Life Bleeding into Art

Roman Polanski’s Macbeth

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The events of Roman Polanski’s intriguing life can often be detected in his films. In this piece, his film *Macbeth* (1971) – about the eponymous Shakespearean character (Jon Finch) who is racked by guilt after murdering the incumbent king, Duncan (Nicholas Selby), to seize the crown for himself – is examined in reference to two disturbing incidents that occurred in the director’s life. The first of these is the death of his mother, and the second, which took place twenty years later, is the murder of his wife, rising actor Sharon Tate. The films that Polanski made after Tate’s murder express a darker ambience, depicting the reality of fear, paranoia and violence. In addition to personal tragedy, these films reflect the changing face of a troubled America during the 1970s. Accordingly, *Macbeth* incorporates a variety of themes and symbols that denote the cultural and sociopolitical backdrop of the time in which the film was produced.

**POLANSKI’S PAST EXPOSED THROUGH THE LENS**

Polanski was born in Paris in 1933 to Polish Jewish parents. They eventually moved back to their homeland of Poland just prior to the German invasion, which was ultimately an unfortunate decision for the family. In the documentary *Roman Polanski: A Film Memoir* (Laurent Bouzereau, 2011), Polanski recalls the hardship of living in the Kraków Ghetto and the heartache of watching his friends thrown into trucks destined for the concentration camps. When his pregnant mother, Bula, was deported and sent directly to Auschwitz, his father took ten-year-old Roman to a secluded part of the fence enclosing the ghetto and told him to run and never turn back. From 1943 until the end of the war, Polanski was in hiding in the countryside, assuming a false identity.

After the war, Polanski returned to Kraków where he was reunited with his father, who survived the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp in Austria. It was not long after that he developed a passion for cinema, which led him to try his hand at acting, appearing in renowned auteur Andrzej Wajda’s *A Generation* (1955). In 1959, Polanski graduated from the prestigious National Higher School of Film, Television and Theatre in Łódź, where he studied film direction. His debut feature film, *Knife in the Water* (1962), is now considered a classic; it has become a staple case study across many film and media schools even though it was critically panned in communist Poland for its blatant depiction of sexual tension and use of experimental filmic techniques. Eventually it was picked up in the US, which led to a nomination from Polanski’s previous films, such as the zany horror *The Fearless Vampire Killers* and the supernatural thriller *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), into a realistic territory of violence influenced by the filmmaker’s exposure to the Polish New Wave. This becomes most

The Manson murders have become a watershed moment in popular culture, and critics have subsequently used the trauma and Polanski’s personal history as a lens through which to view his adaptation of *Macbeth*.
escape once they have 'done the deed'. After Duncan is killed and Macbeth ascends the throne, the image of death is revisited in the most cruel manner when a paranoid Macbeth orders the killing of Duncan’s general Banquo (Martin Shaw) and the latter’s son, Fleance (Keith Chegwin), after he envisions them killing him during a dream. When Fleance escapes, Macbeth becomes even more fearful of his secret being uncovered, leading him into a state of delusion whereby he ‘encounters’ Banquo’s ghost. But the haunting does not deter Macbeth from his path of destruction; in fact, it encourages the murder spree that results in the brutal killing of Macduff’s wife (Diane Fletcher) and children. Believing Macduff to be a traitor, Macbeth orders his henchmen to annihilate the Macduff household. Of this scene, Barr contends that Polanski ‘drew on his own memory of Gestapo violence in Poland’, whereas the theatre critic (and the film’s co-writer) Kenneth Tynan ‘made the more obvious link to Manson’.

The callous murderers, shown raping the women and slaughtering the children in the Macduff home, represent a darkness that mirrors the terrible events of Polanski’s life. The harrowing violence of the scene is indeed reminiscent of the Tate murders. It begins with a deafening scream, heard from the courtyard as Lady Macduff bathes her young boy. She runs outside to the hallway to find a pack of ruffians ravaging her household and causing havoc. Two of them spot her and follow her into the bedroom, where she is cornered and forced to watch as her son is stabbed to death. Although the scene occurs in Shakespeare’s text and is a pivotal moment in the play, the emphasis on violence and the inclusion of a rape scene and slain children – something Hollywood audiences at the time were not accustomed to seeing – strikingly evokes Polanski’s loss of his wife, unborn child, and mother as well as his would-be sibling.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Polanski pays special attention to the female characters in the film, accentuating the power that Shakespeare gives them in his original text. For instance, a clan of witches (Maisie MacFaynghar, Elsie Taylor and Noelle Rimmington) foretell (and therefore impact) the fate of Macbeth, who is not only a man but also a king. Then there is Lady Macbeth (Francesca Annis), who psychologically manipulates her husband and influences him to kill, while the strong-willed mother figure is embodied by Lady Macduff, who protects her children until the end. Through these female archetypes, Polanski commemorates the women in his life who had endured pain, representing his mother and wife through Lady Macduff, and depicts the brainwashed disciples of the Manson Family through Lady Macbeth.

Further to the graphic violence, the film presents more explicit links to the Manson Family crimes. Macbeth’s short-lived rule matches the undignified manner in which he obtained the crown; he becomes increasingly unpopular, primarily in the eyes of Banquo, and eventually loses the respect of his henchmen. Like
Macbeth, Charles Manson was an antihero of sorts who ached for his fifteen minutes of fame and was prepared to kill in order to gain it. Theatrically trained British actor Finch renders a stoically attractive representation of Macbeth, while the striking Annis radiates as a femme fatale-esque figure and driving force behind her husband’s crimes. This is an uncanny representation of the Manson Family members who were responsible for Tate’s murder: Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel, Linda Kasabian and Charles Watson. The number of female murderers recalls the three Weird Sisters, and their malevolence and violent, trance-like state is comparable to that experienced by Lady Macbeth, who begins to lose her mind, entering into monologues with herself and walking frantically about her quarters in the nude. Indeed, Finch even bore a slight resemblance to Watson, the one man who physically carried out the killings.

Polanski uses blood, nightmares and ghosts in his adaptation to accentuate the hauntings in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, and to reinforce the underlying theme of the past returning to torment those in the present. The film presents the narrative as a timeless portrayal of the hunger for power and the lengths that some individuals will go to in order to gain that power. This notion becomes symbolic in a cruel bear-baiting scene in which two chained-down grizzly bears are tormented and killed by a pack of hounds as the Macbeths and their guests laugh grotesquely at the blood sport. The scene mirrors the manner in which Tate and her guests were helplessly attacked and murdered, without any chance of fighting back. Manson and his family did gain a moment under the spotlight, but it was for the wrong reasons, which some of the members, such as Atkins, eventually came to understand as guilt crept into her consciousness. Similarly, Lady Macbeth loses her mind and commits suicide, unable to deal with the crime of manipulating her husband into murdering Duncan and becoming his successor. The moral here is that a premature summoning of the future provokes certain consequences, such as the past returning to haunt the protagonists.

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scandal. These events signified dark times in the US, during which leaders and individuals in power plotted clandestine schemes, analogous to those of the Macbeths. In order to convey the sinister context of the 1970s, Polanski purposefully selected Lindisfarne Castle on Holy Island in Northern England and parts of Wales notorious for dreary weather and grey landscapes as locations for Macbeth. Complementing the ruthless actions of the Macbeths, the set helps to establish an association between the Dark Ages encompassed in Shakespeare’s play and the disturbing events of Polanski’s personal life, plus the violence and ambition characterising the US in the 1970s.

Shakespeare’s Macbeth is known for its detailed description of the madness and paranoia that haunts the Macbeths following their premeditated murder of King Duncan. Polanski captures this guilt-provoked mania through his lead characters and metaphoric imagery. Macbeth suffers from nightmares and hallucinations following the killing, while Lady Macbeth is haunted by the smell of blood. The theme of regicide in the film is represented through a number of symbols from the moment Duncan’s crown falls onto the stone ground as Macbeth stabs him viciously in his bed. During the killing scene, there is a moment when the camera focuses on the crown as it spirals for some time on the ground, signifying the vortex of sinister experiences and events that will haunt the Macbeths. Essentially, it is guilt that drives the couple to hallucinate objects – such as the dagger used to kill Duncan and spots of blood that once stained their hands – tormenting them about their crime. This aspect of the narrative captures the idea that illegitimate success and premature access to the spotlight is short-lived and will lead to tragic consequences, just as the ideals of freedom, peace and love that proliferated in the 1960s did not advance into the following decade.

With Macbeth, Polanski has united a classical text with personal experience and a reflection of contemporary social issues. The film is a valuable adaptation of Shakespeare’s tragedy, as it demonstrates the ageless quality of a story about ‘hunters and hunted, eaters and prey, persecutors and victims, subduers and subdued’ – a politically charged society sustained by an infinite power trip.

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Endnotes

1 Polanski abandoned the project upon hearing of Tate’s murder. It was later resumed by Mike Nichols, best known for his film The Graduate (1967), and released in 1973.
5 Greenberg, op. cit., 107.
7 Barr, op. cit., p. 45.
9 ibid.