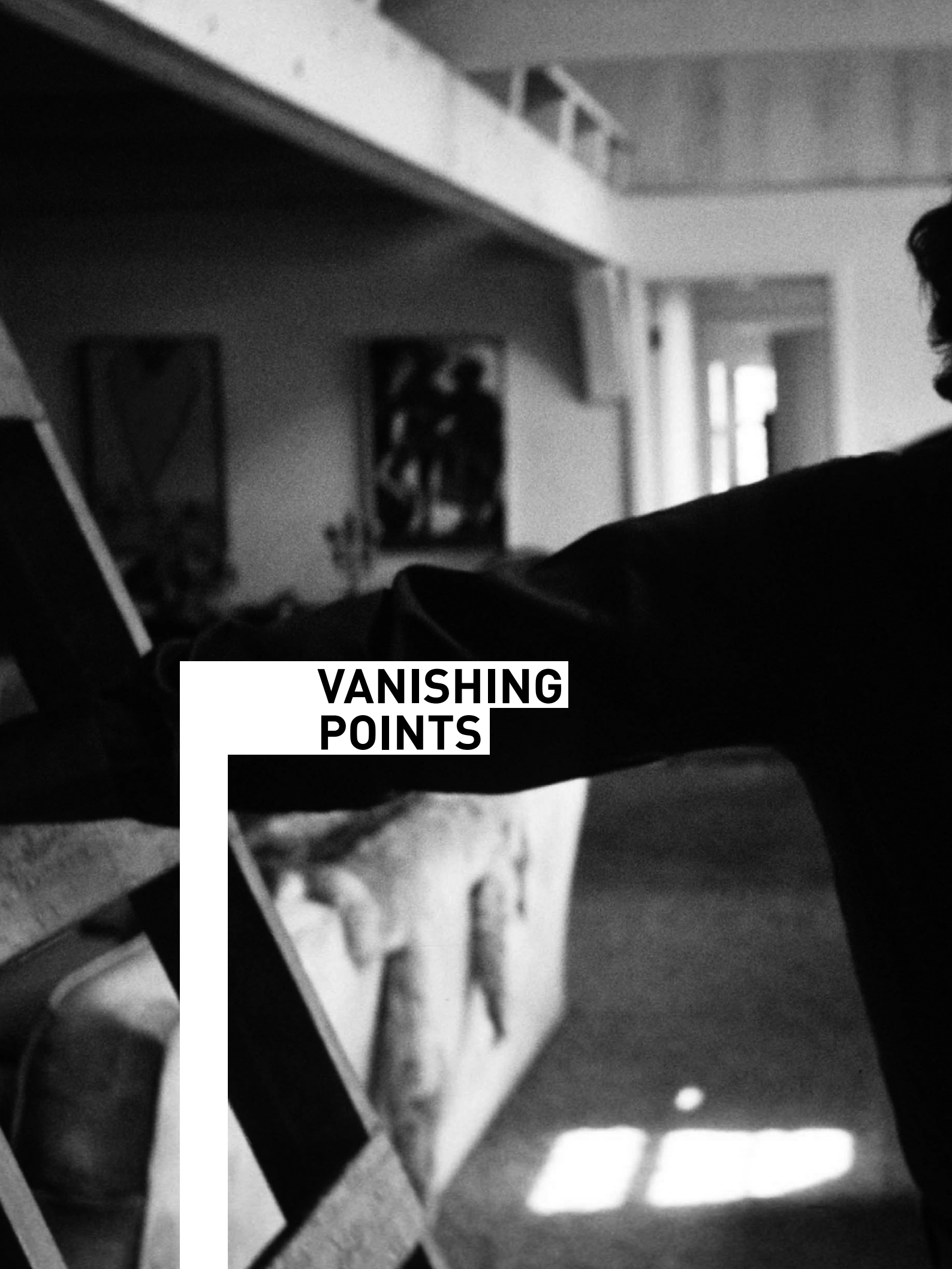
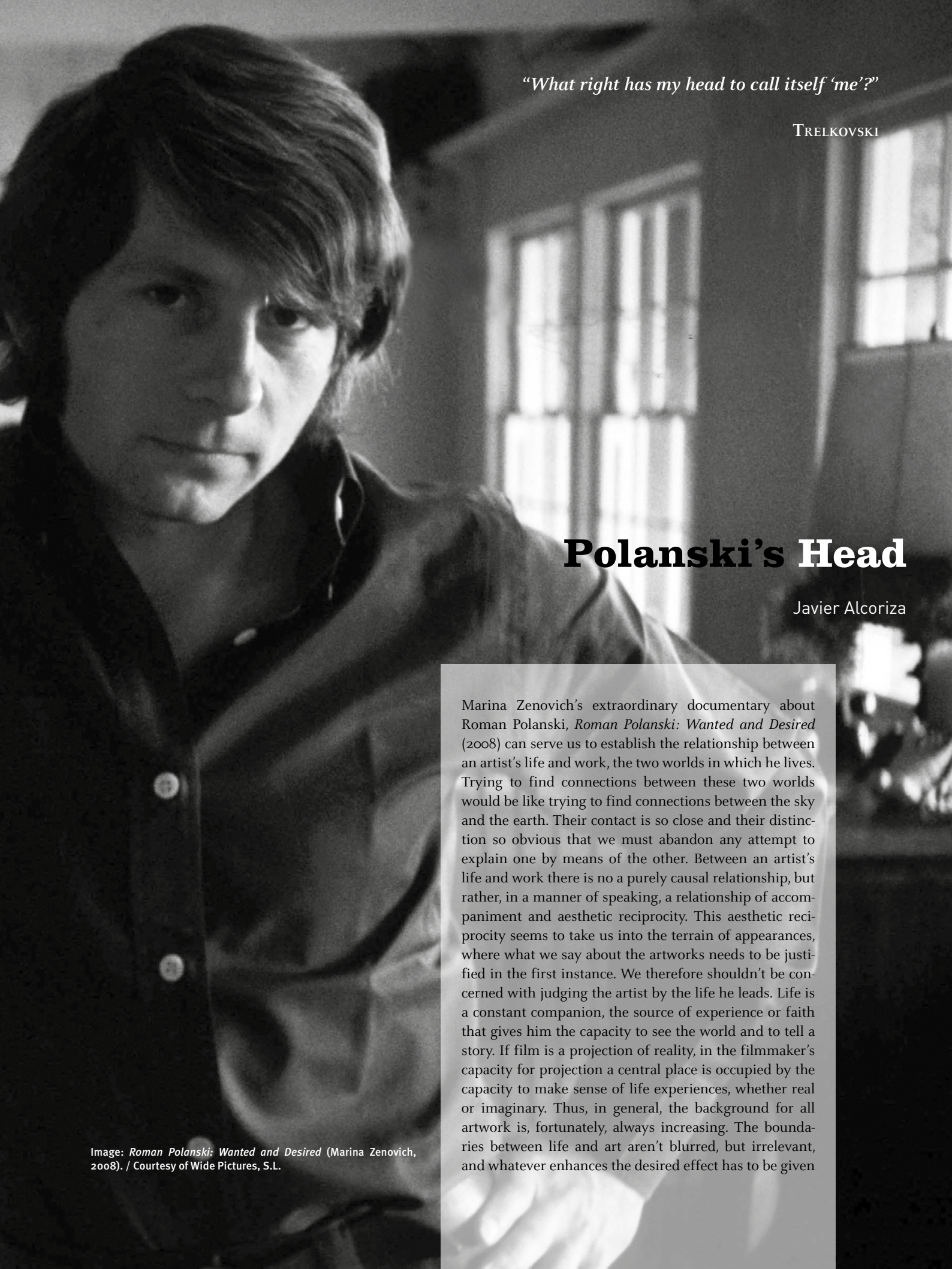


A black and white photograph showing a person's arm and hand in the foreground, reaching towards a wall. The background is a gallery with a balcony and a doorway. The text "VANISHING POINTS" is overlaid on the image.

VANISHING POINTS



"What right has my head to call itself 'me'?"

TRELKOVSKI

Polanski's Head

Javier Alcoriza

Marina Zenovich's extraordinary documentary about Roman Polanski, *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired* (2008) can serve us to establish the relationship between an artist's life and work, the two worlds in which he lives. Trying to find connections between these two worlds would be like trying to find connections between the sky and the earth. Their contact is so close and their distinction so obvious that we must abandon any attempt to explain one by means of the other. Between an artist's life and work there is no a purely causal relationship, but rather, in a manner of speaking, a relationship of accompaniment and aesthetic reciprocity. This aesthetic reciprocity seems to take us into the terrain of appearances, where what we say about the artworks needs to be justified in the first instance. We therefore shouldn't be concerned with judging the artist by the life he leads. Life is a constant companion, the source of experience or faith that gives him the capacity to see the world and to tell a story. If film is a projection of reality, in the filmmaker's capacity for projection a central place is occupied by the capacity to make sense of life experiences, whether real or imaginary. Thus, in general, the background for all artwork is, fortunately, always increasing. The boundaries between life and art aren't blurred, but irrelevant, and whatever enhances the desired effect has to be given

Image: *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired* (Marina Zenovich, 2008). / Courtesy of Wide Pictures, S.L.

THE LACK OF SCRUPLES
DOESN'T HAVE TO BE
UNDERSTOOD AS A LACK
OF MORALITY WHEN WHAT
MATTER ARE THE DESIRED
EFFECTS WHEN TELLING A
STORY AS EFFECTIVELY AS
POSSIBLE

priority, regardless of its origin. In great works of art –and in my opinion Polanski's best films should be considered as such– the pursuit of certain effects is an aspect of the work produced. It is true that the reality projected in his films doesn't have a substratum that can absorb the shocks that we suffer while watching it as spectators, but, fortunately, the question of desired effects has a privileged place; and a privilege that they enjoy is to show is the domain of violence, from *Morderstwo* (1957) to *Bitter Moon* (1992). The domination of violence isn't the domination of evil, but, obviously, the domination of the battle between the good and evil impulses or *angels* of human nature. The obviousness of this affirmation underlines the fact that Polanski's films have not turned violence, in spite of its virtual omnipresence, into the purpose of the stories he tells. The purpose, to highlight the obvious, is to tell a story. The fact that the domination of violence is a common feature of Polanski's films doesn't mean that they are violent in the usual sense of the word; nor does it refer to psychological violence, although this kind of violence is recognisable in some of them. In this respect,

way it is. If you don't show it realistically, that's immoral and harmful. If you don't upset people, that's obscenity" (SANDFORD, 2012: 161).

It is an honesty, however, associated with a certain lack of scruples. I keep coming back to the view that the lack of scruples doesn't have to be understood as a lack of morality when what matter are the desired effects when telling a story as effectively as possible. It could be argued that this moment of amorality is indispensable in art in order to achieve a lasting moral repercussion. Of course, the human world is a moral world, and for the director of *Death and the Maiden* (1994) or *The Pianist* (2002) wouldn't be difficult to agree. The difficulty would lie precisely in assailing our conviction on this point when stories like from these must be told. In assailing this common conviction, the director is putting the spectator, and, at the same time, his own imagination, to the test. The director has no privileged knowledge of the sources of human morality. In reality, he doesn't even have to explore them; he need only follow the current of the facts that affect the human world as a moral world (SANDFORD, 2009: 286). The risk involved in assailing this conviction that the human world is a moral would therefore be that the assailant may succeed. Nevertheless, I don't believe that the spectator of Polanski's films would be persuaded that the human world is an immoral world. The director's virtue is to stay neutral in this conflict, not because he refrains from interfering but because

he has developed the capacity to fight on both sides. Neutrality is not a quality assumed by omission in the director of *Repulsion* (1965). I would argue that it is equivalent to his ability to recover completely for a new film, after having filmed *Repulsion*; or, more to the point, his ability to recover in order to make a film completely different from *Repulsion*. The shift from one genre to another, from *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, or *Pardon Me but Your Teeth Are in My Neck* (1967) to *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), from *Chinatown* (1974) to *The Tenant* (1976) would serve as an indirect test of Polanski's ability to recover from his films. A director's recovery from his films, of artists from their art or, in general, of people from

their work should be considered a sign of vitality. When stories contain a seed of violence that characterizes the human world, such vitality could be understood as an antidote to the inadequacy of every consolation. Consider, for example, the end of *The Pianist*, when the pianist is wandering through the streets of the devastated ghetto. There is a transfusion between the ability to recover and



Roman Polanski: *Wanted and Desired* (Marina Zenovich, 2008). / Courtesy of Wide Pictures, S.L.

I would argue that the physical or psychological expression of violence is secondary to the primary –or *realist*– domination of violence in Polanski's films. I would suggest that this dominance or presence could serve us to highlight, paradoxically, Polanski's honesty as a director: "among his other artistic tenets, broadcast either now in the near future, was that 'You have to show violence the

the inability to surrender in the face of devastation that may illustrate the resistance against giving into desperation as the final point of this story, perhaps the most challenging of the many stories Polanski has tackled.

The performance of Chopin's Scherzo in front of the German soldier, incidentally, would be the perfect occasion to claim that there is an inherent redemptive force in art that suggests the annihilation of moral distinctions. After all, a Nazi could be as good a musician as a Jew, or could express the same passion for art¹. Something similar occurs between the executioner and the victim in *Death and the Maiden*. The passion for music would seem to transcend the boundaries of mere morality. (Is music perhaps the art form that can consummate the absence of distinctions so that executioners repent of torturing their victims? Is the aesthetic revelation produced by Chopin's or Schubert's notes ethically ineffectual? Would this revelation be destroyed by the sound of words? The Jews in *The Pianist* fearfully follow the news on radio and in the press about the Nazi persecution; the victim in *Death and the Maiden* recognizes her executioner by his voice. Might the realm of music be the realm of the spirit where one can escape from violence?) Nevertheless, the music is contained, dominated or tamed by the film. The reality projected carries more weight than the reality transformed by the music; this is not to say that the reality projected doesn't have an evasive quality. Every good film is an escape from reality; however, the cinematic escape doesn't involve, like the musical escape, the negation of all mundane circumstances, but the fixation of our attention on mundane circumstances translatable into the ones we are living. The genuinely democratic dimension of film is reinforced by this parallel, regardless of the use the director seeks to make of it. Polanski would have known how to contain the impulse of musical escapism and to put it to the service of the stories that connect with the world we live in.

I feel it is important to underline that Polanski's commitment to reality is the commitment of the filmmaker, of the artist who has explored the different ways of putting the spectator's imagination into contact with the world around us. Our experience of reality, the director of *Chinatown* or *Tess* (1979) would tell us, is never complete. If the stories have a good plot, if they can't be perceived in any other way but the way they have been told, then they offer a new understanding of experience. Jack Nicholson's face at the end of *Chinatown* or Nastassja Kinski's at the end of

Tess are incomparable with the characters' faces at the beginning of both stories. This transformation seems all the more amazing given Polanski hasn't used the techniques available to him to open the door for us, so to speak, into the protagonist's mind, as was the case in *Repulsion* and *The Tenant*. There is, without any doubt, an advantage that the first two films have over the last two, in that they allow us observe their protagonists' crises with apparent objectivity. In my opinion, this appearance would be Polanski's greatest cinematic achievement. The spectator is waiting to obtain the assurance that what has been seen hasn't been a deception. The suspension of disbelief has to be followed by a renewed act of faith.

On the other hand, the obvious partiality in the use of cinematographic techniques was a characteristic of movies like *Repulsion* and *The Tenant*, and this would reach its apex with Mia Farrow's dream sequence in *Rosemary's Baby*. The centre of gravity of these stories is in the minds of their protagonists. However, it's worth noting that the root of the imbalance they suffer has social

WHEN STORIES CONTAIN
A SEED OF VIOLENCE
THAT CHARACTERIZES
THE HUMAN WORLD,
SUCH VITALITY COULD
BE UNDERSTOOD AS
AN ANTIDOTE TO THE
INADEQUACY OF EVERY
CONSOLATION



Roman Polanski: *Wanted and Desired* (Marina Zenovich, 2008). / Courtesy of Wide Pictures, S.L.

than psychological hues. In these cases, and paradigmatically in *Rosemary's Baby*, there seems to be a conspiracy between the other characters to crush the protagonist's capacity for resistance. From a certain point of view, Polanski's sick characters are morally healthier than those around them who end up abusing them. The suspicion in *The Tenant* that Trelkovski isn't a French citizen hints

THE EXTREMES OF
POLANSKI'S FILMS ARE
EXTREMES OF HUMANITY
IN GENERAL, RATHER
THAN OF THE LIFE OF THE
FILMMAKER HIMSELF

at a discrimination that foreshadows a silent persecution led by Mr. Zy (Na-zi?). Ominously, none of Trelkovski's neighbours prevents him from jumping out his window for a second time. With this and other feverish stories, Polanski insinuates that the body of society is ill despite its apparent health. The appearance of health marks the beginning of these films and it is the director's art to induce us to doubt it. Real health would be that of an organism on guard against potential threats. Real health allows the individual to maintain the tension with his fellow man and even with his loved ones, as in *Bitter Moon*. There is a danger in the restraint of the British married couple who renew their oaths of wedded bliss, and there is an extreme risk whose consequences are suffered by Mimi and her invalid husband, whose cynicism doesn't stop him from admitting brutally, before committing suicide, that they were too greedy.

Believing we are not immune to the dangers to which Polanski's characters are exposed would be a way of appreciating stories as stifling as *The Tenant*, or as sadistic as *Death and the Maiden*. At this point there is a great temptation to believe that Polanski transferred the ghosts of his personal experience to the screen. Nevertheless, it should be noted that it would be the spectator, not the author, who would come out the winner in this transaction. Not one of Polanski's films conveys the impression that it was autobiographical. Even Marina Zenovich's extraordinary documentary looks like one of Polanski's works. The extremes of Polanski's films are extremes of humanity in general, rather than of the life of the filmmaker himself. *Polanski: Wanted and Desired* confirms the absurdity of reducing the interpretation of his work to the biographical level (or to separate the head from the body to ponder our real identity) [see Figure 1]. I would say that, after seeing the documentary, what is left to be done is to take the opposite approach: to expand the biographical level to the cinematic, since this transformation is associated with the exclusive work of genius. In my opinion, the quality of Polanski's best films depends on that wonderful expansion that transforms the movie screen into a sounding board for real or imaginary experiences where *the show man* has the last word. To try to confine Polanski within his own film would be to do an injustice to cinema as art. Appreciating the meaning of his explorations, as extravagant as they can sometimes be, would be the most honest way of celebrating the quality of his cinematic revelations. ■

Still frames that illustrate the sequence in which Trelkovski asks himself "What right has my head to call itself 'me'?" in *The Tenant* (Roman Polanski, 1976)



Notes

- * Editor's Note: This essay was originally published in *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, num. 12, in July 2011 under the Spanish title "La cabeza de Polanski". The English version was translated by Maja Milanovic and revised by Martin Boyd in September 2013. *L'Atalante* appreciates the permission given by Wide Pictures S.L. to reproduce still frames from *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired* (Marina Zenovich, 2008).
- 1 George Steiner reflects on this question in relation to literature: "We do not know whether the study of the humanities, of the noblest that has been said and thought, can do very much to humanize. We do not know; and surely there is rather something terrible in our doubt whether the study and delight a man finds in Shakespeare make him any less capable of organizing a concentration camp. Recently one of my colleagues, an eminent scholar, asked me with genuine bafflement, why someone trying to establish himself in an English literature faculty should refer so often to concentration camps; why they were in any way relevant. They are profoundly relevant, and before we can go on teaching we must surely ask ourselves: are the humanities humane and, if so, why did they fail before the night?" (STEINER, 1998: 65-66).

Bibliography

- ANIKRUPA, Julia (2009). *Roman Polanski: A Life in Exile*. Santa Barbara: Praeger. Reino Unido: Renn Productions and Timothy Burill Productions. France: Marianne Productions.
- CRONIN, Paul (coord.) (2005). *Roman Polanski: Interviews*. Mississippi: Univeristy Press of Mississippi.
- ORR, John; OSTROWSKA, Elzbieta (eds.) (2005). *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World*. Harrow: Wallflower Press.
- POLANSKI, Roman (2003). *Roman By Polanski*. New York: Pan Books.
- SANDFORD, Christopher (2012). *Polanski*. New Zealand: Random House Books.
- STEINER, George (1998). *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*. New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press.

Javier Alcoriza Vento (Valencia, 1969) holds a bachelors degrees in Philosophy and in Art History from the Universitat València and a PhD in Philosophy from the Universidad de Murcia and is a Professor of Philosophy at the Universitat València. In addition to working as a translator and editor for more than thirty works for different Spanish publishers, he is also the author of various books, including *La democracia de la vida: Notas sobre una metáfora ética* (Verbum, 2009), *La patria invisible. Judaísmo y ética de la literatura* (Hebraica Ediciones, 2010), *Educación la mirada. Lecciones sobre la historia del pensamiento* (Psylicom, 2012), *El tigre de Hircania. Ensayos de lectura creativa* (Plaza y Valdés, 2012) y *Látigos de escorpiones. Un ensayo sobre el arte de la interpretación* (work in progress). He has co-directed two periodicals, *Caracteres literarios* (1997-2005) and *La Torre del Virrey. Revista de estudios culturales* (2005-2009) and has contributed to a wide range of books on cinema, including, *La filosofía y el cine* (Verbum, 2002), *Estudios sobre cine* (Verbum, 2004), *Ingmar Bergman, buscador de perlas* (Morphos, 2008), and *Stanley Cavell, mundos vistos y ciudades de palabras* (Plaza y Valdés, 2010). Since 2010 he has served as president of the Sephardic Jewish cultural association, Tarbut Vilanesa.