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# The Self-Reflective Nature of Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*

David Middleton

Most people are tempted to get on the critical bandwagon which attends Roman Polanski's cinema and to announce from there that his version of *Macbeth* (1971) is another in a continuing series of intensely personal cinematic statements Polanski has made about the violence which pervades the human condition. Beginning in 1958 with his allegorical short subject "Two Men and a Wardrobe," evident also in his implicitly violent first feature film, *Knife In The Water* (1961), in *Repulsion* (1965), his study of psychological obsession, in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), his study of literal obsession, and clearly dominating *Chinatown* (1974), his study of individual and social decay, there recurs in the work of this director a preoccupation with man's destructive tendencies toward other men. Formalist critics may delight in examining the Polanski canon because of the patterned consistency evident there. Biographical critics are likely to relish analysis of his career because of the undeniable relationship between his life and his art.

But while it may be fruitful to be alert to biographical implications in Polanski's films generally, to suggest, as Pauline Kael does, that *Macbeth* is similarly personal leads to a reading of that work which is rather wide of the mark.<sup>1</sup> Usually film adaptations of Shakespeare have artistic merit because of something *in* them: wonderfully conceived dialogue.<sup>2</sup> In this particular adaptation, however, neither autobiographical meaning nor handling of Shakespearean language is notable.<sup>3</sup> What stands out is purely and simply its superb visual quality. Polanski's every effort has been designed to make the film reflect itself, to make audiences aware of the art of making movies. He has gone out of his way to focus our attention on the nature of this "plastic" medium, and to make us, in the final analysis, appreciate the piece as a medium. That is, this version of *Macbeth* induces us to consider consciously that we are seeing cinema.

Polanski admits that he has a "kind of wierd humor" that often tends to work against him.<sup>4</sup> That sense of humor shows up in his affection for visual art which is self-reflective. A Renaissance Dutch painting that he likes, for example, has in it not only the individuals who are ostensibly the subjects, but also — in one corner of the work — a reflection of the painter painting the painting. His wry description of this composition suggests to us something of Polanski's feeling about the relation between artist and artifact:

It's a thing around you. That's why I like those films so much, like *Hamlet*, you know. You're in it . . . You don't look at your watch; you don't move on your seat. You're in that goddamn castle and there's a wind blowing, and a fog behind the window, and a bell quietly ringing in the cemetery. You see, all these elements are important to create an atmosphere that envelopes you. And it's so strange, it's on a square screen. It's not even cinerama . . .

I like that Van Eyck painting, "The Marriage of Arnolfini," with the man and woman standing holding hands. It's a perspective of an interior and there's a little dog on the floor. It's a very famous painting. And there's a mirror at the end, you know, one of those round Dutch mirrors with a

convex surface. And you see the reflection of this side of the room in it, very small, and the painter painting. And under the mirror, on the wall, it says, "Van Eyck was there," and the date.

In the 15th century in Holland was this fashion of getting it around you. They even did little paintings in arrangements like boxes, and you could see the interior through different holes. One of them is in the British Museum. Anyway, the idea was to render in this flat picture the three dimensional world in the sense that you would feel you were inside it. That is something when you talk about things that influenced me, that was important, even when I was a child.<sup>5</sup>

Bearing this anecdote in mind, one can well imagine Polanski's being tempted to allow audiences to catch a glimpse of himself as artist-filmmaker in Act IV, scene i of **Macbeth**, where the hero looks into a series of mirrors, the camera moving in tight on one reflective surface, then seemingly passing through it and going in tight on the next, until Macbeth at last stares fixedly at Banquo's image in the last mirror. While solving the technical problems raised by this kind of shot, Polanski resisted the temptation to show himself in the work too literally. Yet viewers may well discern the self-conscious craftsmanship of the scene and wonder with one part of their minds how the director managed to shoot into mirrors without allowing the camera (i.e. himself) to be visible:

Q: In **Macbeth**, you use a scene in which there are about eight mirrors. How was that done, especially the last shot where Banquo is by the water and looks at Macbeth?

A: Well, first there are scenes when we go through the mirrors. I just used the frames, you know, a wall, and a hole in the wall, and a frame. So it looks like a mirror. So when you go into it, and you go through it, we cut to the next one, and again we do the same motion. Then optically we would superimpose those shots so that it looked like continuously you were going through the mirrors.

The last one was just a mirror, a regular mirror, which was reflecting Banquo, and Macbeth was on one side, and we placed the camera in a way that it would not reflect itself in the mirror. And then he takes the sword and breaks the mirror and it falls, and the image disappears. (videotaped interview)

That same reflective technique occurs also in **The Fearless Vampire Killers** (1967).<sup>6</sup> The simple fact that Polanski borrows from himself so ostentatiously calls attention to the device; more importantly, though, the borrowing borders on a kind of self-parody, since Polanski has lifted for use in a "serious" later work (**Macbeth**) a strategy that is merely conventional (the effect of mirrors on vampires) in an earlier piece of pop entertainment. The knowledgeable filmgoer will recognize in that borrowing not only work habits that repeat themselves during the course of a career, but also the implication that devices remain just devices, and that the ostensibly naturalistic, three dimensional dramatic experience is merely filmed and two dimensional; it is not "real."

Polanski has remarked on several occasions that Laurence Olivier's **Hamlet**, Carol Reed's **Odd Man Out**, and Orson Welles' **Citizen Kane** were films that influenced him greatly during his student days.<sup>7</sup> He has not always been so obliging as to specify precisely what it was about those works that affected him, though, so I felt it was a bonus when, during our interview session, he did

elaborate by talking about the peculiar ambiance of the forementioned selections:

I always wanted to make films, as far as I can remember. As a child I was always trying to construct projectors and things like that. I would go to cinema sometimes twice a day, secretly because, of course, it was disapproved. During this time I had a friend and he loved cinema, too, and we would see every film that was in town. The first desire to make films comes obviously from seeing them.

One film that had a tremendous impact on me was Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*. I saw it when I was about 14, or something like that. Subsequently I saw it about 25 times, maybe now about 30 times. And then later, or more or less in the same period, I saw Carol Reed's film *Odd Man Out*, with James Mason. These films have more or less the same — they are entirely different, of course, but they have something in common. It's the atmosphere, you know. They're slightly queer. They are real but not completely real. They are both done in the studio, although *Odd Man Out* happens mostly on the streets and in the bars and the garrets, and strange interiors. But it's all done in the studios, and that gives it a very peculiar atmosphere. And so is *Hamlet*.

And I was of course very influenced by *Citizen Kane*; but aren't we all? When I think of the films that really meant something to me in my later work, they are those films. (videotaped interview)

For our purposes, it is crucial to notice that the content of the selections he cites is not what impressed itself on the young Pole who at about that time was deeply engaged in film studies at Lodz. Polanski seems to have found himself principally attracted to the "slightly queer" atmosphere that pervades the trio of works, and by "slightly queer" he means neither crazed nor bizarre, but rather an oddity of tone that marks the films as a consequence of their having been made in studios. That tone one might describe as "hollow," perhaps, or as being "too clean." It is a natural tone in that the sounds are all generated by sources that occur in the world (they are not synthetic or electronic). Yet it is a kind and quality of sound that lacks nature's usual interferences: all the wild sound that so often clutters a track. In short, what Polanski is suggesting in his last remark is that there is for him a compelling fascination in this group of films precisely because the works themselves are patently artful, and because of an audience's consequent awareness of the form and order which man's art imposes on chaotic experience. To the ear that could really hear, such as that which young Polanski turned toward them, these seminal western films all said with their "slightly queer" sound, "we are examples of cinema art; we do not signify events as they actually are lived."

Still another sense in which Polanski underlines the objective artfulness of his *Macbeth* is by repeatedly insisting that the film is based on scrupulous research, as though by announcing such disclaimers he cannot be held responsible for its artistic statement:

I did a lot of studying before I started writing the script. Also, I wrote it with Ken Tynan, who used to be the literary director of the National Theatre in England. We went through a tremendous amount of research, through whole centuries of scholarship on the subject. There is a tremendous amount of literature and a tremendous amount of theory

about every line, every scene, and that inspired us to do a lot of interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

Of course audiences are still free to speculate about the authenticity of his **Macbeth**, and speculate they do. For instance it has been noted that sleeping nude in the dank Scottish castles of the eleventh century is scarcely a possibility to be seriously considered; thus the nude sleepwalking scene becomes suspect on historical grounds. But if the director himself is to be believed, proof text exists for every bit of business in the piece:

As a matter of fact, the way I ended the film is a part of history. Donalbain later became a king. And then later he was thrown off the throne and reduced to laundry. That's what the chronicles said — to laundry . . . The ending is the way it seems to me it is in Shakespeare . . . I tell you, whatever I did in the film I based on different research and on different opinions of scholars. There's three hundred years of scholarship, you know, and every gesture, every line in the play has some reference to be found and can be interpreted according to different theories. And that's what inspired us when we were writing the script.

There was a scene — as you know, in Shakespeare there are no stage directions at all. There's only "exit" and "enter." Otherwise there are just lines of verse. So you can play it any way you want . . . And if sometimes you see several productions that are staged more or less the same way, it's only because that's the way traditionally they are staged, not necessarily because that's the way it should be. Now, when you write a script, an adaptation of Shakespeare, you can fill it up with practically anything you want. We filled it up not with things that just came to our mind. But we read all the time what different people had to say about the work, why, what does it mean, etc. (videotaped interview)

Considered logically, Polanski's suggestion here points to the conclusion that the work is not his own in any unique sense, but that it is an amalgam of three hundred years of received critical opinion. Hence we might say Samuel Johnson has his hand in this **Macbeth**, as (perhaps) have A.C. Bradley and L.C. Knights. Still, Polanski does not parcel out credit for the film completely, because he bristles at the suggestion that **Playboy** magazine, which financed the project, exerted any influence or control over its making:

Q: Did **Playboy** have any influence on the production? For example, your doing the sleepwalking scene nude?

A: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. All they did . . . they financed the picture, and Heffner wanted to have his name on it as the Executive Producer. But obviously there were all sorts of associations, connotations, suggestions, and innuendos — like yours — as far as the press were concerned. It was like the kiss of death to the film, the fact that **Playboy** participated. It has affected the press in this country, yes. Not in England, though. It had very good press in England, this film, very good. As a matter of fact, it was enthusiastic, and here it was all down. (videotaped interview)

If we ask ourselves what, exactly, is Polanski's artistic share of the project, we come eventually to the conclusion that he did not revive in traditional theatrical terms a tried and true Shakespearean piece of dramatic material; he made a *film* of his own that happens to concern an assassination and its

consequences. Polanski “translated” *Macbeth*. He engaged himself in an all-out effort to render visually what is in the first place a verbal medium. “I . . . tried to translate to a visual whatever was possible to translate,” he explains. “I always took the explanation that was most visual, that was most useful for our cinematographic adaptation.”<sup>9</sup> Even among those reviewers who were not favorably disposed to the film as a whole, the visual qualities of the piece were considered stunning.<sup>10</sup>

In the process of making the drama into film, the director obviously had to leave on the cutting room floor much of its powerful poetry. Both Stanley Kauffmann and Pauline Kael lament that loss, but Roman Polanski does not appear to:

I . . . tried to make it as easy to understand as possible, because often the language is so archaic that half the house doesn't understand what it's all about, but they shake their heads as they don't want to appear stupid.<sup>11</sup>

When he says he intended to make the work “easy to understand” and to make it “cinematic,” Polanski acknowledges the responsibility he felt to reduce the play's thematically dense material to relatively lucid visual statements. In a broader sense, though, he is suggesting that what he wanted to make apparent is that one is seeing in this selection an instance of modern man's most refined and demanding mass medium: film. Consider, as a case in point, the obligation Polanski has as a filmmaker to render a soliloquy in terms of *movement*, as well as in sounds:

Q: Particularly with reference to Shakespearean lines, were you satisfied with the performances you got from the actors, their ability to handle the lines?

A: Not all of them . . . I was happy with Jon Finch in the second half of the film, less happy in the first half. I had this idea of giving him a beard after he became a king, and having him younger and more innocent looking in the first half. There was something about his beard which made him feel better in the real tyrant role than in the young, honest warrior role.

Since you mention *Macbeth*, I want to tell you — in *Macbeth* when you had long soliloquies, a lot of shots had to be planned before even we built the set. Not only that, I would walk with the art director or sometimes with the actor reciting the soliloquy so that we would know how long to build the balcony so that we would be able to do it. You understand? I had certain ideas of him walking down the stairs and them meeting, and so if you have to build the stairs a proper length, then the balcony has to be long like that too, and then the courtyard has to be built accordingly, and the whole castle, etc. (videotaped interview)

There is a very sure sense in Polanski's inference here that the film took on a physical shape (its sets, its interiors, its locations) dictated by, or at least suggested by, the language.

Occasionally the audience have their sensibilities jarred as the filmmaker works to create a cinematographic thing from relatively intransigent raw materials. Most viewers are not likely to have been aware that a set was constructed of sufficient length to facilitate delivering an entire speech while an actor moves along it. *Macbeth*'s death scene is different, though, in the sense that it forcibly impresses audiences with its cinematic qualities. During the long, brutal fight with Macduff, as the combatants alternately hack at and club

each other and then rest on their heavy swords, each time Macbeth's body slams against a wall the screen image appears to jerk violently, In an attempt to intensify the audience's impression of this scene, Polanski cut frames out of the film at each of those impact points.<sup>12</sup> No audience ought to overlook such jump cuts in the action. Thus by explicitly violating the principle of continuity, and editing instead along more "dynamic" lines, Polanski succeeds in heightening our awareness of the piece as filmic art.

Finally, the ending of the film is a further indication of its being selfreflective. Polanski, either at the prompting of his own critical faculties or by pursuing suggestions made in analyses preceding his own, has Donalbain return from exile and meet the witches in a scene strongly reminiscent of Macbeth's encounter with them at the beginning of the work. The strong visual similarity between the scenes underscores clearly the link in character type between King Malcolm's younger brother and the tyrannically ambitious Macbeth. More significantly, however, the ending signals an audience that perfection of form has been achieved by the filmmaker. Polanski has so cut and shaped his material as to cause it to describe a complete circle, and in so doing he forces us to pull back from the drama of the drama and to notice instead the cinema artistry which his rendition of *Macbeth* represents. This ending is the single most obvious example of the way in which Polanski depends upon proven structural paradigms to fashion his material. In this case he relies on the circle, a design that suggests to modern filmgoers both perfection (circles being without beginning or end) and cynicism, calling to mind as it does the admonition that those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it. Perfection of form is by definition so qualitatively different from the literal facts of life as we know them that a film which achieves it becomes what Murray Krieger calls "the aesthetic equivalent of miracle."<sup>13</sup>

Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema," *The New Yorker*, 5 February 1971, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Casebier, *Film Appreciation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1976), p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Kauffmann, *The New Republic*, 1 January 1972, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> "Roman Polanski," *Dialogue on Film*, Center for Advanced Film Studies, 501 Doheny Road, Beverly Hills, California, 90210, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Videotaped interview with Roman Polanski, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, 1976. All other excerpts from this interview, played from video cassette for the audience at the 1978 Ohio Shakespeare Conference when this paper was read, will be indicated parenthetically.

<sup>6</sup> "Roman Polanski," p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> "Roman Polanski," p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> "Roman Polanski," p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> "Roman Polanski," p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Kauffmann, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> "Roman Polanski," p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> "Roman Polanski," p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Murray Krieger, "Shakespeare and the Critic's Idolatry of the Word," in *Shakespeare: Aspects of Influence*, ed. G. B. Evans, *Harvard University Studies*, 7 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 206.