



Ashes and Diamonds

Two views of the new Polish film

Rod Prince

THE publicity for *Ashes and Diamonds* tells us that it is "a drama of political assassination". At a purely factual level, this is a fair description. The film deals with the assassination by a young nationalist partisan of a Communist district secretary; the nationalist, Maciek, is shortly afterwards killed in an encounter with the security police. The action takes place in a small Polish town at the end of the war; in fact, it is the first night of peace, and much of the action centres on an hotel in which peace celebrations are going on. Over everything, the atmosphere of death and destruction lingers: the film opens with an unsuccessful attempt on the party secretary's life, in which two men are killed; it is punctuated by scenes in which columns of soldiers and tanks pass through the town. The realisation of this background atmosphere is a major asset: it gives the film body. But there have been other Polish films which have done this: *A Generation*, *Five Boys From Barska St.*, and to a lesser degree *Kanal*. This realisation, together with the expression of human courage and aspiration, has been the outstanding feature of Polish films since the war. What, then, marks *Ashes and Diamonds* out as particularly valuable? Firstly, I think, its relative freedom from the melodramatic and political conventions which hemmed in the earlier films. *Five Boys From Barska St.* was remarkable for the amount of human feeling which it managed to express in a framework of Stalinist socialist-realism, with its simple good-bad opposition between Communists and "Fascist wreckers". *A Generation* was slightly hampered by the necessity of showing the Nationalists as plotters of evil; and *Kanal* suffered badly from a leaning towards crude melodramatic effects. *Ashes and Diamonds* is the first film to take a nationalist as its central character, and to treat him with understanding and sympathy. In its treatment of the other nationalists, it returns briefly to the cliché of the Nazi connection, but on the whole gives a more accurate and honest, if savagely critical, account of the "old Poland". Stylistically also it is far more restrained and assured than the earlier Wajda films: there are several stylistic adventures, some of which shock and jar, but all of which are intelligible and coherent. There are images of horror and pain—Maciek's victim collapsing into his arms, Maciek's own death agony in a stretch of waste land—and images of peace and beauty, like the white horse which wanders round the hotel courtyard. None of these seem out of place: the scenes of violence, for example, are not glamorised; they are horrifying and disgusting. On his own admission, Wajda was influenced in the final scenes by Bunuel: but, although the sequence is visually similar to some sequences in, say, *Los Olvidados*, there is all the difference in the world between them. As against Bunuel's savage emptiness, with its nightmare overtones of the individual psychology, Wajda's sequence comes at the end of a film of peculiar moral intensity. For this reason we are not simply disgusted by it; we are at the same time outraged and compassionate.

This is the second—and by far the more important—characteristic of the film. With a clarity and intensity rare in the cinema or anywhere else, it raises a real moral issue: two wholly opposed ways of life are suddenly brought into contact. With the end of the war, Maciek is already beginning to doubt the necessity of killing. Now, in the hotel where he is to kill the party secretary, he meets a barmaid, Krystyna, and persuades her to come to his room. She comes, telling herself that she could never fall in love with him, and so it doesn't matter—"things must not get any

more complicated". They make love; they talk to each other. Maciek confesses that "he never knew anything about love before". Suddenly, a new vision of the world has opened for him: he promises Krystyna to try to "change things"—meaning that he will try to get out of having to shoot Sczuczka. His superior insists that he shall go through with the assassination; he obeys, and returns to tell Krystyna that he couldn't "change things". The nature of the conflict appears most clearly during his conversation with the nationalist lieutenant, to whom he is responsible. The lieutenant can only see the problem in military terms—or rather, he makes himself see it in these terms, since he himself has previously voiced doubts to the commander about the necessity of continuing the murders. He accuses Maciek of cowardice and desertion, of putting his private affairs before his duty, and reminds him that he joined the nationalist army voluntarily. Maciek attempts to explain the difference between killing now and killing during the Warsaw rising, but fails to get across to his friend the fact that his feeling for Krystyna is not just a "private affair", but a complete change of outlook. This scene refers back to an earlier one, in which Maciek lights some glasses of vodka to remind the other man of the "easy" days during the war, when they only had to fight and kill, before things became complicated.

Here is the centre of the film: the moral and political chaos which has followed the end of the war, for which Maciek is trying, in his stumbling and incoherent way, to find a solution. The Polish nationalists were, in a sense, betrayed by their leaders: they fought unquestioningly, expecting to inherit a free Poland after the war. Instead, their movement was smashed in the Warsaw rising: after the Communist Government came to power, the alternatives were only prison or to go on fighting. Suddenly, everything became hopeless and meaningless. This is a position which strikes familiar echoes today, both in and out of Poland. There is a new generation of cheated Poles, who are having to unlearn everything which the Krushchev speech exploded, who are having to think outside the old slogans. We are in the same sort of position: some people are working out new positions of morality—others are rejecting the old political formulations. Here and there the two meet.

Even in Maciek's appearance we find this contemporary note. He is dressed in narrow trousers—the girl also wears modern styles, and together they make a striking contrast to the other characters, who are so evidently people of 1945. His gestures, moods and mannerisms recall James Dean or Marlon Brando—as when he teases Krystyna at their first meeting, by snatching his glass away at the moment when she is about to pour him a drink. There is the same fumbling and searching for words, and the same restlessness.

Maciek crystallises the moral conflict in the film; but this conflict is thrown into relief by the treatment of subsidiary characters and incidents. On the one hand, there are the new rulers, pompous men, full of self-importance, with *arriviste* politicians dancing attendance on them, and backed up by a brutal security police; on the other, the old Poland, whose supporters are trying to keep up appearances, although they know that the world has changed, and their day has passed. Cut in with the sequence of Maciek's shooting and death, there is a long sequence at the end of the film in which a half-drunken, half-crazed noble organises the rump of the guests at the hotel into a grand finale. It turns out to be a Chopin Polonaise, hideously distorted by the exhausted musicians: to the music of this twisted Polonaise, the dancers move out of the seedy hotel

into the morning light. Old Poland is crumbling away. Everything is crumbling; morality is turned upside-down. Power is dangerous. And here we want to say: is it as bad as this? Has *everything* crumbled? Wajda's answer seems to be *no*: the love scenes between Maciek and Krystyna are treated with a delicacy and tenderness which refute the accusation, made by one national critic, that in this film Wajda has lost his humanism. There is still hope and the vision of a better future. There is still poetry.

Alan Lovell

I can only admire Wajda's awareness of the resources of the cinema and his self-confidence in using them. But they seem to have misled Rod Prince in his estimate of the film. Certainly, compared with the films normally seen in British cinemas, *Ashes and Diamonds* is a masterpiece. With his first two films, however, Wajda set himself rather higher standards than those provided by regular visits to British cinemas. *A Generation* and *Kanal* are the films to measure *Ashes and Diamonds* against.

It is quite true, as Rod Prince says, that *A Generation* is hampered by the Stalinist conditions under which it was made. Part of the merit of the film is in the way it overcomes these conditions. The awakening of a boy through contact with Marxism is an orthodox enough social realist theme. Wajda makes us believe in it. The boy's relationship with Marxism and with the girl are presented as part of a coherent reality. Love and politics are not mutually exclusive; in a sense, love is what politics is *about*. The young people are unable to realise the possibilities of life they have sensed but these possibilities remain. *Kanal* explores very similar themes—as its English sub-title "They Loved Life" reveals.

Superficially, *Ashes and Diamonds* also deals with the same themes. Its hero, Maciek, slowly becomes dissatisfied with his life and through his relationship with the girl, Krystyna, becomes aware of life's possibilities. But I do not accept Rod Prince's suggestion that implicit in this awareness is "hope and the vision of a better future". Implicit in it, surely, is a kind of romantic defeatism which reveals itself in Maciek's remark to his nationalist colleague "Everything's funny in this country"; in his response to the poem that Krystyna reads from the church wall. The way the love scene is shot, with its liquid close-ups and its slow dissolves surely emphasises the same quality.

This defeatism is not only present in Maciek. It runs throughout the film. It is peculiarly evident in Krystyna who throughout remains mysterious and sad (reminding

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one very much of Michele Morgan in Prevert and Carne's film *Quai des Brumes*). It runs through all of the Communist organiser Sczuczka's attitudes—he and his comrade talk sadly about the times past in Spain and in the forest, Sczuczka warning him sadly and uneasily about the exercising of power. It is in the old porter's memories of Warsaw. And it even creeps into the satirical portrait of old Poland. The scene where the representatives of old Poland dance pathetically to the dance band's absurd rendering of Chopin's Polonaise is savage. But when the film returns to the dancers, the music has become tuneful and the dancers have acquired a certain pathetic dignity. This shot is closely followed by one of the old porter unfurling the Polish flag as the morning sunlight blazes in. Added together, these shots almost amount to an elegy for the Poland that is passing away. In fact, the only person who shows any real confidence in the future is the band-wagon climbing mayor.

The only antidote to this defeatism is in the rather empty and flashy symbols of Sczuczka dying in Maciek's hands or the figure of Christ hanging upside down in the church where Maciek and Krystyna take shelter from the rain. There are other odd symbols which are less flashy than these, like the man ploughing the field immediately after the first killings, or the white horse, but they do not carry any weight in the film.

Overall, the film has a cold, empty feeling. This is surprising in a film which, on the surface, has a richness of both character and theme. Besides Maciek and Krystyna, there are Sczuczka and his comrade, the old porter, the countess and her associates, the mayor and his associates, the mayor's secretary and the old journalist, and the Russian officers; the themes that are touched on include power, love, comradeship, *arriviste* politicians, Warsaw and the passing of old Poland, the coming Russian occupation. It should all add up to a rich film.

The clue to its failure is, I think, early in the film. After the mistaken killings, Sczuczka arrives on the scene and is soon surrounded by a crowd of workers who ask him how long the killings are to go on. This is the only time that the presence of day to day life is felt in the film. Most of the remaining action takes place in the hotel which in effect seals the action off from the everyday world. None of the central characters in the film are completely real. Maciek and Krystyna, both in dress and mannerisms, are projections of a contemporary stereotype (the "rebel without a cause" stereotype of James Dean and Marlon Brando). The people from old Poland are just *representatives* of their class rather than people, the mayor a representative of *arriviste* politicians; the nationalists are caricatured, as, on a different level, are the mayor's secretary and the old journalist. And the background to their actions is either the flashy symbolic world of the upside down Christ and the exploding fireworks or the great gloomy dining and dancing rooms of the hotel.

"There is poetry," concludes Rod Prince. This seems to me merely a rhetorical remark. To have poetry we must have life and it is life that is missing from *Ashes and Diamonds*.

One is not surprised that Wajda has relapsed into this defeatist mood. The situation in Poland does not encourage optimism. But Wajda's pessimism is not the mature pessimism of a man who looks at the world squarely. The lack of an imaginative awareness of life which I have pointed to in the film suggests he has retreated from life into his own doubts and confusions. One can understand, but remembering *A Generation* and *Kanal* one can only hope that he will very soon come out of them.