

How to find a great apartment in new york: rosemary's baby as urban horror



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The horror genre is one of the most established genres in film history. One of the first movies was Thomas Edison's Frankenstein which featured a Frankenstein creature that was decidedly different than the iconic Frankenstein played by Boris Karloff. Many of the early silent films were classics in the horror genre including Nosferatu and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. In this paper, I will discuss the horror genre and use the 1968 Roman Polanski movie Rosemary's Baby as a case study.

The Horror Genre

Horror is one of the most popular genres in motion pictures. In the early days, most horror movies were based on the Gothic and Romantic novels of the 19th century including Dracula and Frankenstein. Since the silent movie phase, horror has remained a steady draw with several subgenres rising and falling depending on the dominant societal anxieties. In short, horror movies depict the most dominant terrors in a metaphorical manner in order to allow the audience to deal with their fears. " At their most effective, horror films will fuse elements of realism and terror in a balance so delicate it can be easily, and irreversibly, upset by the simplest error in judgment by the filmmakers" (Mohsen).

Many academics and writers including Douglas Cowan have argued for " the importance of horror in revealing the sociophobics of the viewers" (Hong 1). In the 1930s, the three major horror movies from Universal depicted a vaguely Eastern European milieu full of werewolves, vampires and mad scientists who were willing to put cadavers together in order to create life. In Frankenstein, Mary Shelly's Romantic Gothic novel was transformed into a

warning against the dangers of science run amok. These movies came at a time when Americans were reading newspapers about the German war machine and its ambitions to overtake Europe while struggling through the Great Depression. Americans wanted financial security and international security. As the decade progressed, Americans wanted to stay out of a European war that was beginning in Czechoslovakia but threatening Poland. By depicting Europe as a place full of pitchfork wielding mobs with torches and dissipated nobles who drank blood, the horror movies were putting the geopolitical scene into a metaphorical context.

In the 1950s, most of the horror movies emphasized both Cold War paranoia and post-nuclear fears. This was the era of the giant monsters like Godzilla and the giant ants from the movie Them! The late 1960s and early 1970s managed to depict fears of counterculture with movies where something was wrong with the children. The Exorcist portrayed demonic possession as the culmination of a single mother unable to deal with her newly aggressive daughter. The happy ending involves two representatives of the patriarchy in the forms of Catholic priests coming over to yell at the girl in order to get the demon out of her.

The 1980s movies reflected an emerging conservatism where teenagers were killed for drinking and having sex. Conformity became one of the major forces in these movies, particularly in the Nightmare on Elm Street movies where the teenagers are living in idyllic suburban environments, but afraid to fall asleep lest their dreams reveal the murderous intent of their environment. As the movies progress the teenagers resemble their

overworked parents by doing all they can to stay awake, knowing that at any moment they will fail to fall out of the artificial environment.

In Egypt, the polarization of society was also a subtext in horror movies.

Anyab was a movie that outright stated that “vampires” represent the more unscrupulous individuals in our society, those who greedily feed off of the weak for a quick reward” (Mohsen). The vampire in the movie keeps looking at the camera and there is an unintentional comedy with the actor trying to speak through plastic vampire teeth.

In the wake of 9/11 many horror movies took on a geopolitical tone. Hostel commented on the apparent affection for torture that seemed to become the standard operating procedure of American armed forces. Cloverfield brought back the rampaging giant monster trope but depicted the rampage from the perspective of New Yorkers with video cameras who need to get through the city as buildings are falling around them.

These are generalized examples of the ways that horror movies depict the most prominent fears and tensions of their respective time periods. It should also be noted that these movies are the successful movies from their eras and they do not necessarily reflect the total outcome of the eras. There were other anxieties and fears that also managed to get into the zeitgeist.

Rosemary's Baby - The Basics

Rosemary's Baby is a classic 1968 horror movie starring Mia Farrow as a pregnant woman living in a New York apartment with her husband, with some very odd neighbors. Mostly, it is a contribution to the “something is

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wrong with the children” genre, but it also brings up fears of neighbors and strange cults. Directed by Roman Polanski based on a novel by Ira Levin, it depicts a couple who moves into an apartment building on the Upper West Side of New York. Rosemary, the pregnant wife, is constantly seeing signs that something is wrong with her neighbors. People die mysteriously around her and the closer she gets to term, the more she is convinced that her neighbors are involved in a sinister cult that is prepared to sacrifice her baby. The movie implies that the events are taking place in her head. After she gives birth, she is told that the child was stillbirth only to learn that her neighbors have taken the baby into their satanic cult. The last scene is a mixture of comedy and horror as the elderly neighbors chant “ Hail Satan” and Rosemary discovers that she was impregnated by Satan, having delivered a baby complete with horns and hooves. In the final moment of the movie, Rosemary accepts her place as the mother of Satan’s child. “ Inherent in the new Hollywood declaration was the profound suggestion that good, in some fashion was enabling evil” (Havis 52)

The Ira Levin novel had been offered originally to Alfred Hitchcock who declined the movie rights, leaving William Castle to obtain them for \$150,000. William Castle was more inclined to make low budget horror movies and since Levin’s book was a bestseller with a great deal of buzz, Castle enlisted Robert Evans - who was the vice president of Paramount - to find a director. Enter Roman Polanski. Roman Polanski is today notorious for fleeing America in order to escape from going to prison for raping a 13 year old girl and continuing his career from France. Ironically Roman Polanski was considered a feminist filmmaker in the 1960s. His movie Repulsion was heavily based on <https://assignbuster.com/how-to-find-a-great-apartment-in-new-york-rosemarys-baby-as-urban-horror/>

a woman being pushed around by the patriarchal culture. Roman Polanski brings more angst into the narrative which does not reveal whether Rosemary “ is losing her rational faculties or she has fallen into the clutches of a powerful satanic cult” (Havis 52). The movie constantly uses the tensions between these alternate viewpoints to push the viewer into places of anxiety. Even though Polanski reveals early that the neighbors are up to no good, the events could still be taking place in Rosemary’s head.

If Rosemary is right about the coven next door, then she is being subjected to evil rituals and is in very great danger. If Rosemary is wrong, then everyone around her is in danger due to the fact that she is mentally unhinged. As she begins to lose trust in her neighbors and close relations, she starts actively trying to flee and turn everyone away. By the end of the movie, Rosemary is crashing a baby shower with a kitchen knife.

The movie would spark a moral uproar as various organizations sought to censor it. The National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures criticized the movie for depicting Christian ritual in a perverse manner. Britain’s Board of Film Censors ordered a deletion of the scene where Rosemary is raped by Satan. Later critics would speak of the film as being cursed as Roman Polanski’s wife would be murdered by the Manson family and John Lennon would be killed near the Dakota which served as the exterior set for the movie. These tragic incidents are coincidences and many directors and movie sets have experienced similar tragic events; however, the legendary nature of the tragedies presents a testament to the discomfort that the movie invoked in audiences.

Characters

Mia Farrow portrays Rosemary Woodhouse as an innocent and unusually naïve woman who is slowly realizing that she is being manipulated by the neighbors. Even though Farrow spends a great deal of time reacting to the forces around her, she conveys a mounting sense of panic that allows her to be a little more than the audience surrogate.

Beyond Rosemary, her husband Guy is an actor who is lacking in theatrical credits. “ John Cassevetes renders Guy with far less purity than Rosemary” (Havis 53), even at the beginning before he signs on for the cult in order to make it as a professional actor. One of the underlying tensions of the movie is the difference between the couples’ prospects and their current standing. They are living in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in New York City in one of the most classical apartment buildings and yet they have no visible means of financial support. Rosemary is a housewife and Guy is an aspiring actor with only a few roles to his credit.

Unlike the other characters in the movie, Guy is not a sinister operative who is trying to usher in Satan’s reign on earth. Guy betrays Rosemary by allowing the satanic cult next door to impregnate her with Satan’s child; however, his motivations are understandable in a twisted way. His attitude toward his wife is the same attitude that characterized many husbands of the era, assuming that she will agree to all of his imperatives and because she is in a subservient position, he has no problem tricking her into become a surrogate mother for Satan’s child in order to live in a nice apartment in New York City. Since 1968, the ability to find and stay in a nice apartment in

New York City has become even more difficult and the idea of a satanic cult offering apartments for surrogacy would be very attractive to the average New Yorker.

In the character of Guy, marriage is depicted as a prison of betrayal. Anyone who has been in an abusive relationship can sympathize with Rosemary when Guy's betrayal is revealed, not so much because of the betrayal but because of the way that Guy dismisses her objections. " Guy tells his wife in the film's final scene that the group has not hurt her and the Woodhouses can live a life of affluence and luxury" (Havis 54).

A unique part of this particular horror movie involves the villains who are not outright monsters. An issue that many people have with horror movies is that many times the villains announce themselves right away. Jason in Friday the 13th comes out of the woods wearing a hockey mask and brandishing weapons. In the movie Dracula, the initial appearance of Count Dracula announces his sinister intentions.

By contrast, the main villains in Rosemary's Baby are the eccentric elderly couple that lives next door. Roman and Minnie Castevet are a friendly couple that befriend Rosemary and Guy acting as surrogate parents, especially to Rosemary who wants to start a family. Ruth Gordon as Minnie Castevet is particularly impressive as she was capable of playing the maternal figure and the much more sinister versions of the same character. In fact, Ruth Gordon makes the character sympathetic, especially at the end when she is convincing Rosemary to accept the demonic baby that she produced.

In the character of Minnie Castevet, Roman Polanski was bringing out the trope of the banality of evil, a term coined recently to describe Adolph Eichmann who engineered the Holocaust. Eichmann did not look like the raving lunatic or the monster that someone who was responsible for the deaths of millions should seem like. Instead he looked like a clerk. Roman Polanski, a Holocaust survivor, understood that the truest horror does not come from an outside force but from the everyday banalities that characterize our lives. Even the Manson Family who would kill Roman Polanski's pregnant wife seemed like ordinary hippies with strange ideas until they began their murderous rampages. Ruth Gordon's Minnie Castevet is a matronly figure who seems a little demanding but basically harmless. It is the combination of her demanding nature and the camera work that gives her a sinister edge. Setting

Even though it is a cliché to speak of settings as characters in movies, the apartment building offers one of the most appropriate settings for a horror movie about a staid satanic cult having an undue influence on a young couple. The fictional Bramford House is a gothic and creepy location with the exterior shots being the Dakota in upper Manhattan. The Dakota has a long history on the Upper West Side and it was built in the late 19th century. It has been featured in several movies, but it has that old New York feeling to it and that serves the movie well since it characterizes the dissipated decadence of a gilded age long dead. Since *Rosemary's Baby*, the Dakota was also the site of John Lennon's assassination at the hands of an obsessed fan. This only serves to make the movie more sinister.

Beyond the exterior, the interior is depicted as dark and claustrophobic. The wallpaper in the hallways seems like it's about to peel off and yellow while the lights are always dim. Even in places where the characters are in rooms that should be well lit, there is a darkness that pervades every section. Even the laundry room seems forbidding. The structure increases Rosemary's isolation. When she agrees to do laundry with Terry, a young woman, she seems to be bonding with Terry. Terry then throws herself out of a window.

Much of the movie makes a great deal about the macabre history of the apartment building with the opening dialogue talking about the residents that died in the Woodhouse apartment before they arrived. In the movie *When Harry Met Sally*, the ability to obtain an apartment due to the death of the previous resident is treated like an opening joke that characterizes the utilitarian New York values. In *Rosemary's Baby*, the death weighs heavy on the couple. "The expository dinner conversation at the house of Rosemary's good friend Hutch centers on macabre acts that had occurred in the Bramford Hotel, including a case of infanticide" (Sullivan, Greenberg & Landau 191).

Manhattan is integral to the movie because it allows people to hide in plain sight. Manhattan seems anonymous and full of strangers in some cases, but for Rosemary it becomes much more limited as she is unable to escape the Casteverts and their influence. At one point she attempts to push away from her destiny by returning to a previous doctor only to have that doctor send her right back to the gynecologist handpicked by the Casteverts. The anonymity of New York forces the individuals to fall into a series of networks and relationships. By the end of the movie Rosemary is fully integrated into <https://assignbuster.com/how-to-find-a-great-apartment-in-new-york-rosemarys-baby-as-urban-horror/>

the satanic cult because she has no exterior form of emotional support and they have eroded any internal strength.

Themes

One of the major themes of *Rosemary's Baby* involves a deconstruction of the idolization of motherhood. The body of Rosemary is continuously violated by the dictates of a patriarchal structure that sees her primarily as a breeder for a demonic force. This stands in sharp contrast to the idyllic views of motherhood as a source of inspiration and strength that were standard fare only a few years before. In the 1960s, feminism took a very dim view of the societal emphasis on motherhood as the only valid role for women.

The demon that impregnates Rosemary may be considered to be nature run amok, but upon further examination, it is important to note the position of her husband and his features that dissolve into those of a devil in the nightmare scenes. Rhona Berenstein points out that "the monster in this film both emerges from and in opposition to the nuclear family" (60).

Rosemary is being constantly manipulated and dominated in order to fulfill her function of becoming a mother.

By contrast, Havis sees the movie as a metaphor for the counterculture-inspired national debate over the role of America in the free world. In the post-WWII era, Americans believed that there was a national destiny to keep the world from falling into Communism. The pre-WWII isolationism that had allowed Hitler to get such a foothold in Europe gave way to the Cold War standards about how America should take a proactive approach to

geopolitical tensions. The standard analogy was America as the world's
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policemen. Whenever revolutionaries were attempting to influence a nation into going Communist, America would step in and keep that from happening.

This comforting metaphor collapsed in the 1960s as the Vietnam War dragged on and the images from Vietnam showed a severely compromised morality. Americans were shocked not only by the failure of American military intervention but also by the lack of discernable difference between American military intervention and its Soviet counterpart. According to Havis, “ no other film from this period encapsulates in metaphor the diabolical implosion of American idealism and innocence. Rosemary, in her decency and simple trust, represents a large section of the country” (53).

A third interpretation sees the movie as a depiction of the kind of evil that is lurking in everyday interaction. Sullivan et al encapsulate this view when they note: “ Polanski’s personification of the Satanists and his relentless identification of them with traditional Christianity through the use of inverted imagery are simultaneously a biting critique on the means and ends of all cultural immortality projects. It is more frightening to contemplate the similarities between Satanism and Christianity as two potentially futile modes of obtaining literal immortality than it is to think about the threat that one poses to the other” (193). The evil of the elderly Satan worshipers is merely an extension of the evil of Western society seeking to control bodies and push its morality upon the world.

Conclusion

The horror genre has been one of the major film genres since the inception of film. It is capable of reflecting the anxieties of audiences through <https://assignbuster.com/how-to-find-a-great-apartment-in-new-york-rosemarys-baby-as-urban-horror/>

metaphor and analogy. Rosemary's Baby represents a case study in horror since it not only uses isolation and sinister conspiracies as a way of invoking terror in audiences; it also comments on the shifting world of 1960s morality where gender roles, morality and social relationships were all examined and found horrifying.

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