KINONIK

ASHES AND DIAMONDS (1958)

Directed by Andrzej Wajda

WEDNESDAY August 6th 7PM



A film, a character, a country, caught between realities: Andrzej Wajda's **Ashes and Diamonds** (1958) exists in a state of constant tension. We follow Maciek, a Polish Home Army soldier, on his mission to assassinate a local Communist official. Made in Soviet-occupied Poland, under ostensibly lightened censorship after the "Polish October", and adapting a novel which was required school reading in the Communist state, Wajda, "told as much of the truth as could be told in the circumstances."

Turns out a director like Wajda, a tight screenplay, and the cinematographic prowess of Jerzy Wójcik can do a lot of truth-telling under duress. Trusting in the power of the image to convey nuances that censors would be unable to concretely refute, Ashes and Diamonds spoke directly to the fraught new world facing Poland's young people. What future could be had for a country thrust from one occupation to the next? What life could people dare hope for under such intense economic and political uncertainty, when one's safety was never guaranteed?

Maciek, played by Zbigniew Cybulski (becoming "Poland's James Dean"), is constrained. By his past war acts, by his party loyalty, by threats from his superiors — by his own neglected desire for a peaceful life. Over the course of twenty-four hours each belief is challenged but no single path makes itself clear: no clarity is possible, here. Yet choices must be made. A tragedy of circumstance, where "characters are betrayed by what they cannot see," **Ashes and Diamonds** solidified Poland's reputation as a cinematic epicenter and gave voice to an emerging generation under Soviet rule.

Trivia:

The first Polish film shot in 1:1.85 format

Sales of sunglasses skyrocketed in Poland following the release (cause Marciek looks so cool).

The first thing Jerzy Wójcik did was convince the set designer Roman Mann to include ceilings in all the sets.

Wajda purposefully had Zbigniew Cybulski wear non period accurate clothes (the film takes place in 1945) as he felt it would limit his acting and expression, and wanted a naturalistic, "non-acting" feel -- so Wajda had him dress however he was most comfortable.

Censorship was a constant threat. While "Polish October" was supposed to lighten the level of Soviet control over Polish communication and creation (and did, to a certain extent), Wajda was very aware that this was not absolute and was liable to go away at any moment. The screenplay was with the censorship board for a significant time before it was approved, and every step of production was haunted by government pushed-for changes. Up until the day of the first screening, the ending was under debate by officials. Due to the constant controversy, the government did not allow it to be submitted to Cannes, but a low-level official shipped a print to the Venice Film Festival, where it won the FIPRESCI prize.