

---

---

## Modernity, Commodification, and Spiritual Affiliation in *Rosemary's Baby*

Linda Sheppard  
*University of East Anglia, UK*

---

### Introduction

---

In the early scenes of *Rosemary's Baby* protagonist Rosemary Woodhouse (played by Mia Farrow) is shown renovating the Manhattan apartment she has just rented with her husband Guy (John Cassavetes). Painters apply white paint to the dark wood that adorns the gloomy interiors; the flat is re-painted, re-carpeted, re-furnished, and Rosemary hangs new curtains and lines the shelves of a mysteriously concealed closet. She pauses in her home-making to watch her husband's TV commercial for the "*the swingin' world of Yamaha*". Later she is interrupted by a comically intrusive neighbour, Minnie Castevet (Ruth Gordon), who comes to introduce herself and see the apartment which has recently been vacated by her recently deceased friend, Mrs. Gardenia. Commenting on the brightness of the home and its modern design, Minnie flatters Rosemary even as she questions the cost of these adornments, the choice of which has been influenced by the world of magazines. In this way, from early on, the Woodhouse family seems to be aligned with impulses involving covering the old, ushering in the new, and establishing a sense of self *vis-à-vis* expensive and fashionably arranged accoutrements – all of this thanks to the support of the media which provide suggestions for what to buy, the means whereby these items may be acquired, and indications of where and how these products should be artfully displayed.

The young couple apparently relies upon methods of identification that are thus more closely aligned with modernity, while their elderly next-door neighbours Minnie and Roman Castevet (Sidney Blackmer) seem to provide an antithesis to this as they question this acquisitive impulse in favour of furthering a sense of generational community. Indeed, if the characters of Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse are determined – initially, at least – by the objects with which they surround themselves, then the Castevets in turn are defined by the people to whom they are connected. This turns out to be a witches' coven, a sacramental spiritual group begun by Roman Castevet's father, Adrian Mercato, whose legacy is now perpetuated by the son. It is this essential conflict of the old versus the new, the traditional versus the modern, and the rational versus the supernatural, that is central not only to the film, but also to the culture from which the work sprang.

This article addresses the connections between the film and its larger socio-political milieu through debates around modernity and modernism developed by theorists such as Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, and Marshall Berman, all of whom, while espousing a range of political ideologies from conservative to liberal, nonetheless arrive at similar conclusions with regard to the importance of traditionalism – specifically adherence to a system of faith, acknowledgement of historical legacy and assimilating within a community – in establishing a cohesive culture. Connections between these debates and the artistic output of the era is supported by a textual analysis of the film in order to locate thematic and aesthetic concerns with the instability of the culture of commodification and the way in which spirituality, negative or otherwise, might function to provide a grounding mechanism for the building of a stable sense of self.

I will be considering narrative characterization, the issue of conflict, and the use of symbolism, as well as the film's aesthetic concerns with the Gothic. The Gothic – a movement established, it could be argued, in reaction to the lauding of reason brought about as a result of the age of Enlightenment – provides a formal embodiment of the same essential debates. Indeed, *Rosemary's Baby* deploys tropes such as enclosure, entrapment, isolation, and the acceptance of the possibility of the supernatural, all couched within the here-and-now of New York City, a setting that is, as suggested by Berman and others, an archetype of modernity, forward thinking, and rationality itself. Finally, the critical responses to the film's release in both secular and religious popular media will be addressed, emanating from influential sources such as *The New York Times* and the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures (formerly The National League of Decency).

### **Traditionalism and Modernity**

---

The period between the mid-1960's and the mid-1970s was a time of vast social, political and cultural paradigm shifts, and many scholars argued as to whether this socio-political transition would in fact result in a return to traditionalism, a looking back toward the orthodoxies of the past, or a continued and potentially increased embrace of a forward-looking, counter-cultural ethos. On the one hand, traditionalism was regarded as

possessing positive attributes, offering mechanisms of stabilization and historic cohesion, including imperatives such as orthodox religion and familial legacy. Such stabilizing influences, however, were equally regarded as being stultifying and repressive even if their rejection could potentially lead to an increasing fragmentation of society and, by extension, of the individuals living in it. As Marshall Berman suggests: "*This drive [to go on endlessly creating the world anew] draws all modern men and women into its orbit, and forces us to grapple with the question of what is essential, what is meaningful, what is real in the maelstrom in which we move and live.*" Considering Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), he goes on to comment: "*It seems to me that beneath her modernist text there is an anti-modern subtext, a sort of undertow of nostalgia for a family and a neighbourhood in which the self could be securely embedded, 'ein feste Burg', a solid refuge against all the dangerous currents of freedom and ambiguity in which all modern men and women are caught up.*"<sup>1</sup>

For Berman, the American metropolis may be regarded as a signifier of, and a locus for, these debates. On the one hand, the urban environment becomes a symbol for the vigour, variety, and richness of life that are celebrated by modernity and around which this forward-focused, individualistic ethos has crystallised and is furthered. However, this diversity could also breed an underlying traditionalist sentiment. Within the urban landscape, not only could a nostalgia for family and neighbourhood be located, but there could equally exist the potential for a concomitant establishment of orthodox mechanisms of faith which, arguably, together ground both the private and the public realms. Indeed, it was religion that held the family together historically, and ideally the spiritual congregation that provided a sense of community wherein the family could thrive. According to Hugh McLeod, religion could allow for the establishment of, "*tightly knit subcultures with highly distinctive dogmatic beliefs*",<sup>2</sup> thus providing the potential for a shared sense of stability.

These concerns with modernity were equally the concerns of the artistic discourse of the Gothic, which arose out of a similar socio-political landscape. This literary genre involves a critique of the mechanisms of traditionalism such as orthodox Catholicism, whilst equally setting itself up in opposition to modernity and the influence of the Enlightenment by issuing a warning against wholehearted acceptance of the rational over all else. As David Punter suggests, the Gothic "*strove to eschew the contemporary world, the world of commerce and the middle class*".<sup>3</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> Century was embroiled in debates over the efficacy of the old and the traditional in opposition to the lure of the new; the traditions that once acted as mechanisms of stabilisation were questioned as to their social, political,

---

<sup>1</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, London: Verso, 2007, pp. 288, 324.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*, London and New York: Longmans, 1980, p. 10.

and cultural relevance. If in fact the contemporary world was one in which a new era of ordered rationalism prevailed, then the Gothic, by ushering in a thematic concern with the chaotic supernatural, seemed to be playing, in an almost literal sense, the Devil's advocate. Punter supports this assertion when he notes, "*fear is recognised as the primary means by which the dictates of reason can be bypassed.*"<sup>4</sup>

The roles of commodification and radical individualism were also the subject of debate. Acquisitiveness could be seen as a mechanism supportive of self-identification, and it was this drive toward re-invention that was contrasted with more traditional elements of stabilisation as described above. On the one hand, such a freedom was in many ways liberating for those without a sense of position, while on the other, it offered the potential for increased insecurity should this acquisitive impulse fail to bear fruit. As Daniel Bell argues, the unfolding of capitalism "*sought initially to unify economy, character structure, and culture in a common frame*". But, in a major contradiction, it "*destroyed the keystone of that character – the sober, prudential, delayed gratification of the Protestant ethic – with the acquisitive impulses unleashed by the technological revolution of the consumer-durable culture, aided by the sociological innovation of the installment plan and consumer credit.*"<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that religious belief is often considered vital socio-politically, not only because it functions to hold society together, but also because it fosters a belief in something outside the realm of the self and self-interest.

Indeed, not only does the ideal of the faith community offer grounding and stability, it also provides a curb that sets limits on individual action. If there is a key to a healthy culture, it is, for Bell, the establishment of limits, and the key contradiction to which he alludes in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*: the modernist culture of the mid-1960s and 1970s finds itself at the pinnacle of a trajectory that has effectively effaced all the limitations that a healthy culture must necessarily establish. Bell perceives the cultural realm to be "*one of self-expression and self-gratification. It is anti-institutional and antinomian in that the individual is taken to be the measure of satisfaction, and his feelings, sentiments, and judgments, not some objective standard of quality and value, determine the worth of cultural objects.*"<sup>6</sup> He goes on to suggest that it is the freedom of self-actualization that typifies the *Zeitgeist* of modernity, as the self in an increasingly secular culture knows no limits or boundaries. Furthermore, any self-regulating economic system, when freed from external controls, runs the risk of fostering the same problematic identification; because of an increased focus on commodities, an individual is defined by his or her accumulation of wealth above all else.

---

<sup>4</sup> Punter, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition, New York: Basic Books, 1996, p. 295.

<sup>6</sup> Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, p. xvii.

In the past, these tendencies toward accumulation have been curbed by ascetic Protestantism, instilling the belief that the moral man is one who toils and who defers gratification in order to please God, increase his kingdom, and guarantee heavenly rewards. In this way, religion held the radical individualist in check and hampered any hedonistic tendencies. However, once appetites had been awakened, and in turn were fostered and increased by a society that links accumulation with meaning and success, agency in and of itself became just another commodity to be bought and sold. During this period, a radical individualist approach to religion seemed to be more appropriate not only to contemporary culture but could also be applied retrospectively to historic America. Bellah *et al* comment: "The American pattern of privatizing religion while at the same time allowing it some public functions has proven highly compatible with the religious pluralism that has characterized America from the colonial period and grown more and more pronounced [...] religion is perceived as a matter of individual choice."<sup>7</sup> Would this shift ultimately result in an increased destabilization of the self? Would it encourage a return to toward the orthodoxies of the past or, alternatively, lead to a continuing embrace of a forward-looking ethos?

### The Acquisitive Impulse

---

In *Rosemary's Baby*, these debates over the role of religion and commodification are represented by the Woodhouses. On the one side stands Guy Woodhouse, aligned with acquisitiveness and commercial gain, whilst Rosemary stands on the other as she deals on a conscious and unconscious level with a crisis of loss: that of family and of faith. From the moment Guy is introduced, he is seen as being a chameleon, acquiring a new identity at will. As the young couple view what will become their new, hip, urbanite, New York City apartment, a conversation ensues between the building manager and the Woodhouses:

Mr. Nicklas (building superintendent) to Guy:

Are you a doctor?

Guy: Yes

Rosemary: He's an actor

Nicklas: What, acting ... we're very popular with actors. Have I ... er, seen you in anything?

Guy: Well, let's see - I did *Hamlet* a while back, didn't I Liz? And then we did the ... the ... *The Sandpiper*

Rosemary: He's joking. He was in *Luther* and *Nobody Loves an Albatross*, and a lot of television plays and commercials.

In this way, Guy's sense of self might be defined as fluid. Indeed, not only does he not deny the misconception that he is a doctor, but he also later pretends to be Burt Lancaster. Indeed, both his on and off-screen/stage personas are consumed with the assumption of roles to further his career and ensure financial success. Many might regard the profession of acting, especially on the New York stage, to be an artistic pursuit, however, as the film progresses, it

---

<sup>7</sup> Robert N. Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985, p. 225.

is revealed that Guy's primary desire is to become rich and famous, a motivation that increasingly consumes him. It is this weakness that is manipulated and taken advantage of by the Casteverts. As the conversation continues:

Nicklas: Well that's where the money is, isn't it, commercials?  
Guy: [laughing agreement] and the artistic thrill too.

Although the comment is, admittedly, tongue-in-cheek, it is later revealed that it is through these commercials, and not more high-art endeavours, that the Woodhouses have managed to prosper. According to the 1967 novel by Ira Levin from which Polanski adapted his film, "*In 1964, Guy had done a series of Anacin commercials that, shown time and time again, had earned him eighteen thousand dollars and was still producing a sizable income.*"<sup>8</sup> This self-same success is equally revealed in the film, as Guy's Yamaha advert is portrayed on the television screen. When comparing the novel to its adaptation, it is the ways in which the original is modified that are particularly noteworthy; a Yamaha motorcycle advertised as "*swingin*", when compared with a pain-killing pharmaceutical such as Anacin, indeed seems a merely luxurious purchase.

Another deviation between the novel and its adaptation, equally relevant here, occurs in the meeting place for Rosemary and her close friend and mentor Edward Hutchens ('Hutch'), played in the film by Maurice Evans. In the novel, the agreed location is the Seagram Building, whereas in the film, the *Time-Life* Building is suggested. Although Seagram's Gin is, admittedly, a commercial product, it could be argued that *Time-Life* magazines, like *House Beautiful*, are even more associated with issues of commercialism, self-definition, and modernity. This is because these publications serve not only as products to be bought and sold, but also function as key vehicles for the dissemination of middle-class values. Indeed, it is the middle class that is most affected by consumerism as self-definition, because this group does not occupy nepotistic positions of power, nor is it chiefly concerned with subsistence, as are the less fortunate classes. *Time* magazine, according to Bell, became a virtual Bible for the disenfranchised middle-class. He argues that publisher Henry Luce's genius "*was to take the traditional American values, the belief in God, in work, in achievement, and to translate these, through the idiom of the coming urban civilization into the creed of American destiny ('the American century') on a world scale.*"<sup>9</sup>

Reporting on and interpreting issues such as these, Luce's magazines *Time*, *Life*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Fortune* influenced a huge demographic. Through manipulating traditional rhetoric and applying it to a consumer culture, Luce effectively sold a lifestyle that Rosemary and other up-and-coming housewives like her desperately wanted for themselves and for their families. Equally, this reference to *Time* foreshadows certain religious debates which, like these consumerist concerns, will come to dominate the film. This connection is made more explicit in the original novel in a discussion of a controversial issue of *Time*.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ira Levin, *Rosemary's Baby*, London: Constable and Robinson, 2011, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, p. 76.

The edition in question features a black background upon which is emblazoned the bold title "*Is God Dead?*". A character comments upon one of the articles included: "*His name is Altizer and he's down in – Atlanta, I think; and what he says is that the death of God is a specific historic event that happened right now, in our time. That God literally died.*"<sup>10</sup> This issue of the magazine is also featured in the film as Rosemary picks up a copy at her obstetrician's office, a man later revealed to be a member of the Castevet coven. As the publication is foregrounded, so too are debates with regard to traditionalism versus modernity revealed. The secularization of religion is also referenced when Guy, watching television coverage of the Pope's visit, sees the broadcast in purely commercial terms: "*It's the Pope at Yankee Stadium. Christ what a mob ... that's a great spot for my Yamaha commercial*". It would appear that faith, organized religion, and all its associated symbols have, at least for Guy Woodhouse, become just another opportunity for media hype. Further, traditionalism has equally become just another commodity whose innate worth is reduced to its ability to be bought or sold.

Indeed, media influence comes to dominate many choices made by this couple. Guy makes wardrobe choices with the assistance of advertisements in *The New Yorker*, while Rosemary takes clippings from *House Beautiful* for ideas in decorating, and supports her unpopular decision to get her hair cut from top stylist Vidal Sassoon with the justification that it is advertised as being very "*in*". This element provides both a diegetic link to commercial concerns and an extra-diegetic pointer to the film's production. Polanski recalls: "*When I suggested that Vidal Sassoon himself should come to Hollywood to cut Mia's hair, Bill Castle [the film's producer] decided to hype the occasion into a spectacular 'photo opportunity' for the Hollywood press [...] Throughout, like the true hippie she was, Mia kept up a verbal assault on the press for covering such a minor function instead of applying their investigative energies to the plight of deprived and underprivileged American Indians.*"<sup>11</sup> This connection between commodification and identification is often overlooked within academic analyses of this film. Mark Jancovich suggests that "*Unlike the film, the novel is saturated with references to the media and media events. It presents a social world in which the population is constantly being [...] told what to think and how to behave.*"<sup>12</sup> While the novel does indeed present these issues of media influence, the film does so as well and perhaps to an even greater extent. This is evidenced not only by the foregrounding of a concern with consumerism, but additionally when it comes to discussions of identification and identificatory mechanisms.

To begin with, the families of both Guy and Rosemary are in a state of rupture, which is first alluded to, if not directly stated in the film, by Rosemary who discusses her large extended family with Minnie. Whereas she confesses to having three brothers, two sisters

---

<sup>10</sup> Levin, p. 146.

<sup>11</sup> Polanski in David Thompson, 'I Make Films for Adults', *Sight and Sound*, April 1994, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Post-Fordism, Postmodernism and Paranoia: The Dominance of the Horror Genre in Contemporary Culture', in Jancovich, ed., *Horror: The Film Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 89.

and sixteen nieces and nephews, this large and potentially supportive network neither contacts Rosemary nor is engaged when the protagonist is in a state of crisis. When she first visits Rosemary, Minnie notes that the only mail she has received are ads, as opposed to any familial correspondence. Later in the film, when Rosemary is in a state of crisis, suspecting all around her of being in collusion to steal her unborn infant, it is her former obstetrician and then her friend to whom she turns rather than to any family member. Guy's family is even more absent, being completely omitted from the film's narrative altogether. Indeed, it is this lack of familial ties that appears to be endemic to all the young people in the film. Even Theresa Gionoffrio, the first woman to be chosen by the Casteverts to become the mother of the Anti-Christ, lacks any generational connectivity, only admitting, dismissively, to having a brother in the Navy.

### Loss, Desire, and the Dream

---

While the family is a structuring absence in the film, in the novel this lack is more directly addressed. Of her role in the family, the novel tells us that: "*She was the youngest of six children, the other five of whom had married early and made homes close to their parents; behind her in Omaha she had left an angry, suspicious father, a silent mother, and four resenting brothers and sisters [...] In New York Rosemary felt guilty and selfish*".<sup>13</sup> This rupture increased with Rosemary's marriage to Guy. As she and her husband began to set up house, she found that she had no one to turn to, to share in her joy. The novel tells us: "*They were all hostile now [...] not forgiving her for (a) marrying a Protestant, (b) marrying in only a civil ceremony, and (c) having a mother-in-law who had two divorces and was married now to a Jew up in Canada.*"<sup>14</sup> In the novel, Guy is on equally shaky ground when it comes to familial ties. Levin explains that not only did Guy change his birth-name, but that he also never knew the father who gave it to him. This isolation, as the book suggests, creates a longing in Guy that is satisfied, ironically, by none other than the Casteverts. As Rosemary observes: "*She saw that Minnie and Roman had become deeply important to him. It wasn't surprising; his mother was a busy self-involved chatterer and none of his fathers had been truly fatherly. The Casteverts were filling a need in him, a need of which he himself was probably unaware.*"<sup>15</sup>

Whereas Guy is associated with commercialism, and thus what can be gained and acquired over all else, Rosemary sits on the other side of this essential dichotomy in being defined not by what she has but what she has lost, not only in terms of her family, but also in terms of her faith. During a dinner party hosted by Minnie, religion becomes a topic:

Roman: No Pope ever visits a city where the newspapers are on strike.  
Minnie: I heard he's going to postpone and wait till it's all over.  
Guy: Well, that's showbiz.  
Roman: That's exactly what it is. All the costumes, the rituals, *all* religions ...

---

<sup>13</sup> Levin, *Rosemary's Baby*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Levin, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Levin, p. 99.



Minnie: Oh, oh, I think we're offending Rosemary.  
 Rosemary: No ... no ...  
 Castevet: You're not religious, my dear, are you?  
 Rosemary: Well I ... I was brought up a Catholic, now I don't know...  
 Minnie: You looked uncomfortable.  
 Rosemary: Well, he *is* the Pope.  
 Roman: You don't need to have respect for him just because he pretends that he is holy.  
 Minnie: When I *think* what they spend on *robes* and *jewels*.

This exchange is indeed interesting not only because of its foregrounding debates around consumerism, but also because it reveals the concerns that Rosemary has about her faith. The Catholic guilt that Rosemary experiences is, perhaps, only alluded to in the film, but it is discussed overtly in the novel. It has been suggested that Levin "*proceeds to create suspense by operating on the theory that a little Catholic guilt can go a long way*".<sup>16</sup> This existential crisis is exhibited in the novel on both a conscious and an unconscious level, as Rosemary directly discusses her loss of faith and also engages in more involuntary actions like crossing herself in times of stress. Even though not made manifest, the lack or loss that Rosemary experiences is nonetheless addressed in the film at an unconscious level through dreams and the symbols featured in them.

The first of these dream sequences appears to resonate, in riddling fashion, with Rosemary's childhood. Following the couple's return from the scene of Terry's suicide, Rosemary lies awake, struggling to sleep. The dream, occupying just about a minute of screen-time, begins with a further shot of Terry in a pool of her own blood. The dream shifts to a large hall in which a nun is speaking in Minnie's voice, haranguing the camera and, it seems, a second nun standing by a group of schoolgirls.<sup>17</sup> Pointing to scaffolding on which a pair of workmen are bricking up large arched windows, and refusing to be shushed by a male figure speaking in her husband's voice, she concludes: "*If you listened to me, we wouldn't have to do this ... We'd be all set to go now instead of having to start from scratch ... I told you not to tell her anything in advance. I told you she wouldn't be open-minded.*" We return to Rosemary, who comments guiltily: "*I told Sister Veronica about the windows and she withdrew the school from the competition, otherwise ...*".

The second, longer dream, occupying almost six-and-a-half minutes of screen-time, dramatises the rape of Rosemary, a veritable nightmare in which again the distinction between fantasy and reality is fundamentally blurred. It takes place following the couple's

<sup>16</sup> 'The Devil Is Alive and Hiding on Central Park West', *Time*, 23 June 1967, p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> Polanski's screenplay intended the venue to be a composite of "*Our Lady's School, Uncle Mike's Body Shop and the candy counter in the Orpheum Cinema*", but only the first of these appears to be invoked in the film itself. In the film the characters in this dream bear no names, but in the screenplay they are referred to as 'Sister Agnes', 'Sister Veronica', and 'Uncle Mike'. See the 'Final Draft' of the screenplay, dated 24 July 1967, at [www.sellingyourscreenplay.com/wp-content/uploads/screenplay/scripts/Rosemarys-Baby.pdf](http://www.sellingyourscreenplay.com/wp-content/uploads/screenplay/scripts/Rosemarys-Baby.pdf), especially pp. 29-30 (first dream) and pp. 65-69 (second dream).

decision to start a baby when Guy becomes aware of his selfish commitment to his own career. The shots which make up this complex and extensive sequence are marked by shifting points-of-view and complex spatial transitions, and the soundtrack features strong acoustic variations between a ticking clock, vocal echo, tense orchestral music, chanting, and high-pitched choral singing. The episode starts when Rosemary becomes dizzy after a meal to which Minnie has contributed portions of chocolate mousse which tastes strange to Rosemary. When she collapses, Guy carries her to bed; she needs sleep, but she wants to make a baby. In her dream, Rosemary at first finds herself lying on a mattress in her dressing gown on a calm sea within sight of land, then as guest at a drinks party on a yacht in an unknown harbour, with the skipper turning into Hutch and back again as the scene proceeds.

Guy undresses Rosemary, who shields her naked torso only to find herself in a bikini amongst other female sunbathers on the deck of the yacht, with the captain standing by. When she sees Hutch on the quayside, his arms full of what might be rolled-up charts, and asks if he is not coming with them, the captain explains, speaking as though in an echo chamber: "*Catholics only. I wish we weren't bound by these prejudices. But unfortunately ...*" A hand is seen removing a wedding ring from another hand; Rosemary is now lying on scaffolding, with the camera roving along a version of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We return to Hutch, waving a flag and warning of a typhoon which has killed 55 people in London. On the deck of a ship in a heavy sea at night, Rosemary approaches a white-uniformed sailor at the wheel – revealed as the lift operator from the Bramford – who urges her to go below. As she obeys him, she is seen to be naked. She enters a dark interior space, ignoring, to her right, the blazing window-like apertures of a structure something like a building. She lies back on a mattress. A naked group at the far end includes Minnie, Roman, and Laura-Louise.

Roman begins to paint red lines and symbols on her naked body as the others chant. Guy tells Minnie: "*She's awake, she sees!*", to which Minnie urgently responds: "*She don't see. As long as she ate the mouse* [Minnie's pronunciation of the word 'mousse', over which Rosemary and Guy laughed at dinner] *she can't see nor hear. She's like dead. Now sing!*" A woman in a flowing dress – described in the screenplay as "*a lady*", but with a striking facial resemblance to Jacqueline Kennedy - descends a stairway, says she is sorry that Rosemary is unwell, and offers to have the "*music*" stopped; Rosemary says her illness is only the result of a mouse-bite, and not to change the "*programme*". The 'lady' recommends that Rosemary have her legs tied down in case of "*convulsions*", a task which is performed by men in white jackets.

Seen from Rosemary's point-of-view, a naked Guy approaches; his face becomes scabbed, and the hands that run over Rosemary's body change from human to scaly. The bed-sheets are now black and silky. Rosemary is both pleased and then terrified as, amidst superimpositions of smoke, a bestial face approaches: "*This is no dream – this is really happening!*" cries Rosemary. A papal figure approaches in the darkness and commiserates:

'Pope': They tell me you have been bitten by a mouse.  
Rosemary: Yes. That's why I couldn't come to see you.  
'Pope': Oh that's all right. We wouldn't want you to jeopardise your health.  
Rosemary: Am I forgiven father?  
'Pope': Oh, absolutely.

He puts forward his ring into a big close-up. It is the amulet worn by Terry and passed on to Rosemary by Minnie Castevet. The next morning, Guy admits that his "*ragged nails*" are responsible for the scratches on Rosemary's body, jovially admitting that he went ahead and made love to Rosemary although she was comatose: "*I didn't want to miss baby night [...] it was kind of fun in a necrophile sort of way*". Rosemary tells Guy; "*I dreamed someone was raping me [...] someone inhuman*". "*Thanks a lot*" responds Guy.

These dreams/nightmares function in a number of ways. First, they give voice to the Catholic guilt that Rosemary experiences with regard to her break from the Church. She is now separated and isolated from her faith and spiritual community, being figuratively bricked off and withdrawn, as her first dream suggests. Also, her guilt manifests in her decision to stay at home rather than to visit the Pope as he comes to the city where she lives, a decision which she feels requires forgiveness. Additionally, these dreams give voice to a potential desire to re-connect with her abandoned religion, as she becomes part of a party of famous Catholics, accepted and not excluded, even as those around her who are not of the faith are rejected. Finally, these dreams might be seen as defence mechanisms, ways of coping with abhorrent conditions.

Her former Catholicism not only functions as a mechanism of unconscious loss and desire but is also arguably what leads the Castevets to choose Rosemary as the ideal candidate for their experiment designed to bring about the Anti-Christ. Whereas Terry, on learning that she was pregnant with the spawn of Satan, threw herself out of the window of the 'Bramford' apartment building, Rosemary, being a former Catholic, would not commit suicide, nor would she do anything to harm her child, both being mortal sins. Indeed, not only does she not kill herself and her unborn child, but comes to care for him, as is suggested at the end of the film. Finally, it is the symbol of Adam from the fresco in the Sistine Chapel that foretells the true nature of the infant that will soon be conceived as a result of the rape. As God breathes life into Adam, so too he offered his son, Christ, as a second Adam to repair the loss caused by original sin. The religious discourse surrounding the Castevet coven offers up a faith that in many ways functions as another sacramental religion complete with ritual, sacraments, and a second coming.

### **Religion and the Lure of Traditionalism**

---

It is spiritual and communal affiliation that acts as a grounding for the apparent villains of the film ('apparent' because, many would argue, it is Guy himself who is the ultimate antagonist and villain). Just as Rosemary and Guy are portrayed as being respectively defined by what they have and what they have lost as opposed to who they are and where they come from,

the Castevets represent the antithesis of this personal crisis. In setting up this dichotomy, it should not be suggested that one side should be favoured over the other. Indeed, at the time of the film's release, there existed complex debates around, on the one hand, the efficacy and necessity of traditionalism including familial allegiance, religious connectivity and generational imperatives, while on the other hand, the benefits of a more forward-focused, self-oriented ethos associated with modernity were equally questioned. To say that the Castevets are more stable does not make them 'good', just as to say that they are affiliated with a witches' coven does not automatically make them 'evil'.

Roman Castevet was born in the apartment in which he now resides and is carrying on his father's work in attempting to conjure the Devil. Minnie, his wife, is a devoted partner who aids him by taking care of his physical needs while also supporting his spirituality through offering advice and counsel as regards important decisions made by his coven. Surrounding the Castevets are Roman's religious followers, members of his spiritual circle who unquestioningly support the couple and their mission, thus forming a connected and committed community. As Tony Williams has suggested, the Castevets are portrayed as being both spiritually and historically connected. Here, Satanism represents "*another older religious order, having its own religious rites alongside the Catholic ones. The Castevets represent the historical, knowing older thespians, practicing an ancient religion [...] Satanism and Catholicism are presented as equally conservative.*"<sup>18</sup>

Like Williams, Beverle Houston and Marsha Kinder discuss *Rosemary's Baby* as articulating an analogous relationship between Satanism and Christianity: "*The story takes the traditional Christ myth and dresses it in its equally traditional Satanic disguise [...] with the divine figure as father of the child, Rosemary as the chosen vessel, the starting of the new era with the birth of the messiah, and the adoration of the child.*"<sup>19</sup> The connection between Satanism and Catholicism is a key trope throughout the film. (The Castevets worship Satan and desire to bring about the birth of the Anti-Christ, but they are never actually referred to as being Satanists. They are consistently regarded as witches and their community as a coven. This is symptomatic of the film's production in an era when Satanism and witchcraft were regarded as synonymous). This feeds into the debate over the efficacy of religious belief versus an isolating secularism. The Castevets, because they do not exist in isolation, and have the benefit of faith and faith community to support their cause, manage to get what they want.

The link between the holy ring of the Pope and the holy amulet of the Castevet coven, and the Devil's assumption of corporeal form to procreate with a mortal woman, suggest obvious parallels between Catholicism and Satanism. Rosemary conceives the Anti-Christ in a non-consensual version of the Immaculate Conception, whilst the child's birth takes place

---

<sup>18</sup> Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, rev. ed., 2014, p. 102.

<sup>19</sup> Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston, *Close-Up: A Critical Perspective on Film*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, p. 17.

in a communal setting surrounded by gift-bearing travellers who have conducted a pilgrimage to witness the new-born saviour, a scene similar to the Biblical depiction of the gifts of the magi. Kinder and Houston suggest a still broader symbolism: *"In the extraordinarily powerful scene where Rosemary conceives the son of Satan, there is a merging of images from at least three mythologies: Satan and the witches from the demonic, the Pope and Michelangelo's creation of Adam from traditional Christianity, and the Kennedyesque yachting captain from the modern myth of power."*<sup>20</sup>

The allusion to the Kennedys in the second dream acts in a similar way, foregrounding the importance of faith to culture. Indeed, not only was Kennedy famously the first Catholic President of the United States, and both his campaign and his dissenters were concerned with his spiritual affiliation above most other issues, but once elected, he continued to point to the importance of religious affiliation. In his Inaugural Address of 20 January 1961, for example, Kennedy makes manifest his beliefs: *"We observe today not a victory of a party, but a celebration of freedom – symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning – signifying renewal, as well as change ... The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty in all forms of human life. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own."*<sup>21</sup>

The President insisted that Americans begin to realize the potential that was inherited from the revolutionary war, suggesting that they look to the past to secure the future of the country. Finally, by invoking the Creator, Kennedy seemed to evince not only a social and political imperative, but a moral one as well, a belief that was rooted in religion as much as in historical nationalism. Indeed, these values are lost on the protagonists of *Rosemary's Baby*. They are groundless, and alone without tradition, historical connectivity or faith to guide them. This representation has been alluded to, though not thoroughly analysed, by authors such as Carol Clover and Mark Jancovich. Contrasting *"White Science"* and *"Black Magic"* in her discussion of the horror film of the 1960s and 1970s, Clover suggests of their religious themes that the latter *"refers to Satanism, voodoo, spiritualism, and folk variants of Roman Catholicism. A world of crosses, holy water, séances, candles, prayer, exorcism, strings of garlic, beheaded chickens, and the like [...]"*<sup>22</sup>

Although Williams, Clover, and Jancovich allude to the conservative nature of Satanism as it is presented in the mid-1960s and 1970s horror film generally, and in *Rosemary's Baby* in particular, they do not go into much detail with regard to why this might be so. This is

---

<sup>20</sup> Kinder and Houston, *Close-Up*, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> John F. Kennedy, 'Inaugural Address', John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address>, accessed 19 October 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton University Press, rev. ed., 2015, p. 66.

because, for these authors specifically, as for the overall academic discourse concerning this time-period and the horror texts it produced, a religious thematic does not serve as a primary concern, even though in this period the efficacy of traditional spiritual affiliation was under heated debate within the United States. Indeed, rather than simply being an example of a repressive institution rejected by the modernist ethos – a theory espoused by not only Williams, Clover and Jancovich, but equally by commentators such as Robin Wood, Vivian Sobchack and Barbara Creed – it is specifically congregational religion, represented in the unlikely guise of a witches' coven, that is instead defined as the chief grounding mechanism for the Castevets. Thus, while the loss of religion (in the form of a more traditional faith like Catholicism) results in the isolation and unhinging of the protagonist it is the affiliation to a religious orthodoxy that allows for the stabilisation of the individual, in this case the Castevets, a grounding that is strong enough to potentially take over the world.

### **The Gothic and the Demonic**

---

Contemporary cultural debates about the efficacy of traditionalism versus modernity played out as a dichotomy between self-definition and consumerism on the one hand, and religious and familial connectivity on the other, thus form the central conflict in *Rosemary's Baby*. Indeed, when analysing the reception of the film, it is specifically the configuration of faith communities that appears to make the film particularly controversial. Following the film's release, *The New York Times* reported that the film's condemnation by the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures (formerly the National League of Decency) was a result of the way in which traditional Christianity was depicted and aligned with Satanism: "*Much more serious [than the scenes of nudity] is the perverted use that the film makes of fundamental Christian beliefs surrounding the birth of Christ and its mockery of religious persons and practices.*" The aesthetic value of the film seemed to pose an additional threat, as the National Catholic Office went on to suggest: "*The very technical excellence of the film serves to intensify its defamatory nature. They [the National Catholic Office] feel that if the film becomes a big money maker it will mean a further decline in the influence of the group.*" The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, meanwhile, gave the film an 'O' (for 'morally offensive'): "*the production values are topnotch and performances completely chilling, but the movie's inverted Christian elements denigrate religious beliefs.*"<sup>23</sup>

The allegedly sacrilegious nature of the film may thus rest on its blurring of the traditional dichotomy between 'good' and 'evil', on the fact that there is no one truly on the side of the angels and thus equipped to do battle with their nefarious adversaries, and on its depiction of the very issue of 'faith' itself. This is a common trope of most horror films of the later 1960s and the following decade. To name but a few, films such as Thompson's *Eye of the Devil* (UK, 1967), Russell's *The Devils* (UK, 1971), Romero's *Season of the Witch* (USA, 1972), Fredkin's

---

<sup>23</sup> 'Rosemary's Baby Given a 'C' Rating by Catholic Office', *The New York Times*, 21 June 1968 p. 45, <https://www.nytimes.com/1968/06/21/archives/-rosemarys-baby-given-a-c-rating-by-catholic-office.html>.

*The Exorcist* (USA, 1973), Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (UK, 1973), Fuest's *The Devil's Rain* (Mex/USA, 1975), Donner's *The Omen* (UK/USA, 1976), and Rosenberg's *The Amityville Horror* (USA, 1979), all seem to share a similar concern with the struggle between faith and a lack thereof, whilst upholding a concern with the importance of belief above all else as being efficacious. Where this faith community's relationship to the outside world is concerned, suggests the book which the dying Hutch leaves as a warning for Rosemary, "*The stubborn fact remains that whether or not we believe, they most assuredly do.*"<sup>24</sup> The absence of belief, for its part, seems to typify the contemporary condition in which the protagonists find themselves. For Bell this increased popularisation of secularism and atheism within modern culture will lead to a future in which religion will inevitably be re-incorporated.<sup>25</sup> What is interesting in *Rosemary's Baby*, allowing for the modern condition of disbelief, is that the sacred is in fact briefly recovered in the form of a reference to Pope Paul VI's October 1965 visit to New York, with the city flocking to attend a Votive Mass at Yankee Stadium – TV coverage of which, however, appears to impress Guy largely for its commercial possibilities.

Even though many textual indicators – location, and the establishment of textual protagonist and antagonist – seem to suggest the foregrounding of a modernist agenda, the ending, as well as the thematic concern with the efficacy of organised religion, further complicates the text's ambiguous relationship to these contemporary debates. If it could be argued that Polanski's work reveals "*The terrors of everyday life, which prise apart the bland surfaces of common interaction to disclose the anxieties and aggressions which lie beneath*"<sup>26</sup>, then this concern is one that is not only thematically but also visually reinforced, through the aesthetic connection between *Rosemary's Baby* and the Gothic. In an early scene in the film, described earlier, a tracking shot follows the Woodhouses when they view the 'Bramford' for the first time. Although this shot establishes them as being the protagonists by following their every move, the camera pauses with Guy as he looks at a man appearing to drill a peephole in the door to one of the apartments. This moment could be read in a number of ways. First, it could be seen as foregrounding the notion that the spectator needs to look deeper and beyond the surface, that all is not what it seems. Additionally, this scene could be regarded as foregrounding the way in which the interiors of *Rosemary's Baby* will increasingly dominate as the labyrinthine 'Bramford' becomes a central 'character' of the film.

Indeed, from the very opening title sequence of the film, the iconic Gothic edifice of the 'Bramford' begs to be considered as an important 'character'. By contrast with iconic modern structures like the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings, the 'Bramford' is old, antiquated, and falling apart. It is not angular and linear, but instead overly decorous, rococo, and replete with long winding corridors, mazes and hidden corridors that confuse, isolate, and entrap, a locus for supernatural occurrences and the macabre. The exteriors of the 'Bramford' were filmed at New York's Dakota apartment building, where John Lennon was

---

<sup>24</sup> Levin, *Rosemary's Baby*, p. 161.

<sup>25</sup> Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>26</sup> Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, p. 347.

shot dead in 1980. Although not of the Gothic revival period *per se*, its steep sloping roofs and decorative tracery were inspired by the movement and its popular vernacular during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the building was constructed. The house is, as Punter suggests, much like a Gothic castle in its emphasis on mystery and terror: "A common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural... Gothic fiction is the fiction of the haunted castle, of heroines preyed upon by unspeakable terrors."<sup>27</sup> Hutch is not keen on "black Bramford", advising Guy and Rosemary of its "unpleasant reputation turn of the century", and reminding them of notorious former residents such as Pearl Ames, Keith Kennedy, the Trench sisters – "proper Victorian ladies" who cooked and ate several young children, including a niece. Adrian Mercato, who practised witchcraft, conjured up the Devil, and was attacked by fellow residents for his pains, is eventually revealed to be the father of Roman Castevet. "In '59", reports Hutch, "a dead infant was found, wrapped in newspaper, in the basement".

As in most Gothic narratives, the internal world is one that is dangerous, steeped in the supernatural, a world in which the unspeakable is actualized. Indeed, while Guy exists in the public sphere of entertainment and commerce, Rosemary, while somewhat affected by the external world of the media, is nonetheless increasingly relegated to interior spaces, much like her Gothic predecessors, and thus slowly driven to the brink of madness. These fears are portrayed on the surface as having a 'scientific' basis, as the product of a woman under the influence of what is, says Guy, following Dr. Sapirstein, "Prepartum – I don't know – some kind of hysteria". The narrative does, in fact, follow Rosemary in her actions and thoughts, unlike any of the other characters, and information is only revealed as she is made aware of it. We are thus left to wonder whether she is truly under threat from the Castevet coven, or simply prey to deluded fantasies. In fact, this seems to be the most common of academic readings of the film. Authors such as Lucy Fisher and Virginia Wright Wexman approach it from a feminist perspective that focuses on the victimization and rape of Rosemary, even as others, such as Mark Jancovich, Robin Wood, and Carol Clover, suggest that, like so many from the period, the film is the product of an overarching concern with heteronormative, phallogentric patriarchy.

Equally, there is a constant questioning of appearances: the attractive husband with ugly intentions, a grandfatherly neighbour at the head of a witches' coven, the kindly and well-respected obstetrician in league with Satan. Nothing is, in fact as it seems, and thus the visual symbol of the peep-hole calls for a deeper look beyond the rational world of the obvious into a realm where superstition and the supernatural abound, all housed within the architecture of the Gothic. Here, it could be argued, the supernatural is real, and those who believe gain strength, even while those who doubt are thus weakened by their denial of this possibility and are destined to succumb to its will. Even while isolated aesthetically, however, the thematic concerns of the Gothic can be seen to be directly commenting upon its socio-political milieu, a point made by Punter when he suggests that the Gothic arose in a climate

---

<sup>27</sup> Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, p. 1.



that saw a shift in cultural values toward the rational, the scientific, and where in an attempt to "eschew the contemporary world", the Gothic became defined as privileging the primitive: "The Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilised values and a well-regarded society."<sup>28</sup>

The movement away from faith, however, as Punter also points out, not only increased a focus on the individuated self, thus adding to the debate over the place of religion in relationship to the hedonism of commodification. Another characteristic of post-Enlightenment secularisation, as Punter suggests, was the favouring of the rational over the supernatural. However, this has a secondary problematic consequence, for while science seeks to answer questions as to *how* the world functions, it cannot address the question as to *why*. For Punter, the fear that is exhibited in the Gothic results from the attempt to bring the rational to bear in relation to all aspects of social and political life: "To consider the passions and the emotions as mere subject faculties to be brought under the sway of an all-dominant reason, as the Enlightenment thinkers did, will render those faculties all the more incomprehensible."<sup>29</sup>

This exclusion is not reducible to passions and emotions, however, but to spiritual beliefs as well. Indeed, Noel Carroll, like Punter, supports the notion that the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, was in fact in direct opposition to religious faith, which presumes a belief in or at least an acceptance of the supernatural. As Carroll suggests, "Reason was elevated as the major faculty and whatever hindered its flourishing was denounced. Religion was a special object of distrust because it valued faith and revelation over reason."<sup>30</sup> If, as Punter suggests, the Gothic was an attack on the privileging of the rational by means of the occult and the supernatural, then a new wave of Gothic began to emerge two hundred years later, at the end of the era of modernity, in response to another paradigm involving the nature of, and affiliation with, spiritual belief systems.

Andrew Tudor argues that the 1970s represents a boom period for the supernatural horror film, especially in relation to religion, a concern shared by Punter: "It is of course thoroughly understandable that alongside the development of the 'traditional' horror film there should have arisen a genre more designed to cope with specifically contemporary perceptions of terror: what is harder to understand is that in the 1970s both of these forms appear to have been temporarily supplanted at least in terms of commercial success by a third form, which returns to the age-old themes of Satanism and possession [...] The first important exponent of the form was Roman Polanski himself in 'Rosemary's Baby', but a more typical example is 'The Exorcist' (1973), directed by William Friedkin from a book by W.P. Blatty."<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Punter, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1989; Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, p. 369.

However, such a concern may not represent a third form, but instead, to a certain extent, a shared thematic and formal sensibility reminiscent of the Gothic tradition, and equally suggestive of the integral relationship between religion and the horror film of the Sixties and Seventies.

### Conclusions

---

*Rosemary's Baby* presents a thematic and aesthetic concern that offers up a dichotomy between more traditional, historical imperatives such as congregational spirituality and familial legacy, and the forward-looking, individualistic foci of modernity. Thus, in many ways the film provides a locus for the essential debates of the era with regard to what will come next – a return of the traditions of the past, or a furthering of the concerns with a heterodox future-focused agenda that may be aligned with modernity. I have suggested that these debates are addressed not only through the thematic conflict presented by protagonists and antagonists themselves, but also in the way in which these conflicts are presented aesthetically in terms of form. Indeed, this textual constellation has at once been linked both to the Gothic in its creation of labyrinthine interior spaces in which chaotic supernatural elements abound, and to modernity through its presentation of the exterior universe of New York City.

Thus, like the aesthetics and the thematic, *Rosemary's Baby*, may be seen to span the new and the old, the traditional and the contemporary. Indeed, religion and religious discourses and debates thus not only form an essential element in understanding the thematic concerns of the film, but also the culture from which it arose. This is revealed not only in the text itself through representations of the efficacy of spiritual affiliation, but also in the way that the film was received as a socio-cultural threat, specifically with regard to these concerns. Significantly, it is informed by and interrogates the intellectual debates of the late 1960s and 1970s over the role of commodification in the building of a stable self-agency, and the ways in which a return to traditionalism – even, ironically, in the unlikely guise of a witches' coven – could, as problematic as this may seem, provide a certain kind of solution.