

Review of
The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World,
edited by John Orr and Elżbieta Ostrowska
(London: Wallflower Press, 2006), x + 175 pages

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Anthologies about movies and their makers rarely fulfil their promise, for the myopia of the 'director as auteur' prevents contributors from comprehending what was done by whom, how and for what reasons as the movies were designed and built.

In 1962 Roman Polanski directed KNIFE IN THE WATER after working with Jerzy Skolimowski and Jakub Goldberg upon its design (screenplay), the first of eighteen feature films that he was to direct over the next forty-five years, earning for him an international reputation as an intelligent, imaginative and distinctive filmmaker. Every one of those movies, however, was designed *with* others. (Gerard Brach co-wrote over half of them, and ROSEMARY'S BABY, the sole movie for which Polanski alone received credit as screenwriter, was adapted from the novel by Ira Levin.)

Polanski was among the best trained and most technically accomplished of the post-1960 directors. Secure in his competence, he acknowledged and respected the contributions of writers, cameramen, sound recordists and others, as they did his own. Actors found him overbearing and insensitive, but even when reaffirming the centrality of his role as director to the final appearance of the movies, he never pretended to be solely responsible for it. He indeed disdained interviewers who, knowing nothing about filmmaking, would ask of him questions irrelevant to the working contexts of the profession.

Unfortunately, not one of the authors of this anthology has designed, directed or otherwise contributed to the making of a feature film. Oblivious to the working consequences of the collaborative nature of film production, they assume that Polanski, by directing the movies that he helped to design, was somehow the *creator* of them. Failing to register the contributions of others to how those movies appear, they are unable to measure his own.

The value of the anthology rests, therefore, upon the resonance of the alignments drawn by the more historically and culturally aware of its authors between the traumatic events of Polanski's early life and those of the movies that he was later to direct, for the bulk of those movies manifest an uncommon and unrelenting absorption by their director in the detailed presentation of the abnormal possibilities of the intersection of sexuality and violence.

As the subtitle of the anthology affirms, Polanski's choices when making the movies were informed by the "dark spaces of the world" impinging upon him from without and within, among them his childhood experiences in and after escaping from the Krakow ghetto, the death of his mother in a concentration camp, etc.; and Helena Goscilo goes further, hinting rightly that the movies bear the imprint of Polanski's "absorption with physical appearance; his own diminutive size and unprepossessing looks; and his geographical/cultural transplantations from boyhood into middle age" (page 23).

Not one of the authors, however, discusses the extraordinary events of Polanski's later life or how they impinged upon him while directing the movies. Even Goscilo stops at 'middle age', neglecting to align with the movies any of the later events of his life that established his reputation for "temperamental immaturity ... [and] repellent behaviour and misogyny in everyday life" (Foot 4, page 36), among them his "anomalous relations with women on and off the set, his predilection for teenage girls, the Playboy Club and one-night stands, plus the criminal charges that 27 years later still make him *persona non grata* in the United States" (page 32).

Reference to "the criminal charges" and their effect is remarkable here, for Goscilo is misrepresenting the historical situation, using the same phrase to the same effect as did John Orr, the senior editor of the volume, twice before her (Endnote 4, page 20), neither of them informing readers that Polanski, having pleaded guilty to having had unlawful sexual intercourse with a 13-year-old girl (as part of a plea bargain calculated to avoid trial on a more severe compound of charges), fled the United States to avoid almost certain and lengthy imprisonment when it appeared that the plea bargain would be disregarded by the judge, being compelled thereafter to work only in countries without extradition treaties with the United States.

Excluded from the anthology, in short, are any delineations of the "dark spaces" of Polanski's later life that, if aligned in order with the movies, might lead readers to question the achievement imputed to him by Orr of being "one of the great directors of the dark spaces of the world" (page 19).

Barbara Leaming, Polanski's biographer of record¹, unrepresented but cited often by others within the anthology (though not by the senior editor), was compelled a quarter-century ago to conclude the opposite, namely, as summarized aptly by Goscilo, that Polanski's "temperamental immaturity", as he converted "personal problems into

¹ Barbara Leaming, *Polanski: A Biography. The Filmmaker as Voyeur* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).

cinematic texts", precluded "the possibility of existential profundity" (see footnote 4, page 36).

One need not agree with Leaming's assessment. But within an anthology devoted supposedly to elucidating the scope and nature of Polanski's lifetime achievement, the absence of nearly forty years of resonant evidence is astounding, indeed disingenuous.