Fear of the Other:

The Horror Genre in Polanksi's *Repulsion, The Tenant* and *Rosemary's Baby*

By Devon Dee Supeene

James Morrison argues in his book on the cinema of Roman Polanski that the affiliation of Polanski's films with the horror genre is a mistake, considering that almost none of his films adhere to the established conventions of horror; rather, his films draw more upon the genres of melodrama and comedy [18-19]. Morrison concludes, however, that one cannot simply canonize Polanski's films into any one genre precisely because he continually combines and transgresses all generic conventions, stating that "his work participates in fluid processes of 'genrification' rather than locating itself stably within the realm of any particular genre" [19]. The theme of being between established categories, the state of in-between-ness, is not limited to the generic conventions of Polanski's cinema, for his characters also experience an ambiguous state of the Other. The Other, as the term suggests, resides outside of societal norms, being different than the standard individual under patriarchy, which is defined as a young, white male. Despite the debate surrounding Polanski's genre affiliations, I will refer to *Repulsion* [1965], *The Tenant* [1976] and *Rosemary's Baby* [1968] as horror films in order to delineate more precisely the ways in which Polanski subverts dominant social norms. As a source for societal fears, Polanski uses the notion of the Other as well as the state of in-between-ness as inspiration for his apartment trilogy in order to destabilize notions of social order and identity.

As Tony McKibbin points out, Polanski's horror films do not follow the Hollywood standard of "shock" and "startle" [52], but focus on the psychology of the character, the internal anxiety, which in turn creates the chilling and gothic atmosphere. Lucy Fischer as well as Robin Wood argue horror films tend to focus on the fears of everyday life and dramatize what our society represses; horror, then, is "an expressionistic 'allegory of the real'" [Fischer 4]. Both Fischer and McKibbin argue that Polanski takes general fears from everyday life and expresses them as internal anxieties of his protagonists. He doesn't stop here, however, for Polanski takes the internal anxieties of his characters and expresses their fears back onto the world through his nightmare imagery of dark, disorientating spaces, which blurs the distinction between objective reality and subjective perception. As McKibbin quotes Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "the imagination is just an instrument for producing reality and that the source of creation is always, in the last instance, reality" [60]. In this sense, Polanski takes inspiration from the everyday reality to produce horror within his characters' psyche, reproducing that same internal horror into a gothic external reality.

What is most disconcerting about Polanski's psychological horrors is the blurring of subjective and objective reality, eliminating the spectator's ability to discern between what is merely part of the character's imagination and the objective world of the filmic text. Polanski's oscillation between illusion and reality "without announcing the shift" results in the total confusion of the viewer, creating an uncertainty in the accuracy of what one observes and a sense of a shared experience with the character [Le Cain, 125]. As Trelkovsky wakes up surprised to find make-up on his face and red polish on his nails

in *The Tenant*, we are just as bewildered due to the fact that Polanski never revealed this event taking place. *The Tenant* follows Trelkovsky, a shy and quiet Polish immigrant living in France, who rents out an apartment in which the previous renter, Simone Choule, has committed suicide. The film delves into a psychological thriller as Trelkovsky beings to suspect that the other tenants had something to do with Simone's death and are now trying to force him to commit suicide as well. Near the latter half of the film, one of the neighbours asks him to sign a petition that would evict an old woman out of the building. When Trelkovsky inquires if it is the same woman with the disabled daughter that he has met before, the tenant reveals that the woman has a little boy, which makes both him and us believe she is speaking of a different neighbour we have not met. However, to further confuse both Trelkovsky and the audience, the woman with the disabled girl comes to thank him for not signing the petition later in the film, causing a complete confusion as to who this woman is, if she is indeed a real tenant or merely part of Trelkovsky's illusions. As we witness Trelkovsky's dissent into madness over the suspicions of his building tenants, the space of his apartment becomes increasingly disorientated. At first the small apartment seems almost claustrophobic, too small for him to move around in let alone have people over, but as he becomes psychologically unstable, the space of the apartment seems to become bigger; however, a bigger space does not necessarily mean more freedom in Polanski's films. The bigger area connotes a sense of alienation and can be just as enclosing as a narrow space, now there is too much space and Trelkovsky's isolation is made apparent, which similarly happens in *Repulsion.*

Repulsion follows Carol, a young and beautiful aesthetician, who descends into psychological instability over unwanted male visitors both real and imagined after her vacationing sister leaves her alone in the apartment. As Carol disintegrates and delves deeper into her psychosis, the camera allows us to share in Carol's vision as the walls of her apartment crack and expand, creating an alienating effect. Polanski takes the internal anxiety of Carol and projects that onto the objective world of her apartment, denying us the safety of retreating into an explanation that it is merely due to Carol's psychosis; we are denied any clear explanation as to what is objective reality and what is part of Carol's imagination. Manuel Aguirre discusses the use of space within the horror genre claiming that it postulates two zones: "on the one hand, the human domain of rationality and intelligible events; on the other hand, the world of the sublime, terrifying, chaotic Numinous which transcends human reason (but which need not be the supernatural)" [2-3]. Aguirre explains that these zones are kept separate by a threshold, but it is the work of the horror genre to transgress the boundaries and oscillate between these two worlds, portrayed in Polanski's transgression of subjective and objective reality. Not only does Carol's apartment become impossibly larger, but the walls also turn mushy and clay-like as she pushes her hand through. Moreover, the walls seem to come alive as numerous hands reach out and attempt to grab her as she walks down the hall. The space of the apartment starts out as a space of objective rationality and then turns into a space of the unintelligible and gothic, yet the threshold is not clearly defined and blurred into one ominous space.

Sound is also used to blur the distinction between fantasy and reality as Polanski distorts diegetic sound. Throughout *Repulsion*, the ticking of a clock is heard and not only do we not see the source of the sound, the clock itself, but the sound of the ticking is clearly amplified. The distorted sound of the clock is repeated in *Rosemary's Baby*; there might indeed be a clock ticking, but the amplified volume at which the ticking is conveyed is assumed to be an expression of Rosemary's internal turmoil. Polanski once again makes no attempts at delineating what is real and imaginary as Rosemary, a young mother-to-be, suspects her husband and overfriendly neighbours are hatching a satanic plot against her and her unborn child. Moreover, as Rosemary lies in her bed and drifts in and out of sleep just after Terry's suicide, the constant penetration of her neighbours' voices through the walls of the apartment become part of Rosemary's dream. The camera tilts up from her face to the wall above, which opens up to an image of a nun and some children—possibly from a memory, but is left unexplained. The continuous camera movement works to blend the two zones of reality and fantasy together, making them part of the same reality. In the second dream sequence, we know that Rosemary has passed out and the gothic imagery of this scene—the dark and claustrophobic space, the use of a fisheye lens to further distort space as well as the people surrounding her, images of fire and demons, etc.—should suggest that she is dreaming. However, her constant struggle to determine what is taking place, along with her statement "This is no dream! This is really happening!" as well as the scratches she has on her back the next day cast doubt on the event being pure fantasy.

As stated earlier, Polanski not only takes internal anxieties and makes them part of the objective reality of his films, but the source of his horrors are from the everyday fears of society. Robin Wood argues in his seminal essay on American horror films, that what the genre takes as its subject is the "struggle for recognition" of what western culture unconsciously represses and consciously oppresses [10]. He defines horror as "normality", strictly meaning "conformity to the dominant social norms", being threatened by the "Monster", which is any person, thing, or action that transgresses or refuses this ideological social order [14]. The social Other in being Other refuses this ideological social order; therefore, the figure of the Monster is the gothic manifestation of the social Other, of what is oppressed within society, which includes women, different cultures and ethnic groups, deviations from sexual norms, and children [Wood, 9-10]. In taking unconscious societal fears and portraying them as filmic reality, Polanski forces us to confront these fears, no longer allowing them to remain in the realm of the unconscious. In this sense, the social Other gains recognition as their oppression and repression under patriarchy is made obvious.

Wood also notes that sexual energy, or more specifically, female sexuality is repressed within patriarchal society. *Repulsion* literalizes this unconscious fear as Carol actively refuses male advances to the point of murder, resulting in her psychological decline. She is shown having visceral reactions to Michael's items that have been left in her and Helen's apartment as she smells his shirt left on the bathroom floor and then vomits immediately afterwards. Her agitation is not a moral one, for she shows no signs of judgement for the fact that he is married; she is simply repelled by all men throughout

the film. Carol's bodily reactions as well as the rotting rabbit carcass that is left out in the living room invoke a phenomenological reading of the film as our knowledge of the rotting carcass creates the sensation of a putrid smell, even though one is not literally present. The decaying corpse acts as a symbol of Carol's decaying mental state; as the body worsens so does her mind. The dead animal also acts as a signifier for us as our repulsion towards the rotting corpse mirrors her repulsion towards men. Once Helen leaves Carol alone in the apartment, her situation worsens as an unknown man mysteriously enters her room and rapes her. The ambiguity of this man's identity and origins in the apartment (as we do not even see him enter her room, he just suddenly appears in her bed) suggests that this rape is part of Carol's psychological instability, but the lack of sound that allows one to focus on Carol's genuine horror of this situation blurs the sense of fiction and reality. After all, it is not particularly important whether the rape was real or imagined, because Carol's trauma from the experience is real. After this scene, one cannot help but to compare the lecherous looks from men on the street, Colin, and her landlord near the end of the film, to that of a type of visual assault as Carol is clearly becomes withdrawn at the time of their looks and advances—she is being taken advantage of as an object of the voyeuristic male gaze.

The notion of the gaze is introduced from the beginning of the film as the camera follows Carol down the street and captures the looks she receives from different men. Through the use of a hand-held camera that films Carol from behind from just over her shoulder, there is a sense of our gaze being acknowledged as voyeuristic as we are the ones following her. Moreover, the continual shifts in point of view as she brutally

murders the two men that penetrate her apartment allow Carol to return our gaze as she punishes us for our voyeurism. Shelley Stamp Lindsey points out in her discussion of the film *Carrie*, Woman and Monster are analogous in horror films "because of their shared (and threatening) anatomical difference"—women are monstrous because of their sexual difference; women are Other [283]. Polanski does not isolate the repression of sexuality to Carol's psychology, but places it back on to society in not only calling attention to our gaze, but also through the blurring of fantasy and reality; we are unable to tell what is real, because essentially it is all real—the fears portrayed in this film are taken from the repressed fears of society. We are forced to confront that which has been repressed and recognize that which has been relegated to the unconscious—the social Other.

Not only does Carol's femininity and sexuality connote her Otherness, but she is also an ethnic Other living in London, which adds to her isolation. Her foreign identity connotes a state of in-between as she is at home in her apartment, but alienated from her native homeland. As she is isolated in her apartment, she is similarly isolated from the London society due to her Otherness, which is also taken up in *The Tenant*. Trelkovsky's ethnic Otherness is exemplified when the police officer questions him about his French citizenship, his Polish accent being an obvious sign of ethnic displacement for the police officer. The notion of an ambiguous or split identity caused by the isolation of Trelkovsky from the rest of the building due to his Otherness becomes the central focus of this horror film as Le Cain states, "the ambiguity generated by the shifting perceptual limits imposed on the viewer is analogous to Trelkovsky's anxiety about the blurred limits of his self" [125]. As Trelkovsky lies in Stella's bed in his drunken state, he questions the limits

of the body and self, "if my arm is cut off, I say 'me and my arm'… but if my head is cut off, do I say 'me and my head?'". Trelkovsky begins to question the boundaries of the self as he increasingly adopts the identity of Simone Choule—his neighbours, the landlord and the owners of the coffee shop across the street all in some way or another confuse his desires and needs with Choule's. Unlike in *Rosemary's Baby* where Rosemary redecorates the entire apartment, turning it into something completely different and her own, Trelkovsky brings nothing with him to personalize or lay claim to the apartment, leaving it filled with Choule's items; Trelkovsky lacks any signifiers of his identity.

Trelkovsky's descent into madness is exemplified through his imitation of Choule—the transvestite being another instance of the Other that society fears precisely because it embraces this state of in-between. Trelkovsky begins to cross-dress after he stumbles to the eerie bathroom across from his apartment in the middle of the night and sees himself looking back at him through his apartment window. Here, his identity has split and become doubled, which makes the assimilation of Choule's identity possible. The end marks a complete transformation as the bandages on Trelkovsky mirror the exact bandages of Choule as the scene of Trelkovsky and Stella standing over Choule in the beginning of the film is replayed. Here, his identity has completely split, becoming "simultaneously the self and the other" [Le Cain, 128].

Lucy Fischer discusses the notion of a split self in reference to *Rosemary's Baby*—pregnancy as a "liminal or marginal state" [7]. She points out that opposed to the stereotypical view of pregnancy being an optimistic and blissful time, some women

perceive the fetus as an unknown, foreign being that "exploits the maternal host" in taking all the mother's resources for its own purposes [10]. This literally transpires in the film as Rosemary is constantly in pain and loses weight as her devil-child consumes her resources, at one point yelling "It's alive! It's alive!" after feeling it move inside her. Her skeletal appearance worsens when she cuts her hair, prompting Guy's ridicule, and although it is a seemingly insignificant gesture, her loss of hair correlates to a sense of a loss or shift in her former identity. Moreover, the feeling of losing control over one's body is represented by the neighbours' intrusion into Rosemary's life—medicating her with herbal drinks, watching what she eats, where she goes, who she talks to and even handing her over to their doctor who instructs her not to read, taking complete control over her actions. Roman and Minnie's intrusion upon Rosemary is conveyed as soon as her and Guy move into the apartment, the sound of their voices coming through the walls and invading Rosemary's dreams. The more they invade, the more anxious Rosemary becomes and as her internal turmoil heightens, the more claustrophobic her surrounding spaces get through Polanski's use of the close-up. She is constantly indoors (doctors' offices or her apartment), but when she does venture outside she is shot within hordes of people or cramped telephone booths, isolating her from the outside world.

Although Rosemary indeed does give birth to the son of the Devil, a literal manifestation of a bodily invasion as described in Fischer's article, Fischer also mentions that the fears of an exploitative foreign invasion upon the body are indeed valid concerns surrounding the dangers and pain involved in childbirth. Fisher argues that, especially in psychoanalysis, discourse surrounding the woman's experience of motherhood and

reproduction has continually been absent from western patriarchal culture as texts only focus on the joyful and fulfilling experiences of motherhood [5-6]. Polanski reflects the repressed woman's experience of the traumatic aspects of pregnancy through the literal birth of the Devil's son, which relates back to Wood's argument concerning the horror genre's ability to recognize that which society refuses, disrupting the social order. Here, Polanski does not confine Rosemary's fears to her own subjective perceptions, which, in taking up Fischer's argument, would arguably belittle her fears and discredit women's anxieties surrounding motherhood, relegating them to the realm of female hysteria. Fischer argues that Rosemary's hesitation towards her child at the end of the film represents the mother's contradictory emotions just after the child is born, viewing it as a "rejected alien object" [12]. She argues that Rosemary's final acceptance of her child can be viewed as either oppressive as the "dominant (Christian) ideology of mothering obtains", or as transgressive because Rosemary indeed accepts the spawn of the Devil—a rejection of the dominant ideology [13].

Ultimately, Fisher claims that the inspiration for Polanski's horror in *Rosemary's Baby* is the societal turmoil over female reproduction, for, as she discusses throughout her essay, the horror genre evokes universal terrors in the common fears of everyday life. Through various cinematic devises and nightmarish imagery in all three films discussed, Polanski takes the repressed and oppressed fears of society as described by Wood and expresses the reality of those horrors as internal anxieties. Although Morrison argues for Polanski's cinema relating more to the genre of melodrama, which is easily arguable in the sense of family turmoil in *Rosemary's Baby* and perhaps alluded to at the end of

Repulsion with the final close-up of a family picture, McKibbin notes that "if we think of Polanski in relation to horror, horror as a word reflecting a problem with the world rather than a genre expectation" then almost all of Polanski's work can easily be included within the feeling of horror [60]. These three films aim to disturb and disrupt our established norms as Polanski constantly switches between fantasy and reality without warning, never allowing us to grasp what is actually happening. These films evoke a sense of uneasiness and confusion not only through an ominous and foreboding mise-en-scene, but also in taking as it's subject that which society refuses to acknowledge—the repressed social Other.

Works Cited

Aguirre, Manuel. "Geometries Of Terror: Numinous Spaces In Gothic, Horror And Science Fiction." *Gothic Studies* 10.2 (2008): 1-17. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 15 Dec. 2011.

Le Cain, Maximilian. "Into the Mouth of Madness: *The Tenant*." *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World.* Ed. John Orr and Elzbieta Ostrowska. London: Wallflower Press, 2006. 121-132. Print.

Fischer, Lucy. "Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in *Rosemary's Baby*." *Cinema Journal* 31.3 (1992): 3-18. Print.

Lindsey, Shelly Stamp. "Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty." *The Dread of Difference*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. 279-295. Print.

McKibbin, Tony. "Polanski and the Horror from Within." *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World.* Ed. John Orr and Elzbieta Ostrowska. London: Wallflower Press, 2006. 51-61. Print.

Morrison, James. *Contemporary Film Directors: Roman Polanski.* Ed. James Naremore. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. Print.

Wood, Robin. "An Introduction to the American Horror Film." *The American Nightmare*. Ed. Robin Wood and Richard Lippe. Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979. 7-28. Print.