

IS IT REALLY HAPPENING?

The Postmodern Horror of Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*

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Abstract: This article examines Roman Polanski's film *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) as both a symptom and a manifestation of the cultural and political upheavals of the late 1960s. Released in an era marked by rampant conspiracy theories and a growing opposition to established hierarchies and institutions, the film constitutes a prime example of "paranoid horror." Reflecting the collapse of commonly accepted metanarratives such as religion and the American nuclear family, *Rosemary's Baby* adamantly rejects the restoration of order that earlier horror movies would have provided. In fact, by questioning ontological reliability, it epitomizes the shift from the classical to the postmodern horror narrative.

Keywords: horror film, Hollywood cinema, postmodernism, paranoia, metanarratives

"This is the age of connections, links, secret relationships."

Don DeLillo, *Running Dog*

The turn to the mundane, everyday world redefined the horror genre in the 1960s. Since Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Robin Wood notes, "Hollywood cinema has implicitly recognized Horror as both American and familial" (*Hollywood* 87). Culminating in suburban versions of the genre such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and *Halloween* (1978), the postmodern horror films of the 1960s and 1970s located the threat in ordinary, everyday environments. Hollywood began to focus on monsters that emerged from within a society marked by a general sense of insecurity. The narrative goal of these films went beyond protecting society from the monster, since the monster had in fact become "an emblem of the upheaval in bourgeois civilization itself" (Sharrett 282). Rather, fighting evil meant fighting the very institutions and traditions that allowed it to exist.

Roman Polanski's film *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), a "case study of paranoia" (Hogan 80), epitomizes the shift from the classical to the postmodern horror narrative. "Instilled with indeterminate menace" from its opening shots (Newton 36), the movie begins with a young, childless married couple, Rosemary (Mia Farrow) and Guy Woodhouse (John Cassavetes), viewing a seventh-floor rental in an Upper West Side apartment building that, several decades earlier, was said to have been inhabited by cannibals and witches. Despite the building's sinister history, Rosemary initially loves the spacious apartment. As soon as they move in, she decorates it tastefully according to the latest fashions. At first, she is untroubled by their strange neighbors, Roman and Minnie Castevet, and the events surrounding them. Everything seems to be turning out fine:

Guy has secured the job he wants and Rosemary finally gets pregnant. But as her pregnancy brings her to the brink of physical and mental exhaustion, Rosemary starts asking herself some uncomfortable questions: was her terrible dream of being raped by Satan more than just a dream? And what is she to make of the stories of the coven which supposedly existed in her building? Nightmares and dark fears haunt the young woman. Is Rosemary gradually losing her grasp on reality or is she indeed the victim of a sinister Satanic cult?

Rosemary's Baby, based on Ira Levin's 1967 novel of the same name, subverts our assumptions about ontological reliability and objective truth, firmly eschewing the restoration of order towards which earlier horror films tend to gravitate. As a postmodern horror narrative, *Rosemary's Baby* is informed by social alienation and the erosion of a universally accepted religious and moral framework (see Wells 6–7). It also embraces a notion of diminished individual autonomy that was ubiquitous in postwar American rhetoric.¹ By weaving a narrative that shrewdly exploits the tension arising from the presentation of multiple, conflicting versions of events, the film introduces viewers to an alternative world of the fantastic—one that lies beneath the surface of everyday life. In the postmodern underworld that Rosemary enters, belief in God is replaced by belief in the devil, and supernatural notions eclipse rational explanations. Gone is the comforting mode of the traditional horror narrative, in which good ultimately triumphs: *Rosemary's Baby* ends with the arrival of the devil's child, whose power will be "stronger than stronger," as Roman Castevet, the head of the neighborhood conspiracy, prophesies. The reign of the Antichrist "shall last longer than longer," for he is born to "overthrow the mighty and lay waste their temples." In the closing scene, we witness Rosemary giving in to her maternal instincts, gently rocking the cradle that holds the baby whose demonic eyes had left her in utter

disbelief only moments before. Simultaneously, we, the audience, are asked to suspend our disbelief in what is as fantastic as it is unnerving. By accepting the inexplicable as an intrinsic aspect of the world, *Rosemary's Baby* undermines faith in reason and science; it celebrates the chaotic and the irrational.

While psychoanalytical approaches to horror cinema, favored by Wood and others, have proven insightful, it is equally important to acknowledge the genre's sensitivity to public events and social and political issues. The horror genre also reflects, as Waller argues, "our changing fashions and tastes, our shifting fears and aspirations, and our sense of what constitutes the prime moral, social, and political problems facing us individually and collectively" ("Introduction" 12). American horror films of the post-Kennedy era, like other genres at the time, were not only reflections and illuminations of the aftermath of the Vietnam War and national crises such as Watergate and the economic downturn. They also commented on civil rights matters, including minority rights and women's rights and abortion. One film that supports this political reading of the horror narrative is George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), a low-budget production shot in eerie black-and-white about undead corpses attacking a group of people barricaded in a Pennsylvania farmhouse. The film's final sequence, in which white men prepare a bonfire to burn the zombie bodies, recalls not only images of white supremacist violence, but also televised depictions of massacres in Vietnam (Pinedo 98–99). Other movies from the New Hollywood era addressed these issues through allegorical, neo-noir portrayals of alienated, disoriented characters, highlighting how American society was divided along generational, racial, and ideological fault lines.²

In what follows, I examine *Rosemary's Baby*—a milestone of New Hollywood—as a postmodern



Theatre advertisement for *Rosemary's Baby*, 1968.

reflection of the cultural and political transformations of the late 1960s. Released in an era marked by rampant conspiracy theories and a growing rejection of established hierarchies and institutions, Polanski's film can be understood as an example of what Andrew Tudor calls "paranoid horror," in which "the disordering unknown [is] often located deep within the commonplace and the threat [is] much more proximate" (215). *Rosemary's Baby*, the ultimate "reverse image of the American Dream" (Williams 99), powerfully conveys the idea that evil can no longer be conquered—it must be accepted.

Questioning All Assumptions: Paranoia in Postmodern America

Horror stories typically derive their suspense from the clash of apparent binaries. By juxtaposing good and evil, day and night, the living and the dead, sanity and insanity, and the conscious and the unconscious, these binary narratives establish parallel worlds. Their central theme is the intrusion of the harmful, if not deadly forces of the underworld into a mundane, everyday realm of control, oppression, and constraint. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1887), one of the classic texts of the genre, in which the main disparity is cultural, this double-world structure is particularly prominent. Jonathan Harker's journey to occidental Transylvania is a journey from oppressive Victorian England, a society of reason and rationality, into the sphere of superstition and imagination—into "some sort of imaginative whirlpool" (Stoker 8).

One of the key features of traditional horror stories is the disruption of the natural order by a formidable monster. In classic Hollywood horror films such as *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Dracula* (1931), the threat of the world collapsing into ultimate chaos was generally averted. According to the narrative logic of these "secure horror" narratives (Tudor 215), the monster is not here to stay; it is to be defeated by the rational forces of Western society and its heroes (such as *Dracula's* van Helsing), who are called upon to make the world safe again. In this way, secure horror sets up a struggle between good and evil, the outcome of which must be the restoration of the natural order. In the 1960s, secure horror gradually gave way to a new paradigm: the paranoid, i.e., postmodern horror narrative. This was a logical progression since secure horror can only function "in the context of a culture and a social world which is confident of its own capacity to survive all manner of threats" (Tudor 220). America had lost that confidence; it had become a culture dominated by ambiguity.

Horror cinema reflects societal anxieties more than any other film genre. In the early stages of the Cold War, the monsters of American horror films were most likely to arrive from outer space or from some exotic place alien to civilized society. The political implications of these invasion narratives were hard to miss.³ In the era of McCarthyism and the Red Scare, the fear of monsters from without expressed the collective fear of Soviet aggression. Films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) celebrated the societal consensus that potential dangers could be averted through unified action (see Biskind 103). In most of these films, nothing less than the future of the country was at stake, with the plot revolving around the need to restore American institutions and authorities. As Tudor notes, the invasion narrative assumes that only the state possesses the military and scientific resources and technical knowledge necessary to defend humanity (220). In the 1950s, the lines between good and evil and friend and foe were still clearly drawn. Thus, the warning "Watch the skies!", which concluded *The Thing (from Another World)* (1951), referred not only to the imagined threat of alien invasion. It also pointed to the duty of the American public to keep their eyes open for possible signs of Soviet aggression. In the 1960s, the threat of an intensifying Cold War was accompanied by a growing fear of an invisible enemy within. The assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963 sparked a paranoid fear of subjugation by uncontrollable forces, with conspiracy theories permeating American society, politics, and popular culture (Hertzberg and McClelland 52). In addition, the Vietnam War, which escalated in 1965 when the US Air Force began its bombing campaign against North Vietnam, had a profound effect on the national consciousness. As Wood points out, the violence in Vietnam, broadcast on the nightly news, not only destabilized the political system, but also affected attitudes toward authority:

The questioning of authority spread logically to a questioning of the entire social structure that validated it, and ultimately to patriarchy itself: social institutions, the family, the symbolic figures of the Father in all its manifestations, the Father interiorized as superego. The possibility suddenly opened up that the whole world might have to be recreated. (*Hollywood* 50)

Postwar suburban affluence had obscured the fact that poverty, racism, and inequality were destabilizing American society. By the end of the 1960s, the suppressed racial, gender, and generational conflicts that had been masked by conformity and economic success finally came to the fore. Societal tensions erupted in mass demonstrations and urban riots in 1968, including violent clashes between police and anti-war protesters during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.⁴ The assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy further traumatized the nation. The headlines brought to suburban family homes by newspapers and television “seemed to be news from another planet” (Cheever 64), as the protagonist of John Cheever’s novel *Bullet Park* (1967) observes one morning as he reads the *New York Times*. What he finds is news of sudden outbreaks of violence and disasters of biblical proportions, both natural and man-made:

A maniac with a carbine had massacred seventeen people in a park in Dallas, including an archbishop who had been walking his dog. The usual wars were raging. The Musicians’ Union, Airplane Pilots, Firemen, Circus Performers and Deckhands were all threatening to strike. The White House secretary denied rumors of a fistfight between the President, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense. Drought threatened the wheat crop. An unidentified flying object had been seen in Ohio. A hairdresser in Linden, New Jersey,

had shot his wife, his four children, his poodle and himself. A three-day smog in Chicago had paralyzed most transportation and closed many businesses. (Cheever 64)

When *Night of the Living Dead* and *Rosemary’s Baby* were released in 1968,⁵ American society had already experienced several waves of public paranoia. Since the early 1950s, with McCarthy’s hunt for Communists and the government’s nuclear tests, politicians and the media had put the population in a constant state of fear. It seemed as if the atomic bomb could explode at any moment; the “red danger” was omnipresent. The conspiracy theories flourishing after Kennedy’s death fueled Americans’ belief that their lives were subject to an “invisible government,” as David Wise and Thomas Ross suggested in 1964. This “interlocking, hidden machinery” was alleged to determine the course of US policy (1–2).

As people became less inclined to believe in the official version of history and more suspicious of politics and the mass media, paranoia also began to permeate American popular culture. Indeed, according to Wells, the “suppression and revelation of knowledge of importance” form the subtext of many political and horror movies of the late 1960s and 1970s (86). Their postmodern narrative of conspiracy is based on an uncertainty about the true version of historical events—the manipulation of truth by the media, the question of whether it is actually possible to determine an accurate version of events, or whether we can even speak coherently about the world. *Rosemary’s Baby* foreshadows the postmodern underworld of films like *The Conversation*, *Chinatown*, and *The Parallax View* (all 1974). However, while the conspiracy in Polanski’s *Chinatown* is politically motivated, *Rosemary’s Baby* locates it within the family, bringing the principles of the political intrigue narrative into the private sphere.

This domestic turn should come as no surprise since the family is indeed the “true milieu” of American horror films (Wood, *Hollywood* 85), even more so since the late 1960s. As Wells notes, the horror narratives of the “post-*Psycho* era” have witnessed “the systematic collapse of assurance in, and promotion of, the family and conservative family values” (85). As divorce rates soared and single-parent households grew increasingly common, it became clear that the postwar model of the nuclear family, with a breadwinner father and homemaker mother, was in part an image constructed by popular 1950s TV sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. By 1971, just three years after the release of *Rosemary’s Baby*, one third of the country’s college-age population expressed the belief that the institution of marriage was outdated. Ever fewer young people considered values such as religion, patriotism, and “living a clean, moral life” important (Schulman 16). The family, once a refuge from social upheaval, began to embody the increasing disintegration of American society.

The shift in societal attitudes toward the family is clearly reflected in the horror films of the era. The idea that the institution of the American family has become the primary source of violence is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974),⁶ which links its horror to a critique of the socioeconomic failures of the American Dream. The story follows a group of teenagers looking for relatives in the middle of Texan nowhere—a setting that illustrates the turn to mundane settings in postmodern horror. They fall victim to a murderous family who used to work in the area’s old slaughterhouse, an environment that evokes a familiar trope in American fiction. Since Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), slaughterhouses—especially those in Chicago, the center of the meat-packing industry at the turn of the twentieth century—have haunted the American popular imagination as spaces that point to the grim aspects

of the American Dream. Having lost their jobs due to the industrialization of the sector, the slaughterhouse family now plies their bloody trade at home. In their mad engagement in cannibalistic activities, these figures of domesticity represent a perverse image of the traditional American family. The internal structure of this slaughterhouse family is based on violence, but also on a lack of patriarchal authority, embodied by the decaying corpse of Grandpa. The demanding task of hunting down the victims and cutting them up with a roaring chain saw is reserved for one of his “boys.”

Violating Boundaries: Reflections on Postmodern Horror

Informed by an overwhelming sense of paranoia, postmodern horror departs from the traditional pattern of order-disorder-order by violating the boundaries between worlds,⁷ essentially revealing the juxtaposition of good and evil, of us and the monster, to be an illusion. The postmodern monster, then, does not invade our world—it is already within us, and there can be no protection from its attack. Consequently, the world of postmodern horror is “unstable” and “open-ended,” as Pinedo notes: “categories collapse, violence constitutes everyday life, and the irrational prevails” (113). *Night of the Living Dead* exemplifies the shift toward disturbingly familiar settings for the unfolding horror. The characters are average people, and the terrible events take place in an unassuming Pennsylvania cemetery and farmhouse—an ordinary world transformed “into a landscape of unrelenting horror” (Dillard 20). In the film’s most horrific scenes, a young girl first eats parts of her father’s body before brutally murdering her mother. A turning point in the history of the horror film, this sequence made it clear that the threat to society was no longer external but lay at the heart of society itself. More recently, in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, a variation of this trend

can be seen in a number of horror films preoccupied with sleepwalking, nocturnal paralysis, and other sleep disorders. Movies such as *Sinister* (2012), *The Conjuring* (2013), and *Dead Awake* (2016), writes Dawn Keetley, feature human monsters who are “versions of ourselves wrenched free from reason and volition” (1017).

Before embarking on our analysis of *Rosemary's Baby*, let us recall Pinedo's poetics of postmodern horror cinema. According to Pinedo's working definition, the genre “operates on the principles of disruption, transgression, undecidability, and uncertainty” (91). First, it violently disrupts the familiar fabric of everyday existence. Second, it boldly transgresses established boundaries and challenges societal norms. Third, it casts doubt on the very nature of rationality, questioning the validity of logical thought. Fourth, postmodern horror leaves the audience in a state of unresolved tension, refusing to provide neat narrative conclusions. Finally, it creates a confined realm of fear in which protagonists and audience are bound by the same unsettling experience of terror (Pinedo 90–91). While the following discussion of *Rosemary's Baby* is certainly guided by Pinedo's valuable framework, I wish to highlight the film as an early but prime example of the dominance of ontological questions in postmodern horror.⁸ From its opening shots, the film's exploration of the horror inherent in the ordinary is reflected in a specific form of the architectural uncanny.⁹ Located in the Dakota Building (1880–84), an iconic Upper West Side behemoth referred to in the film as “The Bramford,” the young couple's new home is the site where supernatural horror, domestic melodrama, and Victorian aesthetics intersect. The building itself carries a rather sinister history: as their friend Hutch informs them, this “repressed Gothic house” (Williams 101) was once inhabited by witches and has witnessed several mysterious deaths. Perhaps even more unsettling is the apartment's architecture. With its “dilating rooms and womblike corridors,” (34) as Virginia

Wright Wexman notes, it takes on qualities reminiscent of the labyrinthine castles often associated with horror stories.¹⁰ From the moment Guy and Rosemary enter with their real estate agent, the apartment exudes an eerie atmosphere. Both the film's frequent shots of half-open doorways and the fact that characters and actions are often only half seen suggest the existence of a hidden reality (Wexman 40). A chest of drawers that has been moved to barricade a closet amplifies this ontological uncertainty. It is in the apartment, of all places, that Rosemary experiences a profound sense of alienation. What should have been a place of refuge and protection becomes for Rosemary a hopeless space of paranoia, where the uncanny has taken root in the very fabric of furniture and wallpaper.

Rosemary's Baby, like many horror movies of the late 1960s and 1970s, can be read as a cinematic response to contemporary social upheaval and the questioning of mainstream American values. The film makes clear that in a paranoid world, the once-trusted institutions no longer offer protection from evil; even friends, neighbors, or family “might prove unpredictably malevolent” (Tudor 221). Most obviously, marriage has lost its 1950s sanctity. In Polanski's perverted version of the nuclear family, the husband is indeed the last person to be trusted. In abusing and oppressing his wife, Guy embodies the familiar that begins to frighten us. Rosemary's profound tragedy stems from her inability to comprehend her husband's sinister intentions. Notably, as “both a product of and widely distributed participant in the anxieties and conflicts of that specific moment” (Valerius 116–17), *Rosemary's Baby* engages with pressing real-world issues in a decidedly postmodern way by implying that the line between historical fact and fictional representation is ultimately unreliable. By rethinking the popular image of John F. Kennedy and constructing a link between the Pope's visit to New York and Rosemary's traumatic “baby night,” *Rosemary's Baby* emphasizes ontological uncertainty

and becomes an example of what Linda Hutcheon has called “historiographic metafiction” (5). Not only does the film suggest that the Pope himself may act as Satan’s emissary, but the embedding of Kennedy in the story carries similar connotations. With its revisionist postmodern impetus, the film rejects the image of Kennedy as a figure of hope; instead, it presents him as both a radical Catholic and, through his association with Roman Castevet, a devil’s advocate. Kennedy appears in Rosemary’s dream as the captain of a yacht headed for a typhoon. When Rosemary asks why her best friend Hutch is not allowed to join them on the cruise, Kennedy replies, “Catholics only. I wish we weren’t bound by these prejudices but unfortunately, we are.”

“Baby Night”: The Violation of the Female Body

A key feature of horror movies is the repressed desire of their characters to escape the mundane world and experience the attractions of the dangerous but more vivid underworld. As Sigmund Freud argued, society constantly feels the need to control people’s desires, to contain them within defined structures. In horror films, these previously repressed forces of ecstasy and disorder return to life and threaten to overwhelm the characters. In a paraphrase of Freud’s ideas, Wood has shown that the monstrous Other represents “what is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self and projected outward in order to be hated and disowned” (“An Introduction” 9). The Apollonian surface of control and order opens up to an abyss of danger, a sphere of the irrational and primal. The horror narrative can thus be seen “as an amalgam of desire and inhibition, fascination and fear” (Pinedo 107). One reason for the appeal of the underworld is its unbridled sexuality, often embodied in the figure of the vampire. This may explain why Mina and Lucy in Stoker’s novel are at-

tracted to Dracula: he allows them sexual experiences that are otherwise repressed in Victorian England. By bringing to the surface what is constantly denied, Dracula channels the dark side of human nature, a sphere whose essence cannot be rationally grasped.

Rosemary’s Baby essentially revolves around a troublesome twist of this constellation. Rather predictably, Polanski’s film juxtaposes the sphere of sexuality with the world of Catholicism. While Rosemary feels increasingly isolated from her own family’s faith because of Guy’s Protestant background, she relives her Catholic upbringing in hallucinatory dreams that allude to her repressed sexuality. In these dreams, Rosemary is repeatedly shown wearing nun-like garb and being scolded by a nun who disapproves of her behavior. More disturbing, however, is the film’s key episode, a surrealistic dream-as-reality sequence typical of postmodern horror cinema (Pinedo 94), in which Rosemary enters the Dionysian underworld and undergoes an “immersion into the dark forces behind Western civilization” (Williams 104). Rosemary, who has been trying to get pregnant for some time, eagerly anticipates an intimate evening with Guy. However, due to the chocolate mousse dessert prepared by Minnie Castevet, she will experience the long-awaited “baby night” in a state of drug-induced unconsciousness. Shortly after Rosemary passes out, a series of disparate, shocking images blur the line between hallucination and reality, leaving the viewer thoroughly disoriented. Rosemary is taken on a fateful journey into the unconscious—a journey that not only liberates sexual desires previously suppressed by Catholic rules, but also perverts those desires in a rape scene. Through shifting camera angles, Polanski intercuts Rosemary’s fantasy with visual and auditory elements that imply that she is dimly aware of being carried into the adjacent apartment where she is then victimized in a Satanic ritual. As Va-

lerius observes, “[h]er dreams register her sensory experience, combine it with memory, emotion and the material of her subconscious, and transform it into fantasy” (123).

We first see Rosemary floating on an ocean raft, her red dress alluding to the sexual encounter to come. Then she appears on a yacht, standing next to John F. Kennedy. Another shot shows her walking naked on deck. When the ship is caught in a storm, an African American helmsman orders Rosemary to “go down below.” Still naked, Rosemary descends a flight of stairs, crossing over into the underworld—the world of the unconscious. In this womb-like space, a coven awaits her, ready to sacrifice her purity in a satanic ceremony. While the members of the coven, including Guy and the Castevets, hum their songs, Rosemary is tied to a mattress and her body is painted with red blood. As Guy approaches Rosemary and begins to penetrate her, her face indicates sexual pleasure—until she regains consciousness, opens her eyes, and realizes that it is not her husband. Guy’s face has changed to that of the devil, his green eyes staring violently at Rosemary, who is terrified but unable to move. When Rosemary wakes up the next morning, she notices that her body is covered with scratches, but refuses to accept her experience as real. Instead, she remembers the nocturnal violence as a dream: “I dreamed someone was raping me. I don’t know, someone inhuman.” Guy informs her that he “didn’t want to miss baby night” and admits to having sex with her: “It was kind of fun in a necrophile way.” Rosemary is appalled, but soon forgives Guy, displacing the horrific events when she discovers that she is pregnant.

After learning of her pregnancy, Rosemary seems to undergo a personality change, as indicated by her new haircut. The extreme pain she endures during most of her pregnancy also suggests a fundamental physical transformation—a

metamorphosis that is at the heart of the paranoid horror narrative (Tudor 99 ff.). She gradually loses weight and acquires a ghostly appearance, accentuated by her unusually pale face. Although she and her friends notice this transformation, her faith in authorities and her husband prevent Rosemary from seeing another doctor. The sadistic Dr. Abraham Sapirstein, a prominent obstetrician recommended by the Castevets, who turns out to be one of the architects of the conspiracy, keeps assuring Rosemary that her pain will soon go away and refuses to prescribe any medication. Instead, he advises her to drink herbal mixtures, which Minnie is eager to prepare. Abusing his dominant position as a figure of trust, Dr. Sapirstein also discourages her from seeking information and outside opinions about pregnancy: “Please don’t read books. And don’t listen to your friends either.”

The violation of the female body by a male villain is, of course, a recurrent theme in horror movies, and *Rosemary’s Baby* is most certainly “a film about men controlling women’s bodies” (Jones 185). After all, Rosemary’s monstrous husband Guy has agreed to a Faustian pact: while he is promised success as an actor, she will give birth to Satan’s son. As a result, her body itself becomes the site of unspeakable horror.¹¹ In the context of the 1960s feminist movement, however, the spectacle of her pregnancy need not be read as a misogynistic commentary on the maternal body, but rather as a rejection of the conservative belief that women should fulfill their role in society as mothers. By undermining the ideal of white, middle-class pregnancy, Valerius argues, the film “contests the essentialist conflation of women with maternity and the paternalistic medical and legal restrictions on women’s access to abortion prior to *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which enforced that conflation in practice” (119).

Rosemary's own conservative attitude toward family and her desire to have a child are expressed in a cynical universe. Caricaturing the conventional notion of the child as a symbol of the future, her demonic child's destiny is to turn the world order upside down, thus symbolizing the disintegration of family structures. In this way, *Rosemary's Baby* explores another recurrent theme of postmodern horror: children have lost their status as figures of innocence and purity. Like everyone else, they are corrupted by society and no longer serve as signs of hope. *Rosemary's Baby* turns the sacred child into the embodiment of evil: as a symbol of the dark side of the American Dream, the Antichrist which Rosemary gives birth to suggests an apocalyptic future. *Rosemary's Baby* thus reflects upon a social reality that troubled the entire nation: children seemed to have become a threat to the social order and the values of the older generation. Above all, Rosemary's child reminds viewers of "the horrifically familiar embodiment of difference" (Sobchack 178). It is the manifestation of the Other that we fear and seek to suppress.

Postmodern Ambiguity: *Rosemary's Baby* and the Absence of Metanarratives

Jean-François Lyotard famously defined the postmodern condition as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). This implies a fundamental skepticism about all-encompassing explanations of the world, especially those with totalitarian tendencies. Among the various grand narratives that have faced considerable challenges since the 1960s, religion stands out as a significant example. It is in this context that *Rosemary's Baby* unfolds its subversive potential. By intertwining the themes of skepticism and religious anxiety, the film presents a poignant examination of the postmodern condition.

As Derry points out, *Rosemary's Baby* was released against a backdrop of societal tensions

surrounding religious faith and disbelief including

the election of a new pope in 1964; the well-publicized notion of "God Is Dead"; the crisis in the Catholic church as so many priests and nuns left the church; the explosion of interest in astrology, horoscopes, and Eastern religion; and the sense in the United States of a special need for a spiritual connection at a time when church attendance had decreased and the country was undergoing social cataclysm. (168–69)

Rosemary's Baby explores the nature of Catholicism and captures the atmosphere of shattered faith prevalent in 1960s America. According to Rosemary's neighbor, Roman Castevet, Catholicism is mere show business, driven by public perception rather than genuine holiness: "No Pope ever visits a city where the newspapers are on strike." His contempt for the Pope is particularly telling in the presence of Rosemary, who was raised Catholic. On several occasions, the film emphasizes the process of secularization and even commodification that has affected the Church. Watching the Pope address a crowded Yankee Stadium, Guy notes striking parallels between this televised speech and ordinary television commercials, further reinforcing the correlation between Catholicism and the realms of entertainment and spectacle.

By emphasizing the ambiguous nature of Catholicism, *Rosemary's Baby* is deeply reflective of a society in which the unconditional belief in God, as a central metanarrative, is being shattered. The film not only alludes to the founding of the Church of Satan in the 1960s, which sparked curiosity about clandestine Satanic cults, but also darkly parodies the birth of Christ by depicting the conception of the Antichrist through an act of violence. This narrative choice challenges the fundamental dichotomy between good and evil. According to Wexman, several

scenes in the film suggest that Polanski deliberately equates orthodox religion with the inhuman rituals of profane sects. As a result, the film “speaks to the ludicrous nature of all religious beliefs, for all religions grant the world an unambiguous meaning that the film wants to deny” (39–40).

The failure of religion in an age of secularization is also evident in other horror films of the period. While in *Night of the Living Dead* a character’s remark that “there’s not much sense in my going to church” reflects society’s increasing disinterest in organized religion (see Dillard 17), William Friedkin’s shocker *The Exorcist* (1973) presents viewers with a more ambiguous stance. Although divine forces are unable to prevent the devil from entering the body of a young girl named Regan, the ancient practice of exorcism proves to be the only effective way to defeat the invading evil and save her. But when the old priest finally begins the exorcism, the devil already has a firm hold on the girl; he can only be defeated by killing the person he possesses. The younger priest sacrifices himself by forcing the demon into his own body. By committing suicide, he kills the demon and becomes a Christ-like martyr. Catholicism proves successful in defeating the intrusion of evil: thanks to the newly won power of religion, the old order can be restored; Regan regains her pre-pubescent innocence, completely unaware of the horrific events her body has played host to. Consequently, the film can be seen as a reactionary response to *Rosemary’s Baby*, which promotes a definite challenge to the world order by turning Christian values on their head. Rosemary accepts the devil’s child as her own—a child born to rule the world, born to “redeem” humanity from Christianity. Given the waning influence of religion, Rosemary lacks the means to defend herself against the onslaught of evil.

As a typical postmodern character, Rosemary operates within an arbitrary interplay of overdetermined signifiers that constantly shift their meanings. The Casteveys initially appear to be “the most wonderful people in the world,” as Terry Gionoffrio, their foster daughter, observes. A former homeless drug addict, she was adopted by the Casteveys two months earlier. If not for them, she would “be dead now,” says Terry: “That’s an absolute fact: dead or in jail.” The Casteveys’ integrity is called into question, however, by Terry’s remark that at first, she thought they wanted to use her for “some kind of sex thing.” In fact, they mean for her to play a crucial role in their coven; faced with the prospect of giving birth to Satan’s son, Terry then commits suicide. Similarly, Terry’s talisman functions as an overdetermined signifier. When Rosemary first sees it on Terry, she exclaims how beautiful it looks. With Terry’s death, however, the good luck charm loses its positive connotation, and Rosemary, instinctively doing the right thing, refuses to wear it when Minnie presents it to her as a gift. After hiding it for some time, she finally decides to put it on despite her initial refusal—and inadvertently nurtures the devil’s child within her. However, Rosemary only realizes that the piece has become a sign of doom when she learns that Dr. Sapirstein has the same pendant.

Time and again, *Rosemary’s Baby* illustrates that, as Pinedo writes, the postmodern horror narrative “operates on the principle of undecidability,” blurring “the boundary between subjective and objective representation by violating the conventional cinematic (lightning, focus, color, music) codes that distinguish them” (94). By constantly confronting the audience with two conflicting interpretations of the same events, Polanski’s film denies the existence of ultimate knowledge until the very end. This uncertainty stems in no small part from the absence of an omniscient narrator. Since the entire story is told from Rosemary’s point of view, the audience

is never presented with any objective clues that might help evaluate the likelihood of a conspiracy. Polanski thus creates a classic example of what Braudy has called “the closed film,” which lures the viewer into a fictional world by means of a “claustrophobic identification of our point of view with that of one character” (48–49). Until the very end, the movie toys with the idea that Rosemary is mad: is everything the viewer sees a figment of Rosemary’s imagination, or is the conspiracy actually real? The conspiracy may well be “a solipsistic delusion with no reality in the world outside her mind” (23), as McHale describes Oedipa Maas’s vision in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), Thomas Pynchon’s paranoia novel. Rosemary herself is horrified by the consequences of each possibility: either she is mentally ill, or her paranoia is legitimate—and she has indeed been raped by the devil. It is this striking ontological ambiguity that distinguishes *Rosemary’s Baby* from traditional narratives. Shifting, in McHale’s terminology, from an epistemological question (“how can I know the world?”) to an ontological one (“what world is this?”),¹² the film becomes a postmodern experiment in storytelling.

By minimizing artificial cinematographic elements and instead using long takes and real-time shots, *Rosemary’s Baby* effectively enhances the film’s ability to immerse the audience and facilitate their willing suspension of disbelief. In contrast to the traditional horror narrative, which locates the monstrous in remote and often bizarre places (the isolated island in *King Kong*, for example, or the Eastern European ambience in *Dracula*), *Rosemary’s Baby* is set in a modern urban environment. In an homage to Hitchcock’s opening of *Psycho*, the film begins with a moving camera over New York. This camera, however, does not descend into the city; the perspective remains a bird’s eye view, suggesting the existence of an invisible power that controls the lives of the characters. The movie’s nat-

uralistic *mise-en-scène* contributes to the suspension of disbelief. Only gradually does the film open up the possibility of an unfamiliar world existing beneath reality as we know it. The illusion of reality—the verisimilitude—that Polanski seeks to establish at the beginning of *Rosemary’s Baby* is intended to support the audience’s suspension of disbelief and to create the impression that things have never been “so clearly seen, so concrete, so ‘real’” (Kinder and Houston, “*Rosemary’s Baby*” 18).

Postmodern occult films such as *The Exorcist* are based on what Clover has characterized as a “split between two competing systems of explanation—White Science and Black Magic” (66). While the system of White Science is typically represented by doctors resorting to “surgery, drugs, psychotherapy, and other forms of hegemonic science,” the world of Black Magic is dominated by practices like “satanism, voodoo, spiritualism, and folk variants of Roman Catholicism” (66). The plot of the occult film, therefore, revolves around persuading rational characters—and, by extension, the audience—that Black Magic is both necessary and superior (67). As the parapsychologist in *The Haunting* (1963) tells us, “The supernatural is something that isn’t supposed to happen, but it does.” Suspension of disbelief in the inexplicable is central to *The Exorcist*, which ultimately rejects the system of rationality as a metanarrative. The entire first half of the movie is devoted to finding scientific explanations for Regan’s alarming behavior. Although the possessed girl is subjected to harrowing medical examinations, it is impossible to find any clue to her illness; modern treatments and machines of utterly futuristic design, “the most sophisticated forms of White Science” (Clover 97), prove ominously ineffective. To liberate Regan from her torment, the narrative requires a rejection of all the rational assumptions on which the enlightened Western world is built; it means, to use Clover’s phrase, accepting the superiority of Black Magic over advanced White

Science. By the time medical and psychological interpretations are rejected “in favor of a phenomenological devil” (Kinder and Houston, “Seeing” 47), however, the demon’s power has become so overwhelming that it is capable of destroying even the priests who attempt to exorcise it.

It is this delegitimization of scientific discourse that *Rosemary’s Baby* also orchestrates. In the postmodern logic of the film, Rosemary could have avoided her fate if she had been willing to question what Pinedo calls “the validity of rationality” from the very beginning (95). In postmodern horror movies, the only characters who can effectively defend themselves against the onslaught of the supernatural are those who resist the notion that the world operates according to rational principles. But by the time Rosemary, with the help of the book on witchcraft she gets from Hutch, finally suspends her disbelief in *Black Magic*, the unthinkable is well underway.

As Rosemary uncovers more and more plausible evidence of the coven’s existence, the audience must decide whether to believe that the conspiracy is “really happening.” Polanski succeeds in confusing the audience about which version of events to believe. Visual images of imprisonment, such as Rosemary’s gray and white striped dress, the phone booth from which Rosemary makes an appointment with Dr. Hill, and the shadows of the blinds in the doctor’s office, reinforce the notion that she is entrapped. Even at the beginning of the film, when Guy and Rosemary first visit the apartment, the camera’s focus on the sliding elevator doors hints at this confinement. And yet it is not clear whether the trap exists only in her mind, for in Rosemary’s world “the psychological and the factual are terrifyingly indistinguishable” (Wexman 36). Ultimately, however, the narrative of *Rosemary’s Baby* is designed to convince us to accept the supernatural interpretation. As Wells points out,

we, as viewers, are compelled to adopt Rosemary’s perspective because “otherwise our own sanity, sense of perspective, and rational order are also questioned and eradicated” (83). Therefore, as Rosemary adjusts to the idea of a satanic plot against her, the audience must also suspend their disbelief in the existence of an alternative universe—a world where the rationally impossible becomes possible.

Conclusion

In its ultimate surrender to an irrepressible evil—a power that cannot be destroyed by the forces of the good—*Rosemary’s Baby* departs from classical horror narratives, which typically conclude with the death of the vampire or the destruction of the monster. The film’s postmodernism comes to the fore in its final moments, where the very essence of family and motherhood is rendered utterly absurd. As she continues to hear infant cries in the building, despite having been told that her baby was stillborn, Rosemary is determined to get to the bottom of things. Her paranoia turns out to be justified. Opening the barricaded door that connects the Woodhouse and Castevets apartments, she ventures into the underworld, “leaving home for a Satanic Wonderland,” as Lucy Fischer aptly puts it (454).¹³ There she encounters the members of the coven, who inform her that the devil is not a figment of her imagination, but that “he really exists”—and that he has chosen her to bear his son. Terrified, but having crossed the point of no return, Rosemary ends up accepting her maternal responsibilities and embracing the baby as her own, no matter how gruesome “its eyes” may be. In a perverse twist, the movie thus establishes an alternative image of the Holy Family. Violated by the devil, Rosemary embodies a distorted version of the Immaculate Conception.

Rosemary's giving birth to the devil's child makes a return to the old order impossible. It is precisely this child's destiny to destroy Christianity, thereby creating a "new world order" that turns the universe as we know it upside down. While the structure of the classical horror film is still intact in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*—i.e., society succeeds in defeating evil—*Rosemary's Baby* embraces the sense of continuous disruption typical of postmodern fiction. Unlike earlier films about witchcraft (e.g., *The City of the Dead* [1960], *Witchcraft* [1964], and *The Kiss of the Vampire* [1964]), *Rosemary's Baby* does not restore the old spiritual order in general or domestic harmony. Instead, it accepts the power of the cult.

In a universe ruled by the music of chance, there is a tendency to project meaning by creating conspiracies. The possibility that some hidden structure exists beneath the chaos can provide comfort: the narrative of conspiracy, after all, is one of reliability. In *Rosemary's Baby*, the existence of Satan paradoxically conveys a sense of hope because it implicitly invokes a God who opposes evil forces. When Rosemary finally accepts the devil's child as her own, she also accepts the advent of a new era that replaces the surface world of reason with an underworld of Black Magic. As a supernatural explanation for the inexplicable, the devil serves as an unequivocal answer to the ontological questions raised by the film. His incarnation not only reverses traditional values. It also provides a new "grand narrative"—and thus compensates for postmodern uncertainty.

Notes

1. For a discussion of this postwar notion of conspiracy, see Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, 1–6. See also Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, who argues that the questioning of concepts such as autonomy, certainty, and authority is characteristic of postmodernism's "interrogative stance" (57).

2. An insightful account of New Hollywood's social preoccupation is given by Lev, *American Films of the 70s*, 55–61.

3. The term "invasion narrative" is used by Tudor in *Monsters and Mad Scientists*. Tudor writes that "horror movies typically depend upon a very direct embodiment of the classic order–disorder–order sequence. . . . [A] monstrous threat is introduced into a stable situation; the monster rampages in the face of attempts to combat it; the monster is (perhaps) destroyed and order (perhaps) restored" (81). Tudor then defines "three fundamental horror movie-narratives," one of which is the invasion narrative, in which the very existence of society is threatened by a monster from beyond.

4. For a discussion of the impact of urban revolts in the Sixties, see Levy, *The Great Uprising*.

5. According to Waller, the horror cinema of the late 1960s represents a distinct departure from 1950s horror ("Introduction" 2). Jancovich, however, denies such a break and regards the 1950s "not as a static period, but as a process during which the central features of post-1960s horror developed and established themselves" (4). Rather, Jancovich emphasizes a thematic shift within 1950s horror "away from a reliance upon gothic horror and towards a preoccupation with the modern world." The threats in these films "are associated with the processes of social development and modernisation" (2).

6. Williams regards the very form of the horror genre as having "an intrinsic relationship with family situations." Based on Freud's assumption that "vulnerable children" often acquire feelings of paranoia and threat "in early family life," Williams suggests that the depiction of dysfunctional family structures lies at the core of many horror films (17–18). Williams argues that even the Universal horror films of the 1930s "attempted to externalize a horror that really originated from within the family" (30).

7. According to McHale's often-quoted definition, the plurality of worlds is the dominant feature of

postmodern fiction. See McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*.

8. My reading is based on McHale (*Postmodernist Fiction*), who argues that the shift from modernist to postmodernist fiction is one from epistemological to ontological inquiry.

9. For a discussion of elements of the uncanny in *Rosemary's Baby*, see Schlepfer. For an in-depth exploration of the built environment through notions of the uncanny, see Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, particularly his discussion of "unhomely houses" (17–44).

10. Cf. also Sharon Marcus's reading of the Bramford in Levin's novel: "The Bramford explicitly represents the antithesis of modernist architecture, with its combination of Victorian and Gothic styles and an interior that suggests the labyrinthine, the invisible, the overstuffed, and the slightly decayed" ("Placing *Rosemary's Baby*" 127).

11. The female body is often turned into a site of horror in postmodern horror cinema. Perhaps most (in)famously, William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) explores this theme in a rather graphic and disturbing way, confounding audiences by zooming in on the torment of a twelve-year-old girl who may be possessed by an evil spirit (or suffering from a neurological disorder). It can be argued that societal ills manifest themselves in the girl's affliction.

12. This shift is central to McHale's argument in *Postmodernist Fiction*.

13. As Fischer argues, "[i]n journeying to the Castevets' suite, Rosemary links woman's conscious and unconscious pregnancies, her ecstatic and despondent views, modern and ancient medical practices, scientific and mystical beliefs, realistic and supernatural portrayals" (454).

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