

# Andrzej Wajda

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**THREE WAR FILMS—A GENERATION (1955), KANAL (1957), ASHES AND DIAMONDS (1958).** Andrzej Wajda, director. Widescreen anamorphic (1.66:1) and Fullscreen (1.33:1), B&W, Dolby Digital 2.0 (mono, Polish with English subtitles). Commentaries, interviews. 3-disc. Criterion.



In the mid-to-late 1950s, around the same time that a group of young directors mounted the New Wave cinema in France, another group was quite separately exploring a still bolder iconoclasm across the Iron Curtain in Poland. The Poles were bucking the ruling Communist Party and recent memories of a Nazi occupation far more brutal than the Vichy regime in wartime Paris. As a consequence, though they shared exuberance with the French New Wave, the landmark Polish films of the era also carried a weightiness, which could be profound or ponderous or, sometimes, both.

Andrzej Wajda and his colleagues came of age during a brief “thaw” in Warsaw politics. Stalin had died in 1953, and bureaucracies throughout the Soviet empire were shedding, to varying degrees, their Stalinist holdovers. In Poland, the new president was Wladyslaw Gomulka, a moderate reformer, a former inmate in one of Stalin’s prisons and, most importantly, a Pole—as opposed to another

thug sent from Moscow—who opened up windows and let fresh air circulate, especially in the realm of culture.

The three films in this Criterion box all deal with the Warsaw uprising, the Poles’ seminal experience of World War II, which climaxed with the Nazi occupiers snuffing out the last enclaves of rebellion while the Soviet army—ostensibly the rebels’ allies—waited across the border, letting the killing continue, so that the Kremlin would have fewer troublemakers to deal with once the war was over and Moscow replaced Berlin as Poland’s imperial dominator.

When these films were made, the official propaganda held that the Red Army *did* aid the uprising. Wajda couldn’t challenge this myth directly (Warsaw in the late ’50s wasn’t quite Prague in the late ’60s), but he could take subtle swipes. For instance, in *Kanal*, the second film of this trilogy, the last resisters try to escape through the city’s sewers. Two of them, the romantic couple, think they’ve found a gateway into the river, but it’s blocked by bars. They see free land just across the way, but it might as well be the other side of the earth. Every Pole watching *Kanal* would have known that this land was the riverbank where Soviet soldiers stood by and watched. They would have detected that Wajda was blasting both the Nazis and their *other* occupiers, the ones Poland was still suffering.

Similarly, *Ashes and Diamonds*, the third film, was based on a very popular novel, which takes place on the last day of World War II, as the Communists—who, at the time, consisted of local resisters as well as Moscow emissaries—are setting up a government while remnants of the Polish Home Army are plotting to assassinate one of the new leaders. The novel’s protagonist is the Communist labor leader. In the film, the labor leader is a decent man, yet the main—and, more daring still, the most appealing—character is the assassin.

Wajda’s first film, *A Generation*, about a group of young Poles who

defer love and life to join the resistance, is the weakest of the three: the characters are shallow, the plot sentimental. But *Kanal* and *Ashes and Diamonds* are both powerful films, in part because they reject the false heroics of official mythology. *Kanal* takes place at the *end* of the uprising; there is nothing heroic about slogging through the sewers; the focus is more on human and moral drama than on political conflict. *Ashes and Diamonds* is the tale of a brazen resistance soldier—a veteran of the uprising—who, just as he’s about to carry out his order of assassination, falls in love with a beautiful barmaid, realizes he might lead a different sort of life, and struggles with the dilemmas. The film is about the old order versus the new order, the personal versus the political, and the impossibility of real happiness and resolution, in a country under occupation, whatever the stripe of the occupiers.

*Ashes and Diamonds* is particularly riveting for two further reasons. First, Wajda had by this time matured as a filmmaker. As he notes in an interview among the DVD’s special features, he was greatly influenced by the films of Orson Welles and John Ford, and borrowed their techniques—Dutch angles and layered depth-of-focus shots—to potent effect. Second, he cast Zbigniew Cybulski as his assassin-hero. Cybulski, 30, was a heartthrob, an existential-rebel in the mold of James Dean (Wajda says the likeness was intentional), and an exhilarating actor full of surprises. In the film, he wears jeans, a leather jacket, and dark glasses—looking more like a ’50s biker than a ’40s resister—yet the effect gives the character, and the film, an aptly contemporary resonance.

The transfers for all three films are based on fine-grain 35mm prints struck from the original negatives. Despite Criterion’s loving restoration work, some noise and scratches remain and the focus is a bit soft. Still, especially on the later two films, the cinematography’s beauty shines through. 