

An evaluation of Roman Polanski as an artist—Part 2

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This is the second of a two-part series. Part 1 was published November 18.

Roman Polanski attended the Cannes film festival during the May-June 1968 events, the massive general strike that shook French capitalism to its foundations. Contrary to myth (for example, in Vanessa Redgrave's autobiography), he did not support the leftist attempt to shut down the festival that year. As he makes clear in his own autobiography, Polanski found the "revolutionary" filmmakers' efforts rather self-indulgent and even "absurd," which they may well have been, to a degree.

Nonetheless, whatever his ambivalence or even hostility, the experience of a mass movement in the West against capitalism ("By this time the general strike was spreading throughout France. Train and plane services were grinding to a halt, gas stations running dry. Exhibitors began to pack up and go home, and the festival ended in complete disarray," he writes) had to have had an impact on him, as opposed to the experience of a later generation of "dissidents" in the Stalinist countries.

In August 1969 tragedy struck when the so-called "Manson family" members murdered the pregnant Sharon Tate and four friends at the Los Angeles home Polanski and Tate shared. He was in Europe on a film project at the time.

Two years after the tragedy Polanski told the interviewer from *Playboy*: "Sharon was the first woman in my life who really made me feel happy. I mean literally aware of being happy. That's a very rare state. Strangely enough, about a week or two before her death, I remember an instant when I was thinking of it, and I was actually thinking: 'I am a happy man!' ... I also remember thinking—and here is my middle-European background, probably—I remember thinking: 'This cannot possibly last. It's impossible to last.' And I suddenly got scared. I was thinking that you can't maintain such a status quo. I didn't have anything tragic in mind, but I was afraid, being quite a realist, that such a state cannot last indefinitely."

Polanski's next film was an understandably bleak version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, filmed in North Wales and released in 1971. The director explained that after his wife's murder, "everything I was considering seemed futile to me. I couldn't think of a subject that seemed worthwhile or dignified enough to spend a year or more on it ... As a kid, I loved Shakespeare, and when I was a teenager I saw Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* 20 times. I always had this great desire to make a Shakespearean movie some day, and when I finally decided I must go back to work, I thought to myself: 'That's something I could do, that's something I could give myself to. That's worth the effort.'"

Polanski adapted the play along with left-wing British theater critic Kenneth Tynan. Their version (perhaps inspired too by well-known comments from the German playwright Bertolt Brecht) emphasizes the shabby, dirty, provincial character of the medieval Scottish nobility's existence. Pigs run through one castle's grounds. The witches, not three,

but a crowd, are ugly, ill-clothed, sometimes unclothed. Polanski and Tynan present Macbeth's murder of Duncan, normally done offstage, in all its chaos and painfulness, as the usurper jabs at the reigning king with his dagger.

Macbeth has a perpetually moving frontline of violence and treachery, insecurity and blood. It contains some of the bitterest, grimmest lines in Shakespeare, reaching a high point in the famous soliloquy, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," which ends with Macbeth indicting life as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Polanski's is an intelligent, creditable version of *Macbeth*, with many picturesque and striking moments. However, by and large, the film lacks the necessary intensity and fury. Jon Finch and Francesca Annis (as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth) perform with sincerity, but the work as a whole lacks great purpose, except to establish the potential of human beings to do terrible things to one another. Orson Welles, Polanski's "idol," in his 1948 version, makes the play a study in despotism, in the psychology and mechanics, and ultimate irrationality, of a tyranny.

In the Tynan-Polanski modernist (or perhaps already "post-modernist") version, no one is innocent, Macbeth is simply one assassin among many. The difficulty is, if everyone acts horribly, then no one does.

Polanski's next major film was *Chinatown*. Released in June 1974 (at a volatile time, only weeks before the resignation of President Richard Nixon as a result of the Watergate scandal), the film is perhaps his most complete achievement to date. It is a remarkable work, both accessible to a wide audience and artistically and politically complex.

Set in 1937, *Chinatown* is loosely inspired by the so-called "California Water Wars" of the 1910s and 1920s. Los Angeles officials at the time, led by the Department of Water and Power's superintendent, William Mulholland, conspired to divert water to the metropolitan area at the expense of farmers in the Owens Valley. The water was used to irrigate the San Fernando Valley, large parcels of which had secretly been bought up by a syndicate. The investors reaped a fortune.

Polanski's film centers on private detective J. J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson), who is apparently hired by the wife of the water and power department chief engineer, Hollis Mulwray, to look into her husband's infidelity. Gittes and his associates spy on Mulwray meeting his supposed youthful mistress at their "love nest." In reality, the woman who retained the detective was not Mulwray's wife, and Gittes has become a pawn in an effort to discredit the chief engineer, who has learned of the effort to divert water and other corrupt goings-on, and plans to expose them.

After Mulwray is murdered, his real wife, now a widow, Evelyn (Faye Dunaway), hires Gittes to investigate the crime. Gittes looks deeper into the water issue, getting his nostril sliced open in the process (thanks to a knife-wielding "midget" thug played by Polanski). He presses the fragile and neurotic Evelyn, "I think you're hiding something." She tries to put him off. As to her personal life, she says falteringly, "I don't see anyone for very long ... It's difficult for me."

Meanwhile, her sinister father, Noah Cross (John Huston), a wealthy businessman and Mulwray's former partner, offers Gittes even more money, \$10,000, to find Mulwray's "girl-friend." At their lunchtime meeting, Cross tells Gittes, "You may think you know what you're dealing with, but, believe me, you don't."

In fact, "large-scale capitalist interests [are] arrayed against the people of Los Angeles and the small farmers of the nearby Valley," who are all "coerced and duped" so that Cross can become "even wealthier than he already is." (Herbert J. Eagle, "Power and the Visual Semantics of Polanski's Films," in *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World*)

Events unfold. Gittes's efforts to protect Evelyn and the other young woman only end up leading to a tragic denouement.

Chinatown evokes with great effectiveness the world first depicted in the "hardboiled" novels of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain, among others. Polanski explained to *Interview* magazine that he was "trying to create ... this Philip Marlowe atmosphere [Chandler's private detective], which I had never seen in the movies the way I got it in the books."

At their best, what those novels captured—and Polanski and screenwriter Robert Towne succeed in this as well—was the shocking contrast between the glamorous surface of life in southern California in the 1930s—the lush vegetation, ocean, sunny skies, movie stars, creamy stucco houses, sleek cars—and the rotten, money-grubbing reality at the heart of its cancerous economic growth.

The genial, avuncular Cross is guilty of everything. Toward the end, he tells Gittes, "Most people never have to face the fact that at the right time and the right place, they're capable of anything." The private eye has earlier challenged Cross about his plans to make additional piles of money: "Why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What could you buy that you can't already afford?"

A critic describes Cross in *Chinatown* as the "very incarnation of the political conspiracy in a single figure of voracious will." What has already happened "can only get worse" because the businessman-developer "indicates that his goal is to buy up the future: the increasing voraciousness of Capital has no limit." (Dana Polan, "Chinatown: Politics as Perspective, Perspective as Politics")

The exile from "communism," Polanski, but an honest artist, with his eyes open, made a meticulously constructed, devastating, and deeply-felt indictment of American society. One wonders if the political establishment, especially in Los Angeles, ever truly forgave him.

Polanski and Towne created *Chinatown* on the crest of a wave of radicalism that was sweeping the globe. The former considered *Chinatown* an "important and serious" work, he told an interviewer years later. (Although he noted in another published conversation shortly after the movie's release that it was his most formally conventional work.) The director described his approach as being that of "an invisible witness to the events," with the camera following. He went on: "If you have a story to tell, try to tell it in a simple, or maybe, elegant manner, and care about the emotions it can evoke in those kind enough to watch it."

Speaking of *Chinatown*'s tragic ending, he observed, "If you want to feel for Evelyn, if you ... feel in general that there is a lot of injustice in our world, you want to have people leaving the cinema with a feeling that they should do something about it in their lives." Or, as he explained in his autobiography, he wanted audience members to get out of their seats "with a sense of outrage."

The director, of course, had the benefit of the participation of Jack Nicholson at the height of his acting powers (Dunaway, Huston and the entire cast are also excellent). There is little question that Nicholson in the 1970s was one of the finest performers working in films. In, among others, *Easy Rider* (1969), *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Last Detail*, *The Passenger*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Shining* and *Reds*

(1981), as well as *Chinatown*, he stood out.

His Jake Gittes can be taken as representative: here Nicholson personifies a certain lower middle-class American type, somewhat vulgar, but honest and quite forceful, skeptical yet not cynical, still naïve and occasionally a little wide-eyed, not too impressed with himself, a bully perhaps in some circumstances but essentially good-hearted, someone you would want on your side, someone capable of an enormous effort to get at the truth.

Polanski directed two more films in the 1970s, *The Tenant* (1976) and *Tess* (1979), both serious, if flawed, efforts.

The former (from a novel published in 1964 by Roland Topor, a French artist of Polish-Jewish descent) is his most "Kafkaesque," if that overworked phrase has much left in it by this time. Polanski plays a mild-mannered clerk, a Polish immigrant living in Paris, who rents an apartment that previously belonged to a woman, an Egyptologist named Simone Choulet, who threw herself out of the window. He visits her in the hospital, where, wrapped head to toe in bandages like a mummy, she emits a terrible scream.

Trelkovsky moves into the unappealing flat (everyone tells him "it is difficult to find a good apartment" in Paris), but immediately comes up against the intolerance and repressiveness of the building's owner, its concierge, and the majority of his neighbors. He's not allowed to have female visitors, he mustn't make noise, every move he makes is watched and disapproved of ...

The mental torment generated by his inhospitable surroundings and his loneliness eventually drives him mad. He begins to hallucinate, he starts to dress up in the previous tenant's clothes, in the end, he loses his identity entirely and becomes Simone, even imitating her method of suicide.

As Polanski later admitted, the lead character's transition is rather abrupt and not entirely convincing. *The Tenant* (humanity as a whole perhaps, with its rather tenuous, continually threatened status on this planet) is at its best when it is most concrete about Trelkovsky's difficulties: a nasty landlord, nosy and bigoted neighbors, a police official hostile to foreigners.

Polanski is charming in those portions of the film, as the much put upon, endlessly patient "little man," who shrugs at setbacks, lets abuses roll off him like water off a duck's back, while somehow maintaining his dignity. French actress Isabelle Adjani, as a friend of the former tenant who seems ready to help him stay or get back on his feet, is also a delight (Adjani is nearly unrecognizable in the role, which is unlike the enigmatic or self-pitying persona she played in a number of films).

The Tenant collapses under the weight of its own amorphous ambitions, but not before it has demonstrated the "'terrible uncertainty of one's own existence,' as Kafka once put it, that is so often central to the haunting aspect of the director's work." ("Polanski and the Horror from Within," Tony McKibbin) In the film, argues Ewa Mazierska (in *Roman Polanski: The Cinema of a Cultural Traveller*), Polanski "draws attention to the social context of the emergence of schizophrenia."

Tess was Polanski's second adaptation of a classic of English literature (Thomas Hardy's 1891 *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*) and his first film after pleading guilty to unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor and fleeing the US in 1978.

Nastassja Kinski starred as the young farm girl who undergoes a series of tests that eventually drive her over the brink. When her impoverished, broken-down father, John Durbeyfield, learns of his descent from an ancient noble family, Tess is sent to make a connection with a wealthy branch of the D'Urberville family that lives nearby. As a matter of fact, the family has purchased the name and coat of arms.

Alec D'Urberville attempts to seduce his lovely "cousin," and when gifts and sweet words fall short, he rapes her. She leaves, eventually giving birth to a sickly baby that soon dies. She goes to work as a milkmaid and falls in love with the charismatic, reform-minded Angel

Clare. They marry, but when she tells him of her past, he finds it difficult to accept, and abandons her. Tess is forced to turn to Alec to help her family avoid starvation. When a remorseful Angel returns for her and finds her living with Alec, tragedy ensues.

Polanski has again done a thorough and convincing job. Hardy's novel is a heartbreaking story of class and sexual oppression. A good deal of that comes through in *Tess*, in its most affecting parts. Peter Firth is especially good as the high-minded, but repressed and hypocritical Angel Clare, who destroys his own and Tess's chance for happiness with his "idealism" and stupid male egoism.

The director told interviewer Max Tessier in 1979, "Tess's rebellion is often seen as something that occurs only at the end of the novel, but it's actually present all the way through. Everyone has a place within society, and rebelling against it brings grave consequences. When Tess does rebel, it kills her."

Unhappily, this element is not really worked through dramatically in the film. Kinski is fine when called upon to convey a smoldering resentment, but lacks the overall depth and dynamism required by the "unspoken rebellion" to which Polanski refers.

The falling off in Polanski's work in the 1980s and 1990s was part of a general falling off. He directed only two films in the former decade, the sporadically amusing *Pirates*, with Walter Matthau, which failed badly at the box office, and the competent thriller, *Frantic*, with Harrison Ford and a young French actress, Emmanuelle Seigner, whom Polanski eventually married (they have two children). *Bitter Moon*, released in 1992, an "erotic melodrama," is a poor, unconvincing film.

Polanski's adaptation of Ariel Dorfman's painful *Death and the Maiden* came out in 1994. The playwright was cultural advisor to the Allende "Popular Unity" regime in Chile, overthrown by a CIA-organized military coup in 1973. In his play, a woman in an unnamed South American country believes a man she accidentally encounters to be her chief torturer years before, who repeatedly raped her to the music of Schubert.

Dorfman, who has signed the petition calling for Polanski's release from Swiss prison, explained at the time why he chose the Polish-French filmmaker to direct his work: "There were six or seven directors who wanted to make the film, but I felt Roman was the right person. He identified, as you say, with all three characters for his own biographical reasons; he has lived these situations of repression over and over again in his life. And therefore I had nothing to explain to him. I knew that in Polanski I had a director who would understand what the story was about without me having to explain it."

Around that same time, Polanski expressed his dismay about the state of contemporary movie-making in an interview: "It's already getting more and more difficult to make an ambitious and original film. There are less and less independent producers or independent companies and an increasing number of corporations who are more interested in balance sheets than in artistic achievement. They want to make a killing each time they produce a film."

Unhappily, his own *The Ninth Gate* (1999), with Johnny Depp and Seigner, is something of a confirmation of the very syndrome he describes. It is a rather bland and anti-climactic, if visually striking, horror film, once again with satanic overtones.

In *The Pianist*, released in 2002, Polanski for the first time addressed himself directly to the terrible fate of the Polish Jews under the Nazis. The director based himself on the memoirs of Wladyslaw Szpilman (in an adaptation by Ronald Harwood)—a pianist and composer who miraculously survived German-occupied Poland and lived another five decades after the war—as well as his own experiences. The result is a difficult to watch, but restrained and dignified account of a population's descent into hell, and an individual's eventual re-emergence.

The first part of the film deals with the step-by-step brutalization of Warsaw's Jews in the first years of the German occupation. Szpilman's

family attempts to carry on under the increasingly humiliating and dangerous conditions. After two years, deportation orders come for the family. As they walk to the railway cars that will transport them to their deaths, a Jewish policeman, a collaborator with the Germans, recognizes Wladyslaw and permits him to escape—an episode with marked similarities to Polanski's own getaway in Krakow.

Then comes Szpilman's two-and-a-half year struggle to survive, both inside and outside the Warsaw Ghetto. From an apartment just beyond it, he watches the heroic Ghetto uprising of April 1943 and later witnesses the general Warsaw uprising in August 1944. In the last period of the war, a German officer discovers him in an abandoned building, hears him play the piano, and helps keep him alive.

In its review in 2002, the WSWS noted a number of weaknesses in the film, observing that "there is something misleadingly passive and empty about Szpilman on screen," and that Polanski, for his own ideological reasons, had softened "some social and political elements in the memoir," including Szpilman's contact with a socialist oppositionist inside the Warsaw Ghetto.

Nonetheless, the WSWS described the film as "a moving evocation of the Nazi Holocaust, depicted through the experience of a single survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto. Polanski does not break new ground, but tackles the subject with intelligence and dignity. He has been largely successful in bringing to the screen the impressive memoir of Wladyslaw Szpilman."

The film was well-received and generally viewed as an artistic "return to form," gaining Polanski the Best Director award at the 2003 Academy Award ceremony, accepted for him by Harrison Ford.

On the strength of that success, Polanski turned to another English classic, Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (2005, also from an adaptation by Harwood), in part, he explained, so that his own children could watch one of his films.

Polanski's version is a straightforward and compelling recounting of the story of the famous orphan boy in early Victorian England. In the Polanski rendering Oliver (Barney Clark) escapes abuse at the hands of his master coffin maker's wife and senior assistant by running away on foot to London. There, he falls in with a gang of boy pickpockets, led by the Artful Dodger (Harry Eden) and managed by Fagin (Ben Kingsley).

Falsely accused of stealing a handkerchief, Oliver is brought before a sadistic magistrate, eager to hand down a harsh sentence. Proven innocent, his supposed victim, the kindly and affluent Mr. Brownlow (Edward Hardwicke) takes Oliver to his mansion and proposes to raise him.

Fearful that the boy will finger them to the authorities, Fagin and his brutish associate, Bill Sikes (Jamie Foreman), conspire to kidnap Oliver, with the help of Bill's girl-friend, the young prostitute Nancy (Leanne Rowe). With Oliver under lock and key at Fagin's hangout, and following a failed break-in at Mr. Brownlow's house, Nancy takes pity on Oliver and attempts to organize his rescue. Bill finds out about her betrayal and beats her to death. In a climactic scene, at Fagin's, the police close in on Bill, who comes to a pitiful end. Oliver, in the film's epilogue, pays a visit to Fagin awaiting execution in prison.

His version of the Dickens novel brings out themes and motifs close to Polanski's heart: the abandoned child, alone in strange and unforgiving surroundings; the bewildering, apparently arbitrary cruelty of the authorities; the general persecution of the weak and defenseless; and, as well, a confidence, which sometimes flickers very low, in the essential goodness (and immense resilience) of human beings. Kingsley, who on occasion strikes the spectator in all his precision as mannered and lacking in spontaneity, delivers a moving performance as the avaricious, grotesque, but still oddly sympathetic fence.

All in all, this is a film career worthy of serious attention. One might learn something important about our world and our times by watching Polanski's films. He has done honest and artistic work, given characters and events "a definite dramatic and visual shape," in a difficult and often

regressive cultural climate.

And now ... Polanski, at the age of 76, has been arrested by Swiss authorities who intend to hand him over to US officials, who would like to lock him up. Given his life history, it seems fairly safe to assume that whatever emotions are washing over the filmmaker, astonishment is not among them. But this travesty of justice, accompanied by all manner of pious and self-righteous bleatings, should also evoke outrage.

Polanski once told an interviewer: “One of the profound experiences of my youth was seeing *Of Mice and Men* [1939]. That has stayed with me. I couldn’t stop thinking about this big, lovely man and his friend, and their friendship, and I thought that if I were ever a film maker, I would certainly try to do something along those lines, something against injustice and intolerance and prejudice and superstition. And I have. These elements are weaved through my films.”

It’s true, and he should be allowed to keep doing “something along those lines,” which is no small contribution to his fellow human beings.

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Filmography:

Oliver Twist (2005)
The Pianist (2002)
The Ninth Gate (1999)
Death and the Maiden (1994)
Bitter Moon (1992)
em>Frantic (1988)
Pirates (1986)
Tess (1979)
The Tenant (1976)
Chinatown (1974)
Che? [What?] (1972)
Macbeth (1971)
Rosemary’s Baby (1968)
Dance of the Vampires (1967) or *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (USA)
Cul-de-Sac (1966)
Repulsion (1965)
Knife in the Water (1962)
Short films:
Mammals (1962)
The Fat and the Lean (1961)
When Angels Fall (1959)
The Lamp (1959)
Two Men and a Wardrobe (1958)
Let’s Break Up the Dance (1957)
A Toothful Smile (1957)
Murder (1957)
Concluded



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