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Some of the analysis of Polanski's work that you quote makes me think of Renoir's comment that great art is produced by craftmen: the sequence from Repentance that seems to me 100% successful is the last - a fantastic travelling shot, which one just didn't know how Polanski could meaningfully round off. This seemed to me absolutely right on every level - emotion, theme, symbol, psychology, technique. I often feel that great art is more likely to result when a director sets out to solve certain technical problems than when he is concerned with making

The Cinema of Roman Polanski a profound statement

(this is certainly true of Hitchcock's Rear Window).

See also JE's comments re -
publication.

new title:

Roman Polanski's Early Films

Polish film director Roman Polanski has said that he is surprised by ^{his} not being considered mad by psychiatrists. Cahiers du Cinema film critic Jacques Bontemps has said, in reply to Polanski's remark, that, "...when he thinks only of cinema, and manifestly his films are beautiful, he forgets that his unreason is, maybe, nothing other than his unshakable will to film, to prove at each film that in cinema he can do everything." Roman Polanski cannot do everything in film, or at least he has not proven it yet. He has proven that he can do some things extremely well, that he is an auteur, however, and it is the purpose of this paper to explain just what those things are.

Roman Polanski was born in Poland in 1933. In 1948 he began studying art, and later film at the Polish National Film School. He is a successful international film director at the age of thirty-three. He began his rapid climb to commercial success and fame as an assistant to Polish director Andrzej Munk, worked as an actor in seven films, two of them his own, and has directed six short and four full length films. He began his work in Poland, but has since moved from France to England to Hollywood. He is what the French call an auteur- he writes his own scripts and has enough control over the filming process to qualify as the author of his movies.

"The films of Polanski are objects," according to Cahiers critics Michel Delahaye and Jean-André Fieschi, "Let us understand that they mock at adhesion or criticism; they need to be acquired, that is to say, quite simply, to be examined, to be seen." Unfortunately, this paper cannot project Polanski's film onto a screen. It can examine them in a different sense of the word, however.

Two Men and a Wardrobe is the most famous of Polanski's early shorts. It is a production of the Polish Film School, and was done in 1958. About the film Polanski has said, "I tried my best to keep myself within a certain form that I believe proper to the short film...strict, without dialogue...which doesn't really fit the short."

Polanski's style is an austere one, perhaps the only way to make a parable like Wardrobe a palatable one. It is slow, methodical, and emphasizes composition. He underlines his point by the very length of his shots and the extreme naturalness of his observation. The camera is an observer which merely happens to be on the scene rather than an active intruder. Polanski uses basically unrealistic material in such a realistic fashion that the story achieves belief almost in spite of itself. By this approach, it is assumed that Wardrobe is propaganda in the broadest sense- a film which discovers to persuade rather than discovery for its own sake.

Perhaps the most obvious means of Polanski's realism is the almost inordinate length of the shots in Wardrobe. In the opening shot, the sea is held on the screen for almost a full wind of the camera until we decipher the two figures with the wardrobe moving towards us. The amazing formal symmetry of the film insures that this first shot will also be the last shot.

Polanski feels no obligation to keep his characters in close-up throughout the film, so that their movement to and from the camera incorporates their surroundings to heighten the reality. An example is the encounter with the girl. Other directors would have moved their camera to keep up with the action, while Polanski lets it play out in one shot. When the short close shots in the fight scene

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shatter the preceding mood, the contrast in length provides emphasis and a welcome change of pace and mood. The point of the film is made in this scene. According to Polanski, the problem with the wardrobe is its mirror- people can see themselves and see that they are ugly. The whole film can be considered as just this sort of mirror. Yet the pathos in the expressions of the two main actors, the lyric jazz score, and the stylistic perfection of Two Men and a Wardrobe render the discovery not without a certain beauty which may negate its premise.

Polanski's next short effort, When Angels Fall, was done the following year, 1959. The subject is a very different one- old age- but the auteur's skillful direction is again strikingly evident. The visuals alternate between the memories of and the image of an old lady seated watching over a street urinal. Tinted film is employed in the presentation of the present, while color is used to communicate the old woman's memories.

Polanski's obsession with the isolation of his characters emerges in Angels even more strongly than in his previous short. This isolation of character and situation appears again in his full length films, Knife in the Water, Repulsion, and Cul-de-sac. The situations found in Angels are also as characteristically striking, and even sometimes alarming, as those in his later work. The stirring quality of Angels is not so much the scornful view of life it promulgates, which can be seen in the images of the bloody amputated legs or the smile of the girl as she gives herself to the cavalryman, but rather the way in which Polanski unprimes these images of their emotional charge. This sort of cinematic overstatement ^{underplayed} is one of Polanski's most effective tools, used to striking effect in his later Repulsion.

Cahiers du Cinema critic Jacques Bontemps has said of Angels, "Mistrust...this little masterwork which will willingly make itself seem only a baroque effusion, approaching, with surprising lyricism, major themes that are in fact the farces to which the auteur... gives himself." The energy and indecency with which When Angels Fall forces attention and wins obedience are in keeping with the fact that, in leading us this way from the most artificially fantastic situations to reality itself, our relation to death, the film takes a road which is entirely believable, and proper. It is undoubtedly Polanski's early shorts, done during the period from 1957 to 1962, were all done in Poland, some while he was still a student at the Polish Film School, with the exception of Le gros et le maigre, which was shot in France. When Angels Fall deals perhaps with the most Polish theme of the lot, with its morbid climate, colors, and visuals based on solitude. All of the component parts of Polanski's early period of work assert his nationality, however, particularly through their basic concern with social protest. Polanski continued the tense coolness of the New Polish Film evoked by his friend Wajda in Kanal, but certainly without the latter's flamboyant romanticism.

These early films have many things in common- Polanski's frequent use of visual tricks, for instance. This sort of thing is seen in Two Men and a Wardrobe in the shot in which a fish appears to be floating across the sky, when it is actually lying on the wardrobe's mirror reflecting the sky, or in Mammals, which opens with what seems to be a blank screen, but turns out to be a field of snow. An interesting effect found in Knife in the Water, to which we will turn next, is the simulation of the effect of looking out of one eye and then the other, achieved by a jump cut.

Knife in the Water is a parable like Polanski's earlier short, Two Men and a Wardrobe. The parable in question is the one about the sailor who danced on glass (and the forty-year-old sailor on the screen). "The sailor did the trick many times...but his feet were soft...he forgot."

The film deals with the traditional Polish duel of honor transferred to the sexual field. Since duelling over a woman is no longer in fashion (even in Poland), the business of the film revolves around sports and games. Witness hitch-hiking for sport, the sailing mystique, the unnerving knife business between the fingers, and the whole gaming scene beneath the deck during the rainstorm. To the radio accompaniment of a boxing match, the girl suggests a game of bridge. They play pick-a-stick instead- a game in which the loser pays a forfeit.

Games are increasingly common in European films, usually serving as a symbol of the events in the film. In Polanski's film, unlike Marienbad, the game is made an integral part of the film, instead of merely a psychological interlude, by setting up and motivating the action which becomes the climax of the film. The nineteen-year-old's forfeit is his knife- a weapon which the kid introduces with a boast, an object which also serves as a sexual metaphor. The husband withholds the knife from the hitch-hiker in order to establish his masculine superiority, motivating the action which ironically ends in the seduction of his own wife. The competitive sporting nature of the whole film is established by the way in which the hitch-hiker stops the car, by the exchanges between the husband and the kid within the car, and finally made explicit by the husband's invitation to "carry on the game" by sailing with them.

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The many long shots were taken from a camera on another boat. Parts of this boat can be seen in the lower left hand corner of the screen when the wind has come up before the storm, and a few shots before the boat runs aground. The wake of the camera boat can be seen in many shots.

An unconventional technical feature of the film is the absence of dissolves, used frequently in Two Men and a Wardrobe. In the ordinary grammar of the film (although a new language is evolving) a dissolve is used to link scenes, signifying a passage of time and/or a change in location. Polanski uses straight cuts, relying upon the content of the new shot to establish the change of time and place. An example is the sudden cut from the opening scene in which the boat is sailing before the wind from the shore; cut to the unmoving boat in the middle of the lake.

In addition to his unconventional framing of shots, Polanski utilizes many striking shots to vary his visual approach. Examples are the opening shots of the couple driving in the car, taken from an outrigger, in which the trees along the side of the road are reflected on the car's windshield, and the shots taken from above the boat straight down on the prostrate bodies of the wife and boy.

The beauty of these various devices lies chiefly in the fact that they do not draw attention to themselves, do not exist for their own sake, but for the sake of the film's content. Technique is most effective when it remains unobserved. Some shots are extremely striking in their beauty, but they exist not as separate entities, but rather integrate their beauty with the whole. The result is impressive in Knife in the Water.

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interesting
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Repulsion, done in 1964, is Polanski's first English-language film. Unlike his earlier work, especially Wardrobe, Angels, and Knife, its subject is not a Polish one. It can be described as a highly effective old-fashioned Continental horror film. The horror tale is a psychological one, and it is brilliantly executed and starkly absorbing. The viewer is concerned with a lonely ~~French~~ (Belgian?) girl, employed as a manicurist in a London beauty salon, whose twisted sexuality turns into a maniacal, murderous psychosis. With a sure sense of tempo (slow when it needs to be), with the power to make the girl's apparitions frighteningly real, with a visual selectivity that is always varied, Polanski moves this picture forcefully down its ghastly road.

Many critics have misinterpreted the nature of Repulsion's ghastly road, however. Polanski has said, "I care about the realism of everything. True, the more I tell myself unbelievable stories, the more conscious I am that I must render them in a real manner. That is what I did in Repulsion. I have made a tour de force which consisted essentially in that: to render the story plausible, realistic. I succeeded." Brendan Gill has accused the film of being, "...plainly out to shock us at any cost, and the cost proved high- the film is a cheat."

Yet Polanski has explained that he, "...did not intend to lead by any means to any form of horror." This comment is perhaps a bit misleading, but it underlines the fact that Polanski intended to unprime his gruesome images of their emotional charge, as he did earlier in Angels. Once again, the most artificially fantastic situations lead to reality itself- this time the study of a sexually

(and therefore psychologically) disturbed girl. As Hollis Alpert put it, "Repulsion is a flawless exercise; it establishes Polanski as a master of the casual macabre." The film's very casualness possibly contributes to something quite different: the Artaudian experience- the purge through violence, instead of through pity and terror. This is why Polanski replied, "Precisely!" to the accusation that the film disconcerts and scandalizes people because it goes too far.

The film is quite realistic and explicit. At times Polanski outdoes even Hitchcock in pictorial invention. The scene in which the girl (Catherine Deneuve) slits the back of her landlord's neck is complete with close-ups. We see her slash his throat again and again as he sinks from sight. Compared with this, the eyeball and razor in Un Chien Andalou and the Psycho shower murder seem dainty. Polanski's use of objects- a man's shirt, a razor, and a skinned rabbit on a platter- is superb. They become objects of dread, and an oppressive silence is broken only by the buzzing of flies, dripping water, a ticking clock. The girl's interior world becomes visible and tangible- rooms change shape, the mere flip of a switch creates fissures in the walls, and a phantom ravisher begins to stalk the tiny flat.

The camera work is exquisitely sinister and Chico Hamilton's music keeps up a discreet, percussive throbbing that alternates with domestic sounds like ringing doorbells and telephones to sustain the atmosphere of menace. The visual de-dramatization of the first murder is aided by a blank sound track, and it is the first part of the film, before this murder, that is most agonizing and terrifying. The best example of Repulsion's explicit use of sound are the moans

and groans of her sister with her lover, which the girl overhears quite audibly in the next room- complete aural pictures of intercourse.

Strong hints are given as to why the girl becomes homicidally psychotic. In addition to the moans of erotic fulfillment which keep her awake, convulsed with loathing and fascination, there is the device of a family portrait in which one sister stands aloof and stricken, while the other lies draped seductively over her father's knees. Repulsion has been criticized for its lack of an explanation of, or motivation, for the horrible things that happen, but more explicit documentation would have provided only greater clinical exactness, nothing else.

Michel Caen in Cahiers said that, "Polanski has visibly mistrusted his subject. Because of this apprehension the intelligence of the story and the will to control entirely the proposed materials mask in part the sensibility that cropped out more freely in Knife in the Water and When Angels Fall." Repulsion does contain a few somewhat false touches. A scary death-mask turns out to be a woman on a beauty-parlor table; a black-gloved hand that appears threateningly turns out to be the sister's. These visual tricks remind one of those mentioned earlier in connection with Polanski's early shorts, but they are perhaps a bit more destructive here where he is running the risk of appearing ridiculous, rather than ^{of} just boring people, as he would have if Knife had been unconvincing.

Where phallic imagery is concerned, Polanski sometimes loads the dice: the girl's sister might well have sent her a picture postcard, but only Polanski would have made it depict the Tower of Pisa. Other symbols work less obviously: the razor whose function of emasculation is implied, the convent school next door to her

esp. the
girls in
Birth of
a Nation

apartment, symbolic of sensuality denied and shriveled, and the skinned rabbit, which begins to look more and more like an aborted fetus. With Repulsion, then, Polanski proves himself a master of the dark art of menace, and, at the same time, of the casual macabre.

Unfortunately, Polanski's latest feature film, Cul-de-Sac, has not been viewed prior to the writing of this paper. It was done in 1966, again in London, is again a "horror" film, and again Polanski places his characters in an isolated situation (as the title indicates). This time the situation is extremely isolated in space- the film is set in a remote castle in Northumberland. Polanski again wrote his own script, again, as in Repulsion, in collaboration with Gerard Brach (with the exception of Knife, co-authored by his fellow Pole Skolimowski, all of Polanski's other films were written by himself).

(an interesting new director)

Among other things, American critics have called Cul-de-Sac "the quintessence of fashionable, phony movie-making," "crudely sensational," and an "odious freak show." Perhaps not surprisingly, the film won the Golden Bear in Berlin and a prize at the Venice Film Festival. The criticisms of Cul-de-Sac have the familiar ring of those levelled against Repulsion about them.

Some critics have a good word for the film. Hollis Alpert said that "the substance of the film is often unpleasant, but Polanski is presenting his own comment and at times nightmarish vision. He once again demonstrates that he is a superb cinematic story teller." Commonweal stated: "No doubt Polanski can be annoying at times by not telling us things we want to know." (Shades of Repulsion?) "He allows little light to shine through his black, black comedy,

but he does use some very effective cinema to say it's a mad, mad, mad, mad world."

Asked by Cahiers du Cinema if Cul-de-Sac was in the same line as Repulsion, Polanski replied, "Have I a line? If so, it must be rather...It was Einstein who said that there was no straight line. Then I believe that mine is completely curved." Asked about the story line, he said, "The film describes the relationship between the couple" (who own the castle),"and their guest," (an American gangster seeking refuge). "A triangle, if you wish, but not based on love. There is love, though, between the man and his wife."

Apparently, Polanski has placed his characters in a bag, and then set himself the task of observing their desparately thrashing attempts to escape. According to Hollis Alpert, Polanski "seems to be saying that people who retreat from the real world are hardly likely to be able to resolve the problems they bring with them, as well as those which present themselves." Brendan Gill, who said that Polanski's "lack of conviction becomes complete in this typically slick, gaudily Gothic movie which seems bent on making our flesh creep," apparently lacked a sense of humor to appreciate this black comedy.

Perhaps some quotes about Roman Polanski and some statements he has made himself will help tie his art together. "If it is difficult to speak at length about his films, I hold this difficulty as significant of their value," Jacque Bontemps has said. "At each moment Polanski compels us to find the work skillful before all, and when emotion might win us, the artisan hastens to make us escape it, with the purpose of bringing our attention back to the admirable mechanism that he has created." Again from Cahiers du Cinema, this

see my
comments

time in the words of Michel Delahaye and Jean-André Fieschi, the statement: "The poetry of Polanski is made of ruses, rather than of abandonments. Born of extreme calculation and care, his forms ignore effusion, outpouring, the appeal to sentiment and even to morality."

Polanski, in an interview with Cahiers, said, "There are two things in me- on the one hand, I am very sentimental, romantic, baroque, and on the other, I am very rigorous...And when I make a film, I discipline myself a great deal...Angels corresponds rather more to my nature than to my discipline, And that corresponds, too, to what I like to see in the cinema, rather than what I like to make...the need for discipline...Knife is more what I like to make while Repulsion is obviously more on the side of what I like to see."

While Polanski distinguishes between his films as reflections of either one of the two outstanding characteristics of his cinematic personality, it is important to see his films as a blending of the two, as do the Cahiers critics. The two diverse fabrics are woven inextricably together in his films, and the result is the fascinating quality of his art.

Polanski has also said that what he likes in the cinema is atmosphere. Perhaps this is why his favorite directors are Welles, Kurosawa, and Fellini. Polanski's atmosphere is vitally concerned with his characters and settings. Although some critics, such as Dwight MacDonald, find his shift from the parable to the horror film both disturbing and morally indefensible, it can be argued

that in his early work Polanski was more concerned with people as individuals than as universal types, and his films seem pointed more towards exploration of character than the promulgation of a point of view. Clearly, Polanski singles out few characters to explore as individuals in his films. Angels and Repulsion are primarily concerned with one character, Wardrobe with two, and Knife and Cul-de-Sac with three. Polanski's preoccupation with triangular relationships appears in all these films but Angels. Couples play key roles in all, again with the exception of Angels. Angels is characteristic of Polanski's work, however, both in the isolation of its setting and its basic concern with a woman. The girl in Wardrobe is a key figure, and a mirror belongs to a woman's world. In Knife and Repulsion, the central feminine characters are treated with more respect than the men involved. While in Knife, the woman is endowed with superior maturity, exerts a greater amount of control over her environment, and remains alone untouched by what happens; in Repulsion, beyond the film of terror and sexual message, there is once more in the work of Polanski the portrait of a woman, who is made to seem authentically tragic, herself the most pitiable victim of the evil she does. Yet pity is as scrupulously kept from her face as it is from the face of the old woman who occupies the center of Angels. In both cases, pathos gains in effect by rising from a look which is intentionally cruel and impartial.

The isolation of Polanski's characters further contributes to the identifiable atmosphere of his films. With the exception of Wardrobe, the characters of all his films are isolated in space. And though they wander the streets, the isolation of the two men

is as great, if not greater, than that of the characters in his other films. All of Polanski's characters exist within a closed world, whether it be primarily in the mind, as in Wardrobe, Two Men, Angels, and Repulsion, or primarily in space, as in Knife and Cul-de-Sac. Some of the former's mental isolation, of course, is included in the physical isolation of the latter two, especially in Cul-de-Sac.

Realism is one of Polanski's essential tools in the creation of his films' atmosphere. "What I like," he says, "is an extraordinarily realistic setting in which there is something that does not fit with the real. That is what gives an atmosphere." Polanski creates his atmosphere simply, as with the flies and other sounds in Repulsion. The world of Knife is more open, although the settings are confined. What is disquieting is what is felt within the minds of the characters. Disquiet is created here through devices like clouds, rain, and physical isolation. Repulsion's realism is a psychological one, while Knife's is a simpler, more physical. The technique of Wardrobe seems real through the naturalness of its observation.

Other essentials in Polanski's atmosphere, his realism, are his lyricism, pessimism, criticism, and humor. Wardrobe and Knife are supported by lyrical jazz scores as well as visuals. In Repulsion, on the other hand, Polanski refuses himself recourse to lyricism. These three are all examples of their auteur's attitude of pessimism, as well. And pessimism necessarily implies criticism, whether it be stated as obvious social protest in Wardrobe, or in a blackly humorous vein in Cul-de-Sac. Polanski's deeply baroque qualities make it apparent that he jests in Angels, but stuffed with intentional details, the jesting becomes more meaningful from film to film. Polanski has said, "I like all the horror films. They make me laugh like crazy."

Roman Polanski is, in the words of Life magazine, "a wayward, explosive young Polish director." He delighted European critics with his bitter, whimsical short, Two Men and a Wardrobe, won an international art house reputation with his first full length film, Knife in the Water, and achieved commercial success with his first English language film, Repulsion. What next? "I never make plans," says Polanski, "I make films." And the film he is working on at the moment is The Vampire Killers, a comedy that he wrote, once again, with Gerard Brach. About the film he says, "I am shooting the exteriors in a chateau in the Dolomites. I believe that it will be wildly funny."

Filmography

As Actor:

A Generation

See You Tomorrow

The Innocent Sorcerers

Lotna

Bad Luck

Two Men and a Wardrobe

Le gros et le maigre

Main Shorts:

A Toothy Smile, 1957

Two Men and a Wardrobe, 1958

When Angels Fall, 1959

Le gros et le maigre, 1960 (in France)

Mammals, 1962

Features;
Films:

Knife in the Water, 1961

Les plus belles escroqueries du monde, 1963

(One episode, in France, Claude Chabrol and Jean-Luc Godard
directed the other two episodes)

Repulsion, 1964

Cul-de-sac, 1966

(The Vampire Killers is now in progress.)

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May recommend reviews of Repulsion by Charles Barr
and Peter von Bagh in Movie 14?

3-31-67

IL,

This strikes me as very usable if condensed (though it might merit breaking the 1500-word barrier, perhaps done in two parts) - but Cul de Sac will have to be added, I should think. In fact I wonder when Vampire Killers

will be released. The journal Film Heritage strikes me as another likely source for publication. In any case, Littleland should be encouraged to revise and submit this to any likely periodicals.

It's first rate

JE

likely periodicals = Film Quarterly, Film Culture, Sight + Sound, Moviegoer. JOL