

Camera Language and Composition in *Man of Marble* (1977) by Andrzej Wajda

Wenyuan Zhao

School of Arts & Creative Technologies, University of York, York, YO10 5FZ, UK

Abstract: This analysis delves into the film *Man of Marble* by Andrzej Wajda, focusing on camera language and composition to depict the transformation of the protagonist, Birkut. Using low-angle shots, the film symbolizes Birkut's shift from conformity to defiance in the socialist system. The composition of frames emphasizes his evolving identity, particularly when he stands up for justice, only to be silenced and isolated by the crowd. The camera work and composition highlight the profound changes in Birkut's identity, as he becomes alienated from the submissive society. Wajda's film masterfully employs visual storytelling to convey these themes.

Keywords: Andrzej Wajda, Polish Film, Camera Languages, Identity, Low-angle lens, Socialist system

1. Introduction

Man of Marble is a movie made by Andrzej Wajda in 1977^[1]. It describes Agnieszka (Krystyna Janda), a student who is about to graduate from film school and wants to make a biographical documentary about Birkut (Jerzy Radziwiłowicz), an exemplary bricklayer from the 1950s. She wants to make a biographical documentary about Birkut (Jerzy Radziwiłowicz), a model bricklayer from the 1950s, as her graduation project. At the museum, she saw a stone statue of the former model worker abandoned in a locked warehouse. Agnieszka becomes intrigued by the twists and turns of his life, for example, how he became a model worker, was accused and convicted of a crime, and was eventually rehabilitated. Agnieszka did a lot of research and information gathering to find out what happened. She also interviewed important people at the time of the history.

Finally she found Birkut's son and learned that the hero, once known as the *Man of Marble*, was dead. Even the tombstone in the cemetery does not have Birkut's name on it. The movie was taken directly from the real life of the time. The officially created myth of the laboring man was disillusioned. And once discarded, the fallen idol is reduced to a name that is strictly forbidden to be mentioned. Carved into marble like a ghost, the individual is completely erased by the system.

The movie consists of three different segments. The first is Agnieszka making a movie about the journey to find Birkut. (As shown in figure 1)



Figure 1: The director is filming the statue of Birkut. (Wajda, 1977)

The second is some news footage from the 1950s which are in black and white. These news clips would be shown as Agnieszka gathered information. They are mostly materials used to promote Birkut's model labourers. (As shown in figure 2)



Figure 2: Birkut is a model worker. (Wajda, 1977)

The last type of image is some colour images from the 1950s. They document some of the realities of the time in film. They include episodes on how Birkut became a model worker through a bricklaying competition, and Birkut's constant petitions to get justice for his friends, which eventually led to his conviction. (As shown in figure 3)



Figure 3: Birkut was forced to move. (Wajda, 1977)

It's worth noting that most of the footage in the movie about the 1970s was done using a handheld camera. This gives a sense of constant movement and immediacy. (Schuppert, 2006)^[2] At the same time, the use of hand-held camera in Agnieszka's timeline creates a sense of documentary objectivity and the movie is quite pseudo-documentary.

Like *Ashes and Diamonds*, the movie has a very strong discussion of identity. This focuses mainly on Birkut, the bricklayer. His characterization has a very clear character arc, that is, he goes from being an advocate and beneficiary of the government system to a rebel. The characterization of the character is of great relevance in Wajda's films. Because Wajda's movies are movies about reality, Wajda himself stated in an interview with Dan Yakir that he chooses different subjects for his movies when he wants to say something. (Yakir, 1984)^[3] So Birkut represents Wajda's political leanings. Compared to 1958's *Ashes and Diamonds*, this 20-year span gives Andrzej Wajda a clearer political orientation, i.e. against the Soviet puppet government. Similarly, the language of the camera, while retaining Wajda's original characteristics, has changed accordingly to the subject matter.

2. Camera Language and Composition

2.1 Low Angle Lens and Identity

In *Man of Marble*, Birkut is supposed to be an ordinary man. He wanted to live in the newly built socialist system in Poland. So in the first part of the movie, Wajda has been using the same height as the level of the actor's eyes. (As shown in figure 4)



Figure 4: Documentary footage of Birkut (Wajda, 1977)

There is nothing special about this camera angle, and the director uses it to show that at this point in the movie, Birkut is nothing special, just an ordinary worker who wants to conform to society. As the plot progresses Birkut's status as a protagonist is established. Wajda uses camera language to focus more on the character's emotions. For example, after Birkut and his friend accept the match, close-ups are used to show the excitement of the two men. (As shown in figure 5-6)



Figure 5: Birkut told of the opportunity to become a role model. (Wajda, 1977)



Figure 6: Birkut's friend. (Wajda, 1977)

Then the low angle shots begin to be used after Birkut's pre-fight training. This is when the low-angle

shots are used to subtly tell the story of Birkut's complex psychology. Normally, low-angle shots are often used to emphasize authority or power, but here it ironically serves to highlight Birkut's defiance and resistance despite the oppressive and unequal environment. This shot also sets the stage for the later changes in his identity of self. For example, after he begins his pre-competition training, he is forced by those in charge to eat large amounts of high-protein food every day. He is also forced to accept the head's formulaic food fillers when he clearly can not eat anymore. As well as his habit of getting a haircut on Sundays, and the person in charge getting a barber to cut his hair on the spot as if he had not heard him. This made him feel that his right to free choice was being ignored. So when the photographer approached him again, he showed his dissatisfaction. The low angle of the shot accurately conveys Birkut's dissatisfaction as well as Wajda's sarcasm, as Birkut is already questioning his own identity. (As shown in figure 7)



Figure 7: Low angle shot of Birkut talking to the photographer. (Wajda, 1977)

This low-angle view not only highlights his plight in this situation but also deepens the audience's understanding of the changes that have occurred in his internal identity.

2.2 Composition, Other Camera Language and Identity

The camera language that accentuates the change in his identity comes after his friend is captured as a spy. By this time Wajda has already been shooting frequently with low angle shots. But the design of the shots and frame compositions is not limited to this. For example, when Birkut is examined along with his friend and realizes that his friend is missing, the three men in the frame are lined up in a straight line at an oblique angle. Such a composition would make the image more extended, as the three men are divided into a front, centre and back view, standing in sequence from the right to the left of the image, giving it a more impactful feel. It is also worth noting that the person in the forefront is back of the head facing the camera. This eye-orientation design along with the facial lighting on Birkut's face will keep the viewer's eyes focused on Birkut, emphasizing Birkut's importance in this image even more. (As shown in figure 8)



Figure 8: Birkut is located at a prominent point on the screen. (Wajda, 1977)

There is a great shot that follows where Birkut wants to speak at a meeting to speak up for the injustices that his fellow workers have suffered. He comes face to face with the crowd of people sitting in the room. This is a metaphor for the fact that the crowd. Combined with the shaking of the handheld camera, this foreshadows the anger that is about to spill out of Birkut's heart. Next he makes a heated

accusation on stage, but is unplugged from the speaker. This means that he loses his right to speak. (As shown in figure 9-10)



Figure 9: Birkut comes through the crowd. (Wajda, 1977)



Figure 10: Birkut's scream on stage. (Wajda, 1977)

At this point, the sides of the frame are blocked by the crowd, which makes Birkut seem to be wrapped up in the centre of the frame, creating a sense of oppression. Then the image is zoomed out, and he looks very small in the crowd. (As shown in figure 11-12)



Figure 11: Birkut is surrounded and scrutinised. (Wajda, 1977)



Figure 12: Birkut is isolated and insignificant. (Wajda, 1977)

In the end, he can only walk off the stage in disappointment. At this point, he walks with his back to the people, which also expresses the metaphor of his eventual turning his back on the numb and submissive people. The camera is still hand-held at this point, showing the great sadness and disappointment in Birkut's heart. As he is about to walk out, he sees the three workers he worked with, standing at the end of the line, not singing the same praises as the others, but not daring to support Birkut, and the three of them gradually lower their heads. This image uses the same compositional approach that creates the feeling of being held hostage. The three of them are in the center and the crowd next to them creates a cage of submission for them. This image and camera design clearly expresses that Birkut's identity has been completely transformed at this point in his life. He does not fit in with the social environment.(As shown in figure 13-14)



Figure 13: Birkut walks angrily off the stage. (Wajda, 1977)



Figure 14: Three workers who were afraid to look at Birkut. (Wajda, 1977)

Some say Andrzej Wajda's *Diamonds and Ashes* devalues the lone hero in favor of collectivism. (Insdorf, 1983)^[4] Others say that throughout the war trilogy, Andrzej Wajda shows his political conscience to his fellow Poles. In *Ashes and Diamonds*, he makes it clear that Polish heroes were killed by Soviet fire. (Britch and Lewis, 1986)^[5] In this thesis, on the other hand, prefers the former part of the argument, but does not agree with the idea that this movie shows a vision of collectivism. *Diamonds and Ashes* merely ponders the question of whether it is time for Poles to pursue individual interests. The reasons for this are summarized as follows. Firstly, the social circumstances of the time were such that Poland had just finished the war against Germany. This had left Polish society riddled with holes and at

the same time had left the Polish people physically and mentally exhausted. Being a citizen of the Polish state allowed people to ignore their personal needs for too long. At the moment of the war's end, the average citizen would be torn between his or her multiple identities: would he or she look for his or her own needs in life or would he or she continue to stand firm in his or her belief in a free Poland? These hesitations are tapped into by Andrzej Wajda and presented in the movie. Also aiding this is the language of the shots in the movie, as mentioned in the section on the analysis of the language of the shots above.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* serves as a cinematic masterpiece that vividly captures the transformation of the protagonist, Birkut, through the astute use of camera language and composition.

The intentional shift in the camera's eye level and the gradual introduction of low-angle shots play a pivotal role in delineating Birkut's changing identity. Initially presented at eye level, symbolizing his desire to assimilate into the societal norms, the gradual transition to low-angle shots portrays Birkut's burgeoning defiance and inner turmoil against the oppressive system. This reversal of the low-angle shot's traditional connotation of power serves to accentuate Birkut's struggle for autonomy and individuality within a system that suppresses such inclinations.

Moreover, the deliberate composition of frames underscores key moments in Birkut's journey. Scenes such as his impassioned attempt to address the injustices faced by his fellow workers highlight his growing isolation and disillusionment. The placement of Birkut within the frame, often surrounded or dwarfed by the crowd, emphasizes his gradual alienation from a society that fails to recognize or support his pursuit of justice. These visual storytelling techniques effectively communicate the profound changes in Birkut's identity, ultimately leading to his symbolic disconnection from the conformist society.

This film not only captures a specific historical moment but also resonates with universal themes of individuality, justice, and resistance, making it a lasting cinematic testament to the complexities of human identity in the face of oppressive regimes.

References

- [1] Wajda, A. (1977). *Man of Marble*. Available at: <https://www.333ys.tv/vodplay/72900-3-1.html> [Accessed: 26 June 2023].
- [2] Schuppert, F. (2006). Andrzej Wajda's *A Generation* and *Man of Marble*. *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media*. Available at: <https://openjournals.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/kinema/article/view/1135/1360> [Accessed: 11 August 2023]
- [3] Yakir, D. (1984). 'Interview: Andrzej Wajda', *Film Comment*. Available at: <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/interview-andrzej-wajda/> [Accessed: 23 July 2023]
- [4] Insdorf, A. (1983). *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*. New York. Random. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/indelibleshadows00insd> [Accessed: 11 August 2023]
- [5] Lewis, C. and Britch, C. (1986). Andrzej Wajda's War Trilogy: A Retrospective. *Film Criticism*, 10(3), pp. 22–35. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44018814> [Accessed: 7 July 2023].