000 copies by the prestigious editorial house Polish Scientific Publishers PWN, the term “Katyń” is not even mentioned.

anniversary of the October revolution, which showed the history of the USSR and the success in each discipline of life<sup>18</sup>, Stalin (who ruled the country for 31 years) is practically nonexistent. His name is not mentioned once and his image is shown on the screen for less than 30 seconds, in the background on a tribune among other members of the government and military leaders watching the parade of victory after the end of WWII. If that is the way history looked through the interpretation of the hegemon, one can imagine how it looked in subordinate nations.

At the same time, however, artists were able to create a non-verbal system of communication, which enabled them to communicate with audiences despite the official bans and regulations. The best example of such communication is *Kanal*, one of Andrzej Wajda's early movies,<sup>19</sup> which presents the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. The movie touched upon a topic completely silenced and erased by officials during the previous twelve years. The case was extremely sensitive: the uprising was organized by the underground Polish Home Army and led by the Polish government in exile, to stress their share in Poland's liberation. Naturally, the pro-Soviet authorities, who were brought from the east with the Red Army units and gained power by rigging elections, tried to immediately erase the meaning, tragedy and even the existence of the uprising from official history. This policy was particularly resented in Warsaw, which became practically a mass grave for nearly 300,000 people, where almost every family mourned fallen insurgents, with over 700,000 civilians brutally evacuated and later sent to labor and extermination camps. In Warsaw 60% of the buildings were destroyed: 25% during

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<sup>18</sup> *USSR: Road to Happiness. The 60th Anniversary of the October Revolution 1917-1977 [Doroga k schastiyu]*. Dir. Valeriy Guryanov. Documentary Movies Studio in Leningrad & the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, 1977.

<sup>19</sup> *Kanal (Kanal)*. Directed by Andrzej Wajda. Poland, 1957.

the combat and 35% in systematic German actions during which “in his fury, Hitler ordered that no stone of the rebel city was to be left standing” (Davies 1041). However, the most inconvenient fact for the government concerned the issue known as, especially in Warsaw, the Soviet betrayal.

The plan was to co-ordinate attacks inside the city with the Soviet final push [but] the intelligence of the Polish Resistance was faulty. [...] Stalin did not recognize independent forces; and he had no intention of helping Poland to regain its freedom. [...] the Soviets suddenly halted on the very edge of the city. Foul treachery was afoot. Moscow Radio, which had called on Warsaw to rise, now denounced the leaders of the rising as ‘gang of criminals’. [...] The demolition proceeded for three months, whilst the Soviet army, with its committee of Polish puppets in tow, watched passively from across the river. They did not enter Warsaw’s empty silent, snowbound ruins until 17 January 1945. (Davies 1041-1042)

As the name of the underground Polish Home Army was censored and articles, novels and films about the 1944 Uprising were either banned or modified nearly until the late 1960s. *Kanal*, released in 1957, was an event just because of its topic. Wajda, who cared and fought for the credibility of his movies, wanted more:

Of course, Wajda could allude only metonymically to the Soviet betrayal: “I could not show that Soviet troops were waiting in the other side of the Vistula River while the Warszawa insurrection died on this side. It was enough that I led the protagonists of my film to the canal’s outlet, from which they could see the other side of the river. The audience knew what I was going to say – we

communicated without words, using symbolic, almost magical language.”

(Falkowska, *Andrzej Wajda* 48-49)

### 2.3. History and Confrontation on the Cultural Field

In a reality dominated by a totalitarian system, adherence to which was guarded by Soviet tanks and bayonets, concentration and effectiveness of dissenters (either through open opposition or just civil disobedience) depended on the occasional lack of attention of the guards and the alertness and severity of local forces. Usually,<sup>20</sup> the Kremlin did not rule directly in the dominated regions but according to the Roman dogma of “divide and rule,” mediated by national Communist parties where initially (until 1956) the apparatchiks were imported directly from the USSR; after 1956 they gave way to their local successors.

In the history of the USSR-dominated Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland the events of years 1956, 1968 and 1980/81 made an impact on cultural politics. The year 1956 is the beginning of the post-Stalin thaw: as mentioned earlier, in April Nikita Khrushchev for the first time openly (though at a secret meeting of the Politburo) discussed the “errors and distortions” of the Stalinist period. This speech, published in pieces, influenced the radicalization of mood in satellite nations on a large scale and in two extreme cases led to open battles. In June 1956, an uprising by workers of Poznan led to the eradication of a conservative ruling party propagating terror politics, arrests and

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<sup>20</sup> Usually, because of the three incidents of an armed intervention on an international scale. The Soviet army was used twice: tanks and infantry in 1951 quenched the workers uprising in East Berlin and other cities in East Germany; in 1956 the Soviets destroyed a significant part of Budapest during the Hungarian uprising. The third time the Soviet dictator hid behind a completely subordinate though in theory international organization: the Prague Spring of 1968 was ended by an advance and occupation of Czechoslovakia by the army of the Warsaw Pact, which included Soviet, Polish, Hungarian and Bulgarian divisions.

executions. In October 1956, the uprising against the regime reached Hungary. Both revolts brought different results: the Red Army stopped at the Polish border but entered Hungary and destroyed a significant part of Budapest killing at least 2500 civilians (Davies 1103). This had, of course, a great influence over the cultural politics led by the communist parties in both countries.

In Poland, despite the violent run of the workers' protest in June 1956 in Poznan<sup>21</sup> “when the Polish army fired on demonstrators carrying banners demanding ‘bread and Freedom’ and ‘Russians go home’” (Davis 1102), the new leaders of the Communist party in October 1956 managed to stop Khrushchev from sending the Soviet army to Poland. Right after October, censorship suddenly eased up and cultural life began to bloom. This cultural thaw lasted nearly two years: toward the end of 1957 the authorities shut down the new wave magazine “*Po Prostu*” [Plainly], which resulted in demonstrations easily handled by the police and caused the government of Gomulka, a Communist party leader who rose to power as a liberal, to quickly gain the name of “dictatorship of nimrods,” as tersely described by a leading intellectual of the times Stefan Kisielewski. Nonetheless, the thaw of 1956 brought many positive changes visible in the first films of the so-called Polish Film School, created by Andrzej Munk and Andrzej Wajda, critical to the system and touching on subjects previously overlooked. Despite later difficulties, this critical current in film was never banned or curtailed – twenty years later, it resulted in the *Man of Marble*, the strongest hit aimed at the system in any film produced in the satellite nations during an active program of national censorship.

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<sup>21</sup> According to official data, 53 people died (Davies 1102). According to unofficial data, more than 100 people died and several hundred were wounded.

In Hungary, after a brutal crushing of liberal movements by the Soviet army,<sup>22</sup> the new pro-Soviet government imposed harsh measures to prevent any future anti-system disturbances. Although the movie industry existed and was well established in Hungary, the censorship muzzled artistic and cultural life for years. Hence, even very interesting, unconventional and critical movies had pro-communist, though sometimes completely irrelevant, elements added. The best example is, for instance, Miklós Jancsó's *Elektra, My Love* of 1974.<sup>23</sup> In this intriguing, poetic and highly symbolic re-telling of the Greek myth in contemporary Hungary, a helicopter with red stars suddenly appears as *deus ex machina* in the final scene – its meaning, necessity or even symbolic function is practically none, beside the presence of the red Soviet star, which speaks for itself. Only very few movies produced in Hungary openly undermined the legitimacy and practice of the Soviet system; the range of their influence was reduced as they were distributed to narrow circles of viewers in film clubs and cinematheques.

The year 1968 brought with it two important events, which, although unequal in breadth and international importance, greatly influenced the cultural life of the nations in which they occurred. In March 1968, Warsaw students began to protest, demanding freedom of expression, freedom of academic research, cultural freedoms and reinstatement of student privileges to people who were removed from the University of Warsaw for dissension. The riots, which in a matter of days took over all Polish academic institutions, were brutally quelled by the police. This was accompanied by an anti-Semitic persecution organized by the Communist party. If any part of the Polish

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<sup>22</sup> Between 5 and 7 thousand people were killed and about 18,000 were wounded. Nearly 24 thousand people were imprisoned; about 200 thousand left the country.

<sup>23</sup> *Elektra, My Love (Szerelmem, Elektra)*. Directed by Miklós Jancsó, Hungary, 1974.

intelligentsia had any questions about the intentions of the regime, March 1968 made them very clear. It became obvious that only corrupt opportunists with no political consciousness could serve the system. In national conscience, March polarized very clearly and precisely the meanings of “us” and “them.”

In August of 1968, the armies of the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia suppressing the Prague Spring – a movement aimed at democratizing the system, working under the slogan of “socialism with a human face.” The short period of freedom of speech and artistic expression was interrupted by the communist hard-line government restored in Czechoslovakia after the invasion. Harsh measures used by censors practically erased any freedom of Czech and Slovak artistic expression for the next 20 years, and the country’s cultural policy was pushed back to the Stalinist era.

The third important period in the political and artistic life in the Soviet bloc, concerning freedom on the largest scale, occurred in Poland between August 31, 1980 and December 13, 1981, commencing with the victory of strikers from the Gdańsk Shipyard and abruptly ended with the martial law declared by the communist military junta. This fifteen-month period, practically censorless, contributed greatly in consolidating forces of democracy and strengthening anti-Soviet sentiments particularly through artistic expression. These tendencies were not even silenced by an incredibly brutal censorship during the years of the martial law. Greatly influential were the underground press, illegal publishers, and shows on pirate radio stations in Poland and international stations such as Free Europe or Voice of America. Polish cinema also participated in this breakthrough. Wajda’s *Man of Iron* was an international success, awarded with the Golden Palm of the Cannes film festival. Unusually popular was (and is to this day) the comedy *Teddy Bear*,

which pointed out the absurdity of the regime. Also highly influential was, paradoxically, printed information in the underground magazines and bulletins about films stopped by the censorship such as *Mother of Kings* and *Interrogation*.

Thus, the cinematic history of three nations subdued by the Soviet regime, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, participated in equal measures in destroying the system from the inside by going against the dogmas proposed by official propaganda, by mentioning parts of history sentenced for obscurity, stigmatizing collaborators and opportunist, and uncovering the lies, absurdity and mechanisms of the Soviet totalitarian system. Due to historical events mentioned above, each of these nations experienced the height of such activity at a different time. Overall, however, due to proximity and ease of communication, such diachrony had a perpetual effect during a longer span of time.

### 3. Response to Totalitarian Reality in Select Films

The situation in satellite states depended entirely on the situation in the hegemonic state i.e. the USSR. During the first several months after WWII, Stalin gave culture a break. In 1946 however, the central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party announced several resolutions calling for a new approach to culture and art. Actually, they were accusations similar to those used ten years earlier by Nazis condemning degenerate art of modernist masters. Charges against contemporary art and artists were drawn up by Andrei Zhdanov, a dogmatic ideologist, put in charge of Soviet Union policy by Stalin. Their intellectual level was devastating: outstanding poet Anna Akhmatova was called “a representative of filth in literature, mingling prayer with debauchery,” famous satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko was named “a lout” and “a depraved, rotten hooligan” (Płazewski 216).<sup>24</sup> This level of restriction imposed on writers, filmmakers, painters will be repeated later in Hungary, after 1956 and in Czechoslovakia after August 1968.

At the end of 1946, Zhdanov presented a resolution on films and the movie industry. A ruthless critique was aimed at Leonid Lukov’s *A Great Life, Part 2*<sup>25</sup>, for a drastic presentation of living conditions in the Donbas coalmine region, destroyed during the war. The harshest criticism was aimed however at movies and directors of a high

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<sup>24</sup> This and all other quotations from Polish sources are translated by Kazimierz Robak.

<sup>25</sup> *A Great Life, Part 2* [*Bolshaya zhizn (2-ya seriya)*]. Directed by Leonid Lukov, USSR, 1958.

caliber.<sup>26</sup> Pudovkin's *Admiral Nakhimov*<sup>27</sup> was condemned for presenting aristocratic parties instead of battle scenes. Dovzhenko's *Life in Bloom*<sup>28</sup> had to be remade because Michurin, a Russian scientific celebrity famous for his research in pomology, agricultural selection and genetics, was presented as a great scholar but also as a caustic and unpleasant individual.

As a result, the Soviet movie production decreased from forty to ten movies per year. In 1951, only six feature movies were produced in the USSR, a country with about 63,000 theaters, which imported only a few movies yearly from abroad. Describing this period, the Russian movie theoretician Pisarevski, observed that "only the movies propagating the cult of Stalin were favored. They also had to present the possible broadest range of problems, which led to overloading with digressions and superficial reactions to the detriment of artistic level. All feelings were vanishing from movies. The characters had only positive features presented in declarations and didactic slogans not in acts or deeds" (Płazewski 217). These restrictions also caused a departure from contemporary topics and a silencing of the greatest masters, such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dovzhenko.

The period of Stalin's "errors and distortions" had stopped the development of Soviet cinema for a long time. A time of liberalization, Khrushchev's Thaw, did not animate or accelerate artistic life substantially, as the period of easement was short.<sup>29</sup> In 1957, Khrushchev informed Soviet intellectuals that:

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<sup>26</sup> As Aleksandr Dovzhenko, Sergei M. Eisenstein, Grigori Kozintsev, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Leonid Trauberg.

<sup>27</sup> *Admiral Nakhimov*. Directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin, USSR, 1946.

<sup>28</sup> *Life in Bloom [Michurin]*. Directed by Aleksandr Dovzhenko, USSR, 1948.

<sup>29</sup> Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev was the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1953 and 1964. In the USSR, after Stalin's consolidation of power in the

they had indulged in ‘incorrect understanding of the essence of the party’s criticism of the Stalin personality cult,’ underestimated ‘the positive role of Stalin’ and should go back to ‘Socialism realism ... [with its] unlimited opportunities’ in developing ‘their talents to glorify’ [...] Khrushchev announces the establishment of ‘creative unions’ through which ‘the creative growth of every writer, artist, sculptor, etc.’ would be subject ‘to constant comradely concern.’ Here we find a clue how he intends to replace the restriction of police terror and to the meaning of his insistence on decentralization. He seems to plan a surveillance exerted not by an outside (police) body but recruited from the midst of the people, in this case the writers and artists themselves. This would be an institutionalization of, possibly an improvement upon, the mutual spying principle that permeates all totalitarian societies, and whose effectiveness Stalin had achieved by making information and denunciation of others the only test of loyalty. (Arendt 484-485)

These remarks, which were actually the main points of the new set of cultural directions, signaled that in fact the thaw in the USSR was superficial and shallow. It explains why after Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, hardliners from the newly reinstalled regime were so tough on artists: they followed the example of their superiors from Moscow.

The thaw of 1956, however, brought a softening of censorship and more freedom in cultural policy in all satellite states. The historical events presented above resulted in

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1920s, the title of the General Secretary was synonymous with leader of the state. After WWII, this pattern was implemented in satellite states regardless official structure of their governments. In some states (as Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland) the Communist party leader’s title was the First Secretary.

the loosening of the ideological harness and were the reason why in the post-Stalinist era only three national film industries were able to deal with the system. Czechoslovakia and Poland expressed open criticism whenever the ideological harness and censorship were loosened. In Hungary, where the Red Army brutally suppressed an anti-Soviet uprising in October 1956, the new pro-Soviet government imposed harsh restrictions and pushed back the cultural policy to the level of Stalinist regulations for many years. Nevertheless, the Hungarian movie industry had a long-lived tradition and was well developed, but filmmakers could express their anti-totalitarian opinions only in an oblique or highly allegorical ways.

In all satellite states there were two types of culture and popular perception: the official and the unofficial one. The former was amplified, enforced and taught by state propaganda, media and educational systems. The unofficial was firstly and generally based on the oral history taught and passed on in private, then it developed in Poland, particularly after 1976, into more advanced forms: underground press, printing houses and illegal classes of history, literature, and social science, nicknamed “flying universities,” for their frequent escapes from secret political police raids.

The film historian is faced with the formidable, if not impossible, task of integrating the dual aspects of Polish culture of this [the Soviet era] period: officially sanctioned culture and its unofficial counterpart.

The first component is the propaganda-filled official culture, promulgated by the Communist authorities that created a false image of reality. The second is the ‘secondary culture’ which existed through underground publishing houses and academic courses operating since 1976, and in the 1980s operated as a cultural

movement (in spectacles, exhibitions, lectures and evening poetry readings), and was helped, to a large extent, by the Church. In the 1980s, this unofficial culture was very much influenced by Central European ideas, especially those represented in the works of Milan Kundera, Adam Michnik, Václav Havel and György Konrad. This ideology was aptly characterized by the historian Timothy Garton Ash when he said that the problem of Polish unofficial culture was the fact that, while it desperately searched for self-identification, it tried to define itself through the romantic stereotypes of the national independence movement and the romantic masks of rebellion and conspiracy. Nevertheless, these were inadequate expressions of the social-political and existential situation of the Poles in the last decades of the 20th century. This element of inauthenticity became a residue with which the cinema entered the 1990s. (Jankun-Dopartowa 178)

This description of the conditions of Polish cultural life, accurately presents the mechanisms existing in all satellite states.

In the Soviet Union, the Brezhnev era (1964-1982)<sup>30</sup> brought further tightening of state control over all public domains, and thus also over artistic life. In the film industry it resulted in the low audience numbers in theaters. “Yesterday the Japanese movie *Empire of Passion* (Oshima)<sup>31</sup> filled the theater with the audience yearning for otherness, scandal, eroticism on the verge of pornography, – wrote in his diaries Józef Tejchma on March 8, 1979 – as opposed to the recent Soviet movie *A Declaration of Love*<sup>32</sup>, shown to empty seats” (Tejchma, *Pożegnanie* 47). The latter was a dull story in Socialist Realist style: the

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<sup>30</sup> Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev was the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1964 and 1982.

<sup>31</sup> *Empire of Passion* (*Ai no borei*). Directed by Nagisa Oshima. Japan, 1978.

<sup>32</sup> *A Declaration of Love* (*Obyasneniye v lyubvi*). Directed by Ilya Averbakh, USSR, 1977.

dialogues, controlled on many levels and filtered by many, were boring, artificial and bombastic declarations about love of the Motherland, and the necessity of serving community hours voluntarily every weekend.

All critical approaches to the Soviet reality, i.e. difficulties of everyday life, shortages, housing or drinking problems, etc., were scrupulously examined by censors and often corrected, cut off or banned. Denouncing and criticizing the Stalinist era, although officially condemned by the Communist party ideologists, had to be performed with utmost caution, as a sensitive topic. Officials tried to balance public demands and ideological requirements but their restrictions backfired sometimes in the most unexpected moments. Suddenly, in the late 1980s, one of the B-class, cheaply produced action movies became a national hit: theaters were overfilled and long lines were crowding in front of the box offices where tickets for the *Cold Summer of 1953*<sup>33</sup> were sold. The movie presented two political prisoners of small importance just released from the GULAG after Stalin's death, who openly spoke – although being extremely economical with words – about their situation. Both critics and censors were surprised to the utmost degree that the Soviet moviegoers reacted this way. *Cold Summer of 1953*, produced in 1987, was one of the first visible signs of permanent changes coming with *glasnost* (openness), introduced as a key term of *perestroika* (restructuring) by Mikhail Gorbachev<sup>34</sup> in 1985. Before this period, a thaw in the USSR was a long forgotten term.

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<sup>33</sup> *Cold Summer of 1953* [*Kholodnoe leto 53*]. Directed by Aleksandr Proshkin. USSR, 1987.

<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev was the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1985 and 1991.

This film was released four years before satellite states threw off the Soviet yoke, and six years before the USSR's disbanding.<sup>35</sup>

### 3.1. Hungary: 'reasonable' critique

In Hungary the movie industry was not nationalized until 1948, hence during the first years after WWII production was continued as before the war. After 1948 nationalization, exploitation of social problems became more frequent element in Hungarian movies, but without strict stylistic discipline in the early phase. Nevertheless, Socialist Realism brought a lowering of artistic standards. Movies had all the flaws of a mendacious art, escaping from real problems toward a fictional, electoral poster-like reality (Płazewski 230).

Until 1956, the paths of both Polish and Hungarian cinematography were parallel: several hits just after the war, then propagandistic schematism, and between 1955 and 1956 a dazzling rebirth. In Poland, this renaissance ignited the Polish Film School. In Hungary, after Soviet tanks crushed the national protests of 1956, the conservative government of János Kádár stopped the natural development of young and talented filmmakers for at least a decade.

In 1957, Hungary's role in the Eastern Bloc and the Warsaw Pact was reaffirmed but Kadar's economic reforms raised the standard of living and Hungary began to develop its own brand within the Soviet framework, nicknamed Goulash Communism for

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<sup>35</sup> “[...] the leaders of Russia, Byelorussia and Ukraine [...] at 2.17 on 8 December [1991] signed a declaration stating that ‘the USSR ceased to exist’. Next day they announced the creation of a Commonwealth of Independent States. The CIS was a convenient cover behind which the core of the strategic arsenal could be kept under a single command whilst most other Soviet institutions were quietly buried. By the end of the year, the peaceful passing of Europe's last empire was complete” (Davies 1127).

mixing an assortment of unlike ingredients, as in the national Hungarian dish. Kadar's government tried to improve the quality of life by introducing elements of free market into the Soviet model of centrally planned economy. This policy had to balance the harsh truth that there was no way to change the political system. With the passage of time, some of the draconian measures against free speech and culture imposed in 1956 were gradually lifted. The Hungarian Communist Party still maintained a high level of control and close observation of society and censorship muzzled artistic and cultural life for years. Only very few movies produced in Hungary undermined openly the legitimacy and practice of the Soviet system; the range of their influence was reduced to narrow circles of film societies. Hungarian directors and scriptwriters were subjected to censors' strict supervision. Any open criticism or thesis opposing the official ideology was nipped in the bud and brought repression down on artists. Even the most famous and internationally acclaimed István Szabó avoided inconvenient topics at home and focused on totalitarianism in the Nazi edition while directing movies for West German and Austrian producers because condemning Nazism was allowed and even highly appreciated by communist authorities.

[Kadar's] famous slogan, "Who is not against us, is with us," came to play a decisive role in the ongoing negotiation and re-negotiation of artistic freedom after the national uprising of 1956. As a result, a loose unspoken consensus ensued: filmmakers were not to discuss taboo subjects such as the Hungarian revolution, the role of the Soviet Union or the leading role of the Communist Party, and they would be left more or less to their conscience and talent. (Hames, *The Cinema* 256)

The executive authorities allowed only few exceptions to the principle of obedience and laudations. In the late 1960s, under Czech influence, a number of films criticized the system; their indirect criticism was limited, however, to the Stalinist regime of Mátyás Rákosi,<sup>36</sup> as in Péter Bacsó's comedy *The Witness*, produced in 1969 and presenting the dark Stalinist years of the early 50s.

Jozsef Pelikán, a levee watchman and most of all a common man, suddenly discovers that his school friend and a co-villager, Zoltán Dániel, is a minister in the Rákosi regime. Dániel lavishes on Pelikán a shower of favors, both unexpected and unwanted, as all Pelikán wants is a simple, quiet life, something actually not easy to attain:

Dániel: – How's the mood around here?

Pelikán: – Well...

Dániel: – I've read it's excellent.

Pelikán: – Where did you read that?

Dániel: – In the official mood report.

Pelikán: – Then it must be excellent. (*Witness*, minute 8)

Being courteous and pleasant to everyone Pelikán cannot refuse, hence he finds himself in the shoes of a director of the city swimming pool, a manager of the amusement park and a head of the Hungarian Orange Research Institute. Each position brings him a spectacular fall, as Pelikán is not able to accommodate the distorted totalitarian reality and uses his common sense, honesty and logic. The movie actually does not have a traditional plot: each “manager's” episode ends with Pelikán's incarceration and the film is rather a set of short cabaret-like scenes interwoven with prison interludes. It is not for

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36 Rákosi was the leader of Hungarian communists (General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party) between 1945 and 1956.

the first time that a simpleton comments on the world around, giving – thanks to his common sense and logic – the most accurate and well-aimed diagnosis. Among his literary ancestors Jozsef Pelikán has Cervantes' Sancho Pansa and Diderot's Jacques the Fatalist, both known for their criticism and sharp wit; this trope is also popular in Russian folk tales. Communist censors realized that these comments could be too harsh, and the officials from the Hungarian Ministry of Culture “allowed filming only with them monitoring it. They even forced the filmmakers to re-write some scenes and cut out others” (A Tanú, [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)).

In spite of vigilance and close surveillance, *The Witness* had the force of an earthquake. Innocent lines displayed in public exploded, as for instance Pelikán's statement to his subordinates from the amusement park: “If the people have anything to worry about they came to the right place to shit their pants at the Great Socialist Ghost Train Ride. Don't you agree comrades?” (*Witness*, minute 43). A silent but visible banner bearing the statement “A big hurrah for the Socialist Entertainment Industry's success!” (*Witness*, minute 44) was not only mocking but also most of all subversive. The dialogue in the Hungarian Orange Research Institute (which name was a bitter joke itself) during a state ceremony honoring the first Hungarian grown orange, was learned by heart even by those who did not see the movie:

Pelikán: – Comrade Virág, one of my sons has eaten the orange. What shall we do?

Comrade Virág: – Take it easy. Here you are.

Pelikán: – This is a lemon.

Comrade Virág: – An orange.

Pelikán: – No, it's a lemon.

Comrade Virág: – I'm not going to argue with you.

[*Few minutes later Pelikán hands a lemon to the Leader of the State*]

The Leader: – What's this?

Pelikán: – Orange.

The Leader: – Orange?

Pelikán: – The new Hungarian orange. A bit paler, a bit sourer, but it's our own.

(*Witness*, minute 51)<sup>37</sup>

At the evening, the first Hungarian grown orange was honored with an evening gala and ball. During this event, Pelikán is still in doubt:

Pelikán: – I must admit, I have some reservations about making such a big fuss about all this. After all, we've just deceived our own people.

Comrade Virág: – Really? Who did we deceive? Ourselves? We know the truth.

The researchers? They are quite content with their new medals. The general public? They don't even eat any oranges or lemons. Nevertheless, they are happy to celebrate with us. The imperialists, on the other hand.

We really outsmarted them this time. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes right now. We proclaimed: let there be Hungarian orange. And there it is.

We don't make empty promises, Pelikán. (*Witness*, minute 52-53)

Virág's lecture, although delivered and formally aimed at the early 50s was read by the viewers unmistakably: it was a sharp and brief description of the ideological paranoia around them. In reality, nobody believed in imperialistic predators as well as in promises made by the communist leadership. Owning the media and propaganda had –

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<sup>37</sup> English translation of Hungarian, Czech and Polish dialogues are quoted from movies' subtitles.

from the totalitarian owner's point of view – good and bad sides. Good was, of course, the ability to shape an image of reality and the mentality of viewers, students and readers. What was bad was that the saying “a lie repeated hundred times becomes truth” does not always apply. When in newspapers people could read that there was plenty of everything and just right behind their door they had to queue in lines for everything, newspapers and official propaganda were losing credibility. Here collective memory and direct experience of reality filled the gap of necessary information: being misinformed about present life, people shared memories from the past and experience from trips abroad. And they tried to keep mental balance by seeking refuge in humor.

“Several quotes from the movie, especially the ones ‘the international situation is intensifying’ and ‘Life is not a cream cake, Pelikán’ have become part of everyday speech in Hungary. Several scenes, including a visit by Pelikán (Ferenc Kállai) at Dániel’s (Zoltán Fábri) prison cell was cut by state-censorship” (A Tanú, [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)).<sup>38</sup> Small wonder that the movie was shelved for ten years: its Hungarian premiere took place in 1979, ten years after filming wrapped. In the meantime, several closed shows took place, hence “during those 10 years *The Witness* has become a legend which can explain its instant cult status after release” (A Tanú, [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)).

Harsh critical films came relatively late in Hungary, when restrictions were not so rigid and scrupulous and films officially dealt with social, not political issues. Through criticizing economic and social phenomena, generated by the ineffectuality of public offices and management, such movies criticized the entire system, but somehow escaped

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<sup>38</sup> Both quotations in this paragraph are from: “A Tanú. *The Witness*. Dir. by Péter Bacsó, Hungary, 1969.” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065067/>

the censor's attention. In the mid and late 1970s, Bela Tarr's films were an exceptional break with the Hungarian censorship rules. They were accepted probably for being classified between film etudes and experimental movies and the distribution spanned rather narrow or closed circles of film societies. Nevertheless, these closed circles gathered the intellectual cream of society so the impact of movies presented in their meetings was immense.

One of the most important and urgent issues that corrupted life in the entire Soviet system was the housing problem. Tarr presented it in his bitter drama *Family Nest*, produced in 1977 and a sharp accusation of the Soviet order. The movie was filmed on black and white tape with sharp contrasts. The plot is placed in Budapest and open locations are chosen carefully: one of the world's most beautiful and enchanting cities is presented as a repugnant, dirty, ugly and most of all hostile place. Constant close-ups and a predominance of scenes in cramped, overcrowded living quarters, create a stifling and oppressive mood and give the viewer a sensory illusion of intruding in the most intimate and private moments of the protagonists' life. Tarr connects objective and subjective narrations intertwining the plot with scenes, which seem taken from a documentary or psychoanalytic interview. The young couple's nightmare of living with two other families in a two-bedroom apartment, the disintegration of social bonds, and replacing family ties with a fight for survival and omnipresent hostility – all this does not bring an easy solution. In fact, it does not bring any solution at all. The couple is thrown out of their place and the movie ends with both husband and wife living separately in different parts of town with no hope for any change. Furthermore, the grueling jobs and the dingy bar were portrayed as the “only escape from dingy houses that the characters live in, and

alcoholism seems the inevitable reprieve from their miserable lives” (Heilman, [www.moviemartyr.com](http://www.moviemartyr.com)).

In the midst of the Kadar’s Goulash Communism, praised by the Communist propaganda as an economic miracle, the bitter words of Irén, the wife, spoken through tears of hopelessness and helplessness were paralyzing:

– Just a room would do for a start, I don’t care, I could go and live with someone...

Now I sleep here, I sleep there, I don’t know where I am. And that’s bad.

We had plenty of problems, we’ve been married for 7 years, but this, I think, this is final. [...] If there’d be just two of us, it’d be different. But it can’t go on like this... [...] Anything, anywhere, even at the far end of the world. [...] And not have a lot of people watching us what we do... Why do we close the door, why don’t we open it?

– You can’t be normal in the factory. Everyone there is nervy. They laugh all the day because so nobody sees what’s up, then they go home and cry. [...] I was on overtime, like a donkey. [...] No one ever helped with a single penny, nothing.

– And they have their own justice... them, the Council. [...] Not the demographic family policies or what, the things they explain all the time. (*Family Nest*, minute 72-87)

Everything around the couple of protagonists is filled with propagandistic joy and optimism. Radio broadcasts of optimistic songs, programs on TV show happy smiling faces, loudspeakers in the amusement park roar with propagandistic slogans: “Everyone

works together for the better of the society. Free health care. Free housing. Everything you need is provided.” The idea is beautiful, however it does not work.

Laci, the husband: – Only one thing missing, a flat... I’ll declare I love her and she loves me. I’m sure of that... Absolutely sure. And if she has someone, I don’t care. If I get the flat, and she comes back: welcome... And she will come back. (*Family Nest*, minute 95-97)

The movie ends with a long silent close-up of a crying Laci, then crying Irén, and then a joyful song broadcasted by the state radio: “If you want to, sleep with us. We’ll protect you as you dream your dreams! Dreams in your dreams will come true. Our house will be a fine little house. All our friends will come here. We’ll play all those old sweet songs, when our cottage is built at last” (*Family Nest*, minute 97-99).

In the reality presented by the movie there is no military, no violence inflicted by any government employees, none of the common images that are normally associated with anti-Communist films. Rather, *Family Nest* portrays a young working class family without a future or prospects. With their finances, they cannot buy or rent another flat. They must literally beg for one every month from the sole apartment owner and distributor: the governmental Council, which only results with an answer “maybe next year.” As the motto of the film says in its opening: “This is a true story. It didn’t happen to the people in the film, but it could have” (*Family Nest*, minute 0).

### 3.2. Czechoslovakia: Two Subversive Tendencies.

After WWII, the Barrandov film studios in Prague were the biggest and the only movie center in Europe untouched by the war. During the war, 82 feature movies were

produced there. In the postwar decade, the number of films created annually in Barrandov never dropped below 15, for instance 18 movies were made there in 1947, and 20 in 1955 (Płażewski 227, 747).

In 1948, the Czechoslovak movie industry was nationalized for the next 41 years. The rules and regulations of Socialist Realism demanded that every movie had to present all aspects of filmed reality in certain proportions: when there was a love scene between a young couple, the viewer should see a modern “socialistic” factory in the distance; a bad character had to have the “wrong” social background, usually a bourgeois background from the middle class; a good character should be a worker or peasant believing in the leading role of the Communist Party, and possibly a party member; every problem particularly concerning people from the lower classes should be positively solved by the party and its activists. Enforcement of these rules however was impeded because of the high number of produced films. As the only movie production center in the Soviet bloc, the well-equipped Barrandov practically uninterruptedly produced comedies, thrillers and detective films. Political epics with a propagandistic tinge were present in Barrandov, but much less visible than in other satellites. A move away from aesthetic dogmatism came with the thaw of 1956. Propagandistic works obeying the aesthetic dogmatism were forgotten, and the Barrandov Studios became a hotbed of young talented filmmakers who, within few years, created a unique artistic current, the Czechoslovak New Wave that culminated in the 1960s.

This open formula movement, connected mainly by aesthetic principles, was never a formal one and produced no manifesto or theoretical writings. Its members, Věra Chytilová, Miloš Forman, Elo Havetta, Jaromír Jireš, Jiří Krejčík, Jiří Menzel, Jan

Němec, Jaroslav Papoušek, Ivan Passer, Evald Schorm and many others, made their debuts in the early 1960s and produced several internationally acclaimed movies through the rest of the decade. “Older directors – Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos, František Vlácil, Karel Kachyňa, Vojtěch Jasný, Štefan Uher, Ladislav Helge – were also to make their contribution” (Hames, *The Cinema* 13). Creators of the Czechoslovak New Wave used dark and absurd humor. Their movies often explored topics previously unsaid and omitted by the communist propaganda as a young generation’s feeling of being lost or its lack of traditional morality. The movies from Czechoslovakia soon gained international fame: Kadar and Klos’s *The Shop on Main Street* and Menzel’s *Closely Watched Trains* received Academy Awards as the best foreign language films and were nominated for Golden Globes in 1967 and 1968 respectively. Forman’s *The Loves of a Blonde* and *The Firemen’s Ball* were nominated for Oscars in 1967 and 1969 respectively, and his *Black Peter* received several prestigious European awards. So did Chytilova’s *Something Different* and *Fruit of Paradise*, Jireš’s *The Cry* and *The Joke*, Němec’s *Diamonds of the Night* and *Martyrs of Love*, Passer’s *A Boring Afternoon*.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> A set of international awards earned by the Czechoslovak filmmakers in the 1960s is impressive:

Věra Chytilová (b. 1929): *Something Different (O něčem jiném)*, 1963 –Grand Prize of the Mannheim-Heidelberg International Filmfestival in 1963; *Fruit of Paradise (Ovoce stromů rajských jíme)*, 1969 – nominated for the Golden Palm award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1970;

Miloš Forman (b. 1932): *Black Peter (Černý Petr)*, 1964 –Golden Sail at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1964 and Jussi, the main film award in Finland in 1967; *The Loves of a Blonde (Lásky jedné plavovlásky)*, 1965 – Bodil Award in Denmark in 1967 and Nominated for the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival in 1965;

Vojtěch Jasný (b. 1925): *Desire (Touha)*, 1958 – award for the Best Selection and nominated for the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival in 1959; *When the Cat Comes (Až přijde kocour)* (1963) – Jury Special Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1963; *The Pipes (Dýmky)* 1966 – Nominated for the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival in 1966; *All My Compatriots (Všichni dobří rodáci)* 1968 –Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969;

Juraj Jakubisko (b. 1938): *Crucial Years (Kristove roky)*, 1967 – Josef von Sternberg Award at the Mannheim-Heidelberg International Filmfestival in 1967;

Despite the New Wave, directors remained mostly in the field of social not political criticism and even the most innocent movies could be perceived by censors as criticism of the system. The best examples are movies of Miloš Forman (*Black Peter*, *The Firemen's Ball*, *The Loves of a Blonde*), which satirically portrayed the flaws of human nature but actually criticized the political conditions in which these flaws could emerge.

Also during the relative artistic freedom in the years preceding the Prague Spring of 1968, state authorities could use sudden harsh measures. Jan Němec, for his politically

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Jaromír Jireš (1935-2001): *The Cry (Křik)* 1963 – nominated for the Golden Palm Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1964; *The Joke (Žert)*, 1969 – OCIC Award at the San Sebastián International Film Festival in 1969;

Karel Kachyňa (1924-2004): *The High Wall (Vysoká zeď)*, 1964 – Silver Sail at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1964; *The Hope (Naděje)*, 1964 – Best Director at the Mar del Plata Film Festival in 1964; *Long Live the Republic! (Ať žije Republika)* 1965 – Best Film at the Mar del Plata Film Festival in 1966;

Ján Kadár (1918-1979) and Elmar Klos (1910-1993): *The Shop on Main Street (Obchod na korze)*, 1965 – Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1966;

Jiří Krejčík (b. 1918): *On the Supernatural: first episode "Glorie" (O věcech nadpřirozených : Glorie)* 1958 – Special Mention at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1959

Jiří Menzel (b. 1938): *Closely Watched Trains (Ostře sledované vlaky)*, 1966 – Grand Prize of the Mannheim-Heidelberg International Filmfestival in 1966 and Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film in 1968;

Jan Němec (b. 1936): *Diamonds of the Night (Démanty noci)*, 1964 – Grand Prize of the Mannheim-Heidelberg International Filmfestival in 1964; *A Report on the Party and the Guests (O slavnosti a hostech)*, 1966 – Gran Premio at the Bergamo International Film Festival in 1966; *Martyrs of Love (Mučedníci lásky)*, 1966 – Special Mention at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1967;

Ivan Passer (b. 1933): *A Boring Afternoon (Fádní odpoledne)*, 1964 – Grand Prix at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1966;

Alfréd Radok (1914-1976): *Grandfather of Cars (Dědeček automobil)*, 1957 – Silver Seashell at the San Sebastián International Film Festival in 1957

Evald Schorm (1931-1988): *Courage for Every Day (Každý den odvahu)*, 1964 – Grand Prix of the Locarno International Film Festival in 1966; *Reflections (Zrcadlení)*, 1965 – Silver Dragon in the Best Documentary category at the Cracow Film Festival in 1966; *Return of the Prodigal Son (Návrat ztraceného syna)*, 1966 – Special Mention at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1967; *The Parson's End (Farářův konec)*, 1969 – nominated for the Golden Palm Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969;

Štefan Uher (1930-1993): *Organ (Organ)*, 1965 – Special Prize at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1965;

Otakar Vávra (b. 1911): *Romance for Bugle (Romance pro křídlovku)*, 1967 – Special Silver Prize at the Moscow International Film Festival in 1967; *Golden Queen (Zlatá reneta)* 1965 – Golden Seashell at the San Sebastián International Film Festival in 1965;

Jiří Weiss (1913-2004): *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness (Romeo, Julie a tma)*, 1960 – Golden Seashell at the San Sebastián International Film Festival in 1960; *Ninety Degrees in the Shade (Třicet jedna ve stínu)*, 1965 – UNICRIT Award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1965; *Murder Czech Style (Vražda po našem)*, 1967 – Silver Seashell at the San Sebastián International Film Festival in 1967. (From various sources)

committed black comedy *A Report on the Party and the Guests*<sup>40</sup> (1966), barely escaped jail: “when President Novotný saw the film, he apparently ‘climbed the walls’ (almost literally, according to Němec) and demanded the arrest of the director. [...] Němec escaped the threat of jail (although the film was banned until the Prague Spring of 1968)” (Hames, [www.ce-review.org](http://www.ce-review.org)). Says Němec:

Němec: Thanks to the awards, I was able to make two more films in Czechoslovakia, *The Party and the Guests* and *Martyrs of Love*<sup>41</sup>. After that, I was forbidden to work. [...]

[Košuličová:] When, exactly, did they forbid you to work? Was it in the beginning of the 1970s, just before you left the country?

Němec: No, it happened already in 1966. But I could still work in television, and I made musical films. I was actually one of the first who started the video-clip culture. In Czechoslovakia, we were among first in the world to do this. The definitive ban came after the Russian invasion in 1969. [...] In 1969, I was forbidden to do anything. (Košuličová, *Everything*, [www.ce-review.org](http://www.ce-review.org))

*A Report on the Party and the Guests* directed by Němec is an absurd comedy close to Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, in which dialogues are constructed from disconnected sentences. A group of friends intending to spend a day on a picnic in the forest is unexpectedly forced to attend a party at the lakeshore with a band of dubious characters who behave like secret police agents. Each of the guests is interrogated, while

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<sup>40</sup> *A Report on the Party and the Guests (O slavnosti a hostech)*. Directed by Jan Němec. Czechoslovakia, 1966.

<sup>41</sup> *Martyrs of Love (Mučedníci lásky)*. Directed by Jan Němec, Czechoslovakia, 1966.

the others are gathered in the open space and surrounded by a circle drawn in the gravel. Only one of them steps out, but after he is pursued and punished, others respect the invisible fence and keep an eye on each other. Then the main host appears, quiets his “boys” and approaches the guests in a conciliatory manner. However, discovering that one of the guests has disappeared, he initiates a manhunt with dogs and guns. “He did not want to be here at the party,” feebly repeats the wife of the missing guest but her voice is drowned out by barking and noise of the chase. Other guests obediently sit at the table, the candles are blown out for energy savings, the screen turns black and the barking is amplified.

An impassable wall created by the enchanted circle on the dirt, existing only in minds of surrounded ones may resemble the main problem of Buñuel’s *The Exterminating Angel*<sup>42</sup>, which is a mysterious blockade keeping guests of a certain party inside the house and disabling their will and potency just before the moment of leaving. Němec however denies any influences:

[...] people say I copied it from him, but I saw Buñuel’s film about 5 years after the completion of *A Report on the Party and the Guests*. I do not believe in direct influence, that someone reads a book that tells him how to make a film. But I think there are indirect influences that affect you even when you’re not aware of it. The mysterious and abstract characters of the film *A Report on the Party and the Guests* arose because of our fight against censorship. We would have had no chance of making the film if it had been more concrete. We used “over-

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<sup>42</sup> *The Exterminating Angel (El Ángel Exterminador)*. Directed by Luis Buñuel, Mexico, 1962.

stylization” to confuse the Communist censors so they would not immediately realize that it was aimed against them. (Košuličová, [www.kinoeye.org](http://www.kinoeye.org))

The authorities nevertheless found offense in a quite unexpected point. Says Němec:

[...] they found something I did not think of. In the film there is the character of the host, played by our good friend Ivan Vyskočil. He was not a film actor. He had his own performances in a theater with his own texts, so it was hard to make him read the text from the script. And one of the censors said that he looked like Lenin and that we were making fun of Lenin and Leninist principles. After that, I realized that there really is a likeness between them. The censors took used this idea as a pretext against the film. I was very surprised at the time. (Košuličová, “Everything”)

Němec of course denied any attacks on the government or desecration of Soviet icons, but the movie was attacked from two sides. As a collective representation of the Czechoslovakian intelligentsia, intimidated and obedient, it was coldly received by critics attending the pre-release screening of a film. The state authorities accused the director of casting amateurs representing the cream of opposition circles.

Apart from Ivan Vyskočil, who played the host, the cast was made up of non-actors, including, for example, Jiří Němec, a psychologist and later a Charter 77 spokesperson, composers such as Karel Mareš and Jan Klusák (who played Rudolf, the head of the police) and film director Evald Schorm, who was identified both personally and through his films as someone of moral integrity. The cast also included the novelist Josef Škvorecký and his wife Zdena Salivarová-Škvorecká, who were later to emigrate to Canada, and Dana Němcová,

who was also to become a Charter 77 spokesperson. It was a virtual photo album of “counter revolution,” says Němec – only Havel was missing. (Hames, *Enfant*)

The short period of freedom of speech and artistic expression came in January 1968, when a liberal wing of the Czechoslovak Communist party led by Alexander Dubček decided to introduce some reforms to create “Socialism with a human face.” This short-lived rule, ardently supported by intellectuals and artists, brought an abolishment of censorship and – in the film industry – the commencement of projects conceived previously but rejected by the former conservative authorities. Among the movies denouncing the Soviet imposed system was *The Joke* by Jaromíl Jireš<sup>43</sup>, a bitter comedy based on Milan Kundera’s novel, presenting experiences of a young man whose unfortunate joke – it was a postcard from the summer holidays sent to his girlfriend reading: “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!” (Kundera 34) – resulted in his expulsion from the university, a sentence at a penal colony and forced labor in a coal mine.

Jireš was lucky – he had finished his film before the Soviet invasion, and it was presented to viewers, although only for several weeks. Others, who started their productions later or were late with shooting or editing, were doomed to oblivion. “During the entire Prague Spring, finished movies were immediately presented in theaters. However there were many productions not edited before 1969: most of these were banned from public theaters and shelved” (Płażewski 424). Three of them were exposed to public view during international festivals after 1990. Jiří Menzel’s *Skylarks on a*

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<sup>43</sup> *The Joke (Žert)*. Directed by Jaromil Jireš, Czechoslovakia, 1969.

*String*<sup>44</sup> took up the subject of Stalinist times and a camp of forced labor where saxophone players were incarcerated because their instrument was considered too bourgeois, professors of philosophy were forced to carry typewriters to a scrap heap, and beautiful girls were reeducated for attempts to leave the country without permission from authorities. Juraj Jakubisko's tragic comedy *Birds, Orphans and Fools*<sup>45</sup> is an anarchic and surrealistic story on three adults acting with childish foolishness to overpass the pain of living in a war-torn country. Karel Kachyňa's *The Ear*<sup>46</sup> was a satire on the *nomenklatura*<sup>47</sup> members: its protagonists are always accompanied everywhere by the fear of being accused, exposed and rejected and hence they act cowardly, spinelessly and incompetently and are rewarded for this with a top positions in a government. "The aforementioned movies, proofs of a true artistic freedom and a spirit of good citizenship were not exceptional. They mirrored an enthusiastic burst of activity of nearly entire artistic milieu" (Płazewski 424-425).

Jan Němec, monitored and supervised in the field of feature movies, shifted to documentaries, as this genre did not need a large crew or sophisticated equipment. "Then [...] came *Strahovská demonstrace (The Strahov Demonstration)*,<sup>48</sup> an analysis of the

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<sup>44</sup> *Skylarks on a String (Skřivánci na niti)*. Directed by Jiří Menzel, Czechoslovakia, 1990. The movie was filmed in 1968-1969 but edited, finished and dated in 1990.

<sup>45</sup> *Birds, Orphans and Fools, (Vtáčkovia, siroty a blázni)*. Directed by Juraj Jakubisko. Czechoslovakia, 1969.

<sup>46</sup> *The Ear (Ucho)*. Directed by Karel Kachyňa. Czechoslovakia, 1970.

<sup>47</sup> *nomenklatura n.* 1. The system of patronage to senior positions in the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union and some other Communist states, controlled by committees at various levels of the Communist Party. 2. (used with a pl. verb). The lists of appointees matching the lists of patronage positions in such a system. 3. (used with a pl. verb). The appointees to these positions: "The ... *nomenklatura* are perceived as draft-immune" (Anthony Arnold). 4. The stratified, privileged class composed of these appointees. [Russian, from Latin *nōmenclātūra*, list of names] (The American Heritage Dictionary, third edition)

<sup>48</sup> *The Strahov Demonstration (Strahovská demonstrace)*. Directed by Jan Němec. Czechoslovakia, 1990.

student demonstrations of 1967 and *Oratorium pro Prahu (Oratorio for Prague)*,<sup>49</sup> a record of the Warsaw Pact invasion. Both were banned” (Hames, *Enfant*). *Oratorio for Prague* was a 26-minute documentary on the Soviet invasion in Prague. It was:

shot in a style so poetic and gentle that the humanism and generosity of spirit, which seemed about to radiate from Czechoslovakia into the world, is there intact. [...] ‘The movie was begun as a documentary about the liberalization of Czechoslovakia and then simply continued when the Russian tanks moved in,’ wrote Renata Adler in *The New York Times*. When broadcast by television, was seen by more than 600 million people, and became the first information that the Soviet Army had not been ‘invited’ in.<sup>50</sup>

The Warsaw Pact invasion, orchestrated by the USSR, invaded Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968, in the name of “fraternal assistance” to crush the Prague Spring. Never again would the Czechs and Slovaks view the Soviets as anything but an occupying force. Jiří Pelikán, the Czech Radio Director General, said: “‘Comrade aggressor’ that’s what the people called the former allies. What they most despised was the stab in the back above all by the East Germans. The formerly good relations have been irreparably damaged. The masters in Moscow and their satraps in Warsaw and East Berlin were concerned not in socialism but the preservation of their own power, their imperial power” (*Prague Spring*, minute 25). The opinion presented by the scholar Eduard Goldstücker, a Germanist and a member of the Czech Writers’ Union, was even more bitter:

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<sup>49</sup> *Oratorio for Prague (Oratorium pro Prahu)*. Directed by Jan Němec. Czechoslovakia, 1968.

<sup>50</sup> From the video cassette cover, *Oratorio for Prague (Oratorium pro Prahu)*. Directed by Jan Němec. Czechoslovakia, 1968, produced by Facets Multi-Media, Chicago, IL and released on November 18, 1998.

I must admit that the invasion of August 68 was more traumatic than Hitler's invasion in March 1939, which I also experienced. Hitler after all was an enemy and from an enemy you don't expect anything good. But the ones who came this time had been trying for years to convince us that they were our allies, our brothers, and the guarantors of our independence – and they came to suppress us and destroy our lives. (*Prague Spring*, minute 26)

The new harness imposed on Czechoslovak cultural life was comparable to restrictions from the Stalin era. Gradually all the reformers were removed from office. By the end of 1968, the old socialist system was back in place.

After the suppression of the reform Communism of 1968, the collaborationist government set about the elimination of a culture. In the cinema well over a hundred feature films were banned for the next twenty years and four of which were deemed especially subversive were banned 'forever.' [...] *The Party and the Guests*, deemed the most controversial of all. (Hames, *The Cinema* 140)

The chairman of cinematography Alois Poledňák was arrested and the production of ambitious screenplays was halted (Płazewski 426). Forman, Jasný, Kadár, Passer, Radok, Weiss left Czechoslovakia. Chytilová, Menzel and others who stayed, were practically gagged. Němec was allowed to cross the border in 1974, which he did and emigrated. Over the next two decades, the Soviet puppet government tried to strangle Czech and Slovak culture and turn back the clock to the 1950s. Vilém Prečan, a modern Czech historian, says: "The intellectual community was atomized, split by the new situation, because we lost not only in political sense. We lost the possibility to do our profession. We lost the possibility to publish" (*The Artists' Revolution*, minute 14).

A good example of the Czechoslovak post-August '68 productions is Vavra's *Days of Betrayal*<sup>51</sup> produced in 1973. The movie is imbued with a propagandistic content and treats the partition of Czechoslovakia in 1938 in Munich, where the prime ministers of Britain and France (Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier, respectively) agreed to hand over Czech territories to Hitler and to create a puppet pro-Nazi Slovak Republic. Jan Wiener, a Czech historian, says:

It was the Munich Agreement, in September 1938 that meant an emasculation of the nation. Here England and France sold us down the river to Hitler, though Czechoslovakia was firmly bound to both France and Britain allied in the Little Entente. They made an agreement about us without us. In 1946, forty percent of the nation voted communists in perfectly free elections. And it was a result of the Munich agreement because people didn't want to be bound to the British and the French who had betrayed us so much, and they thought it was more realistic to be bound to the Soviet Union. Hopes for equality under socialism were soon destroyed by the violent dictatorship of Stalin. (*The Artists' Revolution*, minute 11)

The *Days of Betrayal* was strictly connected to Czechoslovakia's current situation: Czechs and Slovaks were still in shock after the Soviet invasion of 1968 and the crushing of their fragile democracy. This monumental production (227 minutes) had to make Czechoslovak society aware of who was their "real" friend and expose their "real" enemy. "It is peace for our time" said Chamberlain in London on his return from Munich waving the paper with Hitler's signature. The message to Czechs and Slovaks was clear: Western democracies supporting the Prague Spring could not be true friends,

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<sup>51</sup> *Days of Betrayal (Dny zrady)*. Directed by Otakar Vavra. Czechoslovakia, 1973.

as only thirty years earlier, despite treaties, they sold Czechoslovakia for their own peaceful life.

The question “who was our true friend?” did not need a direct answer at all: it was enough to read any newspaper dripping with propagandistic platitudes or just walk the street, where decorations nicknamed “Soviet altars” with red flags and portraits of “beloved leaders” were placed every five hundred yards. Jan Wiener, a historian, says: “Policy of the communists between 1968 and 1989 could be described: a lie repeated a hundred times becomes the truth” (*The Artists’ Revolution*, minute 14). Václav Havel said about this period later: “We lived in a state of timelessness. There was no progress only stillness. We waited, hoping for history to resume. Then, on 1977, came Charter of 77” (*The Artists’ Revolution*, minute 15).

“Charter 77” was a manifesto signed in January 1977 by several hundred Czechs and Slovaks of different professions, religions and ideologies, which generated an informal civic movement named after the document. “Charter 77” criticized the government of Czechoslovakia for breaking human rights guaranteed by United Nations covenants and the Helsinki Accords of 1975, signed by the USSR and all satellite states. This movement commenced the new era in the anti-Soviet opposition, which led – after twelve years – to the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and full democracy. It probably wouldn’t have been possible to receive support from nearly the entire nation in 1968 and 1989 if not for the images shown before and during the Prague Spring and the messages sent through them, expressing the real, totalitarian face of the Soviet imposed system. For decades, despite the omnipresent propaganda, collective memory carried such images to release and record them turn when came the time of change.

### 3.3. Poland: Open Attack at the Hegemony

#### 3.3.1. Historical Bbackground

During WWII, all film studios in Poland were destroyed and many filmmakers and actors were killed. In 1938, the last entire prewar year, 21 feature films were produced in Polish studios. Two years after the war's end, in 1947, only one (Płażewski 747). The necessity of having Polish movies presenting war trauma was extremely strong. Nazis placed the Poles third among candidates for physical extermination, after Jews and Gypsies: 16 percent (the absolute number of deaths was 5.6 million) of Polish citizens perished during the war. Poland was partitioned between two totalitarian powers: the Third Reich and the USSR in 1939. Both occupations brought arrests in street round-ups, concentration camps, and resistance against occupants.

After 1945, the Nazi occupying forces were replaced by the Soviet occupying forces and a new post-Yalta order left Poland behind the Iron Curtain in the Soviet zone. Any examination, complaints or grievances against the new aggressor were out of the question. Only the Nazis inflicted losses and only the Nazis could be presented and condemned – in the press, literature and movies. On a larger scale, an army of historians tried-and-tested by the new regime began rewriting historical textbooks and establishing officially binding interpretations of history.

Polish post-war movies were worlds apart from the pre-war productions. Light entertainment was replaced by realist movies analyzing responsibility for historical and public events. In the post-war reality fiction was not needed: to attract viewers it was enough to present the war and occupation as viewed through Polish eyes. The movies

produced between 1947 and 1949 presented concentration camps<sup>52</sup>, resistance<sup>53</sup>, the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising.<sup>54</sup> There were also comedies, for instance about a young couple with housing problems in Warsaw, destroyed in three-fourths.<sup>55</sup> In 1949, the communist authorities imposed on artistic circles a doctrine of the Socialist Realism forged and enforced in the Soviet Union since the mid 1930s. Under an executive order, artists were accustomed to presenting the “real and historically correct” reality, i.e. the official version of history.

Vice-minister of culture, Włodzimierz Sokorski claimed, in the characteristically rhetorical and inflated style of the Party spokesman: ‘The material power of our [the Party’s] idea is its objective truth. The historical truth of our world determines the truth of art. The deeply real truthfulness of our way of living, of our battles and of our victories, requires deeply realistic modes of representation. Thus, as a phenomenon, demands truthful reproduction. Indeed every deformation whether intended or not, perpetuates an ideological deceit. Therefore art in the Socialist era can only be shaped by the methods of Socialist Realism.’<sup>56</sup> (Crowley 72)

In practice, this policy meant plots glorifying Marxist-Leninist philosophy, presenting everyday life saturated with historical processes in which the Communist party and its activists (always absolutely positive) play a key role, presenting the superior role of the Soviet Communist Party, and promoting the providential role of Stalin as a worshiped

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<sup>52</sup> *The Last Stop (Ostatni etap)*. Directed by Wanda Jakubowska, Poland 1948.

<sup>53</sup> *Forbidden Songs (Zakazane piosenki)*. Directed by Leonard Buczkowski, Poland, 1947.

<sup>54</sup> *Border Street (Ulica Graniczna)*. Directed by Aleksander Ford, Poland, 1948.

<sup>55</sup> *The Treasure (Skarb)*. Directed by Leonard Buczkowski, Poland, 1949.

<sup>56</sup> Crowley quotes Sokorski’s words from: Sokorski, Włodzimierz. “Kryteria realizmu socjalistycznego” [Criteria of Socialist Realism]. *Przegląd Artystyczny*. No. 1-2, 1950, p. 6.

leader and Lenin as a deified hero of the recent past. In form, it meant monumentality, half-heartedness, schematism and simplified realism.

A slackening of the harness came – in Poland as in Czechoslovakia and Hungary – with the post-Stalinist thaw. Its first signs could be felt in 1955, before Khrushchev's Secret Speech, when the overwhelming majority of artistic circles rejected Socialist Realism and the Communist authorities waved it aside.

From a historical perspective, the development of the anti-Communist opposition in Poland followed a known pattern: the authorities relatively easily broke up isolated protests, and opposition's victory came not before workers united their efforts with the intelligentsia. The process of this unification took more than 30 years.

The first mass demonstrations in Poland took place in June 1956 in Poznan. Authorities sent armed police units and tanks, and brutally suppressed protesting workers.<sup>57</sup> In October of the same year, however, communist liberals replaced the pro-Stalinist conservative government. Their leader, Władysław Gomułka managed to convince Khrushchev to stop the Soviet army at the Polish borders.<sup>58</sup> The Polish thaw however, did not last long: within two years, Gomułka and his group made Poles aware that liberalism was only a momentary and passing tactics.

The next protest occurred in March 1968, when Polish students and a major group of intellectuals demanded freedom of speech, discussion and assembly. Despite their appeal for support, the workers did not respond: as important centers of both academic life and big

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<sup>57</sup> "The repression was swift and ruthless as Pole oppressed Pole. There were about fifty fatalities" (Service 313).

<sup>58</sup> On October 23, 1956, encouraged by the Polish success in negotiations with Khrushchev, the Hungarians started their protest with a powerful rally supporting Poland and demanding freedom for Hungary. Spectacular destruction of the 75-foot high Stalin's monument opened their heroic struggle, ended with the invasion of Soviet tanks, thousands casualties, and bombing of Budapest, what was already presented in this paper.

industry, cities saw students demonstrate alone and the police pacify them quickly and, as usual, brutally.

In December 1970, the striking shipyard workers took to the streets in Gdańsk and in Gdynia. This time, students were on the passive side, and legend has it that in one of the dorms in Gdańsk a huge banner was unfurled with the slogan reading: “As you did in March, we do in December.” Street strikes were an easy target: the authorities released provocateurs into the crowd, who initiated demolishing cars, smashing windowpanes and looting the shops to create an excuse for using tanks and machine guns. The official propaganda claimed six casualties<sup>59</sup>, however hundreds of demonstrators were killed (Service 366) with over 1000 wounded. This massacre shocked even the Party elite, and the Politburo decided that Gomułka, along with his accomplices, had to step down and elected party liberal Edward Gierek the new leader of Polish Communist Party.<sup>60</sup>

In 1975, the USSR and all satellite states, Poland included, signed the Helsinki Final Act, a document sanctioning *détente* in Europe, but at the same time a charter of freedom for nations and individuals. Its Principle 7 (“Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief”) gave civil rights movements a platform on which they could base their appeals and which the Communist leaders themselves had accepted.<sup>61</sup> In Poland, loans granted by Western

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<sup>59</sup> *Grudzień 1970* [December 1970]. Web page authorized by the “Solidarność” Gdańsk. <http://www2.solidarnosc.gda.pl/grudzien70.htm>

<sup>60</sup> His formal title was the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers’ Party; the real range of his power in the monopartial totalitarian system was the leader of the state.

<sup>61</sup> The participating States will respect the equal rights of peoples and their right to selfdetermination, acting at all times in conformity with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and with the relevant norms of international law, including those relating to territorial integrity of States.

banks helped Gierek's government briefly reanimate the dying economy, which was based on the unwieldy Soviet economic system of central planning. The state was still, however, an owner of nearly all means of production, hence a main employer. Harsh reality of repayment schedule caused an increase of prices without increase of salaries.

In 1976, workers of big industrial plants in Ursus and Radom went on strike against new prices. Authorities reacted with particular violence: hundreds of workers were incarcerated, brutally beaten during interrogations, tried for hooliganism and criminal offences, and verdicts were often between ten and twenty years of imprisonment. This brutality stirred up a general opposition. Polish intellectuals set up numerous anti-government organizations – the name of one of the most important spoke for itself: The Workers' Defense Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR*) – and began cooperation with oppositionists from the working class. A shared viewpoint was worked out: future strikers would not take to the streets to avoid provocations and casualties, protesting only in sit-ins and with non-violent methods. Intellectuals established a net of underground press and publications and developed close cooperation with media in the democratic world. Since then, any violation of the Helsinki Final Act was exposed and publicized often in headlines of Western newspapers. Opposing feelings were heightened after 1978, when Karol Wojtyła, the Polish Cardinal from Cracow, was elected the Pope.

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By virtue of the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, all peoples always have the right, in full freedom, to determine, when and as they wish, their internal and external political status, without external interference, and to pursue as they wish their political, economic, social and cultural development. The participating States reaffirm the universal significance of respect for and effective exercise of equal rights and self-determination of peoples for the development of friendly relations among themselves as among all States; they also recall the importance of the elimination of any form of violation of this principle. (*Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Final Act. Helsinki 1975.* <[http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1975/08/4044\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1975/08/4044_en.pdf)>)

On August 14, 1980, after a subsequent price increase, a sit-in strike commenced in the Gdańsk Shipyard. By the ninth day the Inter-Factory Strike Committee, supported and advised by the leading Polish intellectuals, spoke for nearly half a million workers in 370 factories in every industry and region of Poland. Finally, workers from over 700 factories joined the strike. The main demand was government approval for setting up free trade unions. “Free” in this case meant “free from any influence and dependence on the communist party.”

An army of Western journalists, who surprisingly were allowed into Poland, gave a detailed account of the strike’s course. The word *solidarność* (solidarity), as the name of the future free trade union made an international career as did Lech Wałęsa, a shipyard electrician and the leader of the Strike Committee. Communist authorities in Poland realized that their consent to the Solidarity Trade Union would mean breaking the Party monopoly on public life and organizations and would receive a hostile response from the USSR as well as a possible invasion. They did not decide, however, to use force against the strikers. On August 31 1980, the vice-Prime Minister signed an agreement with the Strike Committee. The workers won the free trade union<sup>62</sup> and the right to strike, relaxed press censorship, pay raises, and a five-day workweek. After signing the accords, the communist side instantly wanted to break them, as Solidarity’s very existence challenged the supremacy of the communist party. In four months, however, Solidarity membership grew to ten million (Poland’s population was 38 million then), hence preparations for the abolition of the Solidarity Trade Union took the Communists over a year.

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<sup>62</sup> Full name: Independent Self-governing Trade Union “Solidarity” (*Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy “Solidarność”*).

On December 13, 1981, a group of hard line army officers formed the military government and imposed martial law in Poland. Solidarity was banned and opposition leaders, including Lech Wałęsa, were detained overnight. Although the curfew, sealing of the national borders, disconnection of the telephone lines, closing the airports and restriction of road access to main cities were gradually removed within three years, repressions lasted for seven years. They were supposed to create and the impression of stability, but below the surface the foundation of the system was rotten. In summer 1988, it collapsed. As price increased, food lines and rationing paralyzed the country. In the meantime, the new Soviet leader Gorbachev, promoting his new model of governing, flatly turned down a request of Polish communist for “brotherly aid,” which in party slang meant a military intervention of the Soviet Army. A new wave of strikes in Poland was beyond the government’s ability to control. The regime offered to re-legalize the Solidarity Trade Union if Lech Wałęsa would stop the strikes. Within three days, the country was back at work. Solidarity had proven itself a capable and responsible force.

In February 1989, Solidarity, the Government, the Party and the Catholic Church began round table talks on Poland’s future. After two months of negotiations, they agreed: on free unions, free press, and parliamentary elections. On June 4, 1989, Poland voted in its first democratic elections in 50 years. Solidarity has defeated the communist party by a margin of 10 to 1. Communism ended in Poland, the first liberated state among Soviet satellites.<sup>63</sup> On November 9, 1989, the Iron Curtain’s embodiment, the Berlin Wall,

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<sup>63</sup> Free elections in Poland were held on June 4, 1989. Democratic system was restored in: Hungary – October 1989, East Germany – November 1989, Czechoslovakia – December 1989, Romania – December 1989.

tumbled down. Soon communism ended in other states incorporated into the USSR as Soviet republics.<sup>64</sup>

At the Malta Summit in December 1989, the presidents of the USA and the USSR (George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev) announced that the Cold War had ended. In December 1991, the Soviet Union disbanded itself in a peaceful way.

The victory in the Cold War and credit for dismounting the Soviet totalitarianism cannot be solely credited to the unification of the Polish opposition, the numerical strength of the Solidarity Trade Union or the Polish Round Table Agreement. These causes were important but would be insufficient without a favorable situation in international politics. The demise of the Soviet system and break-up of the USSR was primarily caused by the internal and external situation of the Soviet Union and a new lineup in world political relations. In the international arena, changes started in 1978 when Cardinal Wojtyła was elected the Pope. It gave tremendous moral support to Polish oppositionists, and was augmented during the triumphant first visit of John Paul II to Poland in 1979. In the same year: Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and was immediately dubbed by the Kremlin “the Iron Lady” for her strong anti-communist attitudes; the hard-line Soviet leader Brezhnev authorized the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which met with strong opposition from the West; US President Jimmy Carter placed a trade embargo against the USSR on grain and weapon and endorsed the 1980 boycott of the Moscow Summer Olympic Games.

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<sup>64</sup> Estonia declared sovereignty on Nov. 16, 1990, Lithuania – March 13, 1991, Latvia – May 4, 1991. Ukraine proclaimed the Act of Independence on August 24, 1991, Belarus – August 25, 1991.

In the early 1980s, international tension rose. Ronald Reagan opened his first term as the President of the United States in January 1981. In December 1981, martial law in Poland was declared. In 1983, Reagan openly described the Cold War as “the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil” and denounced the Soviet Union actions as “the aggressive impulses of an evil empire.”<sup>65</sup>

These three personalities [John Paul II, Reagan and Thatcher] breathed a new spirit into East-West relations. All three opposed communism on moral principle; all three were hugely popular in Eastern Europe – more so than in the West; all three looked unhappy with the accommodations of the previous decades. Reagan and Thatcher honed the twin-track policy of NATO, which held out the palm of peace whilst strengthening its military shield. (Davies 1116)

The anti-communist front in the West, although not an official coalition, continuously increased aid to dissident circles in Poland. Technological devices as copiers, printing presses, radio transmitters, money funds, food supplies, logistical and propagandistic support were streamed to Poland mostly from the USA, Great Britain, France and Germany. The Reagan Doctrine<sup>66</sup> caused the USA gradually to drop its *détente* policy.<sup>67</sup> For the first time, America took a firm course towards the Soviet superpower, commencing among other things

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<sup>65</sup> “President Reagan’s Speech before the National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, FL, March 8, 1983.” <<http://www.presidentreagan.info/speeches/empire.cfm>>

<sup>66</sup> “Reagan asserted America’s right to intervene anywhere in the world to support local groups who were fighting against Marxist governments. The assumption underlying this assertion, which later become known as the Reagan Doctrine, was that Soviet-influenced governments in Asia, Africa, and Latin America needed to be eliminated if the United States was to win the Cold War” (Goldfield 969).

<sup>67</sup> “*Détente* means an easing of tensions, not friendship or alliance. It facilitated travel between the United States and China. It allowed U.S. farmers to sell wheat to the Soviets. More broadly, *détente* implied that the United States and China recognized mutual interests in Asia and that the United States acknowledged the Soviet Union as an equal in world affairs” (Goldfield 940) .

– or at last announcing - development of a modern and technologically advanced defense systems<sup>68</sup>, and drove the Evil Empire to economic collapse.

The financial inefficiency, Western advantage, and embargo on food, modern equipment, and advanced technologies<sup>69</sup> put the Soviet economy on the brink of ruin. Mikhail Gorbachev, who became the Soviet leader in 1985,<sup>70</sup> comprehended that his state has no chance for any development in the future without an influx of Western capital and technology. At the same time, he understood that the West would not support a totalitarian state any longer. The first harbinger of the re-labeling from a totalitarian to a democratic state was introduced by Gorbachev in 1985, as a new policy of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness, which allowed discussions and criticism on any topic and “freedom after speech,” as it was immediately mocked in the USSR). The arms control negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union commenced and brought unexpectedly positive outcomes.<sup>71</sup> The final act was the disbanding of the USSR in December 1991 and changing it into a Commonwealth of Independent States commanded by Russia, this time under the aegis of democracy.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> “In 1983 President Reagan’s announcement of the multi-billion-dollar Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), commonly known as ‘Star Wars’ – a space-based anti-ICBM defence system – openly challenged Moscow to a race that simply could not be run” (Davies 1111).

<sup>69</sup> “The West was reluctant to sell advanced technology of military value. The American COCOM list grew to contain many thousands of forbidden commercial items. The East, for its part, believed strongly in economic self-sufficiency, preferring backwardness to dependence on capitalist imports” (Davies 1112).

<sup>70</sup> Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev was the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1985 and 1991 (see footnote #33).

<sup>71</sup> “Suddenly in the middle of the talks at Reykjavík [December 1987], Gorbachev struck without warning. He proposed a sensational 50 per cent cut in all nuclear weapons. [...] This General Secretary seemed intent on stopping the Cold War in its tracks” (Davies 1117). Actually, it resulted in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union signed in Washington on December 8, 1987.

<sup>72</sup> see footnote #34

### 3.3.2. The Role of Art

Art played a crucial role in the battle for shaping public consciousness. As usual, the most important was film, as movies reached every corner of the state and touched all social and generational levels. It was particularly important in the case of young people who did not know any other system but the Soviet, and whose natural sharp criticism required arguments and systematized background. To them, totalitarian propaganda slogans and absurdities had to be exposed and explained, in order to avoid the situation when abnormality replaces normality with full ignorant acceptance from those who do not realize that other solutions are possible.

One-party dictatorships controlled by communist party, however, despite liberal appearances, did not change their propaganda and ideology course. Memoirs by Józef Tejchma give an important clue in this matter. Tejchma, already quoted in this text, was a member of the Polish communist government. In the party circles, he had the reputation of being a liberal, particularly after he authorized releasing Wajda's film *Man of Marble*, discussed below in this paper. Three volumes of memoirs of this apparatchik, published after 1989 in the democratic Poland, cannot of course be considered a reliable historical source or evidence, because the author evidently tried to whitewash himself out of concern for his future image. Tejchma, however, did not realize the real nature of the system he supported and built, therefore the frankness of some of his statements is disarming, surprising and revealing. Here are some samples.

A lecture "On the Cultural Policy" during the C.C. [Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party] course in Jadwisin. The main question: why are the most outstanding creators and intellectuals becoming members of communist

parties that are an opposition, and why do they go over to oppositionists' ranks when communist parties got through to the power. (Tejchma, *Kulisy* 67)

After debating with different circles, I conclude there are two tendencies. One exists in the C.C. – to tighten the screw, the other exists in circles – to expand freedom. I am between as a fig leaf: from the C.C. I conceal artists' aspirations for independence to avoid provoking harder restrictions. From artists I conceal the intentions of the C. C. to avoid increasing discontent (Tejchma, *Kulisy* 52)

For the first time I complained, a bit, about artists. Maybe it is necessary to rule you with a thick club; I wouldn't be capable of it, but if artists want it, they would achieve what they want. (Tejchma, *W kręgu* 160)

Suslov,<sup>73</sup> a member of the Soviet gerontocracy, who should be in a pensioner's asylum for a long time, giving an award to the Art Academy in Moscow said: "Socialist Realism rejects formalism, decadence, primitivism and lack of values in art as a matter of principle." The stubbornness and consistency of this babble, not having any connection with Marxism and socialism, can be only admired. (Tejchma, *Kulisy* 179)

There were grimaces and issues with the selection of art works for exhibitions in Moscow or Prague, however in Budapest everything is possible now. (Tejchma, *Pożegnanie* 106)

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<sup>73</sup> Mikhail Andreyevich Suslov (1902-1982) between 1947 and 1982 was a member of the Politburo and Secretariat of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Nicknamed "the Red Eminence," he helped Leonid Brezhnev to overthrow and replace Nikita Khrushchev in 1964. Under Brezhnev, Suslov was a chief ideologist in the Party Control Committee.

The Prime Minister<sup>74</sup> asked me to figure out whether anywhere in the world there is a situation as scandalous as in Poland: the authority cannot edit films according to its own discretion and regardless of director's opinion. He asked me how it looks in Czechoslovakia. "After 1968 there is no artistic film work in Czechoslovakia, so I will ask about the USSR," I answered. The boss of the Soviet cinematography confirmed: yes, the authorities do editing but with director's hands. (Tejchma, *Kulisy* 202)

Tejchma, it seems, does not connect a simple fact that communist parties exist as an opposition only in the democratic system while being in power they immediately impose a mono-party, totalitarian system with dictatorship of the proletariat and opposition erased by physical liquidation or pushed to the underground. "Tightening the screw," ruling the artistic world with a thick club, the meekness and obedience of artists in the USSR who cut off everything whenever their authority knits its eyebrows – all this is rather grim, particularly bearing in mind that Tejchma describes reality of the mid 1970s.

Aesthetic doctrinairism in the USSR in the days of the omnipotent Suslov, the main Party ideologist who controlled propaganda, media and any artistic activity, however, was not different from the norm of Stalinist times, excluding excessive terror. In Czechoslovakia, authorities censored even artistic works sent from "brotherly states" and even Tejchma contrarily noticed that "after 1968 there is no artistic film work," which statistically was not true. Nevertheless, there are positive accents in Tejchma's notes: a liberal approach to art in Hungarian "Goulash Communism" and a situation in Poland in

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<sup>74</sup> Between 1970 and 1980, the Prime Minister of the communist government in Poland was Piotr Jaroszewicz.

which censor's interferences needed an author's agreement, at least formally, which so infuriated the Polish communist Prime Minister.

To sum up, events in Poland developed in a different way from Hungary and Czechoslovakia, where the Stalinist straightjacket in cultural life was restored after Soviet military invasions in 1956 and 1968 respectively. In Poland, the Poznań workers' revolt of 1956, despite casualties, in the context of international relations ended peacefully: Khrushchev eased up and the Soviet invasion was called off. Events of 1968 and 1970 also did not bring Soviet intervention, and a new Polish Politburo, installed after the revolt of December 1970, was relatively milder.

Under no circumstances could this specific situation be considered as artistic freedom. Censors could not delete scenes without director's consent, nevertheless they could ban the entire film and order its shelving for years. The qualifying process was long and painful. In the beginning, director's and script author's individual sense indicated what was allowed and what was forbidden. Then, before the production could start, the script was scrutinized at several levels. The last take or the last editing cut during the production did not finish the process of filmmaking. On the contrary, it was the beginning of the long road. Firstly, the members of the movie studio watched and discussed the film. The second stage was an unofficial pre-release screening of a film by bosses of the film industry and representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Art. These viewers considered not only the aesthetic values but first of all its political meaning, and careless supervisors risked their careers in case of lenience. The third stage, official pre-release screening of a film, gathered film critics, filmmakers and writers, journalists but most of all censors, an officer from the Ministry of National Defence and a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all

led by a deputy minister (or, in case of renowned directors, a minister himself) of Culture and Art. Rebellious, disobedient or just imprudent authors had to face and stand often hurricane-force criticism and accusations from such groups. The last stage was executed by the Main Office for the Control of the Press, Publications and Public Spectacles, or in short the censorship. Despite this web of obstacles there were still movies too daring and too difficult to be edited by censors. In 1979, eleven movie titles were blacklisted.<sup>75</sup>

In such circumstances, the Polish Film School emerged in 1955. Although as a consistent artistic movement it was active only until the mid 1960s, a big group of film directors and screenplay writers continued its traditions and accustomed step-by-step censors, apparatchiks and viewers to a critical approach to reality. This process climaxed in 1977 with Wajda's *Man of Marble*. Then came nearly sixteen months of the Solidarity period (September 1980 – December 1981), when censorship was practically suspended and several movies, critical to the utmost degree of the system, were produced.

### 3.3.3. Polish Films against Totalitarianism

Among Polish movies produced up until 1989 and providing critical analysis of the system, the first was Marek Piwowski's 1970 *The Cruise*, a daring absurd comedy, a kind of Polish Monty Python. A weekend river cruise is turned into a parody of the entire communist system, and presents an allegorical picture of the communist-ruled society in a nutshell. A kind of politburo, and then a dictatorship emerged within a group of unfamiliar people suddenly divided into factions, steered by stupid but greedy and wily leaders.

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<sup>75</sup> An outline of a control process in the movie industry and data are taken from: Krajewski, Andrzej. "Jak wykuwało się film" [How a movie was forged]. *Mówią Wieki*. Vol. 12 (540), 2004, p. 32-36. <[http://www.mowiawieki.pl/artukul.html?id\\_artukul=1268](http://www.mowiawieki.pl/artukul.html?id_artukul=1268)>

Actions undertaken by passengers altered into a grotesque representation of political life, and a satire of political leaders and nonsensical customs produced by the imposed reality. All this created a simulation of real life in totalitarian Poland in the late 1960s and was faultlessly received by viewers as a mockery of the system.

The most important anti-communist movie of this period was Andrzej Wajda's 1977 *Man of Marble*. As a director, Wajda debuted in 1950 but his important works came with the thaw of 1956. Since then, he has become a chronicler of Polish political and social evolution with moral courage and uncompromising nature. *Man of Marble* marked the peak of Wajda's politically involved art. The film explores topics condemned by the communist government to total oblivion, revokes the dark period of the not so distant Stalinist past, and awakens anti-communist feeling among people. However, most of all, the movie tells about the intellectual and political maturing of the young generation and the passion of discovering history mendaciously contorted by the totalitarian regime. The oddest thing of all is that Wajda, the director, and Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski, the script writer, created this revolutionary movie in 1977, despite communist censorship and was financed by state funds within a Soviet model of economy, based on a system of state ownership and central planning, where the only owner and sponsor of the movie (and any) industry was the state.

During the Solidarity period (August 1980 – December 1981), when censorship was practically suspended, several movies, critical to the utmost degree of the system, were accepted, subsidized and entered into the stage of production. Out of the most important four, only two were finished and shown in theaters. Released in July 1981, Wajda's *Man of Iron*, a sequel to the *Man of Marble*, was then the most famous, especially after winning the Golden Palm (*Palm d'Or*) in 1981 at the Cannes Film Festival. This most prestigious

movie prize in Europe was augmented the following year by awards from the Spanish and British Cinema Writers Circles for best foreign film and a nomination for an Academy Award in the Best Foreign Language Film category. *Man of Iron* is a dramatic panorama of the Gdańsk Shipyard strike of 1980, ending victoriously with the legalization of the Solidarity trade union, free from Communist dependence. It fills in gaps and threads left incomplete in *Man of Marble* because of censorship and combines a fictional plot and characters with documentary scenes of the Polish students' and workers' revolts against communist authorities in 1968, 1970, 1976 and 1980.

The comedy *Teddy Bear* by Stanisław Bareja, released in May 1981 did not receive any important prizes and actually was not prized at all, being known for decades only to Polish viewers (it was supplied with English subtitles only several years ago). Nevertheless, within a few months, *Teddy Bear*, which spoofs bribery, the flourishing black market, bureaucracy, corruption and most of all the absurdity of the Soviet economic system, gathered record-breaking attendance and became one of the best and most popular Polish comedies ever. Even after restoring the democratic system in 1989, subsequent generations consider *Teddy Bear* a cult movie and place it on top of blockbuster lists, while the *Man of Iron* is presently nearly forgotten by elder and unknown to younger viewers.

Ryszard Bugajski's 1982 *Interrogation* and Janusz Zaorski's 1983 *Mother of Kings*, although finished, had to wait years before being released to a wide audience. "Upon its completion in 1982, *Interrogation* was banned, since the Polish government (then under martial law) declared the film inflammatory and dangerous. For years, the film remained unseen, until the director managed to flee the country, smuggling out a

copy of the motion picture. Since then, *Interrogation* has grown in reputation until its unveiling at the Cannes Film Festival in 1990<sup>76</sup>, where its star, Krystyna Janda, received the prize for the best actress. Keywords attached to this movie in catalogues speak for themselves: Communism, Eastern Europe, Political, Social injustice, Stalinism, Torture, Freedom, Police Brutality, Women's Prison. This film is a paradigm of the communist abuse of power, which for decades afflicted the population. Although the movie shows scenes that were surrounded by official secrecy, the collective memory keeps knowledge of such practices alive. The movie reminds viewers of the injustices to those who would rather forget the past, and informs those who were not aware of it.

*Mother of Kings*, dealing directly with Stalinism and indirectly with the entire Soviet totalitarian system, was shelved for five years and released in 1987. The movie received two awards at the Berlin International Film Festival: a Silver Bear for an outstanding single achievement in “the mastery of visual language in the context of a tragic historic era”<sup>77</sup> and an Honorable Mention as the FIPRESCI (*Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique*) Prize. The story shown in this film narrates the life of a widow struggling to raise four adolescent sons. Seeing them taking different paths and following their fates, the viewer gets a thorough view of Polish society during several decades. The movie shows that the society created by the Soviet system was not at all monolithic and democratic as the official version asserts. The intersection of private stories with historical events gives the film an important place

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<sup>76</sup> *Interrogation (Przesłuchanie)*. Dir. Ryszard Bugajski. Poland, 1982. From the video cassette cover, designed in 1991 by Kino International Corp., 333 West 39th Street, New York NY 10018.

<sup>77</sup> The *Berlinale* (Berlin International Film Festival) web page:  
[http://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/1988/03\\_preistraeger\\_1988/03\\_Preistraeger\\_1988.html](http://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/1988/03_preistraeger_1988/03_Preistraeger_1988.html)

among those who visualize collective memory. The narration of fictional lives shows both the opportunism and lack of values of the ruling party leaders and the everyday heroism of common people striving to survive and keep their human dignity. It subverts the discourses of hegemonic power and teaches the viewers to be critical of the regime.

#### 3.3.4. Men of Marble and Iron

Wajda's *Man of Marble* opened a chapter of the Stalinist period in Poland previously closed, ignored or superficially mentioned by official propaganda, textbooks on all levels and media. Released in 1977, the movie presented a quest for determining historical identity and roots despite state imposed bans, restrictions and persecutions. The expressive acting of Krystyna Janda in the main role of Agnieszka, a young filmmaker, imparted a sense of accusation and a cry for freedom.

A question should be raised regarding Wajda's ability to make a film presenting one of the state's most concealed issues, using state money and despite censor's interferences at all consecutive stages of a filmmaking process. Andrzej Wajda explains it circumspectly:

*Man of Marble* wasn't made on somebody's bidding, it wasn't made by somebody's order. We were talking about making a contemporary film. We were aware of all the difficulties about the film that concerns labor leaders, heroes of labor. This film couldn't be shot for ten or twelve years because the hero of labor was a symbol, an icon, an untouchable. The situation changed in 1975 to the degree that Mr. Tejchma joined the Ministry of Art and Culture. And he wasn't only a Minister of Art and Culture but also a Deputy Prime Minister. His position was

extremely strong. And as a former member of the Polish Youth Union, a man who believed that those beautiful sublime moments of Stalinist Youth he respected [more than] everything else, are worth immortalizing. And that in spite of Stalin, the youth had their ideals, knew why to live, where to go and so on. He wanted such a film. [...]

Here in Poland the film itself often plays a political role, whatever its context. In this case, the film was a political act but everything around it was even more explicit as a political act. Everything that happened after the premiere all of that, and everything that happened before the premiere, I mean all those struggles against the film. I've experienced this twice very clearly, with *Ashes and Diamonds* and with this film [*Man of Marble*]. There were many objections, great objections, attempts to torpedo the film but my allies, Minister Tejchma and Minister Wojtczak,<sup>78</sup> they supported the film, since they believed that they were personally involved. And what they achieved was that once the film was made it was shown in the cinemas. (*Andrzej Wajda: A Portrait*, minutes: 46-47 and 51-52)

Tejchma held Wajda in high esteem but treated his movie with utmost cautiousness.

On December 11, 1976, he wrote:

Plan of conversation with Wajda: the movie will be released. Certain changes are needed. The main: delete the last scene from the Gdańsk cemetery, because it is a reference to issues of December 1970. Soften everything what touches police activities in the 1950s. Delete the sentence: "what a dreadful

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<sup>78</sup> In the 1970s, Mieczysław Wojtczak (b. 1933) was a deputy Minister of Culture and the head of the Department of Cinematography.

architecture” (it concerns [generally the architectural style of the city of] Nowa Huta but will be associated [by the viewers] with the [local] statue of Lenin). Delete the scene with smashing windows in the Political Police headquarter. I added that the film would cause a storm, but it might be a cleansing storm. Wajda and Ścibor-Rylski received my remarks calmly, but declared that they have to save face in front of young filmmakers, as many of them read the script. If the movie would be reduced and changes would be contrary to author’s consciousness then Wajda would not agree to sign it with his name. But it was rather Wajda’s warning for the future. (Tejchma, *Kulisy* 234-235)

The go-ahead Józef Tejchma gave to *Man of Marble* resulted in his dismissal from the post of the Minister of Culture in January 1978. Tejchma recalled in memoirs this fact several times. Here are two of the most representative samples of his remarks: “In my biography an adventure with Wajda was a positive risk. I’ve lost a lot, I’ve gained much more” (Tejchma, *Pożegnanie* 121). “If I was asked what cultural event was connected most dramatically with my four-year term as a Minister of Culture I would answer without hesitation that an issue with *Man of Marble*. It was the direct reason of my ministerial dismissal” (Tejchma, *W kręgu* 83).

Readers not acquainted with customs of the time may presume that after his heroic decision Tejchma, an unconventional liberal punished by removal from governmental office, became an unknown martyr of the totalitarian system. Indeed, it definitely would have happened 40 years earlier in the Soviet Union under Stalin’s rule: a disobedient Soviet minister or one who only relaxed his vigilance, could have considered himself lucky in a Siberian GULAG camp rather than facing the firing squad. In Poland however, such

practices were unknown, particularly in the mid 1970s. The rule “once in the *nomenklatura* – always in the *nomenklatura*” was fully applied from the beginning of communist regime until its last moments. Tejchma, despite his tragically serious tone, not only was not hurt but also could not claim that he was being unfairly treated. He was removed from the position of the Minister of Culture, yet after several months he was appointed as the Ministers of Education and Behavior and after a year spent in Switzerland as the Polish ambassador, he was the Minister of Culture again. In the meantime, he was uninterruptedly a deputy Prime Minister and a Politburo member. In this light, his 1978 dismissal does not look particularly dramatic.

Wajda’s explanation is also neither convincing nor exhaustive. He does not mention for instance, concessions he planned to get the green light for the distribution of his movie. *Man of Marble* exposes Stalinist reality, persecutions and crimes committed by the communist party in the early 1950s, at the same time that it glorifies achievements of the then present government led by Edward Gierek. The movie contains long and boring scenes showing the latest investments in roads and buildings: the new highway cutting through the city of Warsaw, the new airport and the Central Railway Station in Warsaw, the biggest steel producing plant in Poland “Huta Katowice.” The message sent to future critics and attackers was clear: there were mistakes, but Socialism is the system and way of living for the future, Poland is a modern country now and we can be proud of its outstanding accomplishments achieved under the present leadership. It was the price Wajda had to pay to be able to send another message, this time a coded one, to the viewer. The times do not differ much, the party apparatchiks still try to possess and distort the present as they did with the past. To oppose it, we have to be as persistent and stubborn as Agnieszka,

a seeker of truth and a thinking individual with a questioning mind. One should always ask naïve and simple questions, as naïve in this case means honesty.

Jerzy Radziwiłowicz, performing the title role, describes the protagonist, Mateusz Birkut, as follows:

The attitude of that man, that event is such that he is fine and very honest. He does not contrive. He lets himself be used just because of his honesty and unawareness. But his internal structure, his ethical skeleton remains untouched. And the basic thing was to play, to show an honest man, bright, human. Andrzej Wajda spoke to me then “How do you imagine him?” Bright, honest, cheerful and with a youthful faith in a sense of all that’s going on around him. And such a man could be deceived. He was naïve. (*Andrzej Wajda: A Portrait*, minutes 48-49)

The female protagonist of *Man of Marble*, Agnieszka, a student filmmaker living in 1976, decides to make her thesis movie about Mateusz Birkut, one of the heroes of Socialist Labor<sup>79</sup> from the early 1950s. Birkut appears only in old documentary movies, taken off dusty shelves. Agnieszka can neither find nor trace him, but old films suddenly reveal to her the dark side of the Stalinist era: purges, accusations, arrests, tortures during interrogations, bullying the honest people, treating people and ideas like objects, opportunism of average citizens and party members caring only for their future career.

*Man of Marble* neither criticizes nor negates directly. In order to expose artificiality and cruelty founded on absurd basis imposed by the totalitarian system, it was enough to present just fragments of the “true reality,” which in this case is not redundant but a

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<sup>79</sup> Hero of Socialist Labor existed as an honorary title in the USSR and its satellite countries; it was generally awarded in form of medal and various benefits to manual laborers.

rejection of the “propagandistic reality” presented by the media. Wajda creates fictional fragments of documentary movies and of the Polish Film Chronicle, a 10-minute weekly newsreel shown in all Polish cinemas between 1944 and 1995 prior to the main film, used as the main propaganda tool in the movie industry. The characters discuss which fragments were presented to the public and which were rejected “because of technical difficulties.” The word “censorship” could not be mentioned in the movie openly, nevertheless viewers knew perfectly well what and who was hidden behind this phrase. In this way, *Man of Marble* presents a dichotomy between propagandistic and true reality. It is of no significance that these “rejected” and “approved” documents, although filmed in black-and-white, are not authentic. This stylistic device was evident, and viewers treated these fakes as genuine because – according to information kept in the collective memory and transmitted orally – they presented an honest assessment of history and historical memory. . Usually certified for wide distribution were movies presenting gilded pictures of an ideal world existing only in propaganda. Fragments rejected due to “technical difficulties” presented a harsh reality; the problems of the 1950s were only slightly different from those known to viewers of the mid 1970s.

Mateusz Birkut, despite sudden fame gained during years when he was being used as an icon of a Socialist Labor, did not lose his moral purity. When the Secret Police arrested his best friend Wincenty Witek under false accusations, Birkut stubbornly searched and struggled for truth and justice. Inevitably, he was also arrested and “accused of organizing a terrorist group code named ‘The Gypsy Folk Band’ and attacking the headquarters of public law and order” (*Man of Marble*. Part II, minutes 13-14).

Wajda avoids moralizing in both contemporary and retrospective scenes. On the contrary, he often uses situational and verbal humor in the least expected situations. Actually, in the moment of arrest, Birkut was disillusioned, disappointed, disenchanted, and heavily drunk. A moment earlier he had paid a street band of Gypsies to accompany him with music and with their accompaniment he threw a brick – tied in a double bow with a ribbon, a symbol of his bricklayer profession he is proud of – at the door of the political police headquarter. This way he squared accounts with authorities for unjustly and falsely imprisoning his friend, for arrogance, for contempt to ordinary people, for gang methods of ruling and for betraying the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. And after this deed, he tottered into the building to be arrested.

Being accused himself, Birkut had to testify as a witness in the case<sup>80</sup> of his falsely accused and imprisoned friend. A dialog in the court sounds like a skit from a cabaret or comedy stage, which underlines the tragic grotesqueness of the situation.

Judge: – Does the witness recognize the accused Wincenty Witek, here in the courtroom?

Birkut: – Yes, I do.

Judge: – During interrogation, the accused Witek has admitted attempting to cause you bodily harm. Did the witness know of Witek's plans earlier?

Birkut: – So he had admitted...

Judge: – That's what I had said. I asked if you knew before hand what he planned to do.

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<sup>80</sup> The trial takes place just before the 28th week (June) of 1952. This date is coded ("28/52") in the title sequence of fictional Polish Film Chronicle, created by Wajda as a part of his movie.

Birkut: – Yes, I did. I knew about everything, Your Honor.

Judge: – Maybe the witness did not understand the question properly...

Birkut: – Why? Your Honor asked it clearly. I knew about it from the very beginning.

Judge: – That can't be so. The witness has testified that he trusted the accused and that he'd been deceived.

Birkut: – Not at all! It was a mutual action.

Judge: – Mutual? That makes no sense at all. The accused considered the witness a committed activist.

Birkut: – That's not true. Our groups worked together. Lead workers were to be attacked. So, we chose each other. Both of us were lead workers, so...

Judge: – But in your deposition, I can read it to you... You state something else entirely.

Birkut: – All of us, enemies, are liars, Your Honor. And I am the worst. I have already attacked the people's authorities. With a gudgeon.

Judge: – What?

Birkut: – A gudgeon. A fish. A small fish.

Judge: – You didn't say that before. During your interrogation, you said something else. I'll quote: ...

Birkut: – No need, Your Honor. Don't you know what goes on there? Want me to tell you why I lied? [He takes his jacket off to show scars and bruises after beating during interrogation]

Witek: – I'm with you, Mateusz! [turns to the judge] You can do to me anything you want! I retract everything I said. Everything! Retract my testimony! I take back everything!

[End of the newsreel. Back in the projection room]

Agnieszka's Cameraman: – Well, young lady, after what I have seen I owe you a small vodka and a large ice cream, whichever you prefer first. (*Man of Marble*. Part II, minutes 14-17)

In 1976, the "Birkut topic" became extremely inconvenient for TV officials, especially since the situation in Poland was strained as workers of Radom and Ursus had just started their protests. TV programs were to entertain, bring fun, establish emotional well-being of the nation, execute and put into practice principles of the propaganda of success, hence the truth and dramatic news had to be prepared and dosed carefully.

Agnieszka did not obediently withdraw, as her TV boss suggested. She proceeded in her search for the truth and found traces of Birkut's son, Maciek Tomczyk (he bore his mother's maiden name), but before she was able to make a contact, she was suspended from TV. Loosing her job, which was her life, loosing her film, which was her passion, realizing she was followed all the time, Agnieszka changes internally. The one who helps her to understand what is important in life is her father, a simple and straight thinking elderly railway man. In the movie, the father – daughter dialog is dense and significant:

Agnieszka: – They got scared.

Father: – Of what?

Agnieszka: – Everything.

Father: – Nobody's afraid of everything. If you're afraid, it's of one thing. What is it?

Agnieszka: – I don't know.

Father: – Then find out.

Agnieszka: – How?

Father: – Find that Birkut of yours.

Agnieszka: – I told you, they took away my cameras and film.

Father: – And without those, you can't do it?

Agnieszka: – What for?

Father: – If they were making a film about me, I'd be very surprised not having any visitor. That's normal. At last, I would be surprised a little. Well? Are you just going to lie there?

Agnieszka: – I'll eventually get up.

Father: – Grab your shoes and bag.

Agnieszka: – What for?

Father: – I've already told you. If the film was about me... Go, find him and talk to him. Then come back and tell me.

Agnieszka: – Tell you?

Father: – That's right. Do you have to tell everything everyone? I want to know how it ended. Go on. You've got a bus in half an hour. (*Man of Marble*. Part II, minutes 56-60)

“You will tell me. I want to know how it ended,” says the father. He emphasizes the superior role of private talks between individuals over pap served by official propaganda to everyone. “You” and “I” mean the truth. “Everyone” means lies. “Private” is counter to “public,” “us” to “them.” The inner world is safe and trustworthy, the outer

world is hostile and mendacious. The simple-minded father knows much more than his educated daughter does. He knows she got involved with the propaganda machine, and was fired because of her honesty. He also realizes that Agnieszka is not able to put to rights this corroded and corrupted system, yet she may improve herself by finding her own way to honesty. Truth cannot be told to everyone, as the truth brings fear to those who lie. Truth must be found, witnessed and preserved, and this difficult, responsible task can be done only by private talks and passing the truth from mouth to mouth. This is a model situation of building collective memory, independent and free.

Jerzy Radziwiłowicz describes the importance of this scene:

[...] they took away her camera and film – it also fits perfectly with what was beginning in Poland. She says she has no camera, no tapes, cannot do anything. The father [...] persuades her to go to Gdańsk to meet the son [of Birkut] without the camera, without the film. This was a very beautiful moment in the film: Agnieszka starts her own, different way, she goes to meet him and possibly to bear witness. This is what later became the movement for conveying historical evidence of forbidden days. This is what later becomes the KOR movement, underground trade unions, which bear witness. (*Andrzej Wajda: A Portrait*, minutes 53-55)

The next take explains everything: Agnieszka stands at the gate of the Gdańsk shipyard and a catwalk over the tracks of the fast city train in the background is shown several times in long shots. Both images are allegoric, clearly readable even to the average viewer. Since December 1970, when Gdańsk with its surrounding

agglomeration<sup>81</sup> became the most explosive region of Poland and the center of workers' protests, this gate became a symbol known to all Polish viewers. The gate with its signboard, shipyard cranes were associated with the December 1970 massacre of workers. In 1970, in the neighboring city of Gdynia, police raked the workers using a catwalk on their way to local shipyard with machine-gun fire. These facts were known widely in Poland: some photographs were even published by the official press as illustrations of "Gdańsk brawlers and troublemakers" and "acts of hooliganism and vandalism." Readers, accustomed to read between lines, and with help of news broadcast in Polish by Radio Free Europe, the BBC, and Radio Liberty from Washington D.C., picked out the tragic truth. Hence, when Birkut's son, finally found by Agnieszka, says, "My father is dead" the scenery directs attention to unofficial, collective memory.

"We had to come up with some kind of an ending in the time that we had. And in the meantime, things had happened. There was first of all the crime of the 1970, everything that happened in Gdańsk, the pogrom of workers. These events played a great role in a working class consciousness so they had to be incorporated somehow in the film" (*Andrzej Wajda: A Portrait*, minutes 55-56) says Wajda in an interview.

The December 1970 massacre in the Tri-City caused shock and changes in the party and state leadership. Edward Gierek, a new *gensek*<sup>82</sup> who replaced Gomułka in early 1971, started as a liberal, nevertheless his liberalism was also only a façade and the "December 1970 issue" was immediately swept under the propagandistic carpet

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<sup>81</sup> The megalopolis created by cities of Gdańsk, Sopot and Gdynia is commonly known as the Tri-City (in Polish: *Trójmiasto*).

<sup>82</sup> *gensek* – an acronym created in Russian from *Generalnyi Sekretar* (General Secretary of the Communist Party's Central Committee) and used initially in the Party jargon from the 1920s. See: Lewin, Moshe. *Lenin's Last Struggle*. Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 2005, p. XVIII.

presenting embellished pictures of so-called propaganda of success. The communist party in Poland, until the end of its existence<sup>83</sup>, neither admitted nor repented crimes it committed, endorsed, supported or incited.

In the mid 1970s, Wajda communicated with viewers over the heads of censors. The language of implications he uses is clear and readable. There are no doubts, that Birkut was killed by the police in 1970 as a shipyard worker fighting for justice and human rights. It means that nothing has changed in the system, which still does not have anything to do with ideals, spoon-fed to the society through official propaganda.

In 1976, when *Man of Marble* was filmed, Birkut's son could say nothing more. The real cause of his father's death could not be named openly. It was said in a sequel of the Birkut saga, *Man of Iron*, shot in 1981 during the second strike in the Gdańsk Shipyard and after the victorious legalization of the Independent Trade Union "Solidarity," when censorship was practically disabled from September 1980 to December 1981.

*Man of Iron* takes place in 1980 and presents the strike in the Gdańsk Shipyard and the origins of the Solidarity trade union. Andrzej Wajda explains:

When it came to producing the *Man of Iron*, I asked Ścibor-Rylski to write the screenplay for the sequel. It was obvious that this had to do with the Lenin Shipyard with these and not some other characters. We were conditioned by characters from the former film, *Man of Marble*, and the present situation in the Lenin Shipyard. These two things had to be combined. Obviously, the screenplay was the result of various possibilities. It was written very quickly, so that I could

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<sup>83</sup> Polish communist party (officially: the Polish Unified Workers' Party, *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza – PZPR*), created in 1948, lasted until 1989.

begin the film, because I knew that what was happening then could not last forever. And if I didn't manage to make that film, it would never be shown in cinemas. I couldn't count on showing it today... [the interview was made in June 1989] Just think: today even I couldn't be sure that it would be shown. (*Andrzej Wajda: A Portrait*, minutes 58-59)

Jerzy Radziwiłowicz, who played both Birkut and his son, Maciej Tomczyk, recalls:

Wajda faced the terrible task: to tell 24 years of history in one film and to tell it quickly, because times might change and it might no longer be possible to do it. And all that was everything around was boiling, when you don't know how the main event, the subject of the film, is going to end. To this, we had a lot of help from the Shipyard, its workers. We couldn't have done it without them, without the Shipyard "Solidarity." I remember well: no documents, no materials, nobody had written it down, nobody cared, there were other things to do at that time. How to learn about the strike in the Shipyard? There is my first scene in the film when the French TV records an interview with Tomczyk and asks him how it all began. Such a great event. The beginning. There were no documents yet: why write down history, which you are just creating? Again, there was the simplest solution. We asked one of the men who participated in the first phase of the strike, a nice young man who took care of us while we were there: "Tell us about it." And he did. For three quarters of an hour. He told us all about the meeting and the moment when Wałęsa jumped over the fence. He kept talking for three quarters of an hour, and then Andrzej said: "Well, you have three minutes. Would you tell us everything?"

They switched on the camera and I had to report the most important things within three minutes. I did it.

What was also amazing was the fact that while we were shooting, Wałęsa agreed to come and let himself be filmed and embraced. Even though traveling from town to town he was so busy talking to strikers. (*Andrzej Wajda: A Portrait*, minutes 60-63)

*Man of Iron*'s retrospective part in one of its threads goes back to 1976, to the exact moment ending the *Man of Marble*. Agnieszka took Birkut's son, Maciek Tomczyk, to Warsaw, to her TV boss.

Agnieszka: – This is Maciej Tomczyk, Mateusz Birkut's son. Well?

TV boss: – Nice to meet you.

Agnieszka: – Stop fooling around. I need a camera, film and a crew.

TV boss: – Excuse me? What for?

Agnieszka: – So I can finish my film.

TV boss: – Excuse me? Where's the hero?

Agnieszka: – You'll find out when you see it. Stop fooling around.

TV boss: – I'd rather know now.

Agnieszka: – You'll miss the emotional impact.

TV boss: – But I'll get information.

Agnieszka: – Fine, but please stand up.

TV boss: – Why?

Agnieszka: – This must be heard with respect.

TV boss: – So what about his father?

Agnieszka: – He died in Gdynia in 1970.

TV boss: – What are you saying?

Tomczyk: – The police killed him in Gdynia.

Agnieszka: – He hasn't even got a grave. Now there'll be a film that will tell his life story. [...]

TV boss: – Have you gone nuts? You are dragging out the situation on the coast? Meddling in these shipyard affairs! Now?

Agnieszka: – You wanted a conclusion and you've got it!

TV boss: – Some conclusion! A guy who's an enemy of the State, attacks the people's police armed, and you want to make him a saint? This is total blindness and irresponsibility!

Agnieszka: – But the party condemned the massacre!

TV boss: – When!? Six years ago! Now workers are rioting in Radom, in Ursus! Party Headquarter buildings being burned, derailed trains, street fights with the police! And you want me to canonize Birkut? You must be crazy!

Agnieszka: – There comes a time to settle scores!

TV boss: – One moment. You attended elementary school for free.

Agnieszka: – Yes!

TV boss: – In high school, your parents...

Agnieszka: – Didn't pay a thing!

TV boss: – Your education at Film School cost the state...

Agnieszka: – A million zlotys!

TV boss: – A million zlotys, yes! And that’s the debt you have to repay! Not working against the state that has invested so much in you! Now please go outside and tell that nice young man that this film will have to wait... That we may return to it and he can be a consultant... I don’t know what... Do it skillfully so he doesn’t feel bitter. Do we understand each other well?

Agnieszka: – I’m going to make this film! I don’t know how, who cares?! It can even be slides!

TV boss: – Really?! Do you have your pass?

Agnieszka: – Yes.

TV boss: – Let me have it.

Agnieszka: – Why?

TV boss: – I just want to see it.

Agnieszka: – Here you are.

TV boss: – You no longer have a pass. And you’ll never enter this building again! Furthermore, I’ll talk to management and fix it so you’ll never work in film again. They’ll take care of it on a level so high, you can’t even imagine. My advice now is to start looking for a new occupation. There are so many professions! I hope you choose well.

Agnieszka: – You son of a bitch.

TV boss: – Good-bye. (*Man of Iron*, minutes 105-110)

Set in 1980, in *Man of Iron* Agnieszka and Maciek have married. Both of them are active members of the underground resistance: they print out and distribute uncensored papers, demonstrate, organize rallies. Certainly, the police arrests them with frightening

regularity. They live with the uncertainty of the next day but certain that the idea of democracy and liberty will overcome the bureaucratic and inhuman system of the present. They know their limits but they also realize their strength.

Agnieszka: – I came here the first time looking for Birkut, not knowing that he was already dead. Maciek was working as a welder at the shipyard then. I didn't know the police had jailed and beaten him twice. I didn't know anything. I had explored the 1950s and never really seen the present: Radom and Ursus. I had no idea of the conditions Polish workers worked in. I'll tell you how a welder works in the double hull of a ship. [...] Without it, you won't understand. It's what's most important. I met Maciek outside the shipyard. He told me how his father had died. Hoping it would help, I took him to Warsaw. [...]

Maciek never did run afoul of the law. [...] The authorities break the law, making arrests without grounds. [...] I'm calmer now. I've calmed down. [...] It's a different life here on the coast. You don't have to choose between success and virtue. Despite the lack of perspectives, you're more relaxed, with no need to be two-faced. You can say what you think. Do what you want and what you think is right. [...] Life here, being an activist, means civil death. You are beyond the law, even though you don't break it. Sometimes it's very hard. But when you get used to it, it can be fun sometimes. There are these amusing situations. And you meet and work with wonderful people. You enjoy fooling undercover cops. The really nice

thing is not being afraid of anything. Even in the slammer, you know at least they can't lock you up. (*Man of Iron*, minutes 100–105)

The importance of the events of August 1980 cannot be overestimated. The victory of striking workers in Gdańsk made the first breach in the totalitarian wall. The hysterical reactions of communist authorities, martial law imposed by a military junta led by General Jaruzelski on December 13, 1981 – nothing could stop the avalanche. Lech Wałęsa, the Solidarity leader and future President of the Polish Republic<sup>84</sup>, when interviewed in late 1981, expressed his confidence: “I said on the first day that we will win. So we have won. This is the simple truth. We have the basic, fundamental thing: the right to freedom through our trade unions, which we will have. And we will have them the way we will make them” (*Poland: “We’ve Caught...”*).

Zbigniew Bujak, a striker from Ursus and a Solidarity activist, shares this opinion, however he declares full awareness of future difficulties, “Seeing these accords being signed we immediately realized that this is the first stage and it is only now that the real race against time, against the clock begins for us. And real tactical, intellectual struggle with the other party, with those in power is beginning. Because it was obvious to us that there were signing the accords but they will immediately want to break them” (*Poland: “We’ve Caught...”*). Bujak said these words twenty years after the events of 1980. His opinion is controversial and the question of whether in 1980 the Solidarity leaders were fully aware of the situation is still open. However, nobody can deny or even undermine that both Andrzej Wajda, the director, and Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski, the scriptwriter, assessed the situation with remarkable perceptiveness. Not only did they foresee the

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<sup>84</sup> Lech Wałęsa was elected the President of the Republic of Poland in 1990 and remained in office until 1995.

future events during the production of *Man of Iron*, not only did they have their fingers on the pulse of history in 1980, but they were also able to predict how the system and its servants will retaliate against those who attacked their monopoly.

One of the scenes of *Man of Iron* presents a local apparatchik. After the victory of the strikers, after signing an agreement between the government and the Strike Coordination Committee, among a general euphoria he says calmly: “[Badecki:] Don’t worry! This agreement is meaningless. The law does not recognize agreements made under duress. It’s only a scrap of paper” (*Man of Iron*, minutes 142-143).

*Man of Iron*’s final scene is admittedly optimistic, as Birkut’s son goes straight from the Shipyard to the place where his father was killed, and reports:

[Maciek:] I wanted to tell you that we won. That we got what we wanted in ‘68 and what you wanted in ‘70. Now I know for sure we’ll never let them to divide us again, never allow them to deceive us. We will make it through the worst. [...] It all still seems like a dream to me. But it’s the truth. We’ve all seen it and nothing can change that now. I hope that you are proud of me now. (*Man of Iron*, minutes 143-144)

These lines were prophetic and salutary. The victory would never be achieved without cooperation and organized mutual actions undertaken by the Polish workers and intellectuals and without international anti-communist league. An old truth “united we stand, divided we fall” is repeated once again as a promise. This is, however, a vision of the distant times that come after nine years. The nearest future inevitably will bring what Maciek calls “the worst” – on December 13, 1981, “they,” the communist authorities,

will revoke civil rights, declare martial law and establish a dictatorship of the military junta.

Ścibor-Rylski and Wajda, writing and filming all this, could view what had happened with a cool, dispassionate and analytic eye while in the storm centre. Wajda however seems to minimize it: “But who could have known then, in 1976, that the meeting of Agnieszka and Maciej Tomczyk at the shipyard gate, that gate, would make a new film possible. That history would develop in that way. This is really intuition, coincidence, luck” (*Andrzej Wajda: A Portrait*, minutes 56-57). He is aware, however, of how significant and important *Man of Iron* was to “our cause”:

When I showed that film [*Man of Iron*] in Moscow last fall [1988] and observed the Russians watching it, I understood that even if nobody in Poland wanted to watch it, if I hadn't won any prize, not even the Gold Palm at Cannes, if all the reviews had been negative, it was worth making that film just for those few performances. For the first time the Russians saw people who treated their authorities in such a way, who had such a clear view as to their individuality, their opposition to the authorities. They watched it with a great amazement and I think that film – shown for the time being just with the small audience but I left the copy there – I think it'll develop slowly and those who are really interested in politics will see it, and I believe it'll play an important role in our cause. First of all just to correct those lies about Solidarity that the Soviet papers published in the eighties. (*Andrzej Wajda: A Portrait*, minutes 63-65)

## Conclusions

Specific political and historical conditions shaped the national movie industries and vice versa: the cinematographic creation helped to shape a different world for the citizens from behind the Iron Curtain. Countermeasures against pressure of omnipotent propagandistic and monopolistic practices of the ruling communist parties could be undertaken only indirectly. In the situation of political repressions in the Soviet bloc, an extremely important role has fallen to film. The movies reviewed in my paper demonstrate that moviemakers from satellite states fulfilled this task. They exposed the true face of the system and sustained ideas of democracy and freedom. Their films opposed and thwarted the effects of official state propaganda, which created its own image of the Soviet system as harmless, friendly and progressive.

Any support for independent and critical thinking, any incitement to discursive reasoning cannot be overestimated, particularly when performed by films, which as a popular art could reach every corner of the Soviet bloc and be understood by the widest audiences. Mass and rapid mobilization in 1989-1990, when satellite states nearly simultaneously broke free from the Soviet domination, was possible also thanks to collective memory shaped and preserved by engagé movies.

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