

Observing Life Through a Camera

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Who raised me and what influenced me?

My parents — the traditional value of obligations and honor as a soldier.

School — a classical high school influenced by Roman and Greek culture.

Catholic Church — the doctrine of God.

When war came in 1939, I had a very patriotic and ethical world view.

What did I see during the war?

I realized that starting a war without declaration was justified because it was an effective way to baffle the enemy. It meant, therefore, that telling a lie was a winning strategy. The winner protected no one and the loser had to die (for example the extinction of the Jews and the lack of reaction from the people of the world). It was possible to plan extinction of a certain race. It was not simple to eliminate the political opposition.

The only artistic things from the winner's viewpoint were marching armies and paintings for propaganda purposes.

I realized that Roman Law and Mediterranean culture had perished.

Could I possibly throw away such experiences when I become a movie director? No, I could not. Therefore, these experiences produced fruit in the form of a movie. That was my second movie, "Sewer" in 1956. What I wanted to be shown in this movie was neither a battle with winning in mind nor patience, but death with honor.

The end of the war was shocking for the Polish people. Neither our expectations nor hopes were at all realized. Poland became a member of the Socialist Block in the Yalta Conference without even consulting the Polish people. Although Poland was peaceful, there were continuous struggles for political power. From this theme I produced a movie called "Ashes and Diamonds," which showed what happened in the world beyond Stalin's iron curtain. This movie had a big impact and it therefore took 10 years to be shown in the U.S.S.R.

This movie did not have a lot in it explicitly, but implied a lot.

In this movie the main character was a nice young man who enjoyed a happy life. He killed a communist in order to fulfill an obligation, but he did not give the impression to the viewers that he was a rogue.

Although his ethics were hidden deeply in the movie, the viewers recognized them. Due to the movie's uniquely Polish theme, a lot of people in the world wished to see it.

Now, there was a necessity to think about a new problem. Polish people have had a sense of inferiority that people in the world have not understood Polish art since around the 19th century. Poland's complicated and crooked history (such as the loss of independence, the division of the country, and revolts against Russia, Prussia and Austria) gave Polish artists a theme which was impossible to express in their art.

It is quite natural that the Polish people, especially those who had experienced the war or who witnessed the early days after the end of the war had different eyes than the people in Tokyo, Paris or Los Angeles when they saw "Ashes and Diamonds." But on the other hand, did the Polish people understand everything about the movies directed by Kurosawa, Ozu, or Bergman?

Why did so many people see this film? Because this film was composed of endless dramatic factors adding to the political theme. It also had the classical eternity of drama. In other words, "Ashes and Diamonds" had universality.

Because of this experience, I had to dismiss the idea that the Polish arts were closed to the world by the nature of their character. But my next three movies were failures. I recognized the reason for their failure was nothing else than my own lack of ability.

After "Ashes and Diamonds," I thought I was a talented movie director but after the failure of my following three movies I changed my mind. "Ashes and Diamonds" was made through inspiration and favorable circumstances and I therefore viewed it as more of an accident than a conscious creative effort.

The confidence I had felt in the early stages of my career and the failure of my later films brought me to the conclusion that I needed to go to a foreign country. I thought that only in a foreign country could I realize my ambitions. But unfortunately, I could not find the script which I had dreamed of. Besides, the country I chose was not an appropriate one. I should have gone to the United States. There I could have met first

class cinema people and had relationships with them. I feel I could have found my place there. However, my true aim was not to be a movie director in America, but instead to realize my position in Poland.

But that experience did not improve my situation.

I wasted almost two years of time making a movie that I felt I should have produced instead. Furthermore, I did not learn anything from the experience, because I had to be a teacher to my Yugoslavian friends. I also lost my rhythm after leaving my country and for a while, even after I returned to Poland the situation got worse. Before I left Poland, I produced a film every year. But at this point, since the passage of time, I could not make a decision in choosing a theme for a movie.

It is very interesting to know that my perplexity was caused, in a deep sense, by a short time of latitude and freedom starting in 1956 and later on as well. That period was a time of regression politically and socially. The movie world could not avoid being influenced by this either. In the evening, many political and artistic budding flowers of the Polish film world were lost. However, that period of time might not be considered as an entire waste of time for me because the ideas for scripts and plans of films which I used later were born during that time. Among them, are the two most important films: "Man of Marble" and "Land of Promise"

Due to the long unsuccessful years from 1958 to 1968, I finally convinced myself to make a fresh start and adopt new principles of film making. These were:

- (1) Not to adapt scripts from literature or stories.
- (2) The dialogue must be the product of a script writer, who is just as important as the actors and actresses.
- (3) That it must be based on my own life.
- (4) I should have a new point of view in my work, in producing, filming, and montages.

No display is needed in the studio.

With these principles in mind, the movie called "Everything for Sale" was made, which showed the history of an unfinished film. The people who influenced the theme were the director (myself) and an actor (Spigunuff Tibuski). It was a story about a man who was killed in a train accident one day.

This movie saved me from adverse circumstances and gave me a hopeful feeling independent of whether it was successful or not. First of all, I felt happy again about making a film. Without a happy feeling I could only make boring films.

There are many directors who think the main problem of making films, although they know enough techniques to do so, is to find a certain theme. They have been waiting for a long time. I was careful not to make the same mistake. Working should bring about a happy feeling and not be a burden. When I make a film every year and do my work systematically, I never feel that my work is a burden.

The most important and aggressive period in my whole life started in just this way. I had already started theatrical work from 1958. In theatrical work, I fell into the same slump which I had experienced in film making after several successful plays based on my own intense experiences. For that reason, I did not do any theatrical work for several years after that. However, after experiencing a new hopeful period, I returned to the theater to produce “The Demons” by Dostoevski. That was the beginning of my own theater.

Previously, however, in the middle of this period, I produced a simple film called “White Birch.” My feeling towards nature, as well as the world, was dull because of my artistic and personal setbacks and failures, and the environment of the hopeless period of politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Many years and seasons had passed without change and everything in the world was gray.

Making a film which takes place in nature at the beginning of Spring, which seemed a most intangible thing at the time, brought me great pleasure and also convinced me that the most natural way of life for a movie director was looking through a camera.

I assured myself of this again when I produced the TV film called “Piwatt and other people” in the Federal Republic of Germany. This was a more conscious attempt in making a film, since this was the second foreign country I had worked in and I had learned from my experiences in Yugoslavia.

- (1) First I chose a theme which could never be selected in Poland due to censorship (this was “The Life of Jesus Christ”).
- (2) The movie was based on the story written by Bulhakowa, but I only used a small

part of the original.

- (3) I used only Polish actors and actresses whom I had worked with several times before. Thus, they spoke Polish in the movie.
- (4) For all the scenes in which Jesus is betrayed, at the council and nailing Jesus to the cross, I inserted pictures, both old and new, of ruined buildings which had been created by Hitler during the Third Reich.

With this method I was finally able to overcome my weak points which caused the failure of the two films I had made before in foreign countries. More than that, I believed making a new film was a totally new experience which would not be repeated, but still there were a lot of things to learn from experience.

Now let's move to my two most important movies, which are:

“Land of Promise” and
“Man of Marble.”

As I mentioned before, these two movies might have been made earlier, but there were labor revolts in Gdańsk and the Szczin seashore area as well as a tragic incident which happened in Gdansk. Following that, Gomulka was out of office. As a result, social and political themes were opened to the film industry in Poland.

Actually, it was not opened instantly. During that period I was looking for a new theme and returned to filming “Land of Promise.” Poland was actively hoping to recover economic stability and attempts were made to stimulate people's interest in getting economic aid from the West. Therefore, it was a good environment for a movie which showed a private person's economic initiative who had the responsibility to act on his own.

Lodz was the town shown in "Land of Promise." Although I had come to know the town while studying film making, I never liked it. However, as I watched the mansions, poor cottages and factories through the camera, I came to feel closer toward this unusual place and felt happy to have an opportunity to film the land which would disappear some day.

Fortunately, this movie was successful at the Moscow Film Festival and I got an award standing with my movie teacher, the great master Akira Kurosawa, who also got an award for his film. This event made it possible for me to start writing the

scenario for “Man of Marble” which I had had in my mind for 11 years.

This movie was the one to discover the hidden and untouched period called Joseph Stalin’s “mistakes and permission” era. The situation of the 1950s confronted the young people the most. I remember all of us in the Film College were forced to attend youth organizations at that time. How much did these obligations destroy people’s character and ruin their souls?

The kind of things shown in this film were:

- (1) That I have had a lot of experience as a movie director and that this movie was the story of my experiences.
- (2) The scenario written especially for this movie did not have any useless extra material which one usually has with literature.
- (3) I was active both in the fields of movie and theater. Thus, I knew many actors and actresses in Poland very well.

With all this I was able to make a film about the most important things the government had hidden most deeply. In the country they portrayed the workers as nothing else but laborers or propaganda objects for labor union activists.

My theme was to deny such stereotypes and show that each of the workers in Poland were individuals.

People who would see this film would understand what I was saying. But those who did not see the movie would believe what I was saying also.

This did not happen because of influence on the actors. The vigorous rhythm in this movie was made by the actors and actresses themselves and nothing else.

Our country was oppressed by the politics of Gomulka. But step by step we were awakened. And then we, having our hopes, turned against the promise made by Gierek.

I wanted to show the process in an urgent manner as well as in a clear tempo and rhythm. Moreover, I had to appeal to the viewers. I wanted to think about every scene that was shown. The 1950s moved between the interest for “records” and our daily gray life. But I had my own different rhythm.

However, the most interesting experience which would give a great meaning to my life later was the last part of the movie. Please remember that I had to adjust some parts to the present situation since the scenario was written 11 years ago.

I asked several questions of myself. How would the hero, “Man of Marble” be? He would retire from his political life and go to a foreign country. But could he have no interest in the political events in Poland which would happen later? Because in those days the most important event was the workers’ revolt in the seashore area, I thought, he could not help but join the laborers’ movement.

In the revolt there were many tragic scenes and a lot of people witnessed a dead man lying on a board carried by his four friends. At that time nobody knew about that picture, which is well known now.

A gravestone for a “Man of Marble” was not shown in the scene in 1970, which I could not show at the time because the scene was cut by the government censors. Gierek got political power as a result of revolts in the seashore area. He controlled it in his own way which was different from Gomulaka who arrested workers attending the December meeting and jailed them. The problems in the seashore, however, were still unsolved. A gate in the Lenin Shipyard which was not symbolic at that time but became so in August of 1980, and has remained there.

The ethics of political life which I wanted to tackle in “Man of Marble” led me to make the next movie, “Man of Iron.”

“Man of Marble” was not sent to the International Film Festival as a Polish movie, but was seen by foreign people. The movie caught the minds of viewers who were looking for an ideological base. They were not the activists of the Polish Youth Union. They threw away their ideal of youth like a caricature. It was not true. This movie appealed to each individual. He was not the intellectual Maciek Chetrmicki anymore. He was a worker, Mateuse Birkut.

In order to make this movie, I had to take another artistic and political road. But I was not deeply impressed with the success and response of this movie. I knew that technique counted more than anything in making this kind of movie. People who have made movies for a long time, could make them from their experiences. But I would not repeat this kind of gamble.

I did not want to be the kind of movie director that puts a higher priority on politics than on the spirit of the movie because he has devoted himself to politics.

Still I loved movies and wanted to be a movie director. I wanted to be an artist touching on many themes, but not to be a slave to making political movies. I returned to

the author of "White Birch" and made a screen version of his next novel, "Daughters in Villuko." This was a story about a woman who lived in a mansion in the countryside, with a surrounding view much like a water color painting.

The reality around me and the political situation, however, forced me to return to politics quickly. For at that time I was not alone. A group of future film directors who would be my successors one day, under the name Group X, had been earnestly working with me under my lead over the past year.

I got closer to the young people's way of thinking and also to the themes which were currently alive in Polish movies by contacting them daily, reading their scenarios, talking about the themes, and arranging the materials with them.

The fact that "Man of Marble" went out into the world was not only a fact of the past, but also the present, since it was adopted as a slogan and there was great demand for more of the same type.

In this manner I made my next movies, which were "Without Pain" and "Conductor." Those were similar in terms of content and form to other movies made by other people at that time. For example, there were "Protective Color" by Krzysztofa Zanussiego, "Amateur" by Krzysztofa Kieslowskiego, "Country Actor" by Agnieszka Holland, and "Dance Teacher" by Feliksa Falka. In those movies, they showed each theme combining the things hidden by social and political systems packed with lies. Also those movies gave warning of the social tension caused by ignoring the present situation in our country.

For the last part of "Man of Marble," I had a son of Birkut appear and put in the scene where he recalls the truth of his father. Maciek Birkut would think of his own character soon. Those series of movies, which were called "ethical anxiety," gave flexibility to the movie industry and reinforced each person's position. We caught up on the film making and organizational aspect of the business through the efforts of young talented people.

The country was about to have a serious incident. Although we made our movies wishing to change our present social relationships, I think that none of our artists could have imagined the scale and nature of the change which would soon come about. None of our artists could imagine that we would support the workers in Poland, who by actually accepting their own propaganda as the leading power of the race, would

gain power. How could we imagine that the labor movement would become solidarity and workers would acquire their rights through their great efforts!

My intuition to end “Man of Marble” with the accent on Gdańsk was, therefore, quite relevant to the political reality.

Because of the fact that I was not able to use any kind of documentary film footage for “Man of Marble” and because of my opinion, this time I, as the president of the Polish Film Society, demanded that the government send a camera crew to Gdansk in order to record everything going on there. (In this way, the documentary film, “Workers in 1980” was made.) I visited the shipyard in the middle of those strikes and heard a voice asking me to make a sequel movie to “Man of Marble.” One of the young workers said, “Please make a movie named ‘Man of Iron’.”

In the middle of the madness — discussions, meetings and gatherings to reform every field of economic and social life of our country, I turned to make the requested film with great hope. I could fully understand that the worse the situation would be, the faster the opportunity would slip away, or that I could not even make “Man of Iron.” Thus, I started to make the movie in the beginning of 1981. The scenario was not well done compared to the previous ones and I had a lot of work as the president of the Polish Film Society. Independent of those reasons, however, I was aware that the movie should be finished before a tragedy could happen.

I concluded my urgent work with the “Golden Palm” award at the 1981 Cannes Film Festival. During the film making, I got assistance from hundreds of people. The workers in the shipyard said, “Please make a movie named ‘Man of Iron!’ or “Please make our movie!” They substantiated the requests from the society.

I knew that several of the other movies submitted were better. Since I had a lot of experience amassed over such a long period, I was able to make up my mind to insert the social processes which were happening at that time, and not finished yet, into plays and movies.

The movie was warmly received at the time due to the peoples’ interest in the Solidarity movement in Poland. I have not finished my duty yet. The movie has not been shown yet in the U.S.S.R. and other socialist countries.

At this point, I will not analyze my future movies. This chapter remains undecided, but the proclamation of Martial Law on December 13 brought unexpected

results, which was a shocking incident for me as well as most people in Poland. We all realized at that time that the slow step by step activities to improve our country's systems and change them to fit the character of the Polish people were impossible to carry out.

Were all the social and educational activities such as making movies and writing stories in which we hoped for more freedom and truth worth it? Yes, they were. They cannot be erased. No one can erase the pages in books, the pictures on the screens, or the scenes on the stages, because they had already entered into the Polish people's mind, and they would stay deeply in their souls without notice.

Thus, putting separately all the mistakes I made selecting themes, making movies, or producing plays, I do not think my life has been fruitless despite the difficulties and restrictions I experienced due to politics.