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AMS 214: Émigrés in Hollywood

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<div align="center">Horror in Repulsion</div>

Every movie director has his or her own style of film where part of him or her self is put into each film he or she produces, leaving a sort of autobiographical effect on the audience; a brief taste of what the director has been through. In Roman Polanski's films, it is noticeable to the audience his consistently dark undertones. Plagued by his traumatic experience in World War II, the Nazis, and the loss of his mother in Auschwitz, Polanski led a dark and troubled life, barely escaping the Polish invasion in 1939. He went on to make films, which focused on complex and strange relationships between people as is exemplified in *Repulsion.* What is so fascinating, however, is the ways in which Polanski succeeds at making some of the most terrifying horror films with minimal gore. So many horror films today depend upon repetitive violence or trying to trick the audience, but Polanski merely relies on the manipulation of camera angles, sound, and strategic selection of actors to portray the characters. He terrifies the audience through the main character's mind because it is unreliable.

The film both opens and closes with the same shots: In *Repulsion*, it is an extreme close up of an eye. In the beginning, it is the eye of the main character, Carol, played by the beautiful and naïve-looking Catherine Deneuve, as she is in the beginning of the film; at the end, however, it is a close up of her eye in a terrifying childhood photo. These images and sounds immediately give the audience a feeling of uneasiness and

choosing to close the film with these same images and sounds reminds the audience that there really was not a resolution to the conflicts; it even implies that Carol's character's schizophrenic break has been developing from her youth. That in itself is terrifying. Most films resolve the conflicts by the end, but Polanski leaves his endings open, up to the interpretation of the viewer.

The effects used to create a feeling of suspense throughout the film were phenomenal. The soundtrack, for example, is fascinating. In both films, simple monophonic piano songs were used consistently throughout to juxtapose the dark and psychotic events occurring within the main characters. These common scales and well known songs make the movies terrifying because they highlights just how abnormal the events in each apartment are while comparing this to the concept that the apartment building's other tenants have no idea what is occurring on the other side of the walls and continue to play their routine piano pieces. Telephone rings also fill the film; much of the film's soundtrack revolves around this shrill ringing, which connects Carol as well as the audience with reality as it begins to fade away and it becomes more difficult to decipher which events are real and which are part of Carol's breakdown.

Many of the film's camera angles are Point of View angles. This allows the audience to see things through the perspective of the main characters. In *Repulsion*, nearly the whole movie is filmed this way, which muddies the audience's ability to differentiate between reality and hallucination. We see what Carol sees; when the walls seem to be cracking, when the hands reach through the walls to grab at her, when she is ravished in her bed at night, we are unable to differentiate between reality and her psychotic break. We start to believe that these things are actually happening to her and

we sympathize with her. We feel the same emotions as her because it's as if we're experiencing it along with her.

Another thing that Polanski does with the camera's angles, however, is that he manipulates them so that the rooms seem claustrophobic. Although it is clear that the apartment Carol is in is rather large, Polanski makes it feel tiny, like she is trapped and unable to escape. He films scenes in the hallways, which narrows the feeling of the film, as well. Many scenes, including the ones with the hands reaching through the walls and the walls cracking, take place in the hallway. This is also where one of the murders takes place. The claustrophobia makes the audience feel trapped along with Carol, which causes the audience to almost empathize with her, a scary thought on its own. It makes the audience members question their own mental stability, something they did not anticipate doing upon starting the film.

Polanski's decision to cast Catherine Deneuve as the main character was a very important selection. Deneuve perfected the role, perfectly portraying a young woman spiraling into a mental breakdown. She had a certain naïve quality about her that made her vulnerable, while able to gain the audience's sympathy. The audience does not want to believe that she is going crazy or mentally unstable because she is so beautiful and seems so normal. She appears as though she is a regular woman, just like any other. This adds to the horror of the film; this terrible experience could happen to someone so exquisite and seemingly normal. Most people believe that it only happens to less attractive people, or that there is some telling sign written across his or her face announcing the instability, like an obvious tick or talking to oneself; but the reality is that we could be walking by someone experiencing a mental breakdown and not even notice.

Repulsion is still one of the best horror films to date. There are so many seemingly unimportant aspects to the film that Polanski pays attention to in order to terrify audiences – things that many people would not notice or think about when watching a film. But it is these things that create a scary movie that remains scary over the decades, labeling it a classic. The fact that, no matter how many times one has seen it, *Repulsion* still has audience members jumping and shrieking speaks to it's quality and ability to scare. Polanski, though he does not necessarily value it as one of his best, did a fantastic and thorough production of this film, and made a name for himself across not only America but Europe, as well.