

POLISH FILM

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The trauma of contemporary Poland is vividly conveyed in a season of films which opens this month on Channel 4. An excellent background to them all is provided by *The Road to Gdansk*, a documentary made by Parallax Pictures, a London film producing co-operative, which will be shown on Monday, February 11. Director Maxim Ford, who lived and worked in Poland for eight years, and producer Sally Hibbin have used both archive film material, tracing the development of Poland since 1918, and interviews with Poles on contemporary issues, which they shot in the country over six months last year.

The compression required for such an enterprise involves considerable dangers of bias. Objectivity has however been attained as far as possible by giving the main alternative explanations of disputed events, an exception being the reasons for the halting of the Soviet offensive at the time of the Warsaw Rising of 1944, on which unfortunately only one view is mentioned. In general the viewer is extremely successfully piloted through the minefield of Polish history with a skilful combination of commentary and visual material.

By interviewing representatives of various trends and walks of life from Party



Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Iron*.

and Solidarity national leaders to local working class and peasant activists and women workers discussing sexual equality, the film gives a lively and multi-faceted picture of the problems of socialism in present-day Poland. The issues of controversy are discussed in such a way as to let the viewers make up their own minds.

A central debate featured in the film is on the role of Solidarity, the 9.5-million-strong trade union, before it was closed down by the authorities in December

1981. Professor Jerzy Wiatr, Director of the Polish United Workers' Party's Institute of Marxism-Leninism, argues that 'Solidarity, almost from its beginning, became essentially a political movement aiming at the peaceful overthrow of the existing government.' Lech Walesa, on the other hand, insists (as he did when I interviewed him in 1981) that if other organisations had existed to express alternative political views to the government's where there were problems, Soli-



Parallax Picture's *The Road to Gdansk*; riot police - martial law.

darity would have been happy to stick to purely trade union matters.

The theme is pursued on Channel 4 the following Monday, February 18, in an edited newsreel of a meeting addressed by Vice-Premier Rakowski at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk in August 1983. He gets a rough ride from the workers when he attacks Solidarity, which he accuses of having in 1981 'put itself above the law and the state' by 'declaring, not asking for' Saturday as a free day. Walesa, to the applause of his workmates, comes into the discussion to affirm his belief in a socialism without distortions and appeals for a compromise solution to Poland's problems. Walesa's appearance and remarks were cut out of the Polish TV version, but will be shown to Channel 4 viewers. A tough and fascinating shipyard confrontation between workers and the representative of a government acting in their name.

Along with a number of other new films of which no preview was available at the time of writing, Channel 4 will be showing four of the best feature films of Poland's two leading directors, which have already been seen and reviewed in this country. Andrzej Wajda's powerful *Man of Marble*

(1976), being projected on February 6, interweaves two plots: the story of a young woman film-maker in the 70s trying to make a film about Birkut, the leader of a champion bricklaying team in the 50s, and that of Birkut himself, whose rise and fall were equally rapid and revealing about the years of Stalinism.

It is followed on February 13 by its sequel, *Man of Iron* (1981), which tells the story of Birkut's son, Maciek, from the student revolt of 1968, through the shooting down of the workers on strike in the Baltic ports in 1970, up to the great strikes of 1980, of which Maciek is portrayed as one of the leaders. Wajda includes documentary film from 1970 as well as footage which he himself had shot at the Lenin Shipyard in 1980. He captures the euphoria at the signing of the Gdansk Agreement when the government finally gave into the workers' demands - but foreshadows, before the event, the crack-down to come when he hears a secret police chief say: 'It was signed under duress and is therefore null and void. It's just a piece of paper'.

The two films directed by Krzysztof Zanussi, both completed in 1980, satirise

and express the director's moral revulsion at the corruption and careerism rife in Polish society, which contributed to the explosion of 1980. *The Contract*, to be shown on March 24, tells the story of the wedding of a young couple arranged by their *nouveaux riches* parents, whose ultra-snobbish attitudes and dubious practices they reject. The wedding party in a luxurious country villa, at which everything goes wrong, develops into a black comedy. The film, which is often exceptionally funny, also has depth and sensitivity.

The Constant Factor is about a young electrician who comes into conflict with the shady dealings of his boss and his colleagues on their business trips abroad. It is more complex and symbolic than *The Contract*, but both are very good examples of the 'cinema of moral anxiety', as it has been called.

These films combine high artistic value with a deep social content. Channel 4 is to be congratulated for offering them to a wider British public. They are essential viewing for anyone who wants to understand contemporary Poland as well as the important contribution it has made in recent years to world cinema.

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