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Fundamentals of Film

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Why Rosemary's Baby Set the Tone for Horror in the 1970s

Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), derived from Ira Levin's horror novel with the same title, is a haunting psychological thriller that transcends its genre by using psychological tension and societal commentary to explore themes of gendered autonomy, paranoia, and control, offering a provocative critique of 1960s cultural norms. At its core, the story follows **Rosemary Woodhouse (Mia Farrow)**, a woman whose desire to become a mother is manipulated by those closest to her—physically and emotionally. Revealing a very sinister truth about the societal expectations of a woman, Polanski blends suspense and horror to create a narrative that lingers long after the end credits roll. This analysis will examine how *Rosemary's Baby* uses subtext and the art of suggestion. Elements such as Rosemary's physical and psychological transformation, her paranoia at play, and the idea of metamorphosis within the supernatural will be examined to highlight the film's unique contribution to the evolution of the horror genre in cinema history.

Before diving into the film and its many subtextual layers, it is essential to consider its context, creation, and the inspiration that went into it. As Roman Polanski's first Hollywood film, released to theaters in 1968, we see the presence of the cultural era that made it relatable. With the Vietnam War's impact on American households, the emergence of a new generation of young adults heading to the real world, and of course, the explosion of the **New Hollywood Wave** (the late '60s-70s). A new artistic response to culture with films like *Bonnie and Clyde (1967), Night of the Living Dead (1968),* and *Easy Rider (1969)* shows the shift in artistic norms with different storytelling focusing on character-driven plot lines, sex, violence, open endings, and other bold subject matter, which can be thanks to the ending of the **Hays Production Code** (Heckmann).

Looking at the horror genre pre-production code, we have films like *The Bride of Frankenstein (1935)* and *Dracula's Daughter (1936),* where the directors had to get creative when slipping themes in while "dodging the censor boards" (Cantabrana). This shows where the concept of subtext comes into play and why we see it so much, especially within horror. This also makes sense when analyzing Rosemary's Baby, as the viewer can make many metaphorical assumptions about the film's true meaning.

The film opens with an **establishing shot** title sequence over the New York City skyline, showing us the importance of the busy city and leading us to the Bramford Building. The plot in New York City is crucial, rather than choosing a small town with a "white-picket fence." Being in the city does not allow for a quiet, calm setting; it's chaotic. There is no illusion of her lack of

control; it's right in front of us. They are in an environment where the place is too busy and distracted to stabilize. This represents this metaphorical loss of control that happens later to Rosemary as time goes on and on.

Once they walk into the building, there is a **long take** of a **tracking shot** as Rosemary and Guy are being taken on a tour, almost immediately being told the history and dark stories of past residents connected to things like cannibalism, murder, and witchcraft. Polanski does this so well with smooth camera movement, keeping the corners very shadowed versus the walkways where they suggest secrets are hidden. It also shows viewers the apartment layout, which becomes important later. With all signs ignored by blind excitement, they move into their apartment. They are greeted by the Castevets, **Minne (Ruth Gordan),** and **Roman (Sidney Blackmer),** who come across as very friendly, almost too intrusively into their lives. Guy happens to befriend them very quickly and frequently goes over to see them without Rosemary.

As we move into the relationship building between Guy and the Castevets and the viewers with Rosemary, we see that the expectations of the household are still the same, with examples supporting this idea of repression against women. As the film reflects the chaotic cultural changes of the New Hollywood era, it also critiques the traditional gender roles still dominating American society. An example is the focus on gender dynamics, specifically Rosemary, through the male-dominated lens. Rosemary and **Guy Woodhouse (John Cassavetes)** start the film as the poster couple of the 60s American Dream: young, in love, and newly moved to the big city. He is looking for his next big break, and she is ready to take her "spot" as a mother of his child.

In this scene at the beginning, it is clear that she has no autonomy within her relationship with Guy, simply in her role as his wife and mother. However, if you look closely at Rosemary, you will see that she holds her husband's achievements in her mind as if they were her own. She continuously recites his resume to everyone she speaks to: "He was in Luther, and Nobody Loves an Albatross and a lot of television plays and commercials" (Rosemary's Baby). She says this three times, and in between, we never witness anyone ask her what she does, whether she went to school or any of her passions, hobbies, or desires. Watching her interactions with the Castevets, they don't even seem interested in her, though they spend so much time nudging her.

Guy is a struggling actor who finally gets his calling when his rival actor mysteriously goes blind, giving him a shot in the spotlight. Shortly after this, Rosemary becomes pregnant under bizarre circumstances, hence the dream sequence. This nightmare vision Rosemary experiences, where a demon is sexually assaulting her, traumatizes her in more ways than one.

Rosemary's Baby avoids overusing explicit supernatural elements and instead uses the art of suggestion to create this presence of Satan and evil itself. In this pivotal moment of the dream sequence, Rosemary's surreal "dream" has fragmented foreshadowing, including glimpses of the devil's eyes, hinting at the diabolical reality. These brief yet vulgar visuals leave the viewers questioning whether Rosemary's experiences are a product of her paranoia or a cult-like sanction happening. Eventually, Rosemary puts two and two together and realizes, "This is no dream! This is really happening!" (Rosemary's Baby). The film shows us the chilling revelation of the child's demonic side when we see a flash of Satan's eyes confirming Rosemary's worst fears without having to resort to more details, the use of lots of special effects, or lots of gore.

As she falls in and out of it, she makes the demon's eyes and then wakes up the next day. Not only does everyone around her gaslight and manipulate her into believing she is paranoid, but her husband admits to the assault himself, saying, "It was kind of fun in a necrophile sort of way" (Rosemary's Baby), completely dehumanizing her and not giving her any comfort. This sequence starts Rosemary's spiral, but I will dive into that more when discussing metamorphosis.

With this strange turn in the Woodhouses' lives, Rosemary's pregnancy does not move like a normal one, with her growing frailer and paler and experiencing otherworldly pain. She goes through this journey of physical decline, and the transformation leaves her in a suffering state.

Anyone around her can see that she is not okay, but the ones who "love" her convince her that what she is experiencing is normal. This deterioration symbolizes how her own body no longer belongs to her. She becomes increasingly suspicious of the Castevets, and it does not help that Guy is over her shoulder, influenced by them, pushing Minnie's unconventional remedies on her. This highlights more and more her increased alienation from the typical pregnancy experience. She has one moment of trying to gain control when she gets her pixie haircut, but it doesn't feel like a proud moment, as Guy mocks it almost immediately. "I've already filed it under haircuts that look terrible" (Rosemary's Baby). At this moment, the haircut becomes a marker of her diminishing self-identity. And with that, there is an emphasis on her isolation.


Isolated and paranoid, they convince her it is hormonal hysteria. From all the manipulation, Rosemary eventually uncovers more and more clues. Guy's dismissive attitude and insistence on controlling all her decisions mirrors the psychological manipulation of women in the 1960s, reducing them to passive roles only. All the patronizing and implying that she cannot be trusted with her instincts finally takes us back to the idea of metamorphosis. One can argue that the metamorphosis started with her physical transformation and that the unnatural

changes suggested something monstrous or alien. Or it can even be from a psychological standpoint, from a trusting, naive, innocent person, with Rosemary starting the film in bright yellow dresses and pigtails, to the paranoid, consumed-by-fear girl who goes through a loss of identity. I think the one that sticks out the most is the idea of maternal metamorphosis, from the fear she had to the very end when she gained acceptance. In one of the most chilling scenes of the film, Rosemary concludes that her baby is the center of a conspiracy of Satan. When she finally gives birth, after a traumatic experience, her baby is ripped away from her, and she discovers her son is the Antichrist, made by Satan himself.

Now confronted by the coven, Rosemary's fear and horrors fall away in a **final close-up reaction shot**, showing Rosemary's face as she looks at her baby for the first time. "What have you done to him? What have you done to his eyes, you maniacs!" (Rosemary's Baby). Despite all the pain and betrayal she had gone through in her pregnancy, her motherly instincts kicked in. From that moment, she is drawn to the cries and succumbs to rocking her child. Feeling like an underscore to the idea of motherhood, the connection between the two holds power regardless of the horrid circumstances. Just like "The Frida Cinema" critique states, "When they become pregnant, they stop being women and become 'mothers." They become an extension of their children, which is exactly what happens to Rosemary." (Frida Cinema).

Polanski's storytelling style marks a significant start compared to the explicit style of horror films that dominated the 1970s. By focusing on psychological tension and the power of suggestion, *Rosemary's Baby* pushes the boundaries of what defines horror, proving that fears can be evoked just as much by what is unseen as by what we see. Rosemary's Baby is special for exploring the unknown or turning everyday elements from our regular lives into our biggest fears. Betrayal by the ones closest to you, paranoia growing within a material identity, and

gendered autonomy resonate as deeply today as they did when it first came out in the 1960s. By embracing the art of suggestion, Polanski crafted a beautifully executed film that set the tone for horror and remains a thinking piece in the history of cinema.

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