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# AMERICAN GOTHIC: THE ROOTS OF US HORROR

## Andrew Graves

### Week 3: Interior Shadows

*The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)

#### Roger Corman

- Born April 5<sup>th</sup> 1926 in Detroit
- Studied industrial engineering at Stanford University
- Served in the Navy from 1944-1946
- In 1948, he worked briefly at US Electric Motors in LA
- His career there only lasted four days
- “He’d made a terrible mistake”
- Using his agent brother as a contact he worked his way into the film business

Though he found work at 20th Century Fox, he was frustrated when his ideas were used but he was not credited. Under the GI Bill – he went to study English Literature at Oxford University. He returned to LA and wrote a script which was picked up by Allied Artists.

He used his script fee to part fund a new film which he would produce – *The Monster from the Ocean Floor* (1954). The film did quite well, so Corman decided to make another film – *The Fast and the Furious* (1955). He sold this film to new company ARC (American Releasing Company) - run by James H Nicholson and Samuel Z Arkoff. ARC then changed their name to AIP (American International Pictures) and Corman was made their lead film maker. In 1959 Corman and his brother Gene formed Filmgroup a company which produced low budget black and white double features for the drive-in crowd. Then, in 1959 Corman made *Bucket of Blood* for AIP

#### *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960)

In some ways represents a crossover between old world ‘gothic’ and the more modern ideas that would surface in later horror movies. Though obsessed with ‘death’ – burial alive etc. it also reflects modern issues of the day. The woman being ‘trapped’ or denied escape is a key motif, as with *The Haunting* and *Psycho* and other films like *The Shining* and *Carnival of Souls*, tapping into pre-and post-feminist ideas. It also deals other popular horror film tropes – that of the subverted family unit and the disturbed homestead.

- A bigger budget than some of his previous AIP movies
- Convinced studio heads that the house was the ‘monster’ they needed to sell it as a horror picture
- Vincent Price – a quietly manic performance

#### Roman Polanski

- Born in Paris, 1933 to Polish-Jewish parents
- Moved back to Poland (Krakow) in 1936
- Poland invaded by the Nazis in 1939
- Forced into a ghetto
- Spent the next six years trying to survive the Holocaust

**Roman Polanski CONT...**

- In 1969 his wife, Sharon Tate, was murdered by members of Charles Manson's 'family'
- In 1977, he was arrested for the alleged rape of 13-year-old Samantha Gailey
- He entered a plea bargain, Unlawful Sexual Intercourse with a minor, served 42 days and was expected to be released as time served
- However, the judge changed his mind and intended sentence Polanski to 50 years
- Polanski fled to France
- Various US extradition requests have failed

*“Movies were becoming an absolute obsession with me. I was enthralled by everything connected with the cinema—not just the movies themselves but the aura that surrounded them. I loved the luminous rectangle of the screen, the sight of the beam slicing through the darkness from the projection booth, the miraculous synchronization of sound and vision, even the dusty smell of the tip-up seats. More than anything else though, I was fascinated by the actual mechanics of the process.”*

**Roman Polanski****The Apartment Trilogy**

- *Repulsion* (1965)
- *Rosemary's Baby* (1968)
- *The Tenant* (1976)

All feature apartments as closed, claustrophobic spaces. They look at the relationship between the individual and 'the other'. The apartment becomes a metaphysical barrier between the individual and the outside world. It's often ineffectual. The peephole motif undermines our sense of privacy.

**Horror Films (pre-new wave)**

- Gothic
- Scenery
- Capes
- Dealt with the fear of death

**New Wave Horror (late 60s early 70s)**

- Dealt with new themes
- *Rosemary's Baby* – the fear of starting a family in a new location, the pressures of modern marriage
- *Night of the Living Dead* – arguably dealt with (failing) race relations
- *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* – the ultimate dysfunctional family

***Rosemary's Baby* (1968)****Roman Polanski**

Rosemary, like Carol (*Repulsion*) seems also unable to reconcile her own inner 'warring factions'. The pressure she feels to conform – marry, move to an apartment, give up her job, get married, get pregnant etc. Her need to retain her personal freedoms. For the first-time Polanski was making a film based on another person's material (Ira Levin's novel). Most of 'the horror' of the situation takes place in the apartment. The apartment in *Rosemary's Baby* acts as a physical manifestation of Rosemary's womb.

Like *Repulsion*, the film contains a rape scene but there is also another ‘invasion of the body’ as Rosemary’s actual womb is taken over by other hands. The ultimate invasion of privacy.

*The movie—although it is unpleasant—doesn't seem to work on any of its dark or powerful terms. I think this is because it is almost too extremely plausible.’*

**The New York Times**

*Polanski shows an increasing ability to evoke menace and sheer terror in familiar routines (cooking and telephoning, particularly) ...Polanski has shown "his transformation of a cleverly calculated thriller into a serious work of art.’*

**The Monthly Film Bulletin**

### **Romero and the New Horror**

When the bodies of young soldiers or innocent civilians were piling up on the news, which was also battering home stories concerning real life bogeymen like The Zodiac Killer or The Manson Family, what good were traditional swirling cloak and rubber bat scares?

#### **George Romero (1940-2017)**

- Raised in the Bronx
- After graduating from college in 1960, he gained practical experience by making educational films and TV commercials
- Alongside screen writer John Russo and other friends Romero formed company Image Ten Productions

#### ***Night of the Living Dead (1968)***

##### **George Romero**

- Stark black and white
- Documentary style feel
- It takes an old idea – strangers trapped in a house – and gives it a modern look
- It’s visceral, violent and unnerving
- Russo and Romero essentially invented the rules for the modern zombie film
- They moved the idea from exotic locales and placed it within an urban/rural setting
- They transformed the zombie from a vaguely religious/magical concept into a ‘scientific’ or sci-fi related concept
- The figure of the zombie became an unthinking killing machine and later a useful metaphorical device

Like later Romero films, it establishes the idea that the ‘monster’ i.e. the zombie hoard is not necessarily the real enemy. As the film plays out we begin to see the real danger comes from other human beings. It subverts many of the classic Hollywood norms. The young couple – our hope for the future - are burned then return as zombies. The nuclear family is eaten alive by the youngest child. The hero only manages to get everyone else killed, then dies at the hands of gun toting racists. It paints a bleak view of America.