

## Review of the Cinematic Elements in “Two Men and A Wardrobe”

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### Abstract

The present research focuses on Roman Polanski’s short film “Two Men and a Wardrobe,” unraveling the sophisticated cinematic language, symbolic motifs, and societal commentary throughout the plot. The short film is one of the director’s earliest works and yet one of the most evocative of the society that he lived in. The study analyzes Polanski’s directorial approach, distinguished by his careful use of simple yet conspicuous settings and recurring motifs, to portray themes of loneliness, surrealism, and resilience within the framework of the cityscape and how townspeople treat strangers. Several stylistic and language questions that Polansky uses are explored. First, the research reveals the director’s expert use of lighting to elicit resonance, particularly in emphasizing the characters’ experiences and the film’s overall mood. It also investigates the film’s relationship stories of Holocaust suffering and its portrayal of societal difficulties, in line with the cinematic discourse around films such as “La Vita è Bella” and “Schindler’s List.” The study provides vital insights into the tremendous effect of Polanski’s work by exploring the theme exploration and artistic choices in “Two Men and a Wardrobe,” clarifying its significance within the fields of film and societal reflection.

**Keywords:** two men, wardrobe, mirror, city.

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#### Introduction

Directed by Roman Polanski, “Two Men and A Wardrobe” is a surrealistic film with exaggerated acting that conveys societal discrimination and unequal treatment (mistreatment) of outsiders. It is important to analyze the gist of this film while exploring how Polanski arranged scenes to illustrate his message and characterize the style of the film.

The film was shot in 1958 while Polanski studied at the Lodz Film School. It tells the story of two men who visit a town near the sea while carrying a large wardrobe. It is important to note that two men with a wardrobe emerge from the sea, each from a unique area (Jainkeff, 2011). The term “coming from the sea” conveys the film’s overriding ambiance, in which absurdity confronts reality’s inherent oddities. Nevertheless, the men experience humiliation and discrimination from the locals, and, in the process, they witness the dark aspects of this city. The film satirically depicts the city’s disorder and emphasizes the cohabitation of hostility and the rejection of compassion, exemplifying the fight for goodness.

#### Analysis

##### The Inspiration for the Film

Two issues become apparent almost immediately in the film. First, the two men and the wardrobe symbolize goodness and idealism. Second, the wardrobe with a mirror attached to the wardrobe reveals the dark side of the city. When the mirror ultimately breaks, it articulates the idea of shattering idealism, given the harsh reality the

world imposes. Moreover, it may be argued that the film’s two central protagonists represent the city’s working class and outsiders. They have modest hopes and goals, such as taking the tram, going to a café, and staying in a hotel. However, their interactions with the city highlight its harsh and unpleasant nature. Despite their initial joy and ambition, the men receive poor treatment, prompting them to flee the city and return to the sea.

The central concept of this film draws inspiration from Roman Polanski’s childhood memories. Polanski grew up during a miserable moment in German history marked by persecution of the Jews. He faced discrimination and saw many people, including his mother and a close childhood friend, suffer harsh punishment for nothing other than being Jewish. Such dreadful events could have served as a crucial source of motivation for his later work in movies. Polanski’s subsequent masterpiece, “The Pianist,” portrays this awful time more methodically and vividly.

##### Film Language and Idea Communication

Polanski uses film language to communicate his ideas. The movement of waves at the beach in the first shot is soft and peaceful, as if contrasting against waves in deep seas that can be furious and dangerous. At the same time, they may simplify some hope and peace for those who arrive by sea, which the film disproves. Following a dissolve, the film moves to a scene in which two male actors, accompanied by a critical prop, the wardrobe, emerge from the sea, swaying and drifting as they reach the beach. This part emphasizes the fundamental silliness of these two characters’ origins, which come from a bizarre and cryptic source. Polanski’s surrealist style adds

an exciting layer to the film.

When the protagonists arrive at the beach, they dance to express their delight at being in such unusual surroundings. Notably, Polanski uses the wardrobe mirror to reflect the undulating waves in the distance from the camera, boosting the scene's depth and vitality. Their actions show a lack of societal influence and the presence of pure hearts before their interaction with the city's residents. It is as if the scene is supposed to illustrate human purity and joy before society corrupts them. Also, using a pristine and uncluttered setting promotes such an image.

### **The Street**

After that, the following scene occurs on the street, with the cinematographic composition involving the mirror initially reflecting the incoming tram. The tram appears from the right section of the frame (Jainkeff, 2011). The mirror image and the transparency of the tram's windows create a visually arresting and dynamically engaging picture of the tram's movements. Furthermore, Polanski uses a high-angle shot to minimize the size of the two men, while a low-angle shot captures the passengers. This juxtaposition emphasizes the men's subordination, successfully connecting the two shots and emphasizing their rejection in their quest to board the tram.

After the happy scene at the landing beach, the two men and a wardrobe attempt to catch a tram. However, they are rejected since the usual urban procedure is not followed in the case of the two foreigners with the distinctive element of the outfit. At this moment, one sees the tempering of the unadulterated joy the two protagonists had on the beach.

### **The Young Woman and the Ruffians**

Following a transition shot, a subsequent sequence is introduced, which begins with a close-up perspective framed via a cage and displaying a bird. The camera then Rises to capture a dazzling young lady in radiant backlighting with a supplementary fill light flowing from the right, illuminating her glowing features and glossy hair (Jainkeff, 2011). A close-up switched to display the countenances of the two guys, simultaneously revealing the girl's departure, without enough emphasis on the scene's development.

Following a brief pause, the two men approach the young lady and introduce the wardrobe. However, their approach is turned down. Notably, Polanski avoids using close-ups or medium views to represent the rejection process. Instead, he uses a long shot, emphasizing the two men's motions and adopting a more "objective" perspective that foreshadows their potential return. The tactic successfully establishes the groundwork for the young lady's final refusal. The girl then gracefully withdraws from view,

disappearing around the corner.

The choice of this particular site emphasizes Polanski's penchant for window repetition and exemplifies his desire for clarity in cinematographic representation. Setting the scenario on an empty street presents each aspect. Furthermore, the deserted street resembles the empty beach in the film's opening shot, establishing thematic tone continuity.

### **The Non-Existent Closeness Between the Two Men**

Before the script brings the plot into the next conflict, a transitional long shot adds a critical element to the film. In this long shot, the two men carry the wardrobe while walking alongside the river, with vertical fences beside them (Jainkeff, 2011). Then, the camera pans to the right and reveals two men close to each other, which makes the audience believe they are good friends. Nevertheless, this conception is swiftly dispelled as the camera's descent unveils an act of thievery, precisely stealing a wallet from the rear trouser pocket.

### **The Restaurant and the Fish Meal**

The two individuals, joined by the wardrobe, enter a restaurant only to be ejected by the watchful waitstaff. The use of medium shots in the depiction of this situation is notable, accurately conveying the expressions of shock and unhappiness visible among the dining clients.

The setting and the frames with the diners are essential. A high-angle shot initially presents the scenario, laying the groundwork for later expansion, such as the entrance door. A second medium view of the waitstaff effectively portrays the restaurant's varied heights and spatial dimensions. Such compositional features give complexity and narrative potential to the scenario, albeit the descriptions are puzzling.

Following their ejection from the restaurant, the two men eat fish in the wardrobe. Polanski uses the reflective characteristics of the mirror to create the illusion of a fish seemingly taking flight in the sky in such a sequence. The inventive idea brings a whimsical touch to the atmosphere. Polanski also chooses a straightforward setting with a textured hardwood ground. He expertly positions himself to catch a larger frame, which he eventually puts into the editing process. The strategy evokes a sense of seclusion amid the austere surroundings, reflecting the efficacy of vacant places used throughout the film, such as the beach, the street with the young lady, and the lunch setting. The film's aesthetically consistent locations provide thematic coherence.

Dissolving into another scene, a fence well organizes the composition of the frame and the hotel's double-frame door, and a puddle of water disrupts the otherwise flat, non-textured surface, offering opportunities for character development. As a result of the characters' behavior,

the reflection and splashes of the water promoted the frame's dynamism. The two men place the wardrobe in the middle ground with a mirror reflection, expanding the depth of the frame (Jainkeff, 2011). The elegantly suited man walks out of the door, and the innkeeper's refusal happens in the background. One of the most interesting parts of this scene is the wardrobe arrangement. The two men carry the wardrobe away while the suited man appreciates his appearance in the mirror. Still, he ignores the moving wardrobe and walks closer to the hotel's mirror just behind the wardrobe in the same direction. The subsequent events exacerbate discrimination against the two men. The innkeeper politely invited a group, creating a stark contrast in attitude towards the two men with the wardrobe. Subsequently, the transition shot was structured with repetitive benches in the foreground, and the two men carrying the wardrobe move in the middle ground with a swinging tree.

### **The Adolescent Troublemakers**

The camera then cuts to a group of adolescent troublemakers using a rock to inflict harm on a cat, which is a terrible act that serves to describe them. One is left wondering what kind of people they are, and their juvenility does not excuse their actions. Polanski uses a stage and seats to enhance the height in this sequence, creating an ordered and balanced composition. The intelligent use of shifting levels for camera location increased the visual impact of the scene.

The troublemakers meet a young lady on the street after a period of frivolous involvement with the cat. The long shot of her arrival is well-composed. She is set against a textured wall with black and white grids, with swaying trees to the left (Jainkeff, 2011). A shot of the girl checking her watch communicates her uneasiness and lack of awareness of the looming danger she is about to confront. The framing turns to an over-the-shoulder picture of the girl with her back to the camera as the troublemaker approaches. The mirror affixed to the wardrobe reflects one of the troublemakers' activities, attracting the girl's attention and blocking his approach. The moment sparks a conflict between the troublemakers and the two men. The final image is stunning, with a double-framed composition and a "face-to-face" confrontation between the girl and the troublemaker caused by the mirror's reflection.

Following the girl's departure, a point-of-view shot is followed by a close-up of the troublemaker, powerfully portraying his rage and contempt toward the two guys. One of the two men retaliates in the ensuing argument by slapping one of the troublemakers, a moment recorded from a low angle to emphasize the height difference and intensity of the confrontation. A close-up shot then tilts downward to focus on the shorter guy, tracing the

troublemaker's actions as the shorter man steps back, emphasizing the troublemaker's sense of suppression.

### **The Shattering of the Mirror**

The mirror shatters during the intense argument, signaling the film's conclusion. During the battle, Polanski plays a troublemaker who gets into a physical altercation with one of the two males. This critical scene, marked by a physical battle between good and evil, represents the conclusion of the film's fundamental premise. The original fistfighting, done with one's eyes closed, represents a symbolic struggle between opposing forces, emphasizing the theme of virtue versus evil while adding depth and complexity to the conflict. Furthermore, clownish self-defense during the battle adds a distinct physicality to the conflict. The element enhances the choreography and accentuates the film's theme by presenting the clash as the finale of a battle between good and evil forces.

The next scene takes place against a backdrop of dilapidated architecture, contrasting the moment when the two guys quench their thirst. The fragmented wardrobe is placed to the right of the frame, acting as a poignant visual accent. The two men are recorded from a low perspective in the following photo, emphasizing the delicate features of the fence and the swaying trees (Jainkeff, 2011). A progressive shift to the left and subsequent tilt downward centers the camera on an alcoholic man laboriously ascending a set of stairs, his wobbly walk visible as he fights on each step.

The city and Polish society function as independent but interwoven subjects of Polanski's critique within the scene. The description of the city as a haven for inebriates, thieves, and miscreants reflects the city's personality. At the same time, this image reflects the state of Polish society at the time, stressing the societal concerns and obstacles encountered within that metropolitan milieu. While they are distinct issues, they mutually strengthen and shape the film's thematic study and Polanski's indictment of his era's culture.

### **The Dumpster**

Subsequently, the men arrive at a refuse dump, seeking a place to rest. However, their preparations are foiled by the presence of a diligent security guard, who swiftly removes them from the premises. The presence of oak barrels distinguishes the setting in the scene and has a recurrent pattern (Jainkeff, 2011). Such a repetition resembles the repeated elements shown throughout the film, such as the recurring benches in the park, the repetitive windows along the vacant street, and the recurring patterns visible in the cityscape scenes.

As the two individuals are forced to leave the garbage dump, they are subjected to ejection and indelicate blows from the guard's stick, one of which shatters a barrel.

Even the waste dump, in all its filth, is unwilling to welcome them. The sequence represents their ultimate rejection by the city, and the film ends with their departure. The guard's slapstick beating is notable in this case. The humorous and physical confrontation gave the scenario depth and fun. It reinforces the impression that they "do not belong in the city" since practically everyone seems hellbent on getting rid of them, even chasing them from dumpsters.

### **The Trees and the Murder**

In the next long shot, the camera shoots the two men through trees, and the camera tilts down to reveal a murder taking place during the daytime in the foreground by the river. Subsequently, the camera turned right to capture the escape of the murderer. The shot underscores Polanski's adeptness in scene and shot management and his impeccable selection of locations. It is a brilliant and precise choice that encapsulates the culmination of the two men's experiences within the city, serving as a final characterization of the urban environment.

In the last sequence, the two men return to the sea in the early "magic" hour. They come across a youngster on the beach, absorbed in play as he builds sand towers with a bucket. The youngster dominates the left side of the frame in this long shot, while the two men enter from the right, with the remainder of the frame taken by these symbolic "towers." Surprisingly, it is the only case in which the two men are not subjected to expulsion by the townspeople, showing that it is only in leaving that they find relief from discrimination and expulsion. The visual tale represented by the boy's sand crafts is profoundly symbolic of hope. The scene seeks to illustrate that, amid the harsh city, another level of optimism exists.

### **The Film and Polanski's Style**

When it comes to film language, Polanski's style is precise. The combination of long shots and medium shots not only shows the interaction and activities fluently but also conveys the feeling of loneliness in his film, which makes his film both surrealistic and absurd. His framing, while appearing natural and casual, is meticulously structured. The meticulous structure is evident in scenes like the mirror-breaking fight, where the shot extends from a close-up to a medium shot, and the transition shots have well-organized composition and graphics.

Polanski's choices of shooting locations are notably simple. They often feature repetitive elements such as benches in a transition shot, windows of buildings, black and white grids on walls, oak barrels, and more. Thus, such an aspect of his cinematography evokes parallels

with specific still photographs of Sebastião Salgado, particularly those depicting ascending levels of laborers. Furthermore, Polanski's aptitude for consistently selecting locations provides ample opportunities for character development and varying heights in their activities. The notion of the "island" as a thematic element in his film is a masterpiece. For instance, during a scene where a troublemaker commits a cruel act towards a cat, others gather around a chair adorned with apples, and even the wardrobe itself becomes an "island" for activities, such as the two men sharing a meal of fish.

Regarding camera angles, Polanski favors high and low angles with a tilted camera, eschewing traditional horizontal angles. The creative approach enhances the impact on the audience, providing a unique perspective. Notably, the lighting in the film is predominantly soft, particularly when illuminating the characters' faces, adding a gentle and evocative quality to the visuals. Polanski's distinctive film language can be encapsulated in a few descriptive words: structured, lonely, and surreal. Such elements collectively contribute to the distinctive style of his work.

### **Later Work and Final Thoughts**

In the years after that, Roman Polanski directed a highly renowned cinematic classic, "The Pianist," a heartbreaking and gripping work that analyzes the tragic circumstances surrounding the Holocaust and Jewish persecution. It is critical to recognize that the picture exists in a larger cinematic environment, including notable titles like "La Vita è Bella" by Roberto Benigni and "Schindler's List" by Steven Spielberg. The films collectively transcend the sphere of cinema, skillfully delivering severe and profound lessons about the heinous moments of human history typified by racial discrimination, bigotry, and persecution.

Such films achieve more than shedding light on history's darkest moments by broadening their storytelling to include these broader thematic elements. They also communicate tremendous messages of hope, demonstrating the human soul's invincible strength in facing the most daunting challenges. Polanski's work, like the others mentioned, stands as a monument to the human capacity for resilience and the ability to find hope even in the most hopeless of circumstances.

## **Reference**

Jainkeff. (2011, 09 July). 'Two Men and a Wardrobe' ('Dwaj ludzie z szafą', 1958) by Roman Polański [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/X8g3fqchasU>