

2

ANDRZEJ WAJDA'S KATYN

*For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?*

—WALTER BENJAMIN, "THE IMAGE OF PROUST"

THE SUBJECT of *Katyn* (2007) is the massacre of nearly the entirety of the elite Polish officer corps at the hands of the Soviet secret police (the NKVD) during the Second World War. As Andrzej Wajda acknowledged, the film project had haunted him for a long time. In 1940 his own father had been one of the twelve thousand officers massacred at Katyn, a spa in Soviet Russia converted into an execution ground for Polish POWs. He was thirteen years old at the time, and in the following years of the war and its aftermath, he had been the helpless witness to his mother's anguished waiting for the return of her husband and her eventual grief and early death. But Wajda could not have undertaken to make a film on such a taboo topic until the Polish People's Republic finally collapsed under the pressure of the democratic movement in 1989. As Piotr Witek affirms, "From the end of World War II until 1989, Polish cinema, like almost all fields of social life in Poland, was subject to overwhelming pressure and control from the communist state, which was watching over the purity of socialist orthodoxy in the work of scholars, writers, journalists, and filmmakers." The past was not open to interpretation: historical narratives followed the party line, and their mode of representation was an obligatory socialist realism. The fall of the People's Republic in 1989 brought about an ideological liberation: "History became both a subject of open argument and a

free area of debate between different social actors: historians, journalists, artists, writers, filmmakers, and ordinary people.”¹

Katyn was, then, a deferred project. It came at the end of a career devoted to the representation of Polish history and the struggle for national independence, an artistic undertaking with few parallels in film history. Indeed, Wajda intended *Katyn* as the continuation and completion of his films about the Second World War, which had covered a broad range of topics: the German occupation and the stories of resistance; the persecution of Jews in ghettos and concentration camps; acts of collaboration with the enemy, both German and Soviet. In his interview for *Telewizja Polska*, Wajda expressed hope that *Katyn* would constitute the last film of the Polish school, “a sort of farewell, the last movie of his type.”²

HITLER AND STALIN IN POLAND

Germany began bombing attacks against Polish cities on September 1, 1939. This was the first attempt by a modern air force to terrorize a civilian population. Beginning on September 10, the German air force began the systematic bombing of Warsaw, the first time a major European city had been attacked in this fashion. On September 17, 1939, in coordination with the Third Reich, the Red Army, half a million strong, swept across Poland from the East toward their meeting with the Germans who were simultaneously invading Poland from the West. Their rendezvous points with German forces would establish the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, dividing Poland into two zones of occupation. In the treaty of September 28, 1939, Warsaw came under German control, and Lithuania was occupied by the Soviets. The Polish state, and with it the Polish nation, as such, ceased to exist.

Stalin spoke of his alliance with Germany as “cemented in blood.” Indeed, sixty thousand Poles perished during the double invasion.³ En route to their encounter with the German Wehrmacht, the Red Army met the Polish army fleeing the Wehrmacht and desperately looking for Soviet military support. Instead of assisting stateless Poland—the official pretense for invasion—the Red Army made the Polish forces prisoners of war. Although the ordinary soldiers were soon released,

the officers remained in captivity. This was part of Stalin's strategy for crushing Polish resistance to the Soviet occupation: "decapitate" Poland⁴ by eliminating its intelligentsia, a strategy the Germans also adopted. The Polish officer corps were made up not so much of military men as of highly educated intellectuals and professionals without whom the future of a free Poland was cast in doubt. The officers were taken by Soviet prison trains to locations in Ukraine (Starobilsk) and in Soviet Russia (Kozelsk and Ostashkov). From there, the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, transported the officers to isolated locations, where they massacred approximately twelve thousand of them. In the coming months the forces of the NKVD would arrest over 109,400 Polish citizens and send them to the Gulags.⁵

In what was formerly Western Poland, Germany ruled. Its goal was to rid Poland of the Poles, whether Christians or Jews, by deporting them to the East, and to annex the territory to its empire. The instrument of aggression against the Polish population was the Einsatzgruppe, whose mission was to pacify the country and eliminate the educated classes (the deportation of the entire professoriate of Krakow University is documented in *Katyn*). After annexing parts of Poland lying on the German border, the Germans left the rest of the zone as a "dumping ground for unwanted Poles and Jews."⁶ In the East, the Soviets, whose motivations were strikingly similar, annexed "Western Belarus" and "Western Ukraine."

Despite significant differences, the ambitions and tactics adopted by Hitler and Stalin show strong parallels, as Timothy Snyder amply documents in his authoritative *Bloodlands*. As we will see, *Katyn* also raises the question of the comparability of the iniquities carried out by Stalinists and Nazis. As Snyder points out, it was Russian novelist Vasily Grossman who first had the courage, in *Life and Fate* (1959, published in the West in 1980) and *Everything Flows* (incomplete but published in the West in 1970), to represent points of comparison between the actions of the two regimes:

He then broke the taboos of a century, placing the crimes of the Nazi and Soviet regimes on the same pages, in the same scenes, in two novels whose reputations only grow with time. Grossman meant not to unify the two systems analytically within a single sociological scheme (such as

Arendt's totalitarianism) but rather to relieve them of their own ideological accounts of themselves, and thereby lift the veil on their common inhumanity.⁷

Wajda also places Nazi and Soviet crimes “in the same scenes,” so to speak. On the one hand, he develops narrative parallels between the German-occupied zones of Poland and the Soviet prisoner of war camp at Kozelsk. In the film's second half, the Soviet occupation of Krakow in the postwar period “mirrors” the German occupation of the city in the first. Indeed, by means of this narrative rhetoric, one term of the comparison contaminates the other: the Einsatzgruppe and the Gestapo, whose iniquity had long been established by history, infects the Soviet NKVD and the Polish secret police, instruments of oppression long obfuscated by the Stalinist left's distorted history of socialism.

In his representation of the Soviet POW camp where the Polish officer corps is eliminated by a bullet in the nape of the neck, Wajda exposes what the Soviet Union and post-Soviet regimes had continued to deny: that the Road to Socialism and its murderous trajectory had allowed Communism to “deprive groups of human beings of their right to be regarded as human.”⁸ This essential narrative in twentieth-century history—with its changing cast of perpetrators—will follow us in a later chapter devoted to Rithy Panh's exposure of genocidal incarceration under the communist regime of the Khmer Rouge. I was not unaware of the ironic parallel I was drawing by devoting the subsequent chapter to the “anticommunist” genocide perpetrated by the fascistic Suharto regime in Indonesia.

THE CRIME AND THE LIE

In his interview with *Telewizja Polska* entitled “Post-Mortem: A Conversation with Andrzej Wajda,” the Polish filmmaker stated that *Katyn* was “about two things: the crime and the lie.” The crime to which Wajda refers—the Soviet massacre of the Polish officers—is emblemized in the Polish collective consciousness as Katyn, the forest spa near which mass graves were discovered in April 1943. At the time of the massacres, Katyn was in Soviet territory, which was subsequently captured and

occupied by the Germans. Minister of Propaganda Goebbels was delighted by the revelation of Soviet crimes and crowed: "Katyn is my victory."⁹ The documentary footage of the exhumation would make glorious propaganda against the Soviets with whom Hitler was now at war.

The lie came later, in 1944. Soviet authorities, who had broken off relations with the Polish government in exile, attempted to shift blame for the massacre to the Nazis. As the Soviet Union was winning the war on the eastern front, the British and American Allies, who needed Stalin, colluded in the lie. Everything turned on the date. If the massacre occurred in April 1940, as the Germans rightly contended, it was the Soviets who controlled the territory where it took place and thus could be held responsible. If it occurred in 1941, according to the Soviet revision, guilt could be deflected onto the Germans, who were then the occupying force. Indeed, Wajda incorporates into *Katyn* projections of two propaganda films—one German, the other Soviet; each asserts the guilt of the other party, using excerpts of the same documentary footage of the grisly discovery of mass graves and of investigators performing necropsy on the bodies. *Katyn* is an accusation against the Soviet state that had never acknowledged responsibility for the massacre and against the Russian state that continued to avoid admitting its guilt after the fall of the Soviet Union.

At the time of *Katyn*'s release in 2007, the Russian authorities had not fully acknowledged the lie. Under democratic pressure, an inevitable shift occurred. On April 2, 2010, the film premiered on Russian television in preparation for the first joint Polish and Russian commemoration of the massacre. One week later, numerous Polish dignitaries, including Lech Kaczyński, perished in a plane crash as they neared Katyn en route for the ceremony.

If *Katyn* were to tell the story of the crime, the story of the fate of Wajda's father, it would take place in the East and recount events of which Wajda had no direct knowledge. If the film were to tell the story of the lie, it would take place principally in the West—German-occupied Poland—and would be the story of the women who waited for the return of the Polish officers, their husbands, brothers, and fathers. This is Wajda's mother's story. Wajda was thirteen at the time of the Katyn massacre and nineteen at the end of the war. He had direct experience

of the events the film renders as a narrative of waiting and saw his mother “wither away after the end of the war when she knew [her husband] wouldn’t come home.” Wajda decided, however, that the subject of *Katyn* was both the crime and the lie and that the film must take place in the West *and* the East. Indeed, at the level of the scenario, the film constructs a pattern of alternation between the two sites of oppression: events occurring in German-occupied Poland and those occurring in the POW camp in Russia and eventually at the execution site known as Katyn.

TO REPRESENT, TO DESIRE

At the moment of preproduction, Wajda is preoccupied with the lapse of time: more than sixty years separate the historical events the film seeks to represent from the here and now of Poland in 2007. For Wajda, Katyn is still an indelible personal memory from his childhood and a national tragedy that the Communist regime long excluded from public commemoration. As we saw in *A Film Unfinished*, the moment presses: the older generation is fast disappearing, and with them the living traces of the events of the war and its aftermath. For the younger generation, Katyn the event has entered the sphere of the historical where living memory has given way to mediated representations that establish an unavoidable estrangement of the present from the past. Despite the Russian Federation’s persistent “amnesia” about this shameful event, historians in the post-Soviet era had already assembled the documents, put events in their proper order and in their proper context, identified the victims and perpetrators, and, with their synoptic gaze, grasped the “truth” of Katyn. It is one of the ironies of historiography that the comprehension of historical events—because of the critical distance it imposes—operates to detach the reality of the past from the discourse that seeks to represent it. All the documented experience of the war and the postwar period, under Nazi and Soviet occupation—the aggregate of historical traces of all sorts—recede before the organizing power of historical language.

The event named Katyn, narrated and thus interpreted, reinforces the perception that the human experience the name should evoke is

retreating, that it has been “broken off” from the present. For Wajda, this loss of *being* is intolerable. As Robert Burgoyne maintains, what is lacking in “objective” history and what needs to be recovered from past events like Katyn is the “pathos of identification,” the “somatic empathy” that would give the new generation access to the emotional experience of the past.¹⁰ This involves, he argues, a reenactment of history, a “rethinking” that takes “the detour by way of the historical imagination.”

What do we mean by the historical imagination? Among philosophers who have reflected on the subject, R. G. Collingwood has perhaps had the most influence on twentieth-century historiography. Knowledge of the past comes, he argues in *The Idea of History* (1946), from an ever-deepening identification with what once was. We do not identify with the outside of events—“everything belonging to [the past] which can be described in terms of bodies and their movement.”¹¹ We identify with the *inside* of events, the *mind* of the past, as Collingwood puts it, that encompasses not only thought and intention but, I would add, the emotional content of actions.

This is how Collingwood describes his methodical approach to historical representation, an approach that combines the rigor of analysis and the studied application of intuition: “The historian’s picture of his subject, whether that subject be a sequence of events or a past state of things, thus appears as a web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by the statements of his authorities.”¹² According to Collingwood, historians are not the free agents of imaginative fiction. They may not speak of what they cannot know, and, as he maintains, they are not at liberty to embellish historical facts with unsubstantiated details. They are duty-bound to respect the relationship—the *vis-à-vis*—between the historical text and the reality to which it refers. As literary theorist Jean-Marie Schaeffer puts it, there is an “isomorphic relation to the reality to be known, therefore by virtue of a resemblance (direct or indirect) between the two.”¹³

Collingwood’s theory of historical imagination is enormously ambitious. He talks of “revivification,” accessing the “inside of events,” and he means nothing less than bringing the past alive in the historian’s mind. This is not, for him, exclusively a cognitive process; it necessarily involves the acuity of the historian’s insight, since internal life cannot

be observed directly. On the one hand, historians must “read” the actions and behaviors that have left traces in the historical record and they must take account of the social and economic contexts that frame these actions. But they must also, he argues, account for the intentions and emotional states of historical actors and their relation to the physical world they inhabit. The historical imagination is not, however, free-flowing; it obeys historic necessity, which the historian establishes through reflection and analysis. “We cannot but imagine what cannot but be there,” according to Collingwood’s formulation.¹⁴ In this, the analysis of internal states is as necessary to the imaginative construction of the past as the directly observable face of events.

Collingwood’s theory of history is, then, a theory of *presence*: that the historian becomes so immersed in the past he is studying that the thoughts that underlie the development of events and situations in the past become revived in his own mind. We need to be cautious here because Collingwood’s idea of historical representation approaches dangerous territory in the eyes of deconstructive theories of the late twentieth century. What becomes of historical time—the essential idea of the pastness of the past—if we are able to replicate in our minds the historical experience of characters and events in both their material and psychological dimensions? There is a sense, Collingwood asserts, “and one very important to the historian, in which they [the historian’s apprehensions of historical events] are not in time at all.”¹⁵

However, historical analysis—even with Collingwood’s emendations—does not have the power to take us out of time. Living history exists paradoxically only in the past as experience. The patient exercise of the historical imagination cannot account for—cannot erase—the utter strangeness we experience when an object extruded from the past imposes itself on our consciousness, like the “mug shots” of starving Jews I cite toward the end of the chapter on *A Film Unfinished*. Such persons do not live in the mind of the historian; they live in the past. It is the indisputable realism of these shots that prepares the way for another sort of apprehension. Our relationship with the images is both direct and complex. We as spectators are not there with those phantoms, in their world, so to speak; we are exchanging looks with them across a breach in time. The look we cast is indeed *fusional*, as our emotional response makes clear. This does not mean, however, that we are,

for that moment, unconscious of time; rather, we are, suddenly, utterly fixated on the temporal reality that separates us from them. We do not *understand* difference, we *live* it. This kind of close encounter with the pastness of the past is, as I have insisted, fleeting. No film can sustain for long this level of contact with historical experience.

In describing the historical imagination, we need to be mindful of what Arthur Danto called “the problem of *Other Periods*.” How do we determine “the degree to which we might succeed in achieving an *internal* understanding of what it would have been like to live in periods other than our own”?¹⁶ Here Danto is referring to *sympathetic*, not cognitive, understanding (the notion of *Verstehen*). Internal knowledge of others, he argues, comes through empathy. We can understand the past only insofar as we identify parallels between our own internal lives and those of persons who have lived in the past, and “where similarity breaks down, external understanding alone remains possible.”¹⁷ Empathy can of course be developed, as the historian who studies a particular period achieves, by dint of research and acute sensibility, an unusual understanding of another world. That is, of course, the sign of a good historian. The same is obviously true of those who occupy the space on the edge of historical events with which they conserve a biographical connection. This was the case of the survivors in *A Film Unfinished*, as it is the case with Wajda or Rithy Panh, and indeed all the filmmakers I include in this study. For them, the past has not been resolved. It pulls them back into what is for them a still living reality.

But even here there appears to be an obstacle to recapturing the experience of others, or even one's own experience in retrospect. As Danto points out, historians and memoirists are not in a “state of innocence” about what the future had in store (I am setting aside for now the case of true repressed memory). In hindsight, they know events in a different way from those who experienced them, or in the case of memoirists, different from the persons they were when they experienced them. They cannot deny their position of narration—their retrospective gaze, as Louis O. Mink would put it—by attempting to hold this knowledge of events and their outcomes in abeyance: “*Not knowing how it is all going to end*,” as Danto tells us, “is the mark of living through events.”¹⁸ In history, narrators—like the filmmakers in this study—do know how things turned out, as do the majority of their audiences, and

this knowledge colors the events they narrate. These are stories imbued with nostalgia, grief, or anger—the emotions generated by the filmmaker's backward glance. But there are also moments in all these films when we “forget” that we are positioned above the fray. Ecstatic moments when we react as if we do not know “how it is all going to end” and follow events in their unfolding, too close to see beyond them. It is possible in such moments to re-experience some of the terror of the unforeseen.

As he suggests in his interview with Telewizja Polska, Wajda understands that Poland is facing a *memory crisis* in which the recollection of the event he calls Katyn, with its far-reaching consequences, is no longer an active part of national consciousness. The modes of representation he adopts are not therefore intended to simply narrate historical events. It is not sufficient, for his purpose, to construct a rational model in which a causal sequence of events represented audiovisually stands for the real events known as “Katyn.” For Wajda, *standing for* is not a discursive substitution. He is less interested in representing the outside of events, their historiographic contours observed from above; rather, he would turn inward and expose the inner life of events, their physical, mental, and emotional content. How was Katyn experienced by the people who lived through it? In what concrete places and in what ways did the Poles suffer occupation and resist oppression and censorship? How did the massacres damage the mythological integrity of the Polish nation?

As Frank Ankersmit observes, the symbolic language of history “presents us with an image of the world, but as such it can offer only the shadow of the terrors inhabiting the world itself and of the fears it may provoke.”¹⁹ To evoke the terrors of Poland in thrall to two occupying powers, historical traces must be reinvested with some of the attributes of real being. Wajda wants to *touch* the world he is representing, and he wants his public to understand that world *affectively*.

The material past—fugitive but real—is then Wajda's object of desire: the desire to put his audience in touch with experiences from a painful period that remains unresolved for him, and for Poland, both historically and psychologically. The Soviet murder of the Polish officer corps was the act that dismantled Poland's future; it was an event that eventually culminated in the Soviet domination of Polish society for

forty-five years following the end of World War II. This crushing historical situation should not be forgotten, Wajda's film argues; it should be hypostatized and emblazoned in public memory. That is, after all, the primary task of historical film: to salvage the past even if it must be relived in the mode of infinite regret. *Katyn* is the *dramatic reactivation* of a historical moment. Wajda creates a compelling diegetic world in which the characters are at once collective and individual protagonists who act or are acted upon in extreme historical circumstances. They live in a world of intense emotion where the pathetic fallacy prevails: the characters, settings, and objects coalesce and are alive with meaning.

Wajda is, then, a complex human agency. He is at once a historian (by his rigor and his attention to the factual record), a living repository of historical experience, and the autobiographical subject that constructs his narrative. "I wanted to tell my story," he said in the interview he gave to *Telewizja Polska*, and it is doubtless for this reason that one feels a special intensity in the film. To tell his story is to undertake the (impossible) return to childhood. Wajda's impulse is nostalgic: to re-inhabit the space-time of loss and re-experience the pain of frustrated desire.

NOSTOS "RETURN HOME" + ALGOS "PAIN"

Although he avoids replicating his personal situation—Wajda does not directly represent himself—*Katyn* is infused with what I will term *autobiographical affect*: an emotional charge that spreads across the entire perceptual field of the film. This most intimate kind of subjectivity shapes all the film's strategies of representation; its presence is not localizable but is palpable everywhere in the text. The same can be said of the subjective character of nearly all the films in this study, but autobiographical affect is most explicit in *Katyn*, *Nostalgia for the Light*, and *S-21*. Wajda, Guzmán, and Panh invest themselves in their films. Victims of history, they are motivated by a devastating loss and seek reparation not only for themselves but for the "intersubjective communities" whose memories they take upon themselves. Whatever distance they may adopt as narrators of the stories they tell, like the dreamer in the dream, they permeate the worlds they stage.

Wajda's vision of the past has all the earmarks of nostalgia, and *Katyn* is a nostalgic film in the strongest sense of the term. It embodies what cultural historian Svetlana Boym describes as the central paradox of nostalgia: it would "repeat the unrepeatable and materialize the immaterial."²⁰ Nostalgic representations are irrational in that they superimpose, as Boym observes, images of the present over images of the past—a temporary suspension of irreconcilable elements.

Nostalgia is rarely, however, just a personal state of yearning. It is a collective phenomenon involving others—the family, the ethnic group, the nation—that constitute the social context of memory. Collective memory, on which all nostalgia is based, involves the notion of the "affective community," a group with which we are closely identified and whose solidarity allows individual memory to "take possession of itself." This is the notion that Paul Ricoeur eloquently formulated in *Time and Narrative* as "participatory belonging." Collective memory is a bond between generations: children's experience with their parents and grandparents, for example, gives access to the ethos of another time. Moreover, as Maurice Halbwachs puts it, the individual may elicit from memory perceptions of the past that belong to contemporary history:

The world of my childhood, as I recover it from memory, fits so naturally into the framework of recent history reconstituted by formal study because it already bears the stamp of that history. What I discover is that by attentive effort I can recover, in my remembrances of my little world, a semblance of the surrounding milieu.²¹

As Boym observes, nostalgia is "a symptom of our age, a historical emotion." It centers on "the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory." Moreover, nostalgia allows for open forms of figuration: "It charts space on time and time on space and hinders the distinction between subject and object."²² In other words, such figurations upset some of the basic logical categories of conscious thought. Replacing ourselves in a time that has been lost to us is a poetic operation.

Nostalgic representations, then, can be only partially explained in rational terms. They are reconstructions of events—stories—drawn

from the reservoir of personal memory, from the community of witnesses, and from the testimony of historical sources, as is the case with *Katyn*. As such they belong to what Freud called secondary process, in this case the discursive shaping of memory through the techniques of narration. Nostalgic representations are, however, also subject to the body—the body’s physical being and response to events—and to deep-seated emotions and reactions we cannot account for in rational terms. The “intentions” of the body and of emotional compulsion belong to what Freud called primary process and reveal the workings of the unconscious. Affective communities, as we have seen, may also be subjects of memory, and memory for the historian, as Pierre Nora asserts, has nothing to do with the objective gaze the historian adopts as a methodological principle. On the contrary, memory is emotional and instinctual; it “wells up from groups it welds together.” Moreover, memory is “rooted in the concrete,” as opposed to the rational units of historical narration. It dwells on “space, gesture, image, and object.”²³ Memory does not discourse; it materializes.

Many contemporary historians resist the dichotomy between history and memory that Nora espouses. The skepticism he expresses for the intuitive faculties—those allies of a-historical emotionalism—would deprive historians of what should be, many contend, one of their fundamental aims: the recovery of the sensorial and psychological realities of the past. Ironically, it is the work of an “old” historian that points the way toward such innovation in historical writing: Johan Huizinga. The Dutch historian’s *The Waning of the Middle Ages* is still as provocative as it was when it first appeared in 1919, and his emphasis on historical sensation remains strikingly modern. As French historian Jacques Le Goff puts it in the 2015 French re-edition of Huizinga’s masterpiece (nearly one hundred years after the original), “Let’s reread Huizinga. He is still an opener of doors that lead to what needs to be done in history.”²⁴

The magnificent opening passages of *The Waning of the Middle Ages* make it clear that Huizinga intends to evoke a whole range of sensations in his historical representation of fifteenth-century Europe. Moreover, Huizinga’s depiction of the material realities of life brings to mind the psychological and moral structures—the mentalities—that organized perception in the medieval period. Consider a few examples.

In modern life, Huizinga observes, we no longer know the absolute contrasts between light and darkness or between noise and silence that were familiar realities in the medieval period. The opposition between wealth and misery or the disparity between sickness and health were more achingly felt then than now, as was the cold and darkness of winter against which “a fur-lined robe of office, a bright fire in the oven, drink and jest, and a soft bed” still offered a sense of the fullness of life. Indeed, Huizinga sees in these polarities the emotional resonance characteristic of the period: “Daily life received the kind of impulses and passionate suggestions that is revealed in the vacillating moods of unrefined exuberance, sudden cruelty, and tender emotions between which the life of the medieval city was suspended.”²⁵

Huizinga asks us, then, to imagine sensorial realities that belong to fifteenth-century experience. Image, sound, smell, taste, and touch emanating from the past, if unavailable to direct experience, can be reactivated in the mind. Consider, for example, Huizinga’s description of the soundscapes of medieval cities and villages. “But one sound,” he tells us, “always rose above the clamor of busy life . . . and, for a moment, lifted everything into an ordered sphere: that of the bells.”²⁶ For the alert observer, signs of past experience can appear in unanticipated ways. In the chapter he devotes to “Art and Life,” Huizinga describes the affective intimacy of Jan Van Eyck’s painting of Arnolfini, represented in his bedchamber with his wife—a rare survival from the period of a painting evoking domestic intimacy. Great lord and ducal counselor he undoubtedly was, but Arnolfini and his wife were friends of Van Eyck, as the inscription he places above the mirror bears witness, a touching manner to sign his work: “‘Johannes de Eyck fuit hic, 1434.’ Jan Van Eyck was here. Just a short time ago. The deep silence of the chamber still reverberates with the sound of his voice.”²⁷

What Huizinga wants to evoke is the *life* of the past, especially the life of the body, as Jacques Le Goff points out in the recent French re-edition of *L’Automne du Moyen Âge*. In his attachment to the image and the *imaginary* of a period, Huizinga brings history closer to ethnology, whose mission it is to discover the symbolic thought and the representations that are deeply inscribed in the cultural foundation of archaic societies.²⁸

It is precisely this kind of historical imagination Wajda espouses. He believes it is possible to hear voices emerging from the past that carry with them the sensorial, emotive, and symbolic qualities of an era. The poetic imagery Wajda produces emerges from experience, not from logic or transparent rhetoric, and therefore remains open to intuitive associations. In relationship to the past, as Huizinga puts it, "We want half dreamt, unclearly delineated images, leaving free play to our imagination and this need is better satisfied by a visual than by an intellectual apperception of the past."²⁹

Before proceeding to an analysis of the text of *Katyn*, I would like to return for a moment to Walter Benjamin and specifically to his short essay "The Mimetic Faculty" (in *Illuminations*). It is Benjamin's intuition that mimesis—the "gift for seeing similarities"—retains, even in the modern period, some of the power it had in prescientific cultures. As Michael Taussig suggests in *Mimesis and Alterity*, this is one of Benjamin's enduring themes: "the surfacing of the 'primitive' within modernity as a direct result of modernity."³⁰ Essential to Benjamin's concept, Taussig points out, is the double nature of mimetic activity: "To get hold of something by means of its likeness. Here is what is crucial in the resurgence of the mimetic faculty, namely the two-layered notion of mimesis that is involved—a copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived."³¹ When one intellectualizes the process of mimesis, describing it in terms of representation and identification, one denies the importance of *contact*—the role of the body and its senses in the activity of imitation. Such has been the impact, Benjamin would argue, of the dominance of language and "rationality," inherited from the Enlightenment, which would detach the bodily subject from the experience of representation. We have become crippled by language, "the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity."³² Indeed, what is important in the notion of the mimetic faculty is the *exchange* that takes place in this double-layered activity in which the copy retains some of the power of the original.

Retaining some of the power of the original—that is the ambition of Wajda's film, indeed, the ambition of all the films in this study. Image-based communication, by dint of its mode of signification, is more

sensuous (more sense-dependent) than language-dominated discourses and is therefore open to the more poetic strategies that characterize Wajda's filmmaking. The indexical quality of the cinematographic image—its existential relationship to the phenomena it photographs—is one embodiment of the mimetic faculty that binds perception and representation. The mimetic ideal is to strip away distance, even if always incompletely. Adorno tells us that in Benjamin's writing "thought presses close to its object as if through touching, smelling, tasting, it wanted to transform itself."³³ Wajda also presses close to his object in his desire for authenticity, as will become clear in the following section.

SEARCHING FOR AUTHENTIC OBJECTS

One should not confuse the search for authentic objects with the fantasy of the literal representation of history in film. As Robert Rosenstone observes, film "can never provide a literal rendition of events that took place in the past. Can never be an exact replica of what happened."³⁴ From the historical perspective, there is no "automatic privileging of the 'realistic' or naturalistic mode for representing the past," as Natalie Zemon Davis tells us.³⁵ Indeed, the relationship between a filmic representation and a historical event depends, I have argued, on acts of figuration that belong to the poetic realms of the metaphoric and the symbolic.³⁶ It does not follow, however, that concrete historical traces showing that "a man, an animal passed by here," as Paul Ricoeur puts it, are only meaningful once they are positioned as signifying elements in historical narrative. Traces are not empty signifiers. When they emerge from the experience of the past in an act of representation, they bring with them material fragments of vanished life. In "Über Walter Benjamin," T. W. Adorno describes Benjamin's fixation on objects, in which he seeks to discover hidden signs of life just as he contemplates life around him for signs of its links to the primal: "He is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects—as in allegory—but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as ancient 'Ur-historical' and abruptly release their significance."³⁷

We know that, in preparing the production of *Katyn*, Wajda was obsessed with authenticity. As in all his historical films, he was intent on reconstructing the everyday existence of a specific period: locations, objects, dress, and behavior observed in the finest detail. He instigated an uncompromising search for authentic historical materials—*indices* of the past, or to use Ankersmit's notion of historical artifacts, "protuberances" that have survived into the present. Their function is not to create a convincing veneer of an era; Wajda wanted no truck with historical spectacle. In his hands, objects are pregnant with latent meanings and susceptible of giving off the *aura* of a specific period. If we are sensitive to them, these indexical signs—material traces left by historical actors and their actions—can produce an experience in which we apprehend at once the present object and the past that adheres to it.

Wajda charged his costumers and set decorators with gathering every available vestige of life of 1940s Krakow, where much of the action is set. Indeed, they were so successful, his team contends, that no subsequent filmmaker could make a historical film using authentic artifacts from that place and time. Wajda's concern for authenticity applied equally to the actors he chose to impersonate his historical protagonists. In his previous films about the Second World War, actors had direct experience of the war, bringing to their interpretations the authenticity of their personal insights. To Wajda's regret, they had become too old to play characters from his mother's generation, and he had to rely on young actors who were not vestigial remnants of the past and who, he feared, might not be able to understand the historical circumstances of the period or the characters' predicaments. He was reassured, however, by the actors' power of empathy: the ability to share the emotions of others, in this case the characters he constructed, and thereby negotiate difference across the historical divide.

Among the traces, the most important are perhaps not objects but texts: the memoirs, journals, and letters that survived both the war and the postwar Stalinist regime that sought to suppress all evidence that might challenge its lie—that the massacres known as "Katyn" were the work of the Germans and not the Soviets. These texts are of course already narrative accounts whose voices speak to

us across time. They furnish much of the narrative and emotional material that Wajda weaves into his film. If the texts are transposed, attributed to “fictional” characters, and framed by dramatic structures, they remain rooted in the urgent concerns of their autobiographical testimony. They bring with them the material experience of the past.

Wajda begins, then, with concrete experience, his own and that of other individuals, and with the material “protuberances” of the past that jut into the contemporary moment. He is much less concerned with the “gasier” constructs of historical representation: those abstract social actors playing on the grand stage of history. He embraces, rather, the (“archaic”) Romantic attitude toward the representation of the past, in which past and present are involved in an exchange that has as much to do with emotion as with knowledge. The Romantic historian intervenes in the world of the past; this historian is, to cite Jules Michelet, in love with his or her subject (“the heart is moved”), and love is the force that draws the historian toward an intimate knowledge of it: he or she “sees a thousand things that are invisible to the indifferent public.”³⁸ History makes the historian as much as the historian makes history. As Ankersmit puts it, “How we *feel* about the past is no less important than what we *know* about it—and probably even more so. ‘*Sentir, c’est penser*’ [to feel is to think], as Rousseau liked to say, and this is where I fully agree with him.”³⁹

FACE TO FACE WITH MEMORY

If Wajda’s *Katyn* constructs a remembrance of the past, we need to be careful in defining what kinds of memory-work are involved. It is useful to recall the distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory that Walter Benjamin draws from the work of Marcel Proust. These are, he argues, radically different modes of recollection that place the “memoirist” in quite different positions vis-à-vis the past. In the mode of voluntary memory, the remembering subject constructs a narrative chain of occurrences in which each remembered detail achieves meaning through its (subservient) role in the montage of events. This is

memory as a constructed discourse. For Benjamin, the mechanism of voluntary memory is repressive in that it inhibits the immediacy of the remembered experience. A frequent instrument of defense against the shock of past realities, narrative memory functions to screen out what seems to endanger the organism; “assigning to an incident a precise place in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents,” turns “the incident into a moment that has been lived (*Erlebnis*).”⁴⁰ What has been lived and told (what has been “processed,” in the language of popular psychology) is relegated to the safety zone created by narration.

In the mode of involuntary memory, the remembering subject is not willful; indeed, he or she is overtaken by sensations—images, sounds, tastes, touch—that arise unbidden. In Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, involuntary memories spring up when the unsuspecting narrator tastes a madeleine or trips on a paving stone, objects that transport him into the experiential past. This is the memory of sensations as yet unorganized by the logic of the mind, unsubdued, as Benjamin makes clear.

It is its characteristic that the information it gives about the past retains no trace of it. “It is the same with our own past. In vain we try to conjure it up again; the efforts of our intellect are futile.” Therefore Proust, summing up, says that the past is “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us) though we have no idea which one it is.”⁴¹

In *Katyn* characters are indeed overtaken by sensations provoked by instigating objects, particularly those that produce in the anxious families the sudden recognition of the experience of their murdered loved ones: the discovery of a wedding ring concealed in the lining of a coat, the borrowed sweater that at first conceals then reveals the reality of a murder, the diary entries that initiate the film’s visualization of the Polish officers’ final moments. Beyond these “narrativized” objects, there is, as we have seen, Wajda’s confidence in the power of authentic objects to evoke a lost world.

TO NARRATE, TO SYMBOLIZE, TO EXPERIENCE

The more general question remains: In what specific ways and to what degrees does *Katyn* reactivate memory? I will argue that the action of *Katyn* is invested with both voluntary and involuntary memory, as Benjamin conceives them, and that Wajda employs three modes of representation to evoke the past.

The first I will call *representational* because it functions according to the principle of *standing for*. The film's actors stand for historical actors, whom they endow with a visible body and the readable signs of intention and emotion. The actions they perform for the camera stand for real actions in the past, as the settings stand for real historical spaces. We are intended to understand them as substitutes for (but not copies of) realities that are no longer accessible to consciousness.

I will call the second mode *symbolic* because it no longer functions as a description of past reality. Rather it rises above denotation—in particular the chronological chain of events the historian creates—to bring into play associations that are part of the shared culture of the community the film addresses, for example the Catholic iconography that infuses the sequences I will analyze shortly. Because these associations are largely understood spontaneously and, at least partially, unconsciously, they are read intuitively and are often charged with emotion.

The third mode, which I will call *experiential*, has nothing to do with historical narration or with symbolic figures. It provokes unmediated experience—a resurgence of historical memory that results in the recovery of a moment of the living past. The most striking examples in *Katyn*, as we will see, are the sequences of mass murder that conclude the film.

Representation takes a certain distance from its object in order to see it more clearly. The symbolic floats above the discursive, so to speak, because it calls into play transhistorical figures of meaning. The experiential is a moment of fusion—fusion of the past with the present, the subject with his or her object—and precludes narrative and symbolic structures. If the representational and the symbolic, as we shall see, frequently intertwine, the experiential stands apart: it is only what it is.

To produce narrative or symbolic meaning, one must blot out experience. As Ankersmit observes, “Where we have narrative, experience is impossible; and experience excludes narrative.” Historical experience, as conceived by Huizinga,⁴² involves the historian in an *ecstatic* movement out of the self (from the Greek *ekstasis*, “standing outside oneself”). No longer centered in the here and now, the historian stretches toward a “contact with the past.” This movement toward the past may culminate in “a moment of rapture,” in which representation gives way to the power of direct experience. Everything that separates past and present momentarily disappears.

All spatial and temporal demarcations have been lifted; it is as if the temporal trajectory between past and present, instead of separating the two, has become the locus of their encounter. Historical experience pulls the faces of past and present together in a short but ecstatic kiss.⁴³

A final note. We know that film has its own modes of representation and that it is not capable of rendering the past without recourse to them. All films—fiction or documentary—rely on narrative and rhetorical structures, on *mise-en-scène*, on the expressive use of the scale of shots and camera movement, and on the textual articulations produced by the work of editing. Otherwise films would be unintelligible. Such techniques and procedures help construct the plot—the *telling* that renders events comprehensible—and contribute to *binding* the images and sounds into a discourse. As we will see, Wajda is a master of these discursive strategies.

FUSING THE NARRATIVE AND THE SYMBOLIC

Let's first look at the film's opening sequence, which is preoccupied with exposition. Wajda chooses a chaotic moment: the invasion of Poland by the Soviets on September 17, 1939. The exposition is particularly dense because it needs to accomplish several tasks: lay out the historical situation; introduce several major characters; set up the narrative “problem”; and establish the film's major themes. From the opening images, the symbolic begins to play its key role. The clouds behind

the titles slowly dissipate revealing a crowd of people immobilized on a bridge (long shot in deep focus). This is the first of the many metaphors the film deploys: memory emerges from oblivion, representation reclaims what has been lost. This group on the bridge (a) is looking, and in the reverse angle response we see another group of people (b) running toward them across the bridge. In the succession of shots that follow we hear a man from group (a) shout: "Where to folks? There are Germans behind us." Someone from group (b) responds: "Where are you going? Turn back!" and another: "The Soviets have entered!" Wajda represents the bridge as occupying one point on the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, the border established according to the Hitler/Stalin nonaggression pact signed in Moscow on August 23, 1939, which demarcated the Polish territories to be occupied by the Germans from those to be occupied by the Soviets.

The figurative meaning of the beginning of this sequence is clear, communicated through the opposition established by the reverse-angles. The literal representation of "these people, trapped between two unacceptable alternatives, hav[ing] nowhere to go," extends, by synecdoche, to the more abstract notion of the Polish predicament in 1939: the nation subjugated by two occupying powers. This space and these actions represented by means of narrative and cinematic structures stand for a broader historical reality. We should remember that any such symbolic exchange in which something material—this bridge and the chaotic encounter of the crowds—represents something immaterial—the historical predicament of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement—opens up all the associative power of poetic language.

As the crowd pushes forward toward the Russian side, this larger movement is broken into a multitude of details: bicycle handlebars, baggage, a close-up of a young woman followed by a close-up of a young girl, then other close shots of the evacuees, and so forth. We are turning from a relatively large-scale historical representation to a smaller scale where the mechanisms of individuation and identification take over. Here the subjective experience of events begins to assert itself. The close-ups of mother and child are at first anonymous "faces in the crowd" at the same level as other details, but, as they are repeated, mother and daughter become focalized as protagonists: the young

mother (Anna) is in search of her husband (Andrzej), a Polish officer held captive by the Soviets; her daughter (Nika) attempts to save an abandoned dog tied to the side of the bridge. A third character appears—a woman in a car who stops to inform the young mother of the Soviet invasion and urges her to abandon the search for her husband. Hers is another “face in the crowd” we will subsequently recognize as the Polish general’s wife, who will wait in vain for her husband’s return. Not only are these individual characters pushed to the foreground of events; they are also endowed with an optical point of view. They perceive things through the mechanism of the point of view series, and we of course see these things through their eyes. This alternation of scales and of positions of narration is a classic structure of the historical film in which individuated action invests the historical situation with intensified feeling.

Later in the sequence the mother and child approach the field hospital in a churchyard, and here metaphor adheres to narrative. Anna sees a cross on which only one forearm of Christ remains hanging (sacrilege). The child recognizes her father’s coat draped over what appears to be a body. The mother lifts the coat and sees the head of the statue of Christ with a crown of thorns. The poetic strategy is complex but quite intelligible. The (atheistic) Soviets are committing ravages against the holy body of Poland: Christ’s body takes the place of the Polish officer feared dead, a substitution that extends to the Pole the aura of Christian sanctity. This kind of figurative substitution will recur frequently in the film. Moreover, not only does the body mistaken prefigure Andrzej’s martyrdom but it also sets up one of the film’s major narrative devices: the mis-recognition followed by recognition—so essential to Greek tragedy—that establishes a pattern of alternation between hope and despair. The most obvious example of delayed recognition plays out over large segments of the film. In the prison camp where Polish officers are held by the Soviets, Jerzy gives his sweater to his friend Andrzej, who is suffering from the cold. When Andrzej’s body is found in the mass graves at Katyn, he is misidentified as Jerzy, whose name is embroidered in the sweater and who is declared dead. Anna therefore continues to believe that her husband is alive and is only disabused when Jerzy returns to Krakow to see his friend’s widow, bringing her a gift of canned meat.

The question long debated is whether the kind of focalization I just described, which presents events from the narrative and even optical point of view of characters who are not “historically real,” is a fictional device and therefore a betrayal of historiography. As in fiction, Wajda’s characters, played by actors, appear and reappear in the course of the narrative: they carry the action and undergo emotions that cinematic structures like framing and editing make clear. That is, they are endowed with individual subjectivity. Since we can see inside them and see others “through their eyes,” we no longer simply observe them from the outside. It is relevant to recall that Käte Hamburger defines the novel, and by extension novelistic film, as the only genre in which we are privy to the inner lives of characters—their thoughts, intentions, emotions—presented in the third person. In Hamburger’s analysis, all proceeds from the position of the author: if the author directly represents events that have an existential relationship to the present in which he or she is writing, then we are dealing with a factual narrative; if such a relationship does not exist, we are dealing with fiction. Factual and fictional narratives are, accordingly, separate domains. As Gérard Genette puts it, “To enter fiction is to leave the ordinary field of the exercise of language, marked by the concerns of truth or persuasion that command the rule of communication and the deontology of discourse.”⁴⁴

What is disconcerting is that *Katyn* seems to partake of both. On the one hand, as I have described, the film employs many of the techniques we associate with the fiction film, in particular strategies of focalization and point of view. And all of these techniques sin against historical representation as the historical discipline conceives it. On the other hand, who could reproach Wajda, who is and has been both historian of the Polish nation and an activist fighting for the liberation of his country (precisely through the “fiction film”), of failing to represent the past from the position of the present or of failing in his obligations to history? Who could doubt the historical intentionality *Katyn* embodies?

In their introduction to *A Companion to the Historical Film*, Constantin Parvulescu and Robert Rosenstone raise this problematic in terms of institutions. Historiography as practiced by professionals in the discipline is a hegemonic institution; representations of the past are constructed according to established historical methods and are vetted by

the body of university-trained historians. Filmmakers, they argue, do not operate under such institutional constraints; rather, they occupy a “secondary position” as challengers to the historians’ representations of the past. According to Parvulescu and Rosenstone’s analysis, film has a “hybrid social function” because films are at once “education and entertainment, document and fiction, an address of reason and emotion, scholarship and art, a public and a commercial enterprise.” Their hybridity—so often the target of historians’ critiques—disqualifies them as “serious” representations of the past. They occupy, rather, a “counter-hegemonic” position that allows, indeed fosters, discursive openness.⁴⁵

This discursive openness appears in *Katyn*. In Wajda’s historical films there is an underlying tension between the abstract and the concrete. As everywhere in cinema, the visual material produces convincing representations of the phenomenological world—moving photographic images cut out of space and time. A title may, for example, identify “a public square in Krakow,” but the succession of shots of the square gives it the sense of real being. Indeed, this is one of the concrete historical spaces within which the actions the films represent took place. Moreover, in cinematic representation, the human characters are always particularized: this specific body and this distinctive physiognomy engaged in carrying out these discrete actions. Such figures seem to lack the defining feature that distinguishes historical narrative from fictional narrative: anonymity. Historical characters are not individual protagonists; they are members of social groups whose actions take place on another plane of narration. They are, to use Paul Ricoeur’s formula, *entities of participatory belonging*.⁴⁶ The work of historical narration in film begins with this problem: How is it possible to show that recognizable human individuals, acting in specific settings, belong to a class of historical characters whose essential traits speak about the collective identity of the group faced with a particular historical situation?

Katyn is, on the one hand, historical *fiction* because its narrative combines real and imagined events; these events take place in a reconstructed space and center on fictional, not anonymous, characters, who are, moreover, played by actors. On the other hand, *Katyn* is undeniably linked to the present of its author, who, as we have seen, is determined

to recount the historical events that marked his childhood. Even if Wajda acknowledges his responsibility for the “truth” of his representations, he does not shy away from the representation of inner states: the psychological experience of the past, *Katyn* suggests, is just as cogent, indeed as necessary, an element of historical representation as the observation of action and behavior. Instead of attenuating the subjective aspects of characters—as in the distancing effects Rossellini achieves, for example, in his historical films—Wajda accentuates his characters’ emotions. It is as if these intense inner experiences were meant to radiate out to embrace the collectivity and thus historicize feelings that film cannot represent directly as belonging to a social group. This is, once again, a poetic device. The rhetorical exchange between the individual and the collective relies on a metonymic figure that expresses the relationship between two aspects of a field: the emotions of the focalized characters infuse the group of their peers, while the group lends the individuals its collective identity. In historical representation the group never functions passively as the simple background to individuated characters. Rather, it is the very definition of their social being.

Consider the following example of this figurative strategy. In the scene of a public square in Krakow, a crowd listens to loudspeakers disseminating the names of those discovered in mass graves at Katyn. I would add that the event represented in this sequence is meant to be taken as frequentative: we understand that these people, and others like them, have come repeatedly to this square to endure the agony of the wait. This representation thus stands for all similar events that are not represented, in the manner of the synecdoche in which a part stands for the whole.

The first three shots represent the crowd of anonymous listeners, a collective figure that is individuated briefly in shot 2 in the close-up of the reader’s hands and, as the camera pans, the face looking over his shoulder. Only in shot 4 does the first focalized character (the university rector) appear, and a point-of-view series links her to the reading of the list of the dead (in this case, a student): the rector gazing off-screen/close-up of loudspeakers/return to rector’s gaze. The second focalized character, the general’s widow, emerges in shot 7. In shot 8 Anna appears, scans the list of the dead in the newspaper, and smiles. Shot 9

EXAMPLE 2.1

EMOTION IS CONTAGIOUS

IMAGE	SOUND
1. A long shot of cobbled pavement; the camera cranes up to a high angle of a crowd; we see the title: "Krakow, April 13, 1943." The camera moves higher to a close-up of loudspeakers.	"Zygmeut Szymkiewicz, major doctor, a letter from the Health Department." "Roman Zajackowski, land engineer. His service papers were found." Ambient noise.
2. A close-up of a newspaper held in the reader's hands. The camera pans across the figure to a close-up of a man looking over the reader's shoulder.	"Anton Darda, military rank unknown." Ambient noise.
3. Another long view of the square. Nazi flags fly in the background, and we see others in the crowd.	The reading of the list of the dead continues in this and all following shots, as does the ambient noise.
4. The woman we will later recognize as the university rector and Agnieszka's sister climbs down from a carriage and turns to look in the direction of the loudspeakers.	The list continues. Ambient noise.
5. Close-up of loudspeakers from the rector's point of view.	The list continues. Ambient noise.
6. Return to the rector in close-up, in sharp focus among other less-defined figures. The camera tracks her as she moves forward.	"Ferdynand Marecki, his student card and a telegram attached."
7. A medium shot of the general's widow. The camera tracks her as she moves; she stops to listen.	The list continues. Ambient noise.
8. Anna runs to the kiosk. The camera pans with her.	Anna: "Goniec Karkowski, please." Vendor: "I got the latest." Ambient noise.
9. Anna opens the paper and reads. The camera pans with her as she walks. She stands in medium shot facing the camera, raises her head and smiles. She turns her head twice to look back, smiling, and disappears in an archway.	The list continues. Ambient noise.
10. The general's widow in medium long shot. She turns and moves away from the camera.	The list continues. Ambient noise.

reinforces Anna's emotion as she hesitates to leave the square and casts backward glances. The general's widow reappears in shot 10 as she turns her back to the camera and moves away. By metonymic transmission, the three women and the emotions they express stand for the experience of all the others. Moreover, the fluid camera movements—a linking strategy that appears elsewhere in the film—and the characters' movements within the frame—tie the three women and the crowd into the shared experience of anxious waiting. On the soundtrack there is only a brief snatch of dialogue (usually a prime tool of individuation). Instead we hear ambient noise and the loudspeakers disseminating without interruption the list of the dead disinterred at Katyn, the accumulation of names suggesting the generalization of experience.

I would call this strategy *collective figuration* in which the individual character and individual actions are to be taken as the narrative expression of larger-scale entities and actions. The episodic structure the film adopts is the clear sign of this figuration: we move between relatively autonomous groups of characters who represent different poles of the developing historical action: the domestic space of the wives and mothers, the collective space of the Polish prisoners, the university under Nazi threat, and so forth. The protagonists who inhabit these spaces are to some degree idiosyncratic but they are at the same moment representative—that is, they are *members of* their class—and as such, they express more general political and existential attitudes. In short, characters take on symbolic functions, as they do in many historical films: this is the rhetorical means of describing social entities and actions that are not easily represented in cinematic terms.

This is particularly apparent in the representation of life in Soviet-dominated Poland after the end of the war. Characters choose to belong to one side or the other of a great political divide. In one camp we have those who “want to live” and choose the present over the past, which means an accommodation with the People's Republic and, in particular, their complicity in the lie about the Katyn massacres. In the other camp are those who refuse to forget, who will tell the truth about Katyn, even if their resistance ends in death.

Take the example of two sisters, whose actions and attitudes make them polar opposites: Agnieszka and the (unnamed) rector of the university (Wajda chose to name only a few of his characters to prevent the

hunt for their “real” models). Agnieszka thinks of nothing but telling truth to power, and she insists on inscribing the correct date of her brother Piotr’s death at Katyn (1940, before the German occupation) on the tombstone she plans to have made for him, as Wajda did for his own father. To pay for the monument, she sells her long blond hair to an actress, who has recently returned from a concentration camp where her head was shaved. The actress has been cast as Antigone, the character of Greek tragedy who performs a forbidden ritual burial for her brother killed on the field of battle and, refusing to decant, is punished by being entombed alive. It is, however, Agnieszka who assumes the role of the mythological heroine. She places the tombstone in the cemetery; she is arrested by the Polish police and is subjected to a Stalinist interrogation, which she contemptuously resists; she is then taken down a dark corridor and descends the stairs that lead into the underground.

Agnieszka’s sister, the rector, stands on the side of accommodation. Anna’s nephew Tadzio appears in her office with a curriculum vitae that supports his application to study at the university’s art school. Tadzio’s CV includes the information that his father was murdered by the Soviets at Katyn. The rector attempts to persuade him to revise his application, asking him to choose life. He refuses. She admits him nonetheless, asking a professor to make him see reason, and reveals her fundamental pessimism: “There will never be a free Poland.” In the next sequence, Tadzio rips down a Soviet poster, is pursued by the police, and eventually is killed in the street.

Another figure of resistance is the general’s widow. She attempts to stop an open-air showing of a Soviet documentary that pins the massacre at Katyn on the Germans. Jerzy, one of the few survivors of the killings, takes her away, telling her he has chosen to live with the lie and pursue his life in the Polish army. Seated together on a bench in a park, engulfed in fog, they engage in a battle of conscience. The general’s widow tells Jerzy, “The Soviets must lie to cover up the crime, but you don’t have to.” Jerzy responds, “I could just as well shoot myself in the head. We have to survive, forgive.” After army officers pass by and Jerzy rises to salute them, she says, “You’re the same as they are,” and walks away into the mist. In the next sequence, Jerzy is drinking heavily in a bar and talking recklessly about Katyn. To silence him, a friend

pushes him out into the dark where the tormented Jerzy does indeed shoot himself in the head.

Most sequences in *Katyn* are sustained by narrative and figurative structures like those I have just described. Codes of action align events in their sequential order and assure the text's readability; rhetorical structures specify the relationship between the individual and the collectivity or relate the details of a scene to a mythic symbology. But, as I have attempted to suggest, Wajda's discourse on history is far from transparent. Indeed, there are pauses in *Katyn* that interrupt the flow of action and create a state of reflection in which every detail of the scene, every action or gesture, every movement of the camera becomes part of a grand metaphor, the distillation of a historical moment. *Katyn* also confronts us with moments of historical experience that refuse to be contained within any narrative logic or any model of symbolic substitution. They do not refer us to codes; they return us to life. I would like to illustrate these quite different aspects of Wajda's text through the analysis of three sequences: the first depicts the celebration of Christmas in the prison where the Polish officers are detained. The second and third represent their massacre at Katyn.

THE SACRED BODY, THE BODY MASSACRED

Three sequences take place in Kozelsk, site of the Optyn Hermitage that the Soviets converted to a POW camp in 1939 and 1940. Irony of history: it was in this monastery that Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* set the dialogue between an old monk and a young aristocrat who discuss whether morality can exist if God is dead.⁴⁷ We are clearly in the sphere of the mythological. The most significant of these sequences takes place on Christmas Eve, 1939. It begins with a long shot of the domed structure of the monastery church under snowfall as a Polish soldier looks at the sky above it where a star is shining. Wajda plays on the irony of the setting: the sacrilege (etymologically "the stealer of sacred things") of the deconsecrated church that, paradoxically, retains its identity as a sacred vessel. It holds within it the elite Polish officers—intellectuals and professionals, not military men—who constitute the hope for the future of Poland.

In the first interior shot we see the back of the soldier who moves toward the door of a room where the general is seated at a table, seen in deep focus. The general/priest is in his “sacristy,” and the soldier announces: “General, I report that the first star has been sighted.” The camera tracks back as the general moves into the church to begin his Christmas Eve speech. It is a symmetrical, enclosed space—the church’s vaulting rises above the multiple tiers of bunks—that the composition of the following shots shows as centered and harmonious. Majestic crane shots take us above the heads of the soldiers emphasizing again the symmetry of space with the general at the center encircled by his men. He is the subject of several interpolated close-ups. His speech concerns the future: “You must endure, because there won’t be a free Poland without you.” The camera re-descends as the general begins singing: “God is born on earth / Powers tremble . . .” and his men join in, and then the camera regains its height. An exterior shot shows Soviet soldiers in a watchtower. Then we return to a long shot of the church.

The subject of the sequence is a ritual, which, like all authentic rituals, reaches into the depths of collective memory. (As we will also see in *The Ascent* and *Siberiade*, sacred myth, whether Christian or animist, is the vehicle of transgression against soulless Soviet materialism.) The rite’s ceremonious character is reinforced by the repetition of motifs and the expressive use of the moving camera. The sequence is symmetrically framed and circular in movement: a long shot of the church inaugurates the sequence and rhymes with the last shot, which brings the rite to closure. The rising crane shot is repeated by the descending crane shot that follows. These parallel movements enclose the figure of the general, who conducts the service and delivers his sermon on the theme of the necessity of survival. Strikingly, the focus on the individual characters disappears: the men are at one with each other and with the space of the church. The sequence constitutes a “mythic model of emotion”: it organizes and subdues the chaotic and traumatic experience of the group and suggests the possibility of transcendence. Thus the POWs become a sanctified body both in their religious faith and in their national solidarity. The sequence has extraordinary poetic resonance—a summation of everything that Poland is about to lose. It is against these representations of the sacred body that the massacre at Katyn forest takes on its savage character.

The massacre is prepared for by Anna's receipt of her husband's diary, somehow salvaged from the Katyn death trenches and delivered to her years later. Beginning with the film's second sequence, we know that Andrzej will bear witness to the events of the Polish officers' captivity. He moves among the multitude of soldiers. He is one of them but he also stands for them; he is their self-appointed witness. In a voiceover Andrzej says, "Surrounded by Soviet tanks, we surrendered weapons. They take us for POWs though there was no war with them." "I'll try to write from time to time to let you know what happened to me, if I died and didn't return." Later in the sequence, Andrzej tells his friend Jerzy: "I've decided to describe everything I've seen here day by day."

Andrzej's journal entries promise to repair the rift between past and present. They cover, beginning on April 7, 1940, the Polish officers' deportation by transport train, their arrival at Gniezdovo, their transfer to Black Marias, and their journey to the Katyn spa, during which we see a bulldozer digging trenches. Andrzej's narrative voiceover accompanies the images, which take on a subjective character expressive of his situation. In the sequence in the transport train, a tracking camera moves across the figures of the prisoners caught in a close and fragmented space. The sense of dread is reinforced by low-key lighting in which the dark interior of the prison carriage contrasts with small areas of the frame brightly lit by the windows. The penumbral effects are striking, as for example in a deep focus shot in which the darkened carriage and the figures of the prisoners are set off against the distant doorway, infused with murky light, where we see the figure of a guard. Andrzej's commentary ends uneasily: "They brought us to a forest, a kind of spa. A thorough search. They didn't find my wedding ring. . . . What will happen to us?" and we see Andrzej putting his diary back in his coat. After a brief sequence representing the arrival of three Black Marias at the spa, a single protracted shot shows us that succeeding pages of the bloodstained diary are blank as they rustle in the wind.

Despite the quasi-religious meanings the sequence at Kozelsk produced, Wajda affirms in an interview that he was not interested in "Polish martyrology." Like other films of the Polish School, *Katyn* was meant to be an accusation, and it was certainly Wajda's intention to strike the spectator with the visceral horror of the Katyn massacres

and deny any sense of the victims' transcendence. Indeed, the two sequences that represent the massacres show a major shift in narrative point of view. The first occurs before the end of Andrzej's account of the events of the deportation, but, exceptionally, he is not a witness: the general and several officers are executed by the Soviet secret police. The second represents the shootings over the death trenches at Katyn, in which Andrzej perishes along with many others. In most of the film's other sequences the representation of the subjectivity of characters, particularly the anxiety of wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters awaiting the hoped-for return of their loved ones, is strongly represented by narrative and visual point of view—these are emotions that we share with them. By contrast, point of view disappears as the massacres take place: victims cannot be witnesses, and the perpetrators are pure instruments of brutality. In this sense the massacre is an unmediated experience.

The executions are unsparing experiences for the spectator. There is first the brutality of the images, cut together in what the French call a *montage sec*. The executions are carried out with mechanical efficiency. The repetitions of the same or similar gestures are caught in dehumanizing close shots: the binding of wrists, the moment of panic, the shot to the head, the hand that removes the gun from the executioner's hand and replaces it with another, the body pushed up a chute, the boot that steps in blood, and the bucket of water that washes the blood from the floor before the next victim is brought in. It is the brutality of the executioners' detachment from the enormity of their tasks that stuns us.

The second aspect of these brutal representations comes from our own detachment from the experience of the characters, our starkly unfiltered point of view. And our detachment from "Wajda," the instrument of historical memory that has organized, up to this point, our experience of the events known as "Katyn." Although we recognize Andrzej and Agnieszka's brother Piotr among the anonymous victims of the second sequence, we no longer consider their subjective beings. They are living bodies, among so many others positioned above the trenches, soon to pass ignobly into death. We do not suffer through the victims—the sequences suppress pathos—but are restrained in our uncomfortable position of observers, all too close to the action. Our

aloofness seems to put us in immediate contact with the event. Ankersmit describes the nature of historical experience in the following terms:

The event is no longer a symbol that can be read or be given meaning in terms of something else (that is, its context)—it is just what it is, and nothing else, and therefore only and exclusively a *potential object of experience*. What withdraws itself from context, from all (narrative and contextualist) meaning, from all signification, *what is just there in its semantic nakedness*, can be only an object of experience to us.⁴⁸

Who is the subject of experience in the final moments of Katyn? The question is complex. It is certainly we as spectators who are faced with this austere representation of a historical event. But it is also Wajda, the subject/historian, who withdraws all the narrative and figurative apparatuses that have served as context in the rest of the film. He is the traumatized subject who exposes himself to this horrific representation: the murder of the Polish nation and the murder of the father. The images he edits together deny all meaning. They demolish, without the slightest afterthought, the sacred edifice that Wajda constructed in the sequence that takes place in the monastery church at Kozelsk. He thus deprives himself of the mainstays of personal and historical understanding. As Ankersmit puts it:

An experience in which the history of the experiencing subject (and the memory thereof) has no role to play—it is an experience without a subject. The subject has to divest itself from its *own* history which ordinarily contextualizes and historicizes his or her experience.⁴⁹

Sometimes the real itself breaks through representation in a way that confounds us and takes us out of time as we experience it in the present. We are there, joined to a terrifying reality of the past. We are not asked to understand it. The distance imposed by narrative or the retrospective gaze of the historian has been wiped away. So have the rhetorical and symbolic figures that are strategies for producing historical meaning. All those screens have been overturned. We simply take in the reality of the massacres in its “semantic nakedness.” It

matters little that the sequences of massacre are not edited from documentary footage, which of course never existed. They are representations that do not simply compensate for the absence of the past, like all historical representations; they abolish all distance. Without indulging in undue speculation, it seems clear that Wajda needed to reconstruct this experience for deeply psychological reasons. It was not enough to understand the loss of his father in historical terms, with all the alienation that such understanding involves. Nor could he understand it personally through the memory of his own suffering or his mother's. He needed to place the murder of his father before his own consciousness in the most direct and brutal manner possible.