

Toward a New Understanding of Two Films from the Dark Side:

Utilizing Terror Management Theory to Analyze *Rosemary's Baby* and *Straw Dogs*

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Abstract: *Rosemary's Baby* and *Straw Dogs* are New Hollywood films that explore themes of death and violence. Terror management theory (TMT), a theory of the role of death fear in the human striving for significance, is utilized to clarify various aspects of these films, including their use of death imagery and the motivations of the characters, and to reveal some novel parallels between the films.

Keywords: death, New Hollywood, psychoanalysis, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Straw Dogs*, terror management theory

Robin Wood points to the work of Roman Polanski and Sam Peckinpah to indicate that American film during the New Hollywood era at the end of the 1960s had entered an “apocalyptic phase” (17). The eerie blend of realism and dark, persecutory fantasy that characterized Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1969) was a far cry from the oversized insects and spacemen that had been the stuff of 1950s horror, and Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971) defied genre classification and pushed violent imagery to its limits. Because they helped usher in a new cinematic era, both films have received a good deal of critical attention. Nevertheless, there is more to them than has been revealed in prior analyses.

Scholars have advocated the use of particular psychological theories to extract the broader cultural and existential significance of “dark” films such as these. For instance, beginning with Wood’s Freudian analysis of the horror genre, critics have used psychoanalytic theory to reveal layers of meaning in films where normality is threatened by the return of the repressed.¹ As only one recent example, Jeanne Hammings employed a Lacanian approach to the discussion of the modern science-fiction film in the winter 2008 issue of *Journal of Popular Film and Television*.

Creatureliness in *Rosemary's Baby*: Rosemary’s (Mia Farrow) pregnancy symbolizes animality and mortality. *Photo courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger’s Movie Materials Store.*

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In spite of the persistence of this tradition of a largely theoretical approach to dark cinema, film criticism has undergone something of a revision (noted by Rodowick) over the past two decades, with an attempt to move away from “theory”-rooted analyses of content to methods that more closely resemble the natural scientific approach of hypothesis construction and verification (such as those advocated by Bordwell and Carroll). Although greater emphasis on methodological rigor and detailed historical and cultural research has certainly produced some profitable results for the field, Rodowick and others (e.g., Casetti) have called for a “return to theory.” These thinkers argue that a self-contained theory is an attempt to illuminate a certain kind of meaning in the world and, as such, can be used to highlight elements of significance in a film in a way that the contemplation of the film without the theory could not have provided. It is possible to take a middle ground on the application of preexisting theory to the understanding of films. Although there is value in an approach to film analysis (such as that advocated separately by Rodowick and Casetti) that draws on a variety of theories to illuminate different aspects of a film, it is also desirable to attempt linear progress in film theory and to use empirical verification as a yardstick of such progress. Therefore, with a full acknowledgment of the value of classic psychoanalytic perspectives, it is here proposed that terror management theory (TMT)—an empirically substantiated social psychological theory inspired by the existential psychoanalytic writings of Ernest Becker (especially *The Denial of Death*)—is particularly well suited to provide novel insights into *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Straw Dogs*. Applying TMT reveals new dimensions of meaning in the films overlooked by prior analyses. To the extent that this is accomplished, it attests to the value of TMT as a useful framework for film readings.

Although orthodox psychoanalytic theory has been largely dismissed by contemporary psychological science, TMT has gained acceptance because it has been validated by over 350 pub-

lished studies conducted in over a dozen cultures using diverse research methods (recently summarized by Greenberg, Solomon, and Arndt). Whereas Freud emphasized conflicts between the superego and innate sexual and aggressive impulses, TMT takes an existential perspective, viewing the essential psychological conflict as one between individuals’ desires to survive and prosper and the knowledge of their own vulnerability and mortality. To manage this internal conflict and avoid potential anxiety stemming from the awareness of death, people subscribe to symbolic, culturally derived worldviews that support the conviction that they are valued members of a meaning-laden, permanent reality rather than mere animals fated only to obliteration on death. Worldviews serve this psychological function by structuring people’s perception of the world in meaningful ways and by providing them with social roles and standards that, if fulfilled, bolster confidence that their lives will continue on beyond their physical death, either literally (in the form of an afterlife) or symbolically (through the passing down of names and fortunes to subsequent generations or through lasting contributions such as those of philanthropists, scientists, actors, and film critics). In short, TMT posits that just as young children feel secure as long as they are good in the eyes of their seemingly omnipotent parents, adults can feel secure as long as they sustain faith in the absolute validity of their internalized cultural worldview and, by living up to its standards of goodness, view themselves as eligible for the culture’s paths to immortality.

TMT posits that to maintain a psychological shield against the awareness of death, people must continually minimize threats to their cultural meaning systems and personal value. Research shows that these threats fall into three basic types. One type of threat stems from the awareness of one’s “animality”—that is, the person’s awareness that he or she is essentially a physical, mortal animal. Supporting the idea that mortality concerns lie behind the threat of animality, laboratory experiments show that reminders of death amplify

people’s efforts to deny their animal nature (e.g., see the work of Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon). Another source of threat consists of indicators that one is falling short of the attributes and role expectations that qualify the individual for enduring significance. Christians must sustain faith in Jesus and live up to morals of their faith; film directors must make films that audiences, film critics, or both, deem worthy. When people sense they are falling short, they feel anxious and strive to restore belief in their enduring significance. Indeed, research shows that death reminders intensify a range of efforts to bolster and defend self-esteem (e.g., Taubman Ben-Ari, Florian, and Mikulincer).

A final source of threat consists of people and events that call into question the absolute validity of one’s cultural worldview. Cultural worldviews and the sense of self-worth derived from them are relative; what constitutes meaning and value to one culture or group of people does not necessarily do so for another. The potential for conflict arises, then, because people who espouse alternative worldviews can call into question the validity of one’s own worldview and, thus, its ability to provide security against the awareness of death. Two lines of research support the idea that mortality concerns underlie this third source of threat. First, reminders of death consistently lead people to derogate others who criticize the individual’s worldview or simply espouse a different worldview. Second, people and ideas that call one’s worldview into question bring thoughts of death closer to consciousness (Schimel, Hayes, Williams, and Jahrig).

Given that *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Straw Dogs* are two New Hollywood films that explore rather directly the themes of death, immortality, and ambivalence over the physical body, TMT can offer new insights into why these works—and other examples of dark cinema—continue to resonate with critics and audiences.² The following analyses are intended not only to show that TMT provides a novel, theoretical vantage for critical discussion of film, but also more

importantly, to show more clearly than past scholarship the value of these films as insightful commentaries on fundamental human strivings.

Jeder für sich und Tod gegen alle:
Rosemary's Baby

Straight from the opening act of *Rosemary's Baby*, the main characters—and thus the audience—are primed to think about death. The opening dialogue between Mr. Nicklas and the leading couple—Rosemary and Guy (Mia Farrow and John Cassavetes)—contains several references to the recent death of their apartment's previous tenant. The expository dinner conversation at the house of Rosemary's good friend Hutch centers on macabre acts that had occurred in the Bramford Hotel, including a case of infanticide. Also, the death of Rosemary's recent acquaintance Terry haunts her nightmares.

The threat of death hovering over the characters early in the film invites viewers to consider the role of mortality concerns in the personas and motivations

depicted. A TMT analysis highlights two aspects of Rosemary's persona: the threat of animality associated with her pregnancy and the threat posed by those around her to her meaning and value systems. From this perspective, as viewers, we are horrified by Rosemary's alienation from her body as it undergoes demonic pregnancy, as well as her betrayal by those closest to her, because we sense that the psychological structures that keep our own death anxiety at bay are fragile symbolic constructions. These points become clearer as various aspects of the film are considered.

Over the course of child development we all must make the transition from helpless animal to person, learning to view ourselves through the symbols of our culture. But our bodies and their necessary activities—ingestion and removal of refuse, menstruation, and so forth—continually remind us of our animal and therefore mortal nature. It is, thus, with horrifying effect that we witness Rosemary descend into an uncanny realm where her physical

vulnerabilities are brought to the fore. Virginia Wexman observed in her study of Polanski's work in horror: "The protagonists . . . are marked by a sense of disassociation between self and body. This sense is closely related to their feelings of sexual dis-ease. . . . In such regressed states, everything becomes an extension of the traumatic schism between body and self" (46–47). Rosemary's body—or, to be more precise, the change it undergoes as a result of her ostensible rape by Satan—is indeed presented as alien throughout the film. Mia Farrow's makeup during the initial period of the pregnancy lends her face a ghastly quality, and her performance emphasizes the agony caused by whatever is growing within her (she repeatedly holds her arms tightly across her stomach, writhing in pain). Even when Rosemary takes on the characteristics of normal pregnancy in the last act of the film, the temporarily misshapen physicality of the prenatal mother appears strangely grotesque. This is perhaps best emphasized in the scene where



Worldviews collide as Rosemary and the coven fight for competing immortality projects. *Photo courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Materials Store.*

Rosemary escapes her pursuers in the lobby of the Bramford, jumping into the elevator. As a series of steady long shots intercut with jarring, handheld medium shots shows Rosemary running through the long corridor to her apartment, her movements appear abnormally uncoordinated; she seems trapped in her body.

But the reproductive animal body is not the ultimate terror behind the premise of *Rosemary's Baby*. Although past readings (Berenstein; Fischer) have presented the film primarily as an allegory for the cultural rigidity surrounding the birth process, it is instead possible that, at its core, *Rosemary's Baby* is a film about the tension that exists between people's incompatible means of striving for immortality. The opening dialogue establishes the different routes Rosemary and Guy are pursuing to give their lives lasting significance. Guy wants to be a famous actor; he lies to Mr. Nicklas, telling him that he has been in productions of *Hamlet* and *The Sandpiper* because he is ashamed of the fact that the majority of his work consists of cheap television commercials. Very shortly afterward, Rosemary responds to Mr. Nicklas's query about children by informing him that they "plan to" have them. As the film develops, Guy's obvious frustration at his inability to procure good acting parts and Rosemary's decision to decorate brightly in anticipation of the coming baby clearly show that while Guy is seeking to obtain immortality through creative achievements (lasting fame as an actor), Rosemary is invested in biological continuance through offspring (being validated by "little Andy or Jenny") and the literal immortality offered by the traditional Catholic worldview of her upbringing.

Guy and Rosemary embrace the classic gender roles designated by American 1960s society for pursuing a sense of permanent self-worth. Traditionally, the arena of cultural sublimation through creative acts with lasting impact on society—art, politics, science—has been reserved for men, whereas women have been relegated to obtaining symbolic immortality through the successful rearing of offspring. In line with these ideas, TMT experiments conducted by Jamie Arndt, Jeff Greenberg, and Alison Cook



show that men and women respond to death reminders by endorsing gender-typical sources of cultural meaning and personal value, in this case nationalism for men and romantic relationships for women. Like Guy (whose name is synonymous with "male"), the male subjects in these studies allayed concerns with their own mortality by turning to broad social roles whereas, like Rosemary, the female subjects endorsed idealized conceptions of reproduction.

Rosemary is not only estranged from Guy in her immortality strivings; she soon discovers that all those surrounding her (with the exception of Hutch) are conspiring in a bizarre plan, led by Roman and Minnie Castevet (Sydney Blackmer and Ruth Gordon), to seek immortality through Satanic religiosity. The Castevets and the coven of witches they lead believe that the devil, their savior, will redeem them from the fate of petty mortality if they only aid him in establishing his kingdom on earth. They will purchase immortality with their souls—a logical decision for any organism that understands its impending death, for what use is a soul that will one day be extinguished?

Polanski's portrayal of Satanism is made all the more chilling because of its peculiar parallels with the traditional Christian ideology that underpins Rosemary's fantasies of motherhood. As film scholar Tony Williams points out:

Guy and Rosemary become Joseph and Mary in a new satanic order inversely paralleling the Christian Messiah's birth. . . . The upturned cross on Adrian's black crib at the film's climax is merely one example . . . [of] pertinent mirror imagery frequently emphasiz[ing] Christian impotence. . . . In her last attempt to oppose the coven, [Rosemary] wears a blue dressing gown over a white nightgown, resembling traditional icons of the Virgin Mary. The Castevet foreign guests are satanic Wise Men bearing gifts. (99–100)

The Satanists are furthermore personified as individuals: Roman and Minnie bicker when Roman spills a drink on the carpet, just like any doddering old couple would. Far from faceless monsters, they are seemingly ordinary people struggling to repress their own death

anxiety through belief in a higher power. They believe in the power of ritual and stories of rebirth and redemption just as any good Christian does. It so happens that their moral standpoint is fundamentally opposed to that of Christianity; but just like Guy and Rosemary, they are clinging to their preferred route to immortality.

by giving birth to the devil's son. But it is an immortality that the culture in which she was brought up condemns, and at the end of the film she is in a shocked state, submitting passively to salvage her primary basis of death transcendence in her role as mother. We are left to wonder how fully over time she will come to embrace her exalted role as

The second key dialectic of the film revolves around the clash of competing immortality ideologies. On the one hand, we are frightened by the eerie Satanists and their seemingly morbid goal of conjuring the devil on earth. But Polanski's personification of the Satanists and his relentless identification of them with traditional Christian-



Members of the coven hover threateningly around Rosemary. Photo courtesy of Photofest.

The terrifying effect of alien worldviews reaches a climax when Rosemary's immortality project of continuance through offspring is ruthlessly commandeered as the result of a pact signed by Guy (pursuing the immortality project of public fame) and the coven (pursuing the immortality project of religion). A union of two immortality projects cruelly subverts a third. And what makes Rosemary's exploitation so frightening is Polanski's depiction of Satanism as a haunting echo of Christianity, the cultural mechanism for literal immortality Rosemary has had inculcated into her psyche since birth. To have one's personal immortality project sacrificed to a philosophy that represents the blasphemous, undermining polar opposite of the belief system into which one was born is a sincerely terrifying prospect.

Ironically, Rosemary is certainly gaining a kind of symbolic immortality

Rosemary, mother of the son of Satan. Perhaps in a mortal storm, any port to immortality is better than none.

Having examined Polanski's work through the lenses of TMT, it is clear that it disturbs through two critical dialectics of fear. The first revolves around gender and sexuality. We are unsettled by the grotesque depiction of Rosemary's tortured physicality; almost unconsciously, it prompts us to move away from the feminist theory of liberated sexuality toward "safer," more traditional ideas of repressed sexuality. Yet, we are simultaneously horrified by the way in which Rosemary's persona is stifled by the patriarchal, old world order of the coven. The Satanists operate in the same way as all historic American and European subcultures: while the men go about the business of engineering symbolic culture, women fulfill their role of bringing new life to feed into and perpetuate the culture.

ity through the use of inverted imagery are simultaneously a biting critique on the means and ends of all cultural immortality projects. It is more frightening to contemplate the similarities between Satanism and Christianity as two potentially futile modes of obtaining literal immortality than it is to think about the threat that one poses to the other.

Although Williams pointed to the normative parallels (or inversions) between traditional Christianity and the film's Satanic subculture, the current analysis is apparently the first to claim that the depicted motivations of Guy and the coven members are just as psychologically interesting as Rosemary's, and indeed, stem from the same source—the human need to deny mortality. Rather than focusing exclusively on Rosemary as a stand-in for all mothers and their birth-related traumas (as do past gender- and culture-focused analyses), a TMT reading goes beyond Rosemary's psychology to reveal new depths in Polanski's other characterizations. Although the value of gender-critical readings, or other readings not primarily concerned with the psychology of the characters (e.g., Schonfield; McElhaney), is certainly not disputed, it is nevertheless clear that the TMT approach sheds novel psychological light on this work. Considered from a TMT perspective, *Rosemary's Baby* is a chilling parable about the dark underside of all our attempts at defeating death and a tale of what can happen to a person when her death-conquering worldview is mercilessly abducted.

The Denial of Death Brings Death to the Fore: *Straw Dogs*

Images and reminders of mortality recur consistently throughout Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971), informing the viewer implicitly that fear of death drives the action of the players. Indeed, the title itself, taken from the *Tao Teh Ching* by Lao Tzu, is a reminder that in the cosmic scheme of things, each human life is unremarkable and disposable. The film opens with an extreme long shot of children playing in a graveyard. Early on, Cawsey the exterminator points out that "I feel closer to rats than people. You know I mean their dying is my living you might say . . . us or them I suppose . . . rats is life!" Later, in a pivotal moment, the film's ostensible protagonist David Sumner (Dustin Hoffman) discovers the beloved black cat of his wife Amy (Susan George) hung in their bedroom closet.

Cawsey's quote and the killing of the cat not only serve as mortality reminders but also establish the film's theme of humanity's deep ambivalence over our animal nature. As critic Stephen Prince wrote, "Peckinpah observed . . . [that *Straw Dogs*] is about 'what can happen when you deny your basic instincts and drives,' and he professed to believe that 'it's wrong—and dangerous—to refuse to acknowledge the animal nature of man'" (104). A TMT perspective complements Peckinpah's analysis with the insights that people deny their animal nature by shoring up self-esteem in the context of a particular cultural worldview (the how), and they do so to satisfy a more fundamental motivation to deny their mortality (the why). In other words, people invest in systems of cultural meaning and personal value to convince themselves that their lives amount to more than the lives of mere mortal animals. Encounters with foreign systems of animality denial and self-esteem striving thus threaten psychological constructs that operate to protect the individual from the awareness of life's finitude. From this perspective we can view the psychological tension running through *Straw Dogs* as stemming from conflicts between competing systems of meaning and value that the characters embrace to deny their own mortality.

A TMT reading moves beyond past scholarship on *Straw Dogs* to show how truly complex the film is. The initial wave of critical reactions to the film (headed up by Pauline Kael) oversimplified its message, dismissing it as a "fascist" work glorifying violence and rape in the guise of amateur sociobiology, with an obvious (and wrong) message on man's instinct to defend his territory and woman's instinct to enjoy abuse. Revisionist criticism of the past couple decades (e.g., Bliss's discussion) has swung in the opposite direction, attempting to salvage the film's credibility by emphasizing Peckinpah's claim that David is the true villain of the piece, paying short shrift to the motivations of the other characters, and sugarcoating Amy as a martyr. More extreme interpretations have even stripped the other characters of their agency, making David responsible for the murder of Amy's cat or painting the Hedden gang as mere projections of David's Jungian shadow (see Prince for further discussion). The TMT perspective reveals greater complexity in a story that interweaves several characters, their different strategies for navigating mortal existence, and the devastation that erupts when those strategies are pitted against each other.

David, Amy, and the local gang that continually encroaches on the couple's isolation at Trencher's Farm all see the world through different lenses, and they ultimately become entangled in a vicious circle of psychological and (finally) physical threats engendered by the clashing of irreconcilable systems for obtaining self-worth. The film's two protagonists cope with their animality in largely incompatible ways. David tries to repress completely, garnering self-esteem from intellectual accomplishments as a professor of mathematics. He has established his sense of self-worth in the liberal American culture of the 1960s, where intellect was celebrated as measured through academic success and pacifism was a virtue. In contrast, Amy embraces her physicality and obtains a sense of self-worth primarily from her physical attractiveness and sexual prowess. The local roughs ascribe to a third, more primitive worldview in which self-worth is based on concepts of virility

and physical domination. David and the roughs accrue self-esteem through value systems on opposite ends of an "animality continuum": David represses, whereas the gang incorporates animalistic violence and sexuality into their worldview. Amy lies somewhere between her husband and childhood mates (the gang) on this continuum. Although she has positively integrated her physicality into her sense of self-worth and is to an extent a product of the village, she has also married David, suggesting that she is seeking some affirmation in the intellectual realm. Her concept of sexuality has clearly been influenced by the American sexual revolution, differentiating it from the patriarchal sexuality of the villagers.

It is worth pausing to further explore these different modes of self-esteem striving and the ways in which they incorporate or reject implications of our animality, as a TMT perspective reveals that their incompatibility drives the entire film's development. David is constantly attempting to sublimate, perpetually busying himself with the cultural artifacts and orderly routines that humanity has designed to lull itself into the comforting thought that we are purely rational, impartially analytic beings that have brought structure and security into the chaos of the animal kingdom. For example, early in the film, while in the apparent throes of passion, David suddenly frustrates Amy by interrupting to set his alarm clock. The extent to which David denies mortality by imposing artificial order and structure is also epitomized in the bird-hunting scene, in which he clumsily props up a dead bird in a bush as if it were still alive.

Amy, in contrast, has embraced her animal body as an important source of self-esteem. She is seen engaging in bold sexual behavior with David—and also with Tom Hedden's gang. At the conclusion of the argument scene in which the dissatisfied couple debate their reasons for coming to Trencher's Farm, Amy walks up the stairs and drops her sweater provocatively onto David's head below, defiantly exposing herself to workmen outside their house a few seconds later. Amy's sexuality is not her sole source of self-esteem or

identity, but it seems to be her primary one. Peckinpah draws attention to this aspect of Amy partly to make clear that she is much more comfortable with, and garners a greater sense of self-worth from, her physicality than the animality-denying David does from his.

While David evaluates himself on an almost exclusively intellectual plane to

phisticate like himself. In another sense, he tries to convert her to his worldview and value system. He has persuaded her to take up the intellectually legitimate activity of chess (a “higher” symbolic form of warfare—evidence that David subscribes to masculine ideologies of domination in sublimated form). When Amy and David are in bed, the chess-

holds their own as inferior, but this diminutive American intellectual, who does not have value vis-à-vis the local standards of worth, has sexual access to Amy. In their simplified Darwinian worldview, the gang believes their potency and bodily prowess entitles them to the most attractive female (particularly Charlie Venner [Del Henney],

When Amy and David are in bed, the chessboard rests securely on her crotch—a prominent symbol that sophisticated cogitation and sublimated conflict is being imposed on her sexuality.

deny death, and Amy focuses on a complex sexuality, the local workmen attain a sense of value that gives the illusion of immortality through a more primitive, animalistic system of domination ideology. These different bases of meaning and value across the animality continuum come into harsh conflict throughout the film. The characters engage in acts of aggression or defend their bases to sustain their sense that they are significant beings.

Perhaps the most obvious of these conflicts is between David and the violent realm inhabited by Hedden's gang. It is quickly impressed on David that he has entered a world in which force and violence are the ultimate arbiters. In his first visit to the village pub, David witnesses an altercation between Tom (Peter Vaughan) and the bartender that ends in bloodshed. Subsequent encounters further reinforce the idea that here, in the village, David is stripped of broad social validation for his worldview and the bases of personal value that normally buffer him from existential concerns. He has entered an alien cultural system that values brawn over brains. The psychological challenge that David faces as a result of confronting a foreign culture is exacerbated by his relationship with Amy, who was born in the town and exhibits behaviors early on (reckless driving, smooth interactions with locals) that strongly suggest she is a product of its beliefs and values. David takes two approaches to Amy. In one sense, he pigeonholes her as closer to the gang along the animality continuum—he refers to her as an “animal” and a “twelve-year-old kid”—not a so-

board rests securely on her crotch—a prominent symbol that sophisticated cogitation and sublimated conflict is being imposed on her sexuality.³

There is an obvious worldview conflict between David and Amy, and almost from the film's opening, it is clear that their marriage is on shaky ground. Despite Amy's liberal embrace of sexuality and David's enlightened intellectualism, both cling to repressive gender roles and enforce demeaning stereotypes on each other. David is constantly belittling Amy's intellect, and he wants to be domineering of her in their domestic environment; he clearly tries to put her in her place as the dutiful but dumb wife of the household. Amy relentlessly wounds David by pointing out his failure to live up to the masculine archetype, continually berating him for not being manly enough, for lacking ideological fortitude (she accuses him of not “taking a stand” while they lived in the United States, presumably against the Vietnam War), and for not defending her against the workmen's advances. She bitingly informs him that if he could “lift a hammer,” the men would not be out on the farm in the first place. By constantly undermining each other's systems of value, David and Amy leave each other precariously unsure of their self-worth, backed into corners from which they lash out when provoked—David with ultimately fatal results.

Hedden's gang is similarly symbolically threatened by the arrival of the Sumners in their territory. For the gang, David poses a double threat: Not only does he represent an alternative worldview and basis of self-esteem, one that

who once felt he possessed Amy). Amy also threatens the gang's worldview because, although she used to subscribe to the local standards of worth, she has now embraced a more empowered, “American” sexuality that is clearly not the norm in this small town and that represents a threat to Charlie's and Scutt's patriarchal worldview.

Caught between two worldviews, Amy is seen as an object to be dominated—and thereby converted to one or the other worldview—by the men around her. David sees her as betraying him through her lingering feelings for Charlie, and he is threatened by her physical expressiveness in the more “primitive” atmosphere of the village. Charlie and the workmen also feel betrayed and threatened by Amy; although she was once one of them, she has now embraced a liberated sexuality and chosen the companionship of an egghead weakling.

Torn between David's intellectual worldview and Charlie's more primitive perspective (the one with which she herself grew up), Amy is halfway between these men along the animality continuum. She has embraced her physicality as a primary locus of self-worth and is clearly better adjusted to the idea of her existence as an animal than the repressive David. However, she still subscribes fully to the uniquely human worldview that the rights of each individual organism should not be violated and that animal violence should never occur between humans. This is a view that Charlie and Scutt do not share, and through their rape of Amy her animality is irreversibly exposed. The rape makes



David Sumner's (Dustin Hoffman) shattered glasses signal an exit from his typical mode of striving for significance in *Straw Dogs*. Photo courtesy of Photofest.

Amy realize her animality in a very real way by laying bare her vulnerability as a being confined to a material body that can feel pain and be exploited. The rape also shatters Amy's symbolic mode of animality denial by revealing that she has entered a world where her liberated sexuality will be seen as a cue for bestial lust and symbolic domination.

Peckinpah forces the viewer to undergo this horrifying recognition of animality along with Amy. The rape unfolds from Amy's perspective, shot largely in wide-angle, distortive close-ups and point-of-view shots conveying her subjective experience of the event. Later, at the church social, Peckinpah gives us a glimpse into Amy's mental torment in the wake of the rape. Interestingly, in the course of this "psychological montage" we see images of David and Charlie juxtaposed in a way that suggests that they have a similar psychological significance for Amy (for further discussion, see Prince). From our current perspective, Amy is realizing that David's manipulative belittlement and condescending attempts to alter her behavior have affected her in ways as psychologically devastating as Charlie's physical and sexual abuse has. Amy understands that

both men are beating her, belittling her, overpowering her; she is an object to be dominated in both of their worldviews.

After Amy's devastating rape, the second major psychological event depicted in the film occurs during the climactic home invasion sequence. This is David's temporary mental "switch" to the gang's system of meaning and value. When the gang threatens to invade his home, David has the opportunity to defuse the situation by handing over the simpleton Niles to them. He decides, rather, to take a stand that provides him an opportunity to finally establish power within the scope of the locals' worldview and, thus (he perhaps believes), regain worth in Amy's eyes.

David's sense of symbolic self-worth is relentlessly undermined throughout the film, both by Amy's accusations of cowardice and unmanliness and his own failed attempts at earning approval from the locals (the unloaded gun he points at the gang during the shooting outing is a perfect symbol of the impotent attempt of an intellectual to masquerade in the world of masculine heroics). Having lost all sense of his value in the hostile and foreign world of the village and farmhouse, David throws aside his prior

investments in pacifism and intellectual sublimation under the strain of the invasion and temporarily embraces the locals' meaning system of pitting body against body. Having buckled under the strain of the gang's constant bullying and jeers, as well as Amy's perceived betrayal, David snaps and is driven with the force of madness to rediscover a feeling of worth in a domain he has spent his life condemning.

In the course of the conflict, David's glasses shatter, symbolizing a temporary exit from his intellectual bases of self-esteem. But David is not simply inheriting his killer-ape legacy through the transformation, as some critics claim; rather, he is instantaneously "switching" from one domain of establishing symbolic worth to another equally symbolic domain. One of the film's most critical moments occurs when David decides to blast a bagpipe march out of the stereo in the middle of the siege. This is a brilliant move by Peckinpah. We are exhilarated by the music and the combat that occurs through its duration, because we are accustomed to seeing action in cinema enhanced by an invigorating soundtrack. But this is diegetic sound; the music is coming from a source that

is visible on-screen. Peckinpah is telling us that David is indulging in the myth of violent heroism: his violence has its root in human culture. An animal would never feel the need to kill with the accompaniment of bagpipes. We are reminded of David's earlier use of the music to symbolically intimidate and overpower the vicar within the domain of intellectual one-upmanship and realize that David is still immersed in a symbolic ideology of domination, but he has crossed over into the domain of

through one's knack for comprehending complex mathematical theorems. Neither character, as David admits to Henry Niles in the film's final scene, knows their way home anymore; their old systems of self-esteem striving have been exposed as delusions.

Parallels between the Films

Rosemary's Baby and *Straw Dogs* are in many ways very different films, yet the application of TMT to them reveals some important commonalities

Because Rosemary stakes her self-worth entirely on the domains of love and motherhood, she has no option when betrayed by Guy and exploited by the Satanists but to surrender to their alternative worldview, abandoning the conventional moral worldview in which she was raised. This is suggested by the film's penultimate shot, in which she silently begins to rock Satan's son in his cradle. David is also pressured by circumstance and what he sees as Amy's betrayal to switch to the standards for

One of the film's most critical moments occurs when David decides to blast a bagpipe march out of the stereo in the middle of the siege.

physical aggression. The music cuts off in the pivotal moment when David has beaten Cawsey to death. The expression of pain that passes over David's face in that moment tells us that we've been had; although the music excited us into joining David in his bloodlust, it ends, and we realize that cultural violence has brought us lower than the most savage carnivore that kills to consume. Now David's temporary switch to masculine heroics is brought to a close. His face is filled with self-loathing and disgust—he realizes that he has not accomplished anything heroic but has simply taken others' lives. Importantly, the fuzz of the record fades away but resurfaces again to chilling effect immediately after Amy kills the last of the gang. By reminding us that the record is still on, Peckinpah is subtly welcoming Amy into a uniquely human club—the society for organisms that like to kill to music.

By the film's conclusion, David and Amy have had the fact of their animality—and thus, the inevitability of their death as animal organisms—flung mercilessly into their faces. Their different systems for denying these facts have been damaged forever. Having been violently assaulted both by an enemy and someone she once loved, Amy will probably never embrace her sexuality as a measure of her self-worth with the same degree of empowerment again. And having realized his capacity as a killing machine, it will not be easy for David to settle back comfortably into a world where one's life is justified

that relate to the core of their impact and meaning. Both center around a young couple who have just moved into an area where only one of them has a historic connection, only to encounter a veritable army of locals who eventually become unified in a cause against the protagonist(s). In *Rosemary's Baby*, the couple—Rosemary and Guy—are contrasted according to the gender-stereotypic immortality ideologies to which they subscribe: career- versus domestic-oriented. In a similar fashion, we can distinguish between the members of *Straw Dogs's* central couple—David and Amy—again striving for death-transcendence through culturally prescribed gender roles but here, also, differing in their position along an “animality continuum,” that is, by the way in which their systems of self-worth cope with the frightening fact of our animality.

Just as Guy is complicit with the Satanists, Amy is complicit in being drawn back to a more physicality-centered sense of personal value promoted by the local ruffians; contrasting David with the more physically adroit Charlie, her old feelings for Charlie resurface and her criticisms of David's failures at masculinity intensify. Guy complies because he relates to the elderly storyteller Roman and is more than willing to “sell his soul” for success. Amy complies because she has residual feelings for Charlie and her greatest claim to self-worth is her sensuality, placing her closer to the locals than David along the animality continuum.

obtaining self-worth dictated by an alternative worldview (although perhaps for a much shorter interval than is to be Rosemary's fate). He draws on his core animality to out-battle the locals, asserting that he can “win” even within the more physically primal worldview. Yet, having violated his intellectual, animality-denying worldview to do so, he is transformed as Rosemary is transformed: forced to see through the broken lenses of his prior worldview of intellect and rationality to his own animal core, covered in blood, he no longer knows where home is.

By examining character motivations in light of the desire for immortality and the repression of animality, new layers of understanding both the content and power of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Straw Dogs* are revealed. In contrast to past critical discussion of the films, TMT readings are more effective at treating a wider range of characters in each film as realistically motivated by analyzable psychological elements. Because of this, it is proposed that TMT both complements and expands on past work to extract the messages being transmitted in the work of two directors who are extremely interested in human psychology and the threats that manipulate it. Through the application of the theory, these two films have been shown to be more psychologically multifaceted than prior readings would hold, and our understanding of the cultural significance of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Straw Dogs* has been enriched.

As has hopefully been suggested by these analyses, TMT can likely be fruitfully applied to a wide range of classic and contemporary films across all genres and eras. Although it is fairly obvious that TMT can be profitably applied to films that explicitly explore people's responses to death, we suggest that this new form of existential film analysis could also reveal much about films covering a variety of psychological and sociological themes, including clashes of cultures, alienation, cultism, heroism, and sacrifice. We believe our application of TMT to *Rosemary's Baby* and *Straw Dogs* makes a compelling preliminary case for the value of this theoretical framework for film criticism.

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NOTES

1. Wood's basic modification of Freud is not the only psychodynamic approach to interpreting disturbing cinema that has yielded interesting results. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's work Creed has shown the overlooked importance of woman-as-castrator archetypes in the form of the often-neglected female monster in her *The Monstrous Feminine*. Kawin has admirably attempted to interweave (or at least to compare) Freudian, Jungian, and Gestalt approaches in his essay "Children of the Light."

2. It is not far-fetched to speculate that thoughts of death were more collectively salient during the New Hollywood era (1967–77; see, further, King) than at other times in the history of U.S. cinema, given the escalation of the Vietnam War and the relative decline in allegiance to traditional aspects of the reigning worldview brought about by "subversive" intellectual and political movements of the day. This is one more reason why TMT seemed a theory well suited to the discussion of these particular films as cultural products.

3. For further discussion of David's cruel treatment of Amy and their negative relationship, see Bliss's chapter on *Straw Dogs* in his *Justified Lives*.

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