We’re halfway through the second term at Miskatonic, and I have to say it’s been great to see how the crossover between different courses is giving the students a noticeable, rounded grasp on the last century of horror history, as well as exploring concepts such as the monstrous-feminine, post-feminism, uses of internal and external space, eyewitness reliability and subjective truth—all in completely varied contexts, from the haunted-house film to the *giallo* .

It has been incredibly enlightening to realize just how much of a complacent viewer I’ve become in the last decade without the kind of weekly interaction you get from a school-like environment, and the enthusiasm of the students breathes new life into concepts that we sometimes brush off as outmoded or past their time. Not to mention that their strong responses to films we take for granted as “classics” also inspire a desire to revisit this material on a more regular basis.

Last night’s class, Misogyny in Horror—Part 2 with instructor Candis Steenbergen, had a screening of and discussion about Roman Polanski’s ROSEMARY’S BABY, and below are Miskatonic student Ariel Estaban Cayer’s thoughts on the film.

•••

ROSEMARY’S BABY

Roman Polanski, U.S.A., 1968

By Ariel Esteban Cayer, age 18

When I first saw ROSEMARY’S BABY, more out of convenience and cinephiliac obligation than anything else, I never stopped to give it much thought, aside from the technical aspects, which are, by all means, extremely strong. Rewatching it last night, though, in the context of a feminist reading, it literally broke my brain and changed my perception of the film forever.

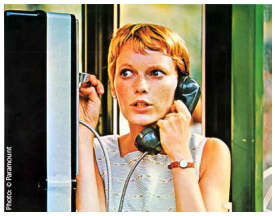
I could not stand this film a second time. Like many films before and after it—ALIEN, THE EXORCIST and CARRIE, just to name a few—ROSEMARY’S BABY explores the avenues through which the female body is desecrated, demonized and objectified. This notion, called the monstrous feminine (as coined by author Barbara Creed) is a truly fascinating one, and ever since I was introduced to it while studying THE VAMPIRE LOVERS, I have been able to understand narratives—especially within the horror genre—in a whole new light.

Before I get any further into this, let me point out that ROSEMARY’S BABY is brilliant, as successful a horror film as I’ve ever seen, and that this is in no way an indictment of it. But truly understanding why and how it is so successful at creeping under your skin and making you feel like an awful mess as soon as it’s over is where the true horror lies.

If you place ROSEMARY back in the post-PSYCHO history of the genre, the film almost seems logical, as horror filmmakers were bound to bring the horror inward, closer to home. No longer rooted in folklore and the fear of the other, the genre quickly turned to women, their bodies and “motherhood” as the easiest, most convenient thing to demonize. Rosemary as a character is perhaps the best example of that.

Infantilized to the point of ridicule through her outfits, mannerisms—think of the scene where she refuses to eat the chocolate mousse—and even the overt reference to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” in the set design, she is perhaps the most victimized of all horror-film heroines, and certainly one of the most helpless. Characterized as borderline stupid, she suffers through every conceivable horror—marital rape, just to name one—and seems to lack any sort of will to fight back. Every time she reaches some sort of conclusion about her situation and proceeds into actively fixing the problem, the carpet is pulled right from under her.

Sometimes, she even ignores her own moments of intelligence—to stop taking the Cassavetes’ shakes, for example—and progresses from one terrible situation to another until the ending where—although it’s arguably open-ended—she seemingly accepts her fate, dry of any will to fight back…as if she was characterized with any to begin with.



Brought up as a highly Catholic girl, Rosemary is a remnant, almost a throwback to the 1950s (and earlier) archetype of womanhood. She is stuck in a horrible marriage and completely excluded from her circle of friends. She suffers from a complete lack of agency and quickly becomes a tool—through which her husband reaches success and fame, through which the Satanist cult brings Satan’s son to the Earthly realm and through which the audience identifies fully.

As the director’s “Apartment Trilogy” (REPULSION and THE TENANT being the two other films) proves to varying degrees, Polanski—and allow me to focus purely on his films for the sake of this discussion, as opposed to his life—knows exactly how to use the woman and androcentric archetypes—neurosis and irrationality quickly dismissed as hormones, erroneous convictions, etc.—to drive his story forward, and this is where rewatching ROSEMARY’S BABY becomes a painful exercise: There is no notion of victim-hero here (think of the slasher film) but only of a relentlessly oppressed female protagonist. There is absolutely no hope for her, and Mia Farrow portrays a dead-on female archetype you cannot help but empathize with entirely, and painfully so.

Surprisingly enough, this film is sometimes read as a pro-feminist film, or even a commentary on abortion. I have a hard time figuring that out, as there is absolutely no notion of choice in Rosemary’s life—she is basically raped and forced—drugged even—to carry the child to term, despite the throbbing pain and unease it’s causing her. The only way such a reading could be made is if you see the film as a complete subversion, a satire of these archetypes, but even then the calculation with which they are carried throughout remains very problematic. I don’t consider this film to be progressive in any way, and while I can understand the confusion—it being 1968 and the beginning of the modern cycle of horror films, with NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD leading the wave—I think it carries out the exact problematic portrayal of woman that has plagued the arts and the cinema of the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s. If the film is anything, it is a perfect example of conservative ideologies and gender dynamics—from abortion, agency and motherhood to the woman’s role in the household. The film also seems to confuse witchcraft and Satanism, but that’s a whole other paragraph, so I’ll leave it at that.

{jcomments on}