



# Kanal

**Director:** Andrzej Wajda  
**Country:** Poland  
**Date:** 1957

*A review from [filmreference.com](http://filmreference.com):*

*Kanal*, Andrzej Wajda's second film, is based on a story by Jerzy Stefan Stawiński which appeared in the magazine *Twórczość*. The events of the story are drawn from the writer's personal experience. Stawiński had taken part in two battles for Warsaw, as an 18-year-old in 1939 and then in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

Wajda quite purposely renounced any possibility of producing an exhaustive chronicle of the Uprising or commemorative poem on the heroic insurgents. His approach to examining this event was different. From the outset he limited himself to the time in which the story itself is set. The Uprising lasted 63 days, and he followed his heroes from the fifty-seventh day, just a few days and nights before the Uprising was suppressed. Defeat is present in the film from the introductory commentary which presents the individual characters: "These are the main heroic tragedies. Watch them closely; these are the last hours of their lives." It is from this point of view that we see the unfolding story of one group of fighters who are no longer able to hold off the enemy and must retreat through underground sewers.

The film is structured in two parts which differ from one another in their use of cinematic techniques. The first part is documentary in nature. It acquaints the viewer with the heroes and briefly conveys something of their lot before the Uprising. The camera follows them through everyday situations: they prepare their food, shave, make love, and talk about their loved ones and about their past. The effects of the war are ever present as these apparently everyday moments occur amid the ruins of the city where not a single house has been left standing. The war itself intrudes only with occasional explosions and small-scale attacks. This relative quiet is expressed through long takes, tracking shots and the use of only a minimum of detail. The actual tragedy commences only after the group has withdrawn underground. There is also a change in the style of representation, which takes on an expressive eloquence; the lighting changes, there are more contrasts of light and dark, the camera focuses on the heroes in detail, the sequences of reality alternate with scenes that have symbolic meaning. A comparison of the two parts brings out the specific use of sound, light, and darkness.

Above ground in the film's beginning, the basic component of the soundtrack is the staccato of firearms, while underground the sound component is far richer—the distorted voices of the heroes, dissonant sounds which the viewer is often unable to identify, even a solitary harmonic note of an ocarina. Here, sound has the extra function of heightening the drama, for the underground odyssey must take place in absolute stillness so that the insurgents do not betray their positions to the Germans who are lurking above. Light and shadow play a similar role. The first part is depicted in light, non-contrasting shades of grey, while darkness and sharp flashes of light are assigned to the underground sequences. Traditionally, the light/sun is a symbol of hope. For Wajda, the symbol has the opposite meaning, for the fulfilment of longing for light would mean death for the heroes. Therefore, at the conclusion both symbolic meanings—light as good, darkness as threat—flow together and empty into tragedy; both extremes of the light spectrum bring the ineluctable ending.

*Kanal* had its Polish premiere in the spring of 1957, the same year it was introduced at the International Festival at Cannes, where it won a prize. Its reception abroad was decidedly positive, while its appearance

in Poland stirred discussions that included both positive and negative views. The country still had a tragic reminder of the Uprising; people who had been direct participants in this tragedy of modern history were still living. Their attitude towards the film was sometimes too uncompromising; they wanted it to be a literal depiction of what they had experienced. However, Wajda could not make such a film. He emphasized his personal approach as a director by presenting the experiences of a specific group of people whom he divests of heroism but does not condemn, for they chose their fate freely and fought not for glory but against bondage and enslavement, and paid the highest price.

Kanal occupies a crucial position in the Polish cinema. It ushered in a series of films noted for their sober view of the myths engendered by the war and the Uprising. From this standpoint the film is similar in function to a declaration of policy.

—B. Uργοšíkova

*Taken from: <http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Jo-Ko/Kanal.html>*