An evaluation of Roman Polanski as an artist—Part 1

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This is the first of a two-part series.

Filmmaker Roman Polanski, as of this writing, remains in a Zurich jail cell, while his lawyers fight the efforts by US authorities to extradite him. Polanski pled guilty more than 30 years ago in Los Angeles to unlawful sex with a young teenage girl, then fled the country when the judge in the case reneged on a plea bargain agreement and threatened to sentence the director to a lengthy prison term.

Every aspect of the case against Polanski reeks of dishonesty, hypocrisy, and expediency. It has far more to do with current political and economic interests than with an incident that occurred in 1977 and whose two participants have long ago wished to see put to rest.

The central concern of the Swiss authorities, by all accounts, is in this instance—as in every instance—the protection of their financial institutions. Embarrassed by a corruption scandal involving UBS and concerned about further investigations into their banks, the Swiss tipped off American officials that Polanski would be in Zurich for a film festival as a means of appeasing Washington.

For Los Angeles authorities, the vindictive Polanski witch-hunt serves the ends of settling a score with an individual who poked them in the eye. The American political establishment generally regards the Polanski affair as a useful means of further stoking up social backwardness and hysteria over alleged sex offenses.

Other factors may have played a role, including the recent efforts of Polanski's lawyers to have the case dismissed, based on the evidence of judicial misconduct, and their charge that Los Angeles officials had shown no seriousness about pursuing the director in recent years. It is at least intriguing to note that Polanski's new film, *The Ghost* (adapted from the novel by Robert Harris), uncompleted and unreleased because of the director's arrest, accuses a fictional former British prime minister (clearly based on Tony Blair) of war crimes and other perfidious acts.

It should be evident to anyone who thinks about it for a moment that the case against Polanski involves a political agenda. His continued prosecution represents an injustice and conforms to reactionary aims.

The fake populist claim that Polanski is a member of the "Hollywood elite" receiving special treatment is false, and even sinister. It echoes (and encourages) the repeated claims of anti-intellectual and often anti-Semitic forces that the entertainment industry is a hotbed of sin and corruption sapping the nation's "moral foundations." To join in the effort to set "Middle America" against "Hollywood," as a series of liberal commentators at the *Nation* and *Salon* have done, is unprincipled and politically reprehensible.

In reality, certain individuals (Michael Jackson and others) are picked out *because* they are wealthy celebrities and served up as human sacrifices to the most backward layers of the population, in an effort to divert their confused but seething anger over deteriorating conditions of life. The punishment of the rich and famous provides a vicarious (and illusory) satisfaction in such cases. It is not accidental that the manipulated outrage against Polanski comes in the midst of the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression and a continuing flood of layoffs, wage cuts, foreclosures and personal bankruptcies.

Beyond the political and legal questions, there is something more involved here. After all, Polanski has considerable artistic gifts. In discussing the concerted effort to lock him up, we are obliged to consider his artistic contribution.

Polanski himself, through his French lawyer, Hervé Temime, has termed "counterproductive" arguments from defenders citing his artistry as an exculpatory factor. The filmmaker, Temime told reporters, felt that some of the commentary "was perceived as support for the immunity of an artist, and I think that's a false debate.… He has never demanded special treatment for himself or his career."

Of course, there is no "immunity" for the artist; we would not even consider the question in those terms. However, Polanski's artistry and body of work demonstrate that he is not a sociopath; he is clearly not a pedophile, which would in any case raise the issue of treatment more than punishment

Does it matter at all then that Polanski is a remarkable artist? We believe it does.

The evidence demonstrates that Polanski is not a sexual predator, but a gifted artist capable of colossally bad judgment.

As a preface, it must be said, the circumstances of his life, dismissed by his self-righteous enemies as irrelevant (the director tends to discount them too, insisting that he doesn't "linger" on unhappy memories), would be taken into account in any humane consideration of his personal difficulties. (That the case should most likely have been thrown out years ago on the grounds of judicial misconduct alone is another matter altogether.)

To be born in 1933, the year of Hitler's ascension to power, was perhaps a tragic omen. Polanski's family returned to Poland from France in 1936, and after the outbreak of the Second World War were forced to move into Krakow's Jewish ghetto. As a boy, Polanski witnessed many horrors. One day, for instance, he saw a German soldier shoot and kill an old woman simply because she couldn't keep up with a group of other women being herded down the street. "There was a loud bang, and blood came welling out of her back," he later recalled. Certain memories and images from this period of Polanski's life were incorporated into the award-winning *The Pianist*, based on the memoirs of Polish Jewish musician Wladyslaw Szpilman.

The following experience inspired the direction of a scene in his film version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "The SS officer had searched our room in the ghetto, swishing his riding crop to and fro, toying with my teddy bear, nonchalantly emptying out the hatbox full of forbidden bread." Polanski's mother was eventually deported to Auschwitz, where

she died, and he witnessed his father being marched off to another concentration camp (where he survived). Polanski barely escaped deportation to a camp. He was hidden first in Krakow and later in the countryside, largely fending for himself. More than 90 percent of the 3.5 million pre-war Polish Jewish population were dead by 1945.

In the brutal conditions of postwar Poland, Polanski was attacked by a psychopath (already guilty of three murders) who struck him on the head repeatedly with a stone and left him for dead.

In 1969, his wife—actress Sharon Tate, eight and a half months pregnant—and three friends were brutally murdered in Los Angeles by followers of cult leader Charles Manson. Before the real culprits were apprehended, the American media had a field day attempting to link Polanski, or at least his "hedonistic" lifestyle, to the horrible tragedy.

It is difficult to conceive what effect all this must have on the nervous system.

And what about Polanski's artistic efforts themselves? Is he a serious figure? How have his films stood the test of time? Moreover, has he pursued themes that belie his media image as a "monster" and a "pervert"?

There is no possibility here of treating in detail a body of work that spans half a century, but certain points can be made.

Polanski began making short films in Poland in the late 1950s and directed his first feature film, *Knife in the Water*, in 1962. One can raise all sorts of criticisms, artistic and ideological, about his efforts, but it is difficult to think of more than a handful of directors globally who began working in the 1960s, or earlier, and continued to make important films into the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Polanski has expressed a variety of sentiments in his films, but a constant has been a concern for the fate of the vulnerable individual—often a child, an immigrant, a young woman, a victim of persecution (*Tess*, *The Tenant*, *Oliver Twist*, *Death and the Maiden*, *The Pianist*, as well as *Chinatown* in its way)—in a generally menacing environment, threatened by different forces, from the insensitivity or social prejudices of others to the outright violence and cruelty of the authorities.

Sometimes, in extreme cases, the external world proves so crushing and destructive in Polanski's films (in *Repulsion* and *The Tenant* most obviously, but there are also elements of this in *Cul-de-Sac*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Bitter Moon*, *Death and the Maiden*, even *Macbeth* and *The Pianist*) that it invades the individual and brings about an internal collapse.

Could anyone reasonably argue, given the difficulties of the last three quarters of a century, that in representing such a frightening state of affairs Polanski has not offered insight into important aspects of modern existence? In other words, Polanski has applied himself consistently—sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully, but seriously, at any rate—to one of the central questions of our time: "the conflict between the individual and various social forms which are hostile to him" (Leon Trotsky and André Breton, *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*).

His terrifying experiences in Nazi German-occupied Poland surely prepared him for that. Stalinist repression in the so-called "People's Republic of Poland" under the rule of the "Polish United Workers Party" would have added to his skepticism about the powers that be in modern society. His encounters with a spiteful American legal system and media have probably not improved his opinion of media-organized "public opinion" and the forces of law and order.

Polanski began his artistic career as a child actor on radio and with a puppet theater. He also "became a well-known street person" in Krakow, according to biographer Barbara Leaming, "little, loud and aggressive." He landed a part in Andrzej Wajda's *A Generation*, released in 1955, the first part of the renowned trilogy (along with *Kanal* and *Ashes & Diamonds*).

Poland never experienced "socialism," much less "communism," but the formation of the postwar Stalinist regime in Poland brought certain social benefits to the population—rooted in the nationalization of basic industry and related measures—that were, in the end, surviving gains of the Russian Revolution of 1917, extended into the Eastern European bloc countries.

Polanski was able to attend the National Film School in Lódz in the mid-1950s, at the time one of the finest in the world. He told interviewers Pascal Bonitzer and Nathalie Heinich in 1979 that "Polish technique was developed by filmmakers who were in the Soviet Union during the Second World War. And Soviet cinematography was based entirely on the principles of American production which had been studied and copied in the post-[Russian]revolutionary era, at a time when they had as much enthusiasm as the Americans have today."

He told a *Playboy* magazine interviewer in 1971 that the school's intense, five-year program was "advantageous." Polanski explained: "Besides all the practical training, like editing, camera operating, etc., you had courses in the history of art, literature, history of music, optics, theory of film directing—if such a thing exists—and so forth. The first year was very general and theoretical, and you got to know intimately the techniques of still photography, which is essential, I think, for anyone who later wants to be an expert in cinematography. The second year, the students made two one-minute films of their own. The third year, a documentary of eight to fifteen minutes. The fourth year, a short fictional film of the same length; and then in the fifth year, you made your diploma film, which could go up to 20 minutes."

Polanski explained that "The school was tightly connected with the Polish film archives and we could see anything we wanted." Elsewhere, he notes that the students were divided into artistic factions, "Personally, I was part of the [Orson] Welles group, but there were also groups of neorealists and students who liked the heroic Soviet cinema."

He left the film school in 1959, he told *Playboy*, "with very firm aesthetic ideals about films.… For me, a film has to have a definite dramatic and visual shape, as opposed to a rather flimsy shape that a lot of films were being given by the [French] *Nouvelle Vague*, for example, which happened in more or less the same period. It has to be something finished, like a sculpture, almost something you can touch, that you can roll on the floor. It has to be rigorous and disciplined—that's *Citizen Kane vs. The Bicycle Thief*."

It is worth citing these comments at length. They indicate some of Polanski's artistic and intellectual advantages at the outset of his career: a firm grounding in film technique (a commentator notes that his "collaborators on *Rosemary's Baby*, his first American film, were astonished at his exacting camera requirements and precise understanding of the optics and geometry of lenses" [Mark Cousins, "Polanski's Fourth Wall Aesthetic," in *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World*]); a thorough knowledge of film history and an orientation toward some of its most complex, aesthetically exacting figures (as a member of the self-declared "Welles group"); participation in a seething artistic environment that was a relative oasis of freedom in Stalinist Poland; an aversion to nationalism, which has proved fatal to more than one Polish filmmaker ("These subjects never interested me and from the start I worked outside nationalistic interests," he told an interviewer in 1992); and despite his avowed anti-communism, Polanski had at least enough historical understanding to know that the Russian Revolution had generated "enthusiasm" among artists until the Stalinist clampdown of the 1930s.

It is perhaps telling about modern history that knives should figure so

prominently in the work of one of its major artistic figures. In Polanski's first completed short at the Lódz film school, *Murder*, only two minutes long, a man enters another's room, stabs and kills him. We see the older man's plump, complacent face and demeanor, fleetingly, only as he turns to leave. Knives (or other sharp blades) feature prominently in *Repulsion*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Macbeth*, *Chinatown*, and *Tess*.

And Polanski's first feature, after all, was entitled *Knife in the Water*. In that film, a couple, Andrzej and Krystyna, nouveau riche Poles, reluctantly pick up a young hitchhiker, a poor student. They own a nice auto, like an "embassy" car, says the young man, and a boat. They are going sailing.

The two men, from the start, go at each other. Andrzej invites the younger man to go along with him and his wife for the day, almost as a dare. "So you want to go on with the game?," says the student. The reply: "My boy, you are no match for me."

Tensions mount on board the sailboat, as the older man, a well-heeled, arrogant (and generally unpleasant) sportswriter, pits his nautical skills and savoir-faire against the other's youth and good looks, with the young wife, presumably, as the prize. The hitchhiker's most valued possession is a knife of the switchblade variety. It becomes central to the conflict between the men.

Andrzej needs to control everything and everyone around him. Later, when the student gains a measure of emotional revenge, Krystyna tells him, "You're not one bit better than he is, you understand? He used to be the same as you.… And you'd really like to be the way he is now. And you are going to be, as long as your ambition holds out."

Numerous commentators agree that the main issue in *Knife in the Water* is a "struggle for power." Andrzej himself says, "If two men are on a boat, one man is skipper." A critic writes, "Power, and the violence used to sustain it, emerged as central elements in Polanski's cinema" (Herbert J. Eagle, "Power and the Visual Semantics of Polanski's films").

No doubt. But the battle captured beautifully in black-and-white (with hints of Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai*) by Polanski and his co-screenwriter Jerzy Skolimowski (the future filmmaker: *Barrier*, *Deep End*, *Moonlighting*) reminds one of siblings quarreling violently. One wants to say: it isn't their fault. Someone else has set them at each other's throats. Something is wrong in the whole situation.

Andrzej and the college student are struggling so fiercely over a knife, over an attractive, but rather passive woman, who doesn't seem terribly interested in the outcome, because, in reality, neither one of them has any real control over his life. The slightly overwrought character of the film, in the end, comes from *everybody's* social powerlessness (including the filmmakers'). The ultimate source of unhappiness is a repressive society, rife with inequalities and hypocrisies, that cannot be criticized openly.

Polanski then left Poland for good and made his first feature film in English, *Repulsion*, released in the US in October 1965. Catherine Deneuve plays a repressed young woman who shares an apartment with her sister. Also an outsider, Carol is a Belgian working in a London beauty salon. When her sister leaves on vacation, Carol suffers a nervous breakdown, hallucinates, and ends up slashing two men, an attractive suitor and her lecherous landlord.

Years ago, the film terrified me out of my wits (I recall spending a good deal of the time more or less under my seat), especially the sequences in which arms come out of the walls and reach for the unfortunate girl. On a more recent viewing, it seems somewhat dated and also a little overwrought. Again, the effort to cram all the fearfulness of postwar life into a purely psychosexual framework overburdens the drama. *Repulsion* sags under the weight and feels contrived as a result.

One might say some of the same things about *Cul-de-Sac* (1966), except that it is a good deal more fun, at least in parts. Two wounded gangsters (Lionel Stander and Jack MacGowran), following a botched holdup, arrive at an isolated castle in northern England inhabited by an ex-businessman and his wife (also markedly different in age), George and Teresa, played by Donald Pleasance and Françoise Dorléac (Deneuve's older sister, who died tragically in an auto accident in June 1967).

One critic (Paul Coates, "*Cul-de-Sac* in Context: Absurd Authorship and Sexuality") comments that the film "can be situated in the Polish and English absurdist tradition, to which it is arguably the most closely related of all Polanski's features, with the possible exception of *The Tenant*."

An attraction for absurdism and related trends is clearly evident in Polanski's art. The influence of Samuel Beckett, as well as Franz Kafka and blackly comic Central European traditions, is present in his early Polish shorts (*Two Men and A Wardrobe*, *The Fat and the Lean*, *Mammals*). The conjoining of sexual aggression and class tension brings Harold Pinter's writing to mind, including his film work with Joseph Losey (*The Servant*).

The somewhat too tempting appeal of absurdism is not difficult to figure out, taking into account Polanski's personal history and the general state of things in postwar Europe: a shattered economy and population, the resulting horror with fascism, the discrediting of "communism" as a result of the crimes of Stalinism—all of this producing an intellectual impasse (reflected in existentialism and other philosophical trends) of an epochal character.

Whether Polanski was conscious of it or not, the ideological atmosphere and physical conditions of life in postwar Eastern Europe, where the regimes set themselves the historically ludicrous goal of building isolated socialist states, were elements too in encouraging his absurdist sensibility. The image of Sisyphean-like, repetitive, and pointless labor recurs in a number of the early short films, in *Knife in the Water*, and even in *Cul-de-Sac* and *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967).

In any event, *Cul-de-Sac* has its pleasures, especially the initial, relatively lighthearted interplay between Stander (a victim of the Hollywood blacklist), Pleasance, and Dorléac. Again, sexual and other power struggles ensue, with a rather murky outcome—the gangster dead, the young wife fled, and George curled up in a fetal position on an outcropping as the tide comes in. A "dead end" (*cul-de-sac*) indeed, but from what precisely?

Among other things, it's possible—although it may not have been the meaning of Polanski and longtime collaborator, screenwriter Gérard Brach—to interpret the film loosely as a comment on Britain's declined and decayed state. The presence of an American thug, a dying Irishman, and an irresponsible Frenchwoman, all creating difficulties for the retired, wealthy and nervous Englishman on his secluded, island home is at least suggestive.

Polanski disowned *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (or *Dance of the Vampires*), shot in England and Italy, after its producer Martin Ransohoff severely re-edited the film and made it incomprehensible from the director's point of view. Still, there are the delightful performances of Jack MacGowran as the inept "vampire killer," Professor Abronsius, and Polanski himself as Alfred, Abronsius's equally fumbling assistant. Polanski met his future wife, the ill-fated Sharon Tate, on the film, in which she played one of chief vampire Count von Krolock's (Ferdy Mayne) comely victims.

The film has something of the flavor of a Central European Jewish tale, understated, droll, earthy, taking a sharp-eyed but still sympathetic and amused view of humanity. And there is the lovely moment when "Shagal," the Jewish inn-keeper (named no doubt for the modernist painter, who frequently depicted Eastern European Jewish village life),

who has himself become one of the “living dead,” enters the bed chamber of the blonde servant girl he’s been lusting after.… When she holds up a crucifix—in the time-honored tradition—to ward him off, he scoffingly tells her: “Have you got the wrong vampire!”

Rosemary’s Baby, Polanski’s first Hollywood film (and major success), for Paramount Studios, shot in the fall and winter of 1967 and released the following June, is a story of the occult. Polanski hastened to assure an interviewer, “You don’t have to be superstitious to enjoy a fantasy.… Myself, I am down to earth in my philosophy of life, very rationally and materialistically oriented, with no interest in the occult.”

The story, about a young woman in New York whose ambitious husband makes a pact with a group of devil worshippers and offers her up as a receptacle for Satan’s child, is one of the so-called “apartment trilogy” (along with *Repulsion* and *The Tenant*), which treats the behavior of “people under stress” in confined spaces, with some of that behavior stemming from the very fact of being in a confined space, comforting and alarming at the same time.

(The boats in *Knife in the Water* and *Bitter Moon*, and the isolated castles or houses in *Cul-de-Sac*, *Macbeth* and *Death and the Maiden* are all, in their own ways, confined spaces—as is the apartment in which Wladyslaw Szpilman is obliged to remain for a time, at the peril of his life, in *The Pianist*, and Fagin’s lair, where Oliver is held against his will in *Oliver Twist*.)

All sorts of psychological issues present themselves in connection to this attraction for and repulsion from enclosed spaces, but at the center of them all probably lies the image of the sealed Krakow ghetto, frightening in itself, but the exit from which is even more frightening.

Rosemary’s Baby is a fantasy, and a well-done one at that. The filmmakers assembled an excellent cast, including Mia Farrow (although she was not his first choice), John Cassavetes as her selfish, opportunist actor-husband, and veteran character or stage actors Ruth Gordon, Ralph Bellamy, Sidney Blackmer, Maurice Evans, Elisha Cook Jr., Patsy Kelly, Phil Leeds, and Hope Summer.

The victim of her husband’s careerism and her sinister neighbors’ plans for her, Rosemary (Farrow) suffers horribly in her pregnancy. She turns pale and at first (unaccountably) grows thin; she’s in constant pain. Her elegant, spacious Upper West Side apartment becomes a prison cell, a place of torture. Those she reaches out to, when she realizes the nature of the plot, betray her. The film builds up a disturbing level of paranoia, at the same time as it maintains, until the very end, its peculiar sense of humor.

To be continued