

## FOREWORD

### *Polanski's Fourth Wall Aesthetic*

Mark Cousins

It is more than twenty years since François Truffaut's book-length interview with Alfred Hitchcock (Truffaut 1984) convinced film historians and critics of the value of reading closely a director's comments on his or her own work. Before that, volumes such as Joseph von Sternberg's *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (1965) and Robert Bresson's *Notes on Cinematography* (1977) had shown that certain filmmakers were interested in the lexicon of cinema criticism but, on the whole, Hawksian disingenuousness was the norm. Where artists in other fields – notably Paul Klee in his diaries – showed an ability to describe the mental processes behind their work, the majority of filmmakers have been unwilling or unable to do so. Paul Schrader, Bernardo Bertolucci, Abbas Kiarostami and Hou Hsiao-Hsien are notable exceptions to this, but in general the ambiguous commerciality of cinema as well as the massive amount of technical process, which lies between a creative thought and its realisation in the completed work, have meant that most directors talk mostly about business or equipment.

His gripping, ghosted autobiography notwithstanding, Roman Polanski has followed suit in this regard. For more than three decades he has deflected questions about the meanings of his films and the human and aesthetic ideas they evince. Asked to justify the position or angle of his camera, for example, he answers with variations on 'It is there because it felt right' or 'because that's where I would watch the action from'. At times he has shown contempt even for the idea of such enquiry. Asked why Françoise Dorléac's character in *Cul-de-Sac* (1966) dresses her husband

Donald Pleasance in women's clothes (Cousins 2000) his complete response was a single, wordless snore.

Of course it is the critic's job, not Polanski's, to describe the genesis and operation of his films, and he is at liberty to ridicule their attempts to do so, but despite the director's manifest reluctance to analyse, it would be a mistake not to attend to what he says about his work. This is the case for three related reasons. Firstly, he is bracingly intelligent. Secondly, he talks at length about the meanings, not just the techniques, of other art forms, such as the paintings of Balthus; not only is he not one of those directors whose visual abilities come at the expense of verbal ones, but he accepts the idea of semantic analysis. From this we can conclude that, thirdly, and as a direct result of such articulacy, even his deflections and generalisations might reveal more than those of other directors.

This seems to be the case. Take, for example, this from a four-hour television interview, conducted for the BBC in March 2000 in Paris. Asked why he was so influenced by Laurence Olivier's film *Hamlet*, made in Britain in 1948 for the J. Arthur Rank Films, Polanski commented:

I loved everything about it ... first of all the atmosphere ... I liked films which made you feel that you are actually inside an interior, feeling virtually the fourth wall behind you. Like in Dutch paintings! *Hamlet* was one of them. It was somehow romantic ... this mysterious geography ... you could not determine the shape of the castle ... the camera gliding through these corridors. (Cousins 2002: 98)

There is the seed of something very interesting here. Olivier's film is seldom considered a landmark one, especially when compared to his conceptually more daring *Henry V*, made four years earlier. Whereas the latter ventilated Shakespeare by moving from interior theatrical to exteriors, it is Olivier's failure to extend *Hamlet*, his refusal of the infinite spatial possibilities afforded by editing, its ability to make him feel enclosed by it, which seems to excite Polanski. The reference to Vermeer, whose people are almost always inside, whose vanishing points can sometimes be glimpsed through open doors giving onto other rooms or exteriors but whose backgrounds are largely obscured by walls, emphasises the point. Poussin's deliberate restriction of renaissance space, by depicting events in frieze-like foregrounds backed by heavy curtains in some of his paintings, has a similar effect. In each case there is a denial of exteriority. Though Polanski has always admired Shakespeare, it is not the human or thematic elements of *Hamlet* that he mentions, but the confined spatial ones. He is responding to a theatrical effect, which if one goes further and sees theatre and movie space as opposed, could be considered anti-cinematic. That his favourite film of all time is Carol Reed's studio bound and claustrophobic *Odd Man Out* (1947), made the year before Olivier's film, also for Britain's J. Arthur Rank Films, strengthens the point. The spatial confinement in both these films is present throughout Polanski's work. *Cul-de-Sac* (1966), *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967), *Macbeth* (1971) and *The Ninth Gate* (1999) are totally or partially set in, and employ the 'mysterious geography' of, castles. *Knife in the*

*Water* (1962), *Pirates* (1986) and *Bitter Moon* (1992) each take place on boats. *Repulsion* (1965), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Tenant* (1976) and *Death and the Maiden* (1994) are almost entirely set in apartments whose back walls press against the backs of their protagonists. And *Knife in the Water*, *Cul-de-Sac*, *Bitter Moon* and *Death and the Maiden* are all versions of the same story, a couple discomforted by the presence of a third person who gets too close.

Aesthetically speaking, what makes Polanski stand out from his art-house contemporaries such as Truffaut, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni and Federico Fellini is that despite the trendiness of the times he lived through, his interest in unified, enclosed space meant that he was never a modernist. This is remarkable. Rather than indulging in fancy editing or flashy camerawork, he applied the studio bound classicism of his favourite films – *Odd Man Out* and *Hamlet* – to his central theme: human claustrophobia and unease.

If the bleakness in Polanski's work comes from his life, it is surely the case that his interest in spatial confinement does too. But anti-modernism also derives directly from another element dealt to him by fortune: his technical talent. Whereas Truffaut and the like had their films shot roughly, with few lights, Polanski's 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. New Wave filmmakers loved the flickering aspect of films but the causticity of *Chinatown* (1974), *Cul-de-Sac*, *Repulsion* and *The Tenant* – and the reason they prevail – is that they do *not* flicker. At the human and technical level, they are devastatingly clear.

This, then, rather than his extraordinary biography, is the lasting significance of a director who is cited today as a major influence by filmmakers such as the brothers Coen and Wachowski and who, at the age of 73, is still boyish, arrogant and full of energy. Ever the anti-modernist his most recent movie, filmed in the Barrandov studios in Prague, is a faithful adaptation of *Oliver Twist* (2005). Those of us who felt that *The Pianist* (2002) was a disappointment, that in the light of *Schindler's List* (1993) – which Spielberg offered Polanski – it looked unconvincing, will be encouraged by the prospect of a retreat back into the world of the film studio and claustrophobic space. Polanski is quite simply the master of such space. In the age of the Danish film movement Dogme95, of handheld shooting and digital imagery, he once again looks like one of the most distinctive filmmakers of the last half-century.