The Problem of Choice in Hollywood Cold War Cinema

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Introduction

The cinematic preoccupation with the problem of choice that emerges especially during the Cold War period can be read against the background of the much older philosophical history of the problem. The ethical writings of Aristotle (384–322 BCE) played an early, and arguably foundational, role in that history. For Aristotle, the only endpoint to the human’s moral development was death. In his reckoning, humans are always becoming more or less virtuous, and the direction of their moral trajectory depends in large part on the day-to-day choices that they make, which Aristotle tended to gather under the term habit. As he observes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, “moral virtue is the result of habit, and so it is that moral virtue [ἔθικη] got its name by a slight alteration of the term habit [ἔθος].”  

1 Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1103a16–8. Note that, in addition to moral virtue, the other component of virtue is intellectual virtue, which is something acquired over time through experience and instruction. This is distinct from the habituation that Aristotle links to ethical character.
important to the problem of choice are Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre. Of these, Kierkegaard (1813–1855) provides a salient point of reference for this essay. Especially in the second part of his *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard argues that choice and the ethical are intimately related. Kierkegaard goes beyond Aristotle and Boëthius in the radical nature he assigns to choosing, which, in his thought, is almost an act that generates the subject: “the I chooses itself or, more correctly, receives itself.” The foundation of an individual’s relation to the ethical lies primarily in the initial decision to pay deference to the ethical and in realizing the extent to which one is thereby responsible for one’s choices, which must have meaning for the individual. Rather than focus on the content of an individual’s choice, Kierkegaard is—at least in the first instance—concerned with demonstrating the importance of choice vis-à-vis its formal relation to the ethical: “the point [of the ethical] is not the reality of that which is chosen but the reality of choosing.”

This necessarily brief and partial tour through intellectual history offers a suggestive vista onto Hollywood cinema in the 1960s, an era in which choice assumed a particularly conspicuous place in ethical debates and nationalist polemics. Throughout the Cold War, patriotic jingoism identified choice as the factor that distinguished the United States from the misguided Soviet experiment; choice was something the United States had that the Soviet Union allegedly lacked.

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2 Kant reads the freedom to act morally on the side of universality (in which autonomy is subject to reason). By contrast, Sartre’s position seems comparable to that of Boëthius, except that Sartre partially inverts the conclusion of the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Essentially, for Sartre, one must act morally precisely because there is no God watching. This is an individual determination in the face of insufficient reason. Nietzsche emphasizes the crucial importance of the one who is self-fashioned.

3 It should be noted that the second part of *Either/Or* is delivered under the persona of B, who is in dialogue with A, the persona of the first part of *Either/Or*.


5 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 2:166, 168. Throughout, Kierkegaard opposes the ethical and the aesthetic orders. If one does not choose the ethical, then one is attempting to pay deference only to aesthetic considerations of action. To attempt to live a purely aesthetic life is improper.

This presumption, in turn, was imbued with moral significance that even Boëthius might have considered overblown. In their *McCarthy and His Enemies* (1954), William F. Buckley, Jr. and coauthor L. Brent Bozell, Jr. defend McCarthyism on the grounds that it helps preserve the humanizing electoral freedoms denied to those living under Communist regimes. The duo accused McCarthy’s critics of undervaluing freedom of choice in the abstract, and—what is more—of choosing their philosophical alliances lightly: “The intellectual scandal around McCarthy is primarily the frightening frivolousness of his opposition which holds that man’s choices signify nothing; that on his walks through the valley of decisions man picks and discards commitments with the abandon of Peter Pan picking daisies.”7

Consumer choice was also a routine feature of moralizing discussions of Cold War politics. On July 24, 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon participated in the Moscow-based Kitchen Debate, which coincided with the American National Exhibition in Sokolniki Park. As part of the exhibition, the United States erected an installation of a model home that was, in theory, affordable to the average worker. As Nixon extolled the modern conveniences of the simulated dwelling, Khrushchev interjected that, in the USSR, housing was a right guaranteed by the government to all, while, in the US, the poor are forced to sleep on the pavement. The following day, the *New York Times* quoted Nixon’s rebuttal to Khrushchev: “Diversity, the right to choose, the fact that we have 1,000 builders building 1,000 different houses is the most important thing.”8 For Nixon, preserving the ability for people to purchase dwelling accordant to their desires and stations in life is a higher moral good than ensuring that every citizen has shelter.

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Hollywood films of the 1960s engage the politicized rhetoric of choice in a number of resourceful and frequently sophisticated ways. Thanks in part to Richard Hofstadter’s influential book, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (essays written from the early 1950s to the collection’s assembly in the mid-1960s), scholarship has tended to filter the philosophical problem of choice in the 1960s through the conceptual lens of paranoia. From the perspective of a Cold War paranoid disposition, there is constant self-questioning: did I really choose, or were events predetermined by a systemic conspiracy? The audience likewise participates in this constant process of seeking verification by performing a commonsense assessment: characters are paranoid if other aspects of the film fail to correspond to the characters’ perceptions. This diagnostic mindset pervades criticism as well. The primary motivation becomes determining whether or not a character or a group of characters is paranoid, with paranoia understood in opposition to the diegetic reality of the film. Analyses of this sort can view the film’s depiction as reactionary, if it is meant to bolster the status quo of the US (against the USSR). Or they can decide there is a radical moment in the depiction, either because it decries the state satirically or because it presents as shameful the paranoia-inducing systems of oppression that define the subject position of at least one of the characters. Another question of assessment is that of psychosocial diagnosis. Criticism reads the paranoia of characters as evidence of the degree to which paranoid films exhibit a sort of social paranoia—the difference between the perceptual and actual “threat” of Communism. There is more involved in the problem of choice, however, than the fear of conspiracy and or the corresponding social diagnosis of paranoia.

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The three films considered in this essay display a range of aesthetic and philosophical investments that exceed the purview of paranoia and the kinds of analysis to which that concept normally gives rise.

Chapter 1 discusses John Frankenheimer’s *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), a film that places the paranoid mindset front and center and that wears its allusions to topical events on its sleeve. Set against the backdrop of international espionage and McCarthyism, *The Manchurian Candidate* effectively creates the sensation that external—and perhaps sinister—forces determine the events of the film, including the most intimate choices of the characters. This effect is achieved through the plot’s elliptical structure and Frankenheimer’s tactical manipulation of filmic and literary genres. The collision of normally distinct generic codes within individual scenes and the disorienting elision of time between them forces the audience to speculate about the causal relationships between the key—and not-so-key—events of the plot. Given the subject matter in *The Manchurian Candidate*, this has the effect that the audience is invited to participate in various degrees and kinds of totalizing analysis. Each loose end is a temptation to join the characters in their paranoid speculations. While Frankenheimer’s film overtly thematizes paranoia, its ultimate interest arguably lies in probing the under-examined choices that are a routine part of film spectatorship.

Chapter 2 turns to Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), a film that takes aim at the statistically-driven, rational-actor models that govern national decision-making in the nuclear age. By dealing with the inconceivable—or, as the film demonstrates, all-too-conceivable—choice to commence the annihilation of the Earth, *Dr. Strangelove* mines grim laughter from the tendency of utilitarian thought to exonerate of the ethical consequences of their actions those entrusted with the most
impactful decisions. Delusional paranoia enters Dr. Strangelove as the disavowed twin of technocratic rationality, which—with consummate hypocrisy and poise—allows the military commanders to engage in the fantasy that they are not to blame for their disastrous choices.

Chapter 3 examines how Roman Polanski’s Rosemary’s Baby (1968) approaches the problem of choice from what might be called an Aristotelian perspective, focusing on the relationship between quotidian habit and the ethical formation of the individual. In its shift away from overt depictions of Cold War tensions, the film turns to issues related to consumer culture, reproductive rights, and the moral mandates of organized religion. For Rosemary Woodhouse (Mia Farrow), the consumer activity of everyday life is the foundation of ethical subjecthood, but one that exists in uneasy relation to the values of her Catholic upbringing. The two competing forces are set on a collision course when Rosemary conceives the progeny of Satan. Satanism and Catholicism work to overcome Rosemary’s freedom-through-consumption; at the same time, their perversely symbiotic theologies present Rosemary with the most significant decision she has ever faced: whether to mother her firstborn.
Chapter 1. Redirecting Cold War Tropes: *The Manchurian Candidate*’s Manipulation of Genre and Critique of Televisual Politics

From being in love to hypnosis is evidently only a short step. The respects in which the two agree are obvious. There is the same humble subjection, the same compliance, the same absence of criticism, towards the hypnotist as towards the loved object.  

Sigmund Freud\(^{10}\)

I. Introduction

On the surface, the plot and dialogue of John Frankenheimer’s *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) treat the hypnotized subject as a horrifying exception to the human condition. Adapted from Richard Condon’s 1959 novel of the same name, the film tells the story of two veterans of the Korean War who were kidnapped and brainwashed during their final tour of duty, as part of an international plot to install a Communist in the White House. Haunted by recurring nightmares that appear to be fragmentary memories of the soldiers’ brainwashing and captivity, Major Bennett Marco (Frank Sinatra) suspects that another member of his platoon, Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey), holds the key to his cryptic dreams. Raymond—the stepson of United States Senator John Iselin (James Gregory) and the son of Communist spy Eleanor Iselin (Angela Lansbury)—has been programmed to become a subversive assassin-on-demand. Much of the film’s investigative plot is devoted to Marco’s efforts to discover the trigger that turns Raymond into a submissive drone with no memory of what he has done while under the influence of hypnotic suggestion. Yet, for all of the horror and pathos occasioned by Raymond’s predicament, *The Manchurian Candidate* delights in suggesting that, in the age of live broadcast television, his lack of agency is far from unusual.

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One of the classic political thrillers of the Cold War era, *The Manchurian Candidate* explores its grim view of mass media by taking a detour through surprising generic terrain, namely, the romantic comedy. The film follows two romance plotlines: a train encounter turned serious romance between Eugénie Rose Cheyney (Janet Leigh) and Bennett Marco and the summer love and brief marriage of Jocelyn Jordan (Leslie Parrish) and Raymond Shaw. Rosie and Marco move rapidly and perfunctorily through the stages of romantic comedy wooing, giving the impression that generic convention is fueling the flame rather than “natural” attraction. With no less expedience, the romance of Jocie and Raymond problematizes the origins of the young couple’s mutual attraction, suggesting that aggression toward, and repressed desire for, parental authority determine their erotic yearnings. In both plotlines, love appears as something commanded by an external force, rather than as something that flourishes organically. The unfree romances of the couples are but a small-scale version of the United States electorate, as the film suggests in its treatment of the symbiosis between the media and national politics. Effective choice in politics proves impossible in the context of the deceptive storytelling of mass media, which generates spectacle by manipulating the libidinal energies of the viewing public. Thus, to the extent that the characters do not seem to choose freely even in the most intimate matters of love, let alone in matters of great national political importance, the film suggests that hypnosis is an allegory for the hapless state in which people make choices that are supposed to guarantee their freedom, but in the end have precisely the opposite effect.

II. Rosie and Marco

Rosie and Marco meet unexpectedly on a New York bound train, where they engage in an awkward conversation between cars. They meet for a second time in a New York police
station, when Rosie posts bail for Marco, who has been arrested for assaulting Raymond’s valet (whom he recognizes as one of the parties who engineered his captivity in Manchuria). The police station scene cements their mutual attraction. Throughout the remainder of the film, we see brief scenes of them together in Rosie’s apartment. These scenes, which already feel out of place within a political thriller, appear all the more strange for the way in which they both draw on and pervert romantic comedy conventions that are so commonplace that they would usually go unremarked, thereby calling attention to the obligatory dictates of genre. The generic determination of the romance between Rosie and Marco provides insight into the way in which *The Manchurian Candidate* turns situations commonly associated with choice into ones dictated by external compulsion.

The romance of Rosie and Marco adheres to a recognizable sequence of generic scenarios associated with romantic comedy but elides the temporal duration that normally separates them from one another. By typical standards, the romantic spark should occur in the second act, with “the ‘cute meet’ between the couple-to-be, while the third act is the ‘joyous defeat’ of the obstacles to their union,” as David Bordwell puts it.11 The barriers that block romantic fulfillment are often related to the availability of the woman. Either she is already in a relationship or she is aloof to romantic advances altogether, in a way films often code as prudery. Eventually, the woman lowers her defenses, and the two finally unite. *The Manchurian Candidate* radically overturns these conventions by drastically shortening the temporal interval between “the first fumblings, inevitable misunderstandings, abrupt separations, and bursts of passion,” to use another of Bordwell’s characterizations.12 The small talk in which Rosie and

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12 Bordwell, 101.
Marco engage on the train turns to questions about romantic availability so quickly that it would be jarring in a typical romantic comedy.\(^\text{13}\) The film also revises the expected situation of the female love interest: Rosie is engaged but willing to dump her fiancé at the first provocation. Thus, the arc of their romance—moving from an awkward first encounter to routine domestic bliss in the span of a few scenes—creates the impression that an uncannily prompt and efficient obedience to generic expectation are responsible for the coupling of Rosie and Marco. A *fait accompli*, the union of Rosie and Marco has the quality of love before first sight.

To further the sense that these characters lack agency in love, the film goes out of its way to hint that Marco may have been hypnotized during his initial conversation with Rosie. The few minutes of Rosie’s initially feeble flirtations culminate in an odd exchange about her name, one that is typical of the disorienting nature of this scene. Abruptly, Marco asks, “You Arabic?”\(^\text{14}\) A couple more minutes of talk go by before Rosie suddenly repeats Marco’s question of ethnicity, which she nonsensically reframes as a question about romantic availability: “Let me put it another way: are you married?” When he also responds in the negative, what was largely a clumsy, mechanical, one-sided flirtation has somehow turned into mutual romantic interest.\(^\text{15}\) It is as if the ham-fisted banter of Rosie has, against all realistic odds, spontaneously seduced Marco. Indeed, throughout the scene, Sinatra plays his character with glassy-eyed abstraction.


\(^{14}\) Condon, 155. This question is another line Axelrod copied over from the novel. The love interest is supposed to have a dark complexion in the novel. Here, the question only adds to the nonsensicalness of their dialogue.

\(^{15}\) The abruptness of the romantic shift in their exchange is anticipated by Rosie’s insertion into the film in the scene before. Fellow travelers sit behind Marco, and he glances to his right to check if anyone saw his embarrassing failed attempts to light his cigarettes. Just as the film suggests the coast is clear, the camera cuts unexpectedly to reveal Rosie. In the other love plot, Jocie’s sudden reentrance into Raymond’s life has a similar, if starker, revelatory shot. The camera suddenly unveils Jocie’s scandalous costume. See section III for a discussion of this scene.
(fig. 1). For much of the scene, the dialogue’s penchant for non sequiturs and the distracted mien of Marco suggest a one-sided—or, at least, non-reciprocal—exchange, one reminiscent of the uncanny Manchurian hypnosis sequence at the beginning of the film. Another reason why the first encounter between these two characters seems bizarre is that it also plays on the espionage thriller trope that any attractive woman one might meet on a train is, more likely than not, a spy.\textsuperscript{16} If Rosie is a spy capable of hypnotizing Marco or, at least, happens to catch Marco when he is open to hypnotic suggestion, then some of her odd comments to Marco begin to make sense.\textsuperscript{17} One of Rosie’s first remarks on the train is that she was one of the Chinese laborers who laid the tracks that convey them to New York, a bizarre assertion whose tangential links to Manchuria and worker solidarity makes it seem like a Communistic hypnotic trigger. Rosie also delivers her address and phone number—53 West 54th Street, Apartment 3B; El Dorado 5-9970—in an odd way, one that recalls the halting, incantatory cadences of the hypnotist.\textsuperscript{18} Later, when the two take a cab from the police station to Rosie’s apartment, Marco volunteers her address to the taxi driver in a mechanical fashion, to her cloying commendation. It thus seems that whatever happened during the train conversation has impressed itself on Marco and conditioned him to submit to Rosie’s control.

\textsuperscript{16} In contrast to the political espionage thriller, the romantic comedy understands choice very differently. Instead of falling in love with precisely the wrong person (and not knowing the person’s identity as an enemy agent), in a romantic comedy, one falls in love with exactly the right person (but does not know it). The film compromises this assurance, however, since it seems love does not drive either of the romance plotlines.

\textsuperscript{17} Note that, while the film gives no further evidence to suspect Rosie is an agent, in contrast to the numerous agents the film unambiguously reveals in due course, Rosie need not be an agent for Marco to be hypnotized. All she needs to be is someone who uses the right set of triggers or catches the hypnotized subject in a compromised state. Two cases provide evidence: a bartender accidentally hypnotizes Raymond to jump into a pond in Central Park, and it seems possible that Jocie unintentionally hypnotizes Raymond to marry her.

\textsuperscript{18} Her comments about being a Chinese railroad worker are part of her rather poor humor program, even clumsier than the humor of Yen Lo (Khigh Dhiegh). Her attempt to recover also seems to betray a deep ignorance: Chinese workers mostly worked on the east–west line. She will joke just as clumsily about Washington in the taxicab scene, suggesting, “if they were willing to go to all the trouble to get a comment … out of George Washington,” then Marco “must be somebody very important indeed.” By this point, Marco is ready to accept the whimsy.
Figure 1. Marco, looking dazed before he connects with Rosie.

The pair continues to progress through romantic rites of passage at an alarming pace for the remainder of the film. Their exchanges in the police station and taxi occur just five scenes after their meeting on the train—on the same day, it seems. Their “first date,” as Rosie calls it, begins as Marco sheepishly accepts her conveyance from the twenty-fourth precinct. The cab ride to her place is even more cramped than the platform between the train cars where they first met, which contributes to the sense that the film is forcing the two ever closer to one another. Rosie wastes no time adopting a perfunctory term of endearment for Marco, referring to him as her darling. Marco, by this point, struggles to do justice to her poorly timed witticisms and her premature familiarity. Yet, by the end of the scene, he succeeds, and the courtship phase of their love plot is essentially over.

19 Or it could be the next day or so. In their cab ride, Rosie speaks of dropping Marco off at Raymond’s apartment. So they may have already spent some time—a night, perhaps—together.
As the analysis of these scenes suggests, the character of Rosie is key to the way that the film cites the conventions of romantic comedy by the letter while violating them in spirit. Rosie does not conform to the usual profile of the female romantic comedy lead. In the taxicab scene, Rosie announces that she has called off her wedding plans, when neither the audience nor Marco even knew she was engaged. Her sudden change of heart and the offhanded, cheery way she tells Marco about dumping her fiancé do not have the same endearing effect as they would have had if Rosie’s decision had come toward the end of the film, after she had been seen to wrestle with her divided feelings while the audience was meanwhile rooting for Marco’s eventual success. By the time the taxi scene closes with a kiss, there is the overwhelming sense—because of both Rosie’s violation of gendered generic expectations and the speed with which the two come together—that Rosie and Marco become a couple under compulsion, instead of falling in love and choosing one another organically.20

In romantic comedy, the union of the romantic pair is supposed to seem predestined, yet also be seen as freely chosen by both parties. However, the romance of Rosie and Marco, whether by generic dictate or hypnotic command, essentially eliminates romantic choice and leaves only the element of predestination. Love becomes a sort of conditioned reflex. This

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20 That it is generic obligation and not genuine desire that binds Rosie and Marco together is further apparent when the two do not seem destined for a happy life together but remain a couple nonetheless. The film goes through the motions of showing them together in Rosie’s apartment—which, in the usual romantic comedy would foreshadow a happy domestic union—but each scene is increasingly solemn. Note also that the elision of time between romantic stages continues. Although the film shows the two together, there is no sense that they are spending time with one another. There is, for instance, a noticeable lack of shots of the two entering and leaving Rosie’s apartment together or accompanying each other anywhere. In the next scene in which the two are together, some half hour of screen time later, they are happily having dinner together. The mood in this scene becomes slightly more reserved, however, when Marco twice suggests they marry. It is not that Rosie rejects Marco, but she does fails to agree straightforwardly. The only other times we see the two together, Marco comes bearing tragic news about Raymond. Marco stumbles into Rosie’s apartment in the dead of night holding a newspaper with a headline that Raymond has murdered Jocie, his newly wedded wife, and her father. The canted angle of the shot emphasizes his emotional distress and the disjoint between him and the normally framed Rosie. The final time we see them together is not until the end of the film, about another half hour later. This scene comes after Raymond has just assassinated his Communist spy mother and senator stepfather and then committed suicide. Rosie is framed apart from him in the shot, lending the sense that she lacks the ability to console him in the way a true love might be able to.
mechanical compulsion, which appears to demand unquestioning obedience, poses the question of who or what is determining what transpires on the screen. This question looms large throughout the film. In the romance plotline that unites Jocie and Raymond, for instance, the film reveals that Raymond’s actions are as much determined by libidinal attachment to Mrs. Iselin (and the authoritarian mystique that she embodies) as by the mysterious power of hypnosis.

III. Jocie and Raymond and Eleanor

The love plotline of Jocie and Raymond is another case of expedited and seemingly compulsory romance, but it unfolds on a much grander scale. No longer is love (and lacking choice in it) a question of two individuals, as it was with Rosie and Marco; with these two children of senatorial families, it is now also a question of dynastic fortune and controlling the country. The film repeatedly uses Jocie as a conduit for expressing Raymond’s tragic fluctuating desire to copulate with and kill his mother, compulsions that are linked to Raymond’s fetishistic relationship to authority. Jocie’s incestuously tinged interactions with her senator father mirror and foreshadow the more physically explicit intimacy of Raymond and his mother. The incestuous desires of Raymond and the way in which Jocie functions as a stand-in for them become more obvious when hypnosis enters the plot. As the film construes it, hypnosis works by activating repressed desires and associations. The manner in which Raymond’s love for Jocie intersects with the hypnosis plotline underscores the cruel irony that Raymond is most in thrall to his crypto-Communist mother at the precise moment when he is supposedly following his heart and rebelling against her.
The love of Jocie and Raymond follows a tragic course that situates the pair in a compromised position from the outset. Midway through the film, Military Intelligence assigns Marco to figure out what is triggering Raymond’s hypnotic episodes and to uncover the Communists’ plan. In the scene that follows the articulation of this counterintelligence mission, Raymond and Marco share some Christmas Eve champagne, while Raymond reminisces about his brief summertime romance with Miss Jocelyn Jordan. In gauzy flashback, Raymond recalls the chance encounter that introduced him to Jocie a few months before he enlisted to fight in Korea. This reminiscence is prefaced by a statement about how much Raymond loathes his mother. Marco responds with the quip that hearing Raymond talk of his mother is “rather like listening to Orestes gripe about Clytemnestra.” This allusion to Aeschylus’s tragic Oresteia trilogy stresses the interrelation of the libidinal, familial, and political in the romance plotline between Raymond and Jocie.

While much of the plot’s focus will be on Raymond’s incestuous desire for his mother, the film delivers its first heavy dose of family romance through Jocie’s overinvestment in

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21 Their eventual marriage can end in nothing but the death of the lovers and their parents. The feuding families are annihilated and leave behind only the eulogizing major. In tragedy, the hero must make an impossible choice in the face of fate; often, it is the attempt, in the hero’s choice, to defy destiny that end up being its very actualizer. The mistress of fate is none other than Mrs. Iselin, Raymond’s mother: it is not the whims of the gods that drive the tragic plot but the actions of the Red Queen (and something beyond even her). In tragedy, choice is not only apparent on critical assessment (as it is in romantic comedy), but it is dramatized in the form itself, to the effect that whatever the tragic result, the plot demands the hero make a choice. Love exists in the rupture of conviction, the conviction of a choice that surely spells death for those involved. The film situates this illusory choice by weaving together Jocie and Raymond through a network of desire ripe with incestuous implications. Frankenheimer’s film diabolically uses incest to weave together the two supposedly absolutely different and opposed sides, the United States patriots and the infiltrating Communists. What unites Jocie, Raymond, Mrs. Iselin, and Sen. Jordan is a common sort of passion that, whatever its source, is perverse. Communist passion and United States patriotism are associated from the start. Jocie Jordan is “That Communist tart!” to Mrs. Iselin. And Sen. Jordan himself suffers from the confluence of a hardly leftist Republican status and the slander of being a Communist. Raymond is thought to be a heroic army soldier but is actually a brainwashed Communist plant. Raymond’s mother is, of course, both the engine behind the zealously anti-Communist campaign of her husband, Sen. John Iselin, and is working as Raymond’s United States controller for the Communists. The film, as it does throughout, collapses the distance between the two Cold War sides. Even the so-seeming good political figure, Sen. Jordan, might need to be questioned. Like Sen. Iselin’s, Sen. Jordan’s residence is full of patriotic décor. The film intentionally frustrates the attempt to determine which side is good or bad—or whether there are any sides at all.
satisfying her father’s desires. Jocie and Raymond meet for the first time on the lakeshore where both their families have summer residences. She happens to come across Raymond just after a snake has bitten him.\(^{22}\) As she treats Raymond’s wound, Jocie pants, “My daddy’s gonna be so pleased about this.” In Jocie’s excitement, it quickly becomes clear that meeting Raymond is only fortuitous because the delivery of a half-naked snakebite victim will arouse her father, who is “just absolutely scared tiddly about snakes in this part of the country.” Jocie then implies, in explicit reference to Freud, that her father’s fascination with serpents has a libidinal underpinning. She seems to know her father’s (possibly homosexual) desires and hints about Sen. Jordan’s interest in Raymond: “I promise you one thing: it may be a little uncomfortable for you, but it’s gonna absolutely make his supper.” Jocie, finding that she has no handkerchief, takes off her blouse in order to wrap Raymond’s wound and exclaims, “Seriously, Daddy is going to be just thrilled about this.” Right on cue, the word “thrilled” lands just as Jocie undoes the last button to her blouse.

If the relationship of Jocie and her father mirrors the incestuous tone of Raymond’s relationship with his mother, then the political power wielded by Senator Jordan makes him a figure that can compete with Mrs. Iselin’s psychic hold on her son. Jocie takes Raymond to her house for her father to examine the wound. After he is satisfied that Raymond is not in danger, the three begin to talk. Raymond is at first appalled to learn who Sen. Jordan is: when he introduces himself, Raymond interjects, “The Communist?!” But Raymond quickly becomes interested when he hears Sen. Jordan once successfully sued his mother for defamation of

\(^{22}\) This scene is predicated on either extreme improbability, if the lake house is somewhere in New York, or impossibility, if it is located specifically on Long Island. There are no poison snakes left on Long Island and only a few poisonous species survive throughout the state. It might be that Jocie and the senator are putting on a show so that Sen. Jordan can have the satisfaction of playing doctor. In the next scene, Jocie and her father exchange a glance when he checks Raymond’s temperature that suggests there was never a real possibility of danger.
character for accusing him of harboring Communist sympathies. The senator’s success against her thus makes him exceptionally attractive to Raymond, as an alternative to his domineering mother. After hearing that his mother lost sixty-five thousand dollars because of the suit, Raymond proceeds to make an awkward, untimely request for Jocie’s hand in marriage. The Jordans, who believe he must be joking (since they have learned each other’s names only moments ago) laugh at the question. Realizing his petition has not been received in the spirit in which it was made, Raymond’s demeanor eventually lightens, and he pretends as though his proposal was in jest all along (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Raymond’s proposal elicits jovial laughter from everyone.

Raymond’s incestuous desires toward his mother are inextricably linked to his fawning deference to authority, and both impulses determine the significance of Jocie to Raymond. When Jocie and Raymond reunite later in the film, Jocie, if only inadvertently, plays the role of substitute for Mrs. Iselin. After Mrs. Iselin forces the couple to put their summer of love to an
end, Raymond goes off to serve in Korea. In the diegetic present of the film, a couple of years have passed since the two former lovers have seen one another. Seeking to make amends with Sen. Jordan, Mrs. Iselin contrives to reunite the couple she has divided. To this end, Mrs. Iselin throws a costume party and invites the Jordans. Unconsciously, Jocie dons the perfect garb for recapturing Raymond’s heart. In the scene where the two finally meet again, Jocie is initially outdoors and shot from behind, as she quietly watches Raymond sit alone in his mother’s study, staring off into space. She swings the door open to reveal herself. When she addresses Raymond, the camera cuts to a brief close-up of his twitching face, a sign that the hypnotically conditioned pathways of his psyche have been stimulated. The camera cuts to Jocie and pans down her torso to reveal the cause of Raymond’s reaction: she has come to the costume party disguised as the Queen of Diamonds. Although Jocie excuses her surreptitious attempt to see Raymond alone, her choice of costume ensures that there is a third party in the room with them. As the audience knows by now, the Queen of Diamonds is the trigger used to plunge Raymond into a hypnotic state. In an earlier scene, it is revealed that this particular card was chosen for its resemblance to Raymond’s authoritarian mother. Jocie and Raymond then disappear from the party together, and, when next we see them, the two have been wed.

While Jocie and Raymond believe their elopement is spontaneous and rebellious, it turns out to be neither. The two think they are defying Raymond’s mother, who made them separate years ago, but they actually do just what she wants. Moments before Jocie enters the room, Mrs. Iselin is about to hypnotize Raymond to fall for Jocie (presumably to get closer to her father, who promises to make things difficult for Sen. Iselin’s political ascension). But Raymond’s stepfather calls away his mother before she can finish the hypnotic procedure. Nonetheless, thanks to the apparent coincidence of Jocie’s choice of costume, Raymond falls for Jocie without
Mrs. Iselin’s hypnotic direction. His apparently internal desires are thus steering him the same way that his mother’s external commands would. For Raymond, the external control is already inside him as the incompletely repressed desire that leads him to the honeymoon chamber with Jocie, the maternal double.

In fact, although hypnosis is used by the Communist conspiracy as a means of remote mind control, its grip on Raymond is built on the foundation of his unconscious drives. The film suggests that Raymond’s hypnotic reprogramming is a mild intensification of the erotically charged brainwashing imposed on him by his mother. In the “summer of love” flashback sequence, Raymond speaks of a breakup letter he sent to Jocie just before his enlistment, but he cannot remember whether he had any part in writing it or whether he simply signed it against his will. Thus, even before Raymond’s conditioning by the Communist agents in Manchuria, his mother had vanquished his will: “I could never beat her. I still can’t.” Contrary to what Manchurian hypnotist Yen Lo claims—and even more disturbing—one cannot be hypnotized to

23 The condensation of these elements into the Queen of Diamonds is part of the film’s vulgar Freudianism. For instance, just before the line from Marco in which he figures out the Queen of Diamonds is the hypnotic trigger and is connected to Raymond’s mother, the psychiatrist begins, “To cheat at solitaire is a form of regression that—” before being cut off by Marco’s revelation. The same psychiatrist ruled out the jacks and kings because they do not fit Raymond’s “psychiatric pattern.” Thus, the film exploits a surface level connection between the card and the mother. And this is not the only such connection: the solitaire game brings out another. Solitaire might seem an odd choice of mechanism, as many of the cards are facedown and will only surface if Raymond successfully wins the game, a task that may take much time and many attempts. From the point of view of the Pavlov Institute scientists who programmed Raymond, then, this mechanism does not make much sense. But, for the concerns of the greater film, it serves its duty as an admirable motif. Unlike in bridge or many other card games, in solitaire, the card’s suite is, of course, irrelevant; all that matters is color. In a game of solitaire, the Queen of Diamonds is a red. And a Communist is a red. Mrs. Iselin is—again, right on the surface—the Communist queen who aims to ascend to her throne. As well as appearing throughout the film, the Queen of Diamonds also recurs in the film’s opening credits and dominates an original poster. The Red Queen is, of course, also a character in Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871), and the film seems to invoke this bizarre world, in a way, in its operative logic of hypnosis.

24 In the logic of the film (although in a way much more subtle than many of the 1950s Cold War films), as a Communist, Mrs. Iselin is also a sexual deviant (but so are all those in power, if we recall Sen. Jordan). The scene near the end of the film in which she gives Raymond his assassination instructions makes this connection obvious. She concludes the scene by giving her son a passionate kiss. Although the film conveys all it needs to, the novel goes further: Mrs. Iselin has sex with Raymond; see Condon, 265–6. In the film, why this kiss must be shielded from view, besides a matter of production censorship, is also a matter of Raymond’s internal censorship.
do anything one does not want to do. In Raymond’s case, hypnosis activates murderous libidinal drives that have taken shape around the figure of his mother. Raymond does not occupy a unique place in the world of this film: infantile neuroses pave the way for the manipulation of the voting populace, an idea explored in the scenes involving the political media (see section IV).

The end of the film evacuates all sense of Raymond’s capacity for self-determination. Just prior to killing himself, Raymond foils the Communist plot to infiltrate the White House by assassinating his stepfather and mother at the Republican national convention, rather than shooting the party’s presidential nominee. The film sets up the scene as if it is a moment in which Raymond finally exercises his will to choose. Events before the convention seem to indicate that Marco has failed in his attempts to break the “hypnotic linkages” that hold Raymond in thrall. It looks as though Raymond will go through with the Communists’ plan to assassinate presidential nominee Benjamin K. Arthur (Robert Riordan), in order to propel Sen. Iselin into the White House. The audience sees Raymond carefully sight his rifle on Arthur multiple times during his acceptance speech, moving it only at the last second to shoot his parents.

But the film quickly obscures the significance of the scene in a way that suggests that Raymond’s choice may have been no choice at all. After Raymond fires, Marco barges in, already on the verge of tears. He finds Raymond in time to see him turn his rifle on himself. The report echoes at length and blends with the sound of rolling thunder as the scene fades to a shot of Marco, with Rosie in the background, staring blankly out from a window in Rosie’s apartment. Marco knows that, even when Raymond was not hypnotized in the strict sense of the word, the enemy had succeeded in “captur[ing] his mind and his soul.” Raymond did what his
fractured psyche commanded or what his matricidal and step-patricidal desires required.\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, in killing is mother, he has not even escaped the directives she has implanted in him. Raymond was raised in staunchly patriotic, anti-Communist household, as we know from Mrs. Iselin’s jingoistic lectures to him about Jocie and her allegedly Communist father. So in disobeying the mother who hypnotized him and thereby thwarting the plot, Raymond actually obeys the mother who raised him.

The only sense of freedom for Raymond seems to be his choice to commit suicide—a rather impoverished expression of agency. The film concludes with Marco’s private eulogy for Raymond, in which he speaks of “poor friendless, friendless Raymond” as one who has “freed himself at last.” Faced with such absolute determination of his agency, the only internal, spontaneous, and organic impulse available to Raymond is the choice of death.

In a way that augments the sense of external determination first explored in the case of Rosie and Marco, \textit{The Manchurian Candidate} interweaves desire, authority, and international conspiracy in the romance of Jocie and Raymond. The suggestion that successful hypnosis relies on the manipulation of taboo yearnings that originate in the subject’s family life sets the stage for the suggestion that Raymond’s situation is not exactly exceptional, but rather a variation on a phenomenon perpetrated by the media and political party leaders on a mass scale.

\textsuperscript{25} That Marco, in his earlier attempt to snap Raymond out of his hypnotic conditioning, may have more crushed or confused Raymond’s psychical network than resolved it seems quite likely. This is evident in the language Marco uses after showing Raymond an entire forced deck composed queens of diamonds: “We’re bustin’ up the joint; we’re tearing out all the wires. We’re busting it up so good, all the queen’s horses and all the queen’s men will never put old Raymond back together again. You don’t work anymore. That’s an order.” Although Marco prefaced these words with talk of the “beautifully conditioned links” being “smashed as of now,” language of the psychical linkages drops out and is replaced by directives against Raymond himself. It is no surprise, then, that Raymond commits suicide, not just because of his state of duress at the time, but because he has been directly ordered not to function any longer.
IV. Televisual Politics

*The Manchurian Candidate* explores how the manipulation of libidinal forces seems to foreclose the possibility of choice and agency at the level of the romantic couple, the nuclear family, and, finally, the national community. As is the case with action in conjugal and familial settings, the space in which political action is effected is a façade that suggests freedom, while in reality foreclosing agency. In this case, the façade in question is the product of jingoistic adherence to ideology and the triviality of the spectacle-loving media. The film portrays the media, especially television news, as vacuous yet authoritative, vapid yet far from innocuous. Faced with misinformation and with the seductiveness of the screen, people are unable to make daily choices, let alone choose a president. While, at first, it seems Mrs. Iselin is in control of the awesome media power and can yield it to influence the political system at will, in the end, televisual politics overtakes even its seeming commander. The film implies that, at a fundamental level, the mass media and political process censor reality in their construction of spectacle, and whatever is driving this process, it is not for long under the control of any one person or party.

The film makes the manipulative role of the media evident by portraying it as a new tool with which Mrs. Iselin is able to extend into politics the skills she practiced on Raymond in his love life. Mrs. Iselin knows well the immense power of television and the spectacle that it is able to generate—a truth she captures perfectly in her assassination instructions to Raymond just prior to the convention: “Johnny will really hit those microphones and those cameras, with blood all over him, fighting off anyone who tries to help him, defending America, even if it means his own death, rallying a nation of television viewers into hysteria to sweep us into the White House with powers that will make martial law seem like anarchy.” But she is just as aware of the adeptness
and precision it takes to manipulate the manipulators of the electorate. The entire conspiracy to install a Communist in the White House ultimately hinges on the shock of Raymond shooting the presidential nominee as he utters the climatic phrase of his acceptance speech. As Raymond’s mother stresses, timing is of the essence. The care it takes to harness the media and, as a result, determine the political process, is evident in the way in which Mrs. Iselin entices the newspapers in the early scenes of the film, giving them just the right amount of misinformation to lure them into propagandizing the populace on her behalf. As Mrs. Iselin firmly tells her husband, “Are they saying, ‘Are there any Communists in the defense department?’” Of course not. They’re saying, ‘How many Communists are there in the defense department?” Mrs. Iselin has expertly provided the reporters with just enough material to ask this leading question, but not enough to justify their apparently irresistible urge to pose it repeatedly.

The press conference in which Sen. Iselin first makes his accusations that Communists have infiltrated the Department of Defense is the most obvious testament to Mrs. Iselin’s knack for televisual manipulation. It is also the scene that most strikingly presents the cumbersome, distortive pervasiveness of the media in politics. An establishing shot shows a press conference room in which the Secretary of Defense and Maj. Marco (whom his superiors have reassigned to public relations after he confessed to experiencing repetitive nightmares about his Manchurian captivity) sit behind a table, fielding questions from the television and print reporters that pack

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26 In this scene, there is also an instance of branding that the film is interested in dramatizing. The overwhelming message of the scene is one of simplicity: simple people choose simple things simply. Sen. Iselin, standing in for the average consumer, lands on the number of Communists in the Department of Defense, fifty-seven, using a bottle of Heinz ketchup. He moves from red ketchup to the Reds with little effort. That John Iselin is a simple man is evident throughout the film, and the film distills the details in this one scene. As the scene opens, we see him by his reflection in front of Lincoln. He mixes the simplest drink, a Scotch and water. Not only simple for its single mixer, it is also simple because the amount of water he adds drowns out the complexities of the liquor, just what a simple person would do to get something more drinkable. The senator likewise betrays his simplicity in the way he eats his steak: he unabashedly pours ketchup onto it. Finally, his talk of picking one figure he can remember for the number of Communists in the Department of Defense implies a simplicity of intellect.
the room. The next shot is of an NBC WRC-TV 4 camera capturing the proceedings for live broadcast. The sheer number of lights and cameras in the room, the cramped, television-set-like mise-en-scène, and the whirring sound of recording cameras that plays over the whole of the scene leave no doubts that the media are invasive participants in political affairs. Fed up with the patently ignorant questions of reporters, the secretary urges Marco to end the press conference. Just as he is about to, Mrs. Iselin cues Sen. Iselin to interrupt (and thereby prolong) the proceedings with the bold claim that he holds a list of the hundreds of Communists in the Department of Defense. While everyone else in the room is fixated on the argument that erupts between the senator and the secretary, Mrs. Iselin intently watches the television monitors to see how her husband is coming across to the nation (fig. 3).

The press conference also makes a more troubling point: much more worrisome than Mrs. Iselin’s deft manipulation of the media is the fundamental deceptiveness of the way television parses political events. Visually and aurally, the scene depicts a divide between what really transpires and what the television crews broadcast to the viewers at home. The visual dissonance of the scene mostly comes through in the fact that the television screens in the scene do not capture what the viewers of the film see as the entirety of the event and its setting. The television company conveys a distorted and partial version of the event, one shot to maximize excitement. From the start, the frequent close-up and profile shots of Sen. Iselin lend him an authority, stature, and conviction that we know he does not inherently possess (fig. 3). The aural distortion of reality is emphasized once Sen. Iselin stands up to make his accusations. A boom operator lifts a microphone over his head to capture the audio, which then comes through clearly to television viewers. But when the camera cuts to a wide shot of the room—similar to the first establishing shot, as if to say that this is the level at which reality is “actually” happening—it is
very difficult to hear what Sen. Iselin is saying, and the secretary himself seems confused and ineffectual because—unlike viewers at home—he has not heard everything that the senator has said. The television crew thus presents a jumbled, chaotic event as a coherent, heroic drama in which the idiot senator plays a starring role.

Figure 3. Mrs. Iselin is pleased with live television’s deceptive presentation of the event.

Underlying the power of television networks is their capacity to produce a false sense of clarity and the illusion of authority. The danger of the mass media is that it forces a narrow-minded narrative onto what is actually much more open to debate and interpretation—and the United States democratic process, in which all positions are forced into a two-party system, is the perfect place for this manipulative force to thrive, particularly in the reductive, us-versus-them context of the Cold War. The partially witting powers of mass media are a magnification and generalization of the paranoid dynamic of the film’s romantic plots, in which choices seem illusory and predetermined (be it by the conventions of plot or by Freudian psychodrama). As
The Manchurian Candidate sees it, choice is always-already constrained by impersonal structures, and even when a particular individual deftly manipulates them, they continue to have a life of their own. The framework in which the film’s characters choose who they love is just as gerrymandered and prepackaged as the electoral choices of the Cold War voting public.

The film stresses this last point in its finale at the Republican national convention, an event in which Sen. Iselin receives the party’s vice presidential nomination. In a sequence of short, kinetic cuts of banner-waving and delegate-herding, the film emphasizes the frenzy of the convention, before revealing that the seeming chaos is simulated for televisual consumption and engineered by the political machine as a kitsch-laden, patriotic validation of electoral democracy and party politics. Maj. Marco and Col. Milt (Douglas Henderson)—Marco’s colleague in Military Intelligence—conduct a panicked search of the convention space in order to intercept Raymond before he completes his Communist-assigned mission. Parading convention-goers swarm them as they attempt to exit their vehicle, impeding their desperate efforts to halt the assassination. Carnival music blares as the two men rush into the hive of political delusion. Balloons, signs, hats, parade queues, Iselin-endorsing umbrellas, and a falsely bearded patriot cheaply costumed as Abraham Lincoln congeal into an excitable, brainless mass. Confetti clouds the air as pennants and pompoms wave. Throughout the scene, the setting is fractured by the juxtaposition of shots taken from odd, opposing angles. The conspicuous presence of multiple television cameras suggests that the media is reveling in a spectacle that it is also concocting.27 The seeming lack of restraint in the convention hall is ultimately brought under temporary

27 This recalls an earlier scene, which underscores the duration of the party that is United States politics. In the scene before Marco bounds out the door to find Raymond and try to break the hypnotic linkages with his pack of fifty-two Queens of Diamonds, a shot of a television screen dominates the view as Sen. Iselin is announced as the vice presidential nominee.
control by the performance of the national anthem. Despite the urgency of their search for
Raymond, even Marco and Milt must at once freeze in place and salute the flag until the anthem
ends (fig. 4). In a sequence of tight shots that render the saluting Marco and Milt,
Frankenheimer gives the impression of a suddenly shrunken spatial reality. This visual
constriction of a space (ostensibly Madison Square Garden) that formerly appeared cavernous
recalls the earlier claustrophobic scenes involving Rosie and Marco, as well as the ill-fated press
conference that launched Sen. Iselin to national prominence. In all of these cases, the closeness
of space creates the impression that some overarching force is controlling what transpires on
screen.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 4. The national anthem halts the frenzy and compels Marco and Milt to salute reluctantly.

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28 The fact that Raymond uses this time to carefully and calmly unpack his rifle and assemble it highlights the
absurdity of their salute. Throughout the film, saluting is something it seems the army officers would much rather
not do—but they must. In light of this reluctance, Raymond’s seeming contempt for his Medal of Honor may not be
so odd. He knows there is something false about it, even if he does not know that how he got it is false as well.
The end of *The Manchurian Candidate* leaves the viewers with little sense that the characters have experienced a genuine reality, in large part because of its relentless skepticism about their capacity to perceive reality. At the level of love and politics, the film’s characters fight a war for the sake of independence only to empower forces bent on enslaving them with their own partially willing consent. The fervor of the Cold War and the passions it arouses make all of its freedom fighters possible targets of hypnosis-like control. Existence in such a world of false and falsified choice is “Hell, hell,” as Marco exclaims in the concluding lines of the film. A total rejection of the current situation, as dramatized in Raymond’s suicide, seems to be the only escape.  

All other actions are but a capitulation to the predetermined.  

Throughout the film, Frankenheimer has handled the plot in ways that seem to omit key (and mundane) portions of the narrative sequence and to subvert otherwise typical generic conventions. This works to infect the audience with the same paranoid impulse exhibited by the characters, especially Marco, as he tirelessly works to discover the secrets of the Communist plot. On a similar quest for some hidden truth, the audience must reconstruct the causal links of diegetic events and routinely speculate about what has transpired. But to pour through the film to find the clues—and none decisive enough to satisfy—is to fall into the same obsessional stupor the film dramatizes. Rendering this aspect palpable is *The Manchurian Candidate*’s final investment: it works to expose the under-examined choices—plot reconstructing, accepting

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29 That total rejection is the only option is reinforced by the writing that adorns the door on the way to Raymond’s assassination perch. The door has a simple No painted on it, suggesting that denying the situation completely may be the only way to access something true.

30 This particularly comes to the fore in the way in which the final scenes of the film fail to resolve loose ends but leaves multiple interpretations and questions swirling. Did Raymond kill his mother and stepfather out of spite, rather than a sense of duty to his country? Is he actually still hypnotically working for the Communists, who are having him assassinate his parents because they have gotten out of hand? Did Marco accidentally program Raymond to kill himself? And the list goes on.
generic tropes, failing to interrogate the protagonist’s perspective, and so on—that are a routine part of film spectatorship.
Chapter 2. Rationalized Strategy as Paranoid Decisional Paradigm in *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*

Whatever account it may give of its own motivation, paranoia is characterized by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure. Eve Sedgwick

I. Introduction

Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) approaches the problem of choice from a starkly different vantage point than *The Manchurian Candidate*. While the latter film has its fun with widespread anxieties about the potential of Cold War society to foreclose the possibility of choice with the unwitting help of its victims, Kubrick’s film restricts its focus to the most cataclysmic of all possible choices: the decision to drop the nuclear bomb.

As stands to reason, criticism on the film routinely addresses its attitude toward the military-industrial complex in the nuclear age. Critics—-informed by the madcap series of technological and communicative failures that animate the plot of *Dr. Strangelove*—have tended to present the film’s ethical stance on nuclear warfare in pragmatic terms. This approach finds some limited support in statements made by Kubrick himself. For example, in Gene Phillips’s

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32 The film is inspired by Peter George’s 1958 novel *Two Hours to Doom* (published in the US as *Red Alert*). Peter George, *Red Alert* (New York: Ace Books, 1958), 191, ends with liberal salvation, the aversion of nuclear annihilation (and in an artificial way that is at odds with the logic of the work). But *Dr. Strangelove*’s unrelenting satire demands a sublime apocalypse. Although the adaptation began preproduction as a straight portrayal that matched the tone of the novel, the film was reworked during production to be a “nightmare comedy,” to use Kubrick’s term for the film’s deranged black comedy; see Gene Phillips, “Stop the World: Stanley Kubrick,” in Phillips (ed.), *Stanley Kubrick, Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 148. The satire of the film, now widely celebrated, faced criticism after release, as well as grief from Columbia during filming and marketing; see Gene Phillips and Rodney Hill, “Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,” in their *The Encyclopedia of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Facts on File, 2002), 93–4.
1973 interview with the director, he and Kubrick discuss nuclear weapons almost entirely in terms of the insoluble problem that it poses to a human nature that has perennially failed to conquer its irrational impulses.\(^{33}\) In a similar vein, an essay coauthored by Alexander Walker, Sybil Taylor, and Ulrich Ruchti frames *Dr. Strangelove’s* critique of weapons of mass destruction in terms of the naïve faith that its fictionalized world leaders place in the communications technologies that repeatedly fail to do their office—and that occasionally are manipulated in order to subvert it.\(^{34}\) Glenn Perusek, meanwhile, contends that the film dramatizes actors’ dispositions and changing moods as something peripheral to rationalized strategy but integral to human actions.\(^{35}\) What these and other writings on *Dr. Strangelove* have in common is that the view that the film finds dark comedy in the fact that, despite the aura of techno-rationality that surrounds it, nuclear policy will eventually be undermined by human imperfection and fail to safeguard the very people who put their faith in it. The bomb is, in other words, a pragmatist’s nightmare: a strategic problem without a solution.

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\(^{33}\) Gene Phillips, “Stop the World: Stanley Kubrick,” in Gene Phillips (ed.), *Stanley Kubrick, Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 148–52. Phillips, 151, quotes Kubrick to this effect: “In *Dr. Strangelove* I was dealing with the inherent irrationality in man that threatens to destroy him; that irrationality is with us as strongly today, and must be conquered.”

\(^{34}\) Alexander Walker, Sybil Taylor, and Ulrich Ruchti, “*Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,*” in their *Stanley Kubrick, Director: A Visual Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999). See also Charles Maland, “*Dr. Strangelove* (1964): Nightmare Comedy and the Ideology of Liberal Consensus” (*American Quarterly* 31.5 [1979]: 697–717), which views the film as a warning about the disavowed irrationality of the liberal consensus that serves to legitimize a nuclear strategy vulnerable to glitches and malevolent manipulation. More in harmony with the argument of this chapter is that of Thomas Nelson, “The Descent of Man: *Dr. Strangelove,*” in his *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist’s Maze,* 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 83, which goes beyond an analysis of unanticipated error to consider Kubrick’s “interest in the aesthetic and moral implications of forms and plans.” Nelson, 87–8, also understands the nightmare comedy as uniquely effective. Unlike the satire of the typical film, *Dr. Strangelove’s* satire is largely non-normative, according to Nelson. Nelson contends there is no individual in Kubrick’s films that serves as a moral metric. In other words, all the characters are question, and it is unclear in what the situation ought to be improved. This elevates the satire to a level at which tensions are not resolved; instead, paradoxes and fantasies are subject to philosophical exploration.

While perfectly reasonable and convincing in their own right, these interpretations do not quite capture the full scope or sophistication of the film’s ethical critique. The force of this critique is aimed at pragmatism itself, which offers an ethical fig leaf to state rulers who profess to safeguard the planet by planning for the eventuality of its annihilation. *Dr. Strangelove* is relentless in its examination of the disavowed moral content of putatively rationalist forms of thought, including statistical modeling, hypothetical forecasting, and rational-actor theory, all of which are part of the military strategy that the film puts on display. The film’s comedic genius rests, in large part, in its orchestration of moments in which this repressed ethical content suddenly erupts from within the technocratic bubble of complacency—be it capitalist or Communist in persuasion—from which it was supposedly exiled. These same moments also suggest that to construe the moral imagination of *Dr. Strangelove* solely in terms of pragmatism is to remain within the very philosophical system that, when it comes to understanding the world’s most pressing choice, the film indicts as worse than useless.

II. Ripper the Rational

The figure of Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) is central to *Dr. Strangelove’s* comic deflation of strategic modeling. Ripper—commanding officer of Burpleson Air Force Base (and of the 843rd Bomb Wing of the Strategic Air Command that it houses)—decides he can no longer tolerate what he sees as the surreptitious Red infiltration of the United States. Convinced that the insurgency has gone too far in “the most monstrously conceived and dangerous Communist plot we have ever had to face”—that is, the fluoridation of water—Ripper circumvents the president’s authority and launches a sneak nuclear attack on the Soviet Union.
Although obviously a loon of the John Birch variety, Ripper is also a comic exaggeration of the hyper-rational processes that, over the course of the film, manage to destroy the world.

By the standards of Hollywood cinema of the 1960s, Ripper gives voice to familiar anxieties about the collective, wholesale foreclosure of agency. His twitching apprehensions about “Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion, and the international Communist conspiracy” are, for example, the stuff of which *The Manchurian Candidate* and countless other films of the era are made. Today, the character’s signature obsession with bodily fluids provides a shorthand for the sexual hysteria that fueled right-wing nationalism at the height of the Cold War (and, according to some, that continued to do so long after the resolution of the conflict). The fluoridation of water is a particularly sensitive subject for Ripper, who views it as “A foreign substance … introduced into our precious bodily fluids without the knowledge of the individual and certainly without any choice.” Ripper names no tangible object that has been placed off limits as a result of this putative loss of choice, but he is nevertheless convinced that the nation’s freedom is imperiled by a chemical Manchurian candidate. Fluoride is the foreign substance that insinuates its way into the body politic via the individual bodies of its enfeebled citizens, with the consent of government forces bent on eroding American liberties. According to Ripper, this nefarious, government-sponsored plot is in the process of expanding, a claim that he supports by citing ongoing “studies … to fluoridate salt, flour, fruit juices, soup, sugar, milk, ice cream.”

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36 Ripper’s statements allude to the circulating (but likely unsubstantiated) anecdote about the John Birch Society that it thought fluoride was part of a Communist mind control plot, since fluoride would weaken the reasoning faculties of the populace and make them susceptible to Communist ideals they would otherwise reject.

37 This is in line with Ripper’s comments in reference to the lack of choice people had in the introduction of fluoride: “That’s the way your hardcore Commie works.” What he means is that, as he perceives it, the government of the US is becoming frighteningly similar to the dictatorial, non-individualist USSR.
While it is tempting to follow the lead of United States President Merkin Muffley (Peter Sellers, in one of his three roles) and dismiss Ripper as a garden-variety psychotic, the film as a whole emphasizes Ripper’s kinship to Muffley and his technocratic colleagues. Ripper carefully conceives a stratagem to circumvent the president and issue Wing Attack Plan R, which will result in an unprovoked nuclear attack on the Soviets. The aim of his gambit is to force Pres. Muffley and General Buck Turgidson (George Scott)—who will be analyzing the impending attack from the Pentagon’s War Room—to authorize a massive supportive strike that will wipe the Soviets off the map before they have the opportunity to retaliate against the US. One of the more hilarious details of this plot development is that Ripper manages to usurp the president’s authority without ever technically running afoul of the protocols that govern the chain of command. Ripper pulls off this bureaucratic coup by taking advantage of recent changes to operational procedure, which he himself designed and which President Muffley naïvely approved. Although his conspiracy theories have a questionable relationship to reality, the deceptively crazy Ripper is the very embodiment of the hyper-rational order whose other members disavow him as an irrational psychotic (fig. 5).

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38 Sellers originally signed to play four roles, per the demand of Columbia Pictures, who thought Sellers largely responsible for the success of Kubrick’s previous film, *Lolita* (1962). After struggling at first, Sellers apparently mastered, in ten minutes, the Texan accent required by the role of Major T. J. “King” Kong once Texan Terry Southern, who had been brought on to assist with the black comedy of the film, recorded a tape for Sellers. Slim Pickens replaced Sellers in this role, however, when Sellers sustained an ankle injury during filming, and he was deemed medically unable to sustain the ten-foot fall astride an atomic bomb demanded of Maj. Kong in the character’s parting shot. See David Hughes, “Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964),” in his *The Complete Kubrick* (London: Virgin Publishing, 2000), 111–2; Phillips and Hill, 90–1.

39 While what he says is absurd, Ripper is a deadly serious character. The film emphasizes Ripper’s seriousness by shooting him in close-up, often at severe angles and from below. Further, Ripper never uses “Russkie” in the off-handed way Gen. Turgidson does. Instead, Ripper always says “Communist” or “Commie”; even “Commie” is simply a contemptuous shortened form and is not comical in the way it is when Gen. Turgidson says it.
Figure 5. Ripper’s seriousness is apparent in the frequent close-ups, sometimes at severe angles.

Ripper’s hyper-rationality lets him anticipate and influence the future responses of everyone from the Pentagon generals through the president. The renegade Ripper coopts their supposedly sober decision-making. Under the guise of Operation Dropkick, Ripper has his squadron fly to their fail-safe points. Once beyond this point, they will not need a second authorization to deliver their nuclear payload. Ripper then seals off Burpleson Air Force Base from all outside communication to prevent the wider military from informing Burpleson personnel that Ripper is duping them. Pretending there has been a Soviet sneak attack, he then orders Group Captain Lionel Mandrake (Sellers), an exchange officer from Her Majesty’s Royal Air Force, to transmit Wing Attack Plan R. This particular plan allows a lower echelon commander to order the use of nuclear weapons if a nuclear strike has compromised the normal chain of command. Because no one besides Ripper knows the recall code, the chance of stopping the bombers is extremely slim. Ripper’s very calculated play is this: while his bombers will not
be able to take out the Soviets on their own, once the rest of the military realizes what is happening—and Ripper helps them to this realization by calling Strategic Air Command headquarters and informing them of what he has done—they will have no choice but to commit totally to an all-out attack or else risk disastrous retaliation once the bombers appear on Soviet radar. The rationality of this plan is not lost on Gen. Turgidson, who praises it in the course of advocating the benefits of preemptive strike.

Arguably, the character of Ripper exists to undermine the facile, ideological equation of rationality and sanity. Ripper’s rationality is never depicted as antithetical to his paranoia regarding Communist infiltration. Indeed, it is as if his delusion acts as a manipulative parasite or as Descartes’s evil demon, animating his rational faculties. Eve Sedgwick’s reflections on paranoia provide a helpful set of tools for reconciling theoretically the counterintuitive alliance dramatized by the film.40 Drawing on the work of Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick classifies paranoia as a strong theory of negative affects. Paranoia is “strong” because it is totalizing (or tries to be), and it is “negative” because it tirelessly seeks to anticipate—and thereby prevent—unexpected injury. These defining characteristics predispose paranoid structures of thought to tautology (or very near it), since paranoia seeks to anticipate and neutralize what it always-already knows is coming. Moreover, “discoveries” that disprove the totalizing convictions of the paranoid position are easily reconstituted as evidence that confirms them. Ripper’s delusional fantasy of a Communist takeover exhibits just such a thoroughgoing rationalization and systematization of unrelated phenomena, both real and imagined.41 Ripper’s character thus serves to present

40 Eve Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” in her Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity.

41 Ripper works into his theory the way in which fluoride is responsible for his “profound sense of fatigue” and “feeling of emptiness” after sex: fluoride saps “life essence” and compromises “all of our precious bodily fluids.” Further still, this sapping of essence is the same mechanism that degrades the state of choice in the populace. And all
rationality as a structure or mode of thought with no more claim to moral neutrality or fitness than paranoid delusion.

In foregrounding Ripper so early in the narrative, the film deflates the pseudoscientific objectivity of military strategy by exposing its pathological underpinnings. Ripper is the most blatant example of what the film sees as the military’s immoral investment in rationalizing the rules of engagement in nuclear war. Indeed, Ripper represents a pathological hyper-rationality that afflicts the military and civilian leadership of the US and the USSR. Not only does Ripper craft a conspiracy theory to aid in the rationalization of the decision to detonate nuclear weapons, but he is invested in the powers of rational modeling to the extent that his plan depends entirely on correctly predicting the US and USSR responses. Throughout the film, other members of the US military are shown to be no less psychopathic or delusional than Ripper (although, admittedly, their delusions all have their own unique flavor). Arguably, the supposedly sober military comes off looking even worse than Ripper, since he at least has the courage of deeply held—if totally delusional—convictions.

III. King Kong and the Hydrogen Bomb

The question of when it is ethically justified to initiate a nuclear conflict rears its head throughout Dr. Strangelove. For Ripper, the preservation of the nation’s essence is reason enough. Once he takes this plunge, however, he effects an interesting shift in the ethical calculus of the film’s other characters, who wrestle with the quandary of being the second party to drop the bomb. Most of these characters view the prospect of being second to strike in an entirely

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this is to be explained tautologically by his prevailing assumptions: the Communist infiltration is manifest and “the Commie has no regard for human life, not even his own.” His framework is comprehensive, and, in view of his strategic military mind, the coincidence of the paranoid and the rational is apparent.
different light than they do being the first to aggress. They seem to think that being the second to wreak nuclear havoc on the world is somehow justified by the place that the decision occupies in a given sequence of events. Ripper counts on this. Knowing that the President of the United States could never countenance, under any circumstances, the abhorrent decision to strike the first blow, Ripper relieves Pres. Muffley of the ethical burden, in the faith that US government will find a way to rationalize being both first and second to drop the bomb. Ripper correctly anticipates that members of the Pentagon will justify this position in pragmatic terms, in arguments about self-preservation and the minimization of casualties. By exposing the hollowness of the first-to-strike taboo, *Dr. Strangelove* suggests that the rationalist doctrine of mutually assured destruction is, above all else, an ethical shell game designed to deflect blame for one’s own actions onto the past and future choices of one’s adversary.

The film explores this issue most vividly in the actions of the B-52 crew who carry out Ripper’s order and, later on, in the scene in which the Soviet Premier makes an inconvenient confession about the existence of the Doomsday Machine. Thanks to the false information furnished by Ripper, B-52 Stratofortress pilot Major T. J. “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) and his crew believe that they are engaging in a retaliatory bombing of the USSR. As the faithful Texan pilot avers, “Old Ripper wouldn’t be giving us Plan R unless them Russkies had already clobbered Washington and a lot of other towns with a sneak attack.” The conviction that they are the second to drop the bomb inspires the crew to overcome nearly insurmountable obstacles to their mission. The crew’s grotesque persistence in its mission is indelibly satirized in the famous shot of the cowboy-hatted Maj. Kong straddling the nuclear warhead and hee-hawing as it

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42 The president hopes to avoid both the first and the second strikes—or, at least, to convince the premier not to seek seemingly justified retaliation. This position is somehow the most ridiculous of the film from the perspective of the audience, who can sense the looming apocalypse.
plummets to earth (fig. 6). The film further suggests the inhuman, mechanized resolve of the crew through the way that it presents the technological interface of their plane. As the B-52 finally approaches its target (which Maj. Kong has redesignated as the intercontinental ballistic missile complex at Kodlosk), an array fail-safes that confront the B-52’s bombardier, Lieutenant Lothar Zogg (James Earl Jones). As the rest of the crew goes through their automated routines, Lt. Zogg flips row after row of safety switches and priming mechanisms. Each flip of a switch affirms the determination of the crew, while paradoxically suggesting that it is the agency of the machine that governs the operations of the human hand, not the other way around. Even the musical motif associated exclusively with the crew—a rendition of the Civil War tune “Johnny Comes Marching Home”—bounces along with a pluck and persistence that seems unstoppable. Along with the other abovementioned formal elements, the ironic score of the B-52 scenes registers a critique of the ease with which the crew follows through on their unthinkable orders, content in the conviction that the initial (fictional) Soviet strike on the US has radically reconfigured the ethics of engagement.

43 Maj. Kong decides to bomb Kodlosk instead of their assigned targets because the plane is leaking too much fuel from an earlier Soviet missile strike to reach either their primary or secondary targets. This decision ensures that the Soviet military will not be able to stop the final B-52 (which did not receive recall code because of damaged radio gear). On Pres. Muffley’s suggestion, all the Soviet military’s firepower was concentrated in the designated target areas.
The Doomsday Machine that Maj. Kong and his subordinates inadvertently activate when they bomb the USSR is the embodiment of the ethical position that motivates the US soldiers; it is also the logical extension of the strategy of mutually assured destruction. The device is the apotheosis of pragmatism, liberating nuclear policy from the errors of humans and humans from the ethical burdens of nuclear policy decisions. The machine is a computer-linked network of some fifty hydrogen bombs in the one hundred megaton range coated with cobalt thorium G buried beneath the surface of the Zhokhov Islands. A nuclear strike on the Soviet Union automatically triggers the machine. Its detonation covers the Earth in a doomsday shroud that will last ninety-three years, wiping out all plant and animal life. Like Maj. Kong, the Doomsday Machine is programmed to believe that striking back is justified by the models and procedures that

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44 Dr. Strangelove, military adviser to the president and generals, indignantly acts as if the machine is an absurd aberration from the sensible strategy of mutually assured destruction, but it fits precisely. This attempted deflection is similar to Gen. Turgidson comments about Ripper ordering Plan R: “the human element seems to have failed us here.”
have been hypostasized as real possibilities. The Doomsday Machine is thus the zenith of the rational-paranoid position first introduced in the figure of Ripper. Impervious to any reality that has not already been anticipated, it knows what it knows; what it imagines, it has already achieved in reality.

IV. Utopia Achieved

As the world hurtles toward its flaming doom, the final scenes of Dr. Strangelove lampoon technocratic decision-making from a new angle. Recognizing the imminent end of the world, the leaders gathered in the War Room brace themselves for the activation of the Doomsday Machine. Just as everything seems hopeless, Dr. Strangelove, a nuclear scientist and erstwhile Nazi, proposes a plan “to preserve a nucleus of human specimens.”⁴⁵ He proposes that he and his audience found a new society in government-owned mine shafts deep beneath the surface of the Earth. As Elizabeth Cooke has observed, the post-apocalyptic world that Dr. Strangelove envisions—to the joy of the gathered governmental personnel—takes its essential cues from the Final Solution to the Jewish Question.⁴⁶ Dr. Strangelove’s utopian blueprint comes complete with the killing of undesirables and the rapid, eugenically-minded repopulation of the Earth. The eagerness with which the Nazi masterplan is embraced by US military leaders is one of the film’s most devastating satirical strokes—one that discerns ethical kinship in the hyper-rationalization of World War Two Germany and Cold War America.

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⁴⁵ As Hughes, 111–2, notes, Sellers originally improvised the behavior of his gloved hand—the gestures of which clearly recall his Nazi past—and then more fully developed the character to suit. One gesture that remains off-screen in the final cut—although the surprised expression of Dr. Strangelove remains—is a shot of the gloved hand masturbating him. This underlines the close connection between sex and the masculine utilitarian world he proposes and the men endorse.

After elaborating the means by which the subterranean society will supply itself with energy and nutrition—nuclear generators, greenhouses, factory meat farming—Dr. Strangelove shifts seamlessly to the goal of maintaining US economic supremacy, which he links to pragmatic challenges of perpetuating the human species. Dr. Strangelove essentially justifies turning women into sexual slaves, factories of babies. And he frames it as a wholesome activity: “Naturally, they would breed prodigiously, eh? There would be much time and little to do.” Dr. Strangelove’s plan also includes the provision that women are to be at a ten to one ratio with respect to men and part of a process that insures “proper breeding techniques.” He manages to spin the place of men as a burden of necessity: “it is a sacrifice required for the future of the human race.” This is made absurd—as the smiles in the War Room betray in some partially conscious way (fig. 7)—by Dr. Strangelove’s inclusion of the condition that “the women will have to be selected for their sexual characteristics, which will have to be of a highly stimulating nature.”

Gen. Turgidson, meanwhile, wastes no time in clarifying that the “the so-called monogamous sexual relationship” will be abandoned only “as far as men were concerned.” The darkly humorous irony of these proposals is that they retroactively justify—and are the direct result of—Ripper’s paranoid suspicion that government technocrats are eager to control the “precious bodily fluids” of the populace. All this is ostensibly to ensure that, based on Dr.

47 It is Ripper’s fatigue “during the physical act of love” that leads him to suspect the loss of his life essence. So the notion of the preservation of the United States is entwined with a sexuality that has coursed throughout the film. Even the most reliable fail-safe of the film is sexual in nature: the “one issue of prophylactics,” as announced by Maj. Kong during the contents check, that is contained in the B-52 crew’s survival kit. The character names are, of course, part of another set of more obvious sexually tinged references.

48 Unless there is artificial selection against males (termination in utero or otherwise), the roughly fifty percent birth rate of males would mean that the coveted ratio of ten females to every male would quickly be in jeopardy or, if maintained, would result in increased homosexual activity among the womenless, threatening to subvert some degree of the heteronormative program. This is but one of many factors that make the plan self-undermining ideologically and practically. More practical considerations include deficiencies in information about the characteristics of each member of the populace, existence of enough of nuclear scientists and technological capacity in the time allotted to have nuclear reactors, likely unrealistic projections about the amount of dwelling space, a lack of information about the mineshafts, lack of the ability to coordinate and reinforce the sorting decisions, and a general temporal squeeze.
Strangelove’s estimates, the country will be back to present gross national product in twenty years.

Figure 7. Gen. Turgidson quickly realizes the phallocentric benefits of the plan.

If the alacrity with which the War Room approves these theoretically un-American proposals can be partially explained by the singular urgency of the impending situation, it is the pragmatism that has been on display throughout the film that offers the ideological cover for the absurd and horrifying propositions. The cavalier way that Dr. Strangelove proposes abandoning most of the population to die is anticipated in the earlier arguments of Gen. Turgidson, who writes off the death of ten to twenty million people as getting one’s hair mussed, especially if one compares that scenario to one that is estimated to result in the deaths of one hundred fifty million.49 If it squares with, and attempts to validate, Gen. Turgidson’s ethical disposition, Dr.

49 When he does this, Gen. Turgidson glides passed the diplomatic alternatives that were then available. He instead gives an itemized list of the reasons why the US should back with everything they have the attack Ripper has initiated. Pres. Muffley reprimands him, “You’re talking about mass murder, General, not war.” Gen. Turgidson’s
Strangelove’s plan also rationalizes, automates, and renders palatable Ripper’s vision of purification-through-extermination. When the scrupulous Pres. Muffley complains, “I would hate to have to decide who stays up and who goes down,” Dr. Strangelove offers a solution that, as with the entire strategy of mutually assured destruction, relieves leaders of a sense of moral responsibility: “A computer could be set and programmed to accept factors from youth, health, sexual fertility, intelligence, and a cross section of necessary skills.” Those unselected by the computer program could be left to perish on the desolate surface of the Earth; after all, this utopia can only sustain a certain projected number of inhabitants, each of whom has to contribute materially to its soon-to-be-burgeoning economy. From the utilitarian perspective, such a plan is better than the total extinction of humanity and certainly preferable to one that would result in a downturn in the gross national product. Since all parties involved already fully subscribe to Dr. Strangelove’s hyper-rationalist framework, his plan will never be debated on properly ethical grounds. In its parting shot, the film takes aim not at an abstract sense of human imperfection, but rather at the resilient immorality of utilitarianism.50

response only takes into account the death toll on the US side: “Mr. President, I’m not saying we wouldn’t get our hair mussed. But I do say, no more than ten to twenty million killed, tops.” Earlier, he quoted statistics, saying the choice is “between two admittedly regrettable, but nevertheless, distinguishable post-war environments: one where you got twenty million people killed, and the other where you got a hundred and fifty million people killed.” It is thus clear that he is only figuring the numbers for the United States, without regard at all for the deaths in the Soviet Union.

Moreover, one might venture that Dr. Strangelove’s appeal to necessity is faulty from the start because of the object of its appeal. The plan is put forward as what must be done to preserve the human species, but there is no a priori moral obligation to preserve humans, especially considering the species nearly destroyed itself and all others. This resonates with Phillips, 156, quoting Kubrick on his A Clockwork Orange: “The essential moral question is whether or not a man can be good without having the option to be evil and whether such a creature is still human.”
Chapter 3. *Rosemary’s Baby* and the Consumerist Struggle for Agency

God also remains unchanged, looking down from on high with foreknowledge of all things; the ever-present eternity of his vision keeps pace with the future qualities of our actions….

Unless you want to hide the truth, there *is* a great necessity imposed upon you—the necessity of righteousness, since you act before the eyes of a judge who beholds all things.

Anicius Boëthius

I. Introduction

*Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), the second entry in Roman Polanski’s Apartment Trilogy—which also includes *Repulsion* (1965) and *The Tenant* (1976)—is a timely film that approaches the dilemma of choice from arguably the most ancient of vantage points. At its center is Rosemary Woodhouse (Mia Farrow), a character who struggles, in valiantly Aristotelian fashion, with the moral and ontological implications of her quotidians decisions. The confined, domestic setting of the film signals the standpoint from which it will explore the ethics of choice. In contrast to the global sweep of *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Dr. Strangelove*, *Rosemary’s Baby* largely confines itself to the space of two neighboring apartments. Although international in scope, the Satanic conspiracy that haunts Rosemary is obscured for much of the film. As a result, the drama involving Rosemary’s choices does not immediately focus on the question of whether these choices have been systemically predetermined by external forces beyond Rosemary’s control. Instead, the trials of the film emerge from more homey scenarios, especially Rosemary’s awkward interactions with the leaders of the Satanist coven, Minnie and Roman Castevet (Ruth Gordon and Sidney Blackmer), who are—first and foremost—her neighbors.

If Rosemary is a moral descendent of Aristotle, there is a decidedly modern twist to her ethics. The day-to-day choices at the foundation of Rosemary’s quest for virtue are almost

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entirely consumerist in orientation. The film leans heavily on the importance of Rosemary’s understanding that her consumer choices are the ultimate expression of her ethical agency. Even before the coven denies her of her reproductive autonomy, Rosemary is beset by another force that blocks her self-realization, namely, her Catholic upbringing. Indeed, one of the more darkly humorous ironies of *Rosemary’s Baby* is the fact that its protagonist’s Christian past paves the way for manipulation by her Satanic neighbors, who find Rosemary’s consumerist impulse far more subversive to their designs than her residual religious convictions.

II. Catholic Guits

More than any other character in the film, Rosemary is associated with Catholicism. Although she does not identify as a practicing member of the church, Rosemary is unwilling to renounce a certain deference to its authority. This is signaled in an early scene, in which Rosemary and Guy (John Cassavetes) dine with the Castevets in their apartment across the hall. Dinner table discussion turns to the pope’s scheduled visit to New York.\(^{52}\) Roman comments that the visit will likely be delayed, because “No pope ever visits a city where the newspapers are on strike.” Encouraged by Guy’s interjection, “Well, that’s showbiz,” Roman derides “the hypocrisy behind organized religion” and the way in which the pope “pretends that he’s holy.” Rosemary is not depicted as espousing any particular theological beliefs (for instance, belief in the trinity or in the doctrine of transubstantiation). Yet, she defends the pontiff on simple, tautological grounds: “Well, he is the pope.” Rosemary is not in thrall to Catholicism in a general sense, but has more specifically internalized its deference to hierarchy and patriarchy.

\(^{52}\) Pope Paul VI visited New York in autumn 1965. This corresponds with the film taking place from 1965 to 1966.
Rosemary’s deference to authority leads to a sense of guilt and shame so pervasive that it suffuses her dreams, as three different sequences of the film demonstrate. The first dream is representative in this respect.\textsuperscript{53} The dream in question begins as Rosemary, lying in bed on her back and shot from above, closes her eyes. The camera pans up vertically above the head of the bed to settle on the wallpapered wall that divides the room from the Castevet’s apartment. Significantly, many of the muffled sounds that intrude on the ensuing dream seem to originate from behind the other side of this wall.

Sound editing is essential to how this sequence articulates dream-images and situates them in relation to the diegetic events of the “real world” of the film. There is a warm white noise static in the background, through which none of the sounds in the dream can penetrate. Over this sound is layered the persistent ticking of a clock. Suddenly, a nun appears and the movement of her lips is out of sync with the audio, which consists of the muffled sound of Minnie’s angry shouting. A bump, apparently on the other side of the wall, briefly awakens Rosemary; the monologue of Minnie, meanwhile, carries on continuously, even as Rosemary moves from sleep, to wakefulness, to sleep once again. Her dream proceeds to pick up where it left off, in what appears to be a chapel. The camera tracks the path of an agitated nun’s finger, landing on the object that it points out: two masons, standing on scaffolding, bricking up two arched windows. In the foreground, a man wearing a smudged mechanic’s coverall enters the frame and shushes the nun, but she keeps talking nevertheless. The camera follows her indication again, which this time alights on a group of girls and nuns, suggesting that the setting is, in fact,

\textsuperscript{53} The first and the second are most relevant to the argument of this chapter (see below for discussion of the second). The second dream also includes many religious elements, including people who seem to be the Kennedys, signaling Rosemary’s alignment with Catholicism; an exchange in which Rosemary is told that Hutch (Maurice Evans) is not allowed to accompany her because her path is for Catholics only; and an appearance of the pope, who forgives Rosemary her sins.
a Catholic school. The girls, ashamed and downcast, are aligned in parallel with the same wall where the workers fill in the windows. The man reenters the shot; he starts to look at his hands to inspect them.

The camera moves down from the man while at the same time fading back to the wallpapered wall of Rosemary’s bedroom to settle on Rosemary. Still on her back, but now with her eyes wide open, Rosemary stares backward and upward at the wall behind the bed, which—by this point in this sequence—seems to have functioned like a cinema screen onto which the dream has been projected. Despite the fact that Rosemary’s eyes are alarmingly wide open, she is still asleep. Nevertheless, she manages to fold her hands and whisper an urgent confession apparently related to the ongoing dream, which is no longer visible to the audience. In hushed voice, she chants, “I told Sister Veronica about the windows, and she withdrew the school from the competition. Otherwise—” and then the audio fades.

This dream does crucial conceptual work for the film: it codes Rosemary’s guilt as Catholic in persuasion. It is telling that the first dream-image projected onto the wallpaper is the bloody corpse of her neighbor Terry, a young homeless women who had been taken in by the Casteves and whom Rosemary had befriended earlier (fig. 8). Unbeknownst to Rosemary, Terry has been murdered by the coven for refusing to bear the child of Satan; her plunge from the window of the Castevet apartment is staged to look like a suicide. Even though Rosemary met Terry only briefly and when it was not evident that she was in any kind of distress, Rosemary feels culpable for failing to save her fragile young neighbor. Although the church in which she grew up plays an insignificant role in Rosemary’s life, she nevertheless processes the failures of her quotidian choices through a conscience to which Catholicism has given definitive shape.
The guilt that Rosemary feels about Terry’s death is one that no doubt originates in her failure to live up to the Christian ideal of loving one’s neighbor as oneself; perversely, Minnie is the character who best understands how beholden Rosemary is to this moral injunction. From the start, Minnie manages to guilt trip her way into Rosemary’s life. A day or so after Terry’s death, she leverages her position as the grieving neighbor to garner sympathy, information, and the promise of future intimacy from Rosemary. (See the following section for more on this point.)

The chapel window of Rosemary’s dream also suggests the extent to which she has internalized Catholic teachings about sex and reproduction, which will prove a key advantage to her Satanic manipulators. Freud, in his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, identifies dream-images of ecclesiastical architecture with the uterus. Suggestively, in Ira Levin’s

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original 1967 novel, Rosemary has used contraceptives in the past, in clear violation of Catholic taboo.\textsuperscript{55} The filled-in windows can be read as an emblem of residual guilt about her prior transgression of “bricking off” of her uterus. They may also relate to her eagerness to have children, a desire to which—in the book and the film—she gives voice. To view the window this way also lends a different significance to the ticking clock, one that suggests that the Catholic superego plays a hawk-eyed role in Rosemary’s otherwise uninteresting desire to reproduce.

Minnie steps into the role of disapproving biological clock in several of the scenes that follow this dream. The first time she visits the Woodhouse apartment, she asks Rosemary if she has any children and registers palpable disappointment when she answers in the negative. In the very same scene, Minnie discovers that the extra room in the apartment is going to be a nursery. She does not hesitate to ask if Rosemary is pregnant, despite the fact the Rosemary already had a natural place in the conversation to provide this information had she wanted. Minnie adds, “Well, you’re young and healthy: you’ll have lots of children.” After dinner at the Castevet apartment the very same evening, while Minnie and Rosemary are doing dishes, she asks if Rosemary comes from a large family and whether her sisters have children. Seeming not to listen to the answer, Minnie responds, “Well, there’s a chance you’ll have lots of children too.” On another occasion, Minnie and her friend Laura-Louise (Patsy Kelly) invade Rosemary’s apartment and, within moments, have her talking awkwardly about her menstrual cycle. All of

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\textsuperscript{55} Ira Levin, \textit{Rosemary’s Baby} (New York: Random House, 1967), 64–5. This evidence is revealed in a passage that contains further details about her reproductive life and the way in which she and Guy are at odds. Since she has wanted a child for a while, “her plan was to get pregnant by ‘accident’; the pills gave her headaches, she said, and rubber gadgets were repulsive. Guy said that subconsciously she was still a good Catholic, and she protested enough to support the explanation. Indulgently he studied the calendar and avoided the ‘dangerous days,’ and she said, ‘No, it’s safe today, darling; I’m sure it is.'”
these questions are, of course, motivated by a desire to see when Rosemary is most likely to conceive, and whether she is healthy enough to carry Satan’s spawn to term.\textsuperscript{56}

However, Minnie’s reproductive shaming also serves the longer-term goal of ensuring that Rosemary will \textit{want} the baby that results from her rape. In fact, right after this visit, Guy—who has aligned himself with the coven’s plot—records Rosemary’s biological rhythms on the calendar, so that the two of them can finally have a child. Chillingly, in complying, Rosemary makes herself an unwitting accomplice to her own violation.

The horrifying implications of Rosemary’s internalization of Catholic sexual politics are dramatized in the scene in which Rosemary is raped. The entire episode unfolds as a lucid dream, combining two different registers of diegetic reality: the “real” external world of the narrative and the “inner” dream world of Rosemary. The dream begins with Rosemary on the deck of a yacht, at first imbibing champagne and chatting at a party. Suddenly, in seeming obedience to the Catholic superego that is dramatized in the first dream sequence, a cold and mortified Rosemary realizes she is topless and fumbles to cover her nakedness. She is then escorted below deck, where she finds herself prostrate on a bed surrounded by Guy and several coven members, some of whom the audience recognizes. At one point, Rosemary—dazed from the combination of

\textsuperscript{56} Minnie is not in the affair alone. Neighborly intrusions in Rosemary’s life are effected by an extended circuit of neighbors and surrogates. Besides Laura-Louise, who is mostly a peripheral nuisance, Minnie drafts many into her service. In a move that validates and officializes neighborly intrusiveness, the medical profession willingly joins the network. Just after learning that Rosemary is pregnant, Minnie dials up her obstetrician friend, Dr. Sapirstein, and insists Rosemary change to him. Besides Dr. Sapirstein making Rosemary reliable on her neighbor for a daily drink, he represents the extent to which Rosemary is confined to the purview of the androcentric medical profession. Part of this control comes through the restriction of outside knowledge. Dr. Sapirstein forbids her from reading medical texts (or their consumerist drugstore version) and from talking to friends and family about her pregnancy. Even Dr. Hill, who had been presented to Rosemary and the audience as unobjectionable, ultimately turns Rosemary over to Guy and Dr. Sapirstein. Rosemary has come to him at the end of the film because she suspects that the Castevets are head of a coven that, with Guy’s help, aims to steal her soon-to-be-born child for use in Satanic rituals. Although Dr. Hill admits the plausibility of her story—even if witches might not be real, people do want to steal babies—he turns her over seemingly to advance his medical career or, at least, to participate in the brotherhood of doctors. Dr. Hill is thus incorporated into the network as well. See Lucy Fischer, “Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in \textit{Rosemary’s Baby}” (\textit{Cinema Journal} 31.3 [1992]: 3–18), for a related discussion of the patriarchal medical profession and the anxiety-inducing and traumatic burdens on women during pregnancy.

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alcohol and drugs administered to her by her husband and the Castevets—exclaims, “This is no
dream; this is really happening!” The scene, however, works to destabilize the audience’s grip on
reality. It mixes signals of the dream(-like) world with elements—namely, characters and
settings—that exist in the wider filmic reality. One example of this, which happens as Rosemary
is raped, involves repetition and marked supernaturalization. Guy’s face goes from its usual
appearance to looking sinister and scabbed. There is then a shot of him scraping his fingers down
Rosemary’s naked body. This shot is then immediately repeated but with hairy, creaturely,
demonic arms. Nonetheless, as Davide Caputo rightly remarks, there is no doubt about the
reality of Rosemary’s rape; it is just a question of who, or what, is responsible.58 When
Rosemary notices bloody gouges trailing across her flesh the next morning, Guy claims that he
had sex with her while she was incapacitated and offers the despicable excuse, “I was pretty
loaded myself.” Rosemary seems somewhat appalled but does not pursue the issue, instead
endeavoring to shake off her objections as unimportant.59 The apparent guilt that she experiences
for initially taking exception to the allegedly spousal rape is, thanks to the lucid-dream structure
of the rape scene itself, shown to originate in a self-punishing unconscious that has crystalized
under the psychic pressures of Rosemary’s childhood religion.

It is in this context that one should also view Rosemary’s categorical rejection of
abortion. This is perhaps the most perverse way that her residual Catholicism advances the
coven’s plot. Carrying the devilish fetus is a taxing process that drains Rosemary’s health: she is

Roman Polanski (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 125–30, for an analysis of some of the possible
readings of the rape sequence’s lack of perceptual certitude.
58 Caputo, 130.
59 Fischer discusses the drastic impact that repressing this highly traumatic rape likely has on Rosemary. The article
also gives an excellent study of the very real strains pregnancy has on women, even to the point of alienation and
bearing blame if anything goes wrong in the pregnancy. Indeed, the position of Rosemary is so tortured that, even
though she has struggled and sacrificed to carry the baby to term, Dr. Sapirstein blames her for the supposed death
of the infant.
weak and gaunt and shocks friends who have not seen her in a while. Her pains are so severe that a doctor not complicit with the coven’s conspiracy would very well advise Rosemary to terminate the pregnancy for the sake of her health. Indeed, as Karyn Valerius discusses, Rosemary’s pregnancy is characterized by signs of the three most common considerations that motivate medical professionals to recommend the termination of a pregnancy: rape, high probability of serious birth defects, and potentially fatal health complications. Nevertheless, Rosemary carries the pregnancy to term and even explicitly rejects the possibility of abortion when telling her female friends about the agonizing state of her health. Given the way that the dream sequences emphasize the religious coloring of Rosemary’s conscience, it is hard not to see her abhorrence of abortion—so convenient to the Satanic cult—as a capitulation to the most ardently patriarchal of Catholic teachings.

III. Consumptive Agency

If Rosemary’s Catholic roots play into the hands of those conspiring against her, the same cannot be said of the other ethical force that has shaped her psyche: consumerism. More than any other character, the film associates Rosemary with the consumerist impulse—an impulse by

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60 Karyn Valerius, “Rosemary’s Baby, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects” (College Literature 32.3 [2005]: 116–35), 125.
61 Rosemary’s Baby contrasts the neighbor figure with that of the friend or confidant (because neighbors are precisely those in whom one cannot confide). Unlike the neighbor network, which restricts her options, her friend network tries to expand them. Besides her female friends at the party, the Woodhouse friend (and old landlord) Hutch provides counsel to Rosemary twice: once, in one of the few scenes of Rosemary outside her apartment; again, when he visits her at home. Hutch is also keen to help her unravel that plot that surrounds her, and he is the one that wills her a crucial book of occult information after his mysterious death. In Rosemary’s life, even strangers are better than neighbors. A woman answers the phone when Rosemary calls to check on Hutch. The woman informs her he is in a coma. Later, the same woman thoughtfully calls Rosemary to tell her of his death. This is the woman who passes on the occult book, All of Them Witches, to Rosemary after the funeral service. That a stranger would be so kind is notable because it is in contrast to many films set in Manhattan or other metropolitan areas in which the stranger is the locus of hostility (for instance, Repulsion and its London setting) or in which the city provides a blessing of anonymity. In Rosemary’s Baby, the trope is reversed: it is those who are familiar who are most dastardly.
which the purchase of commodities becomes the principal means of self-fashioning, self-
realization, and social interaction. The first scene of the film shows Rosemary pleading with Guy
to agree to take the apartment at Bramford (the film’s name for the iconic Dakota Building in
Manhattan). Rosemary coos throughout their tour of the apartment, an acoustic indicator of the
fantastic, aspirational role that the space is coming to occupy in her imaginary. For Rosemary,
moving into the Bramford extends the promise of living the life: strolling in Central Park West,
purchasing tickets for shows at all the nearby theaters, and filling the apartment’s ample rooms
with furnishings for the family that they do not yet have. Similarly, Rosemary’s modish
wardrobe is a persistent visual cue that links her to consumerism, and it sets her apart from
characters like the gaudily dressed Minnie (see below) and even Guy. Guy often dresses in a
bland, styleless way, and his unfamiliarity with fashion is underscored when he dopily buys—but
never wears (at least not on screen)—“the shirt that was in the New Yorker.” The apartment
space also reflects Rosemary’s purchasing pride: the film’s early scenes track the gradual
addition of furniture and accoutrements to the abode, including the stylish decoration of the
nursery.

The conflict between Rosemary and Minnie plays out, in large part, as an allegorical
battle between consumerism and frugality. This is evident from the first time Minnie steps foot
into the Woodhouse apartment.\(^{62}\) In stark contrast to Rosemary, Minnie enters the scene sporting
her characteristically gaudy, hand-me-down look: chunky, inelegant jewelry, brash, carelessly
applied makeup, and that blue and white polka dot headscarf, which neglects to conceal the

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\(^{62}\) A striking shot through the peephole of the Woodhouse apartment signals Minnie intrusiveness clearly, at the
same time it contrasts her person with that of Rosemary. After a fade to black, a doorbell buzzes, and the view
returns with a circumscribed Minnie. The edges of the peephole act a mask, concentrating all attention on her visage,
which takes up of the shot. Although the audience has seen Minnie once two scenes before, the centralized optics of
the peephole compose a reveal shot. This shot and the consequent scene mark the way in which her demands work
to frame Rosemary’s actions in the film, even as each individual imposition or inquiry seems inconsequential.
curlers in her hair and which clashes with the hectic, muddy gold, green, and brown pattern of her shirt and with the pink eyeglasses that dangle from her neck (fig. 9). Inviting herself into the apartment for a tour, Minnie eyes her surroundings as critic and appraiser, commenting on the interesting placement of the kitchen table (which Rosemary saw in a magazine), the beautiful paintjob, the gorgeous upholstery, and so on. Her survey of the apartment manages to damn with full-throated praise, suggesting that, while everything is oh-so-“nice” (a word she utters repeatedly in the scene), it is also too costly and done up. Minnie inspects a new chair and thumbs the upholstery: “What do you pay for a chair like that?” Rosemary’s pricy answer—about two-hundred dollars—noticeably disappoints Minnie.63 The tension between these characters is rendered from another perspective just two scenes later, as Rosemary and Guy return to their apartment after dinner with the Castevets. This time, Rosemary plays the critic, scarcely managing to contain her explosive giggles long enough to cross the hall and close the front door before mocking the frugality of her neighbors: “Only three dinner plates that match!”64

63 The film also establishes Minnie as the anti-consumerist in a more passive way by means of her personal thrift and vocalness about it. During the dinner the Woodhouses have at the Castevet apartment, while Roman attacks the religious aspect itself, it is the economic wastefulness of the affair that concerns Minnie. She laments with disgust, “When I think what they spend on robes and jewels.” Minnie’s particular anti-consumerism is underscored by her generally invasive character. In the scene when Minnie first enters the apartment, Minnie even examines the canned goods suspiciously while the two sit around the kitchen table, seemingly checking the dates on the cans. As she is leaving this short but obviously stressful scene for Rosemary, she picks up and leafs through Rosemary’s mail before handing it to her.

64 It is therefore unexpected when Guy says he will go back over the following night. Since they had planned on doing something that same night with another couple—presumably outside the house, thus spending money—Rosemary takes this as a betrayal. Guy’s decision separates him from her attempt to construct her desired home life and aligns him with the reluctance of the Castevets to spend. The divide that this creates and the constriction it initiates is underscored in the next scene (presumably that following night or soon after), when Minnie and her dear friend Laura-Louise barge in while Guy is at the Castevets. They establish in living Rosemary’s room a circle of knitting and embroidery—homespun items that will not see market exchange.
The ongoing conflict over Rosemary’s choice of prenatal vitamins is the most obvious instance in which her consumerism poses a pragmatic threat to the coven’s plot. Dr. Hill (Charles Grodin), Rosemary’s first obstetrician, prescribes regular off-the-shelf vitamin pills to take during her pregnancy. This suits Rosemary well. She is therefore taken aback when coven member Dr. Abraham Sapirstein (Ralph Bellamy) later replaces her regimen of vitamins with a peculiar homemade drink that is to be administered daily by Minnie Castevet. Minnie’s herbarium, in which she grows the herbs for the daily drink, is somewhat removed from the capitalist consumptive circuit (as she proudly points out, none of the active ingredients come from the store), and it is a microcosm of the strange, alternative world that is sucking in Rosemary inch by inch. The clockwork schedule built around the consumption of the drink intrudes on Rosemary’s autonomy and mobility. It is within this context that the vitamin pills come to symbolize the restoration of Rosemary’s self-determination. Toward the end of the film, having discovered that the Castevets are witches, Rosemary demands “regular” mass-produced
vitamin pills from Dr. Sapirstein, who grudgingly obliges. When Rosemary later flees her home to the office of Dr. Hill, she specifically removes the vitamin bottle from her bag and sets it beside her. When Dr. Sapirstein and Guy later arrive at Dr. Hill’s office to force Rosemary to return home, the camera lingers on Dr. Sapirstein as he pockets the vial of capsules in a symbolic gesture of regaining power over her.

Rosemary does not give up her consumerism without a fight, and much of the film can be read as her struggle to assert herself through her consumer choices. Particularly striking are the instances in which she seems to use her consumer fancy to allay her suffering. In a scene soon after she learns she is pregnant, Rosemary returns from Vidal Sassoon sporting a trendy new cut-and-color. Palpably proud, she stands by eagerly, waiting for her husband to acknowledge her metamorphosis. But, when Guy finally notices, all he can say, with disgust, is “What’s that? Don’t tell me you paid for that!” Instead of reacting resentfully to this gruff response, Rosemary describes the persistent, sharp abdominal pain that she has been experiencing. This apparent non sequitur suggests that Rosemary’s consumption of fashion is a way to try to regain control over her own body and the pregnancy that has begun to cause her anxiety and physical torment.

As the pregnancy progresses, consumerism becomes even more obviously associated with the promise of a deliverance from the bodily discomfort, confinement, and social isolation that has stripped Rosemary of her sense of autonomy. At a later point in the film, Rosemary, over the objections of Guy and Minnie, decides to host a party for their “young” friends (which, as she quickly points out, excludes the Castevets). Rosemary clearly fantasizes that the countless little expenditures and preparations for the party will mark a turning point in her currently bleak existence. She turns out to be right. After the final guests file out of the apartment at the end of the evening, Guy and Rosemary—surrounded by mounds of postconsumer waste—begin to
quarrel. This dispute ends abruptly, when the sharp, chronic pain that Rosemary had been experiencing for weeks suddenly stops. Yet, even this victory plays into the coven’s hands. After the pain recedes, Rosemary becomes more trusting of her neighbors and proves docile to their wishes for much of the remaining film.\(^{65}\) It is as though Rosemary is content in the belief that her festive orgy of consumption has cured the pain that was preventing her from being a more gracious mother-to-be. She happily submits to the intrusive ministrations of her neighbors, on the condition that the door to consumerism remains theoretically open to her.

The party scene is staged amid a portion of the film in which formal techniques combine to create a growing sense of Rosemary’s physical confinement. This claustrophobic arrangement is obviously a spatialization of the narrowing scope of her agency. Even when it seems that Rosemary has been out in the world, whether to get groceries or a Vidal Sassoon hairdo, the action tends to pick up only after she has returned from the confines of the apartment.\(^{66}\) (Compare this tendency for example, to Repulsion and The Tenant, in which the camera routinely follows the characters’ paths from their apartments to the outside world and back again.) In Rosemary’s Baby, Davide Caputo notes, the “tethered camera” of the film always keeps us near Rosemary.\(^{67}\) This tethering effect is relies heavily on wide-angle shots, which create what Caputo calls a “wraparound effect.”\(^{68}\) The closeness of Rosemary’s world is also conveyed through cleverly composed shots in which some action protrudes into the frame from

\(^{65}\) One can also track Rosemary’s path of increasingly foiled or unsatisfying consumption with reference to her encounters with red meat (and organ matter). The regression is as follows: delectable lamb with Hutch, a terrible sirloin beefsteak with the Castevets, a ribeye seared for ten seconds, and, finally, a raw liver.

\(^{66}\) A further effect of this tethering is that, as far as diegetic truth goes, the audience and Rosemary know the same information. For instance, the audience never sees into the Castevet apartment, except for the two times Rosemary is there herself. The audience also never sees events in Guy’s acting career, since Rosemary is not accompanying him. Nor does the audience have any shots of Hutch while he investigates witches. The examples of what the audience is not shown because of this tethering abound.

\(^{67}\) Caputo, 121–2. The following discussing of tethering is based on Caputo’s observations.

\(^{68}\) Caputo, 120.
beyond its edge. These partial glimpses tease the audience with the possibility of discovering the source of the visual intrusion, whether it is a cigarette smoker or a yacking neighbor. Yet, this desire is often thwarted, confining the audience’s gaze to the limited world that closes in around Rosemary. One such instance is when Guy answers a phone call in the bedroom. The audience can hear his voice but the camera hangs back, only cutting to a shot of Guy after Rosemary has been in view for a few moments. A more visible example is when Minnie later telephones Dr. Sapirstein from the same bedroom (fig. 10). Throughout the brief call, she repeatedly rocks ever so slightly backward and forward, partially revealing and re-concealing her face, as the camera remains fixed.

Figure 10. Minnie makes a call.

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69 Caputo, 122. Caputo refers to this phenomenon as “visual references to intra-frame concealed space.” His example is a shot that comes after dinner with the Castevelts, while Rosemary and Minnie are washing up. After a shot of the two washing, there is a counter shot from the kitchen into the living room. Smoke wafts into the doorframe from the right, but the camera remains fixed.
Consumer activity extends the promise of release from these stifling constraints, which are figured in spatial, psychic, and ethical terms. Nevertheless, the duration of Rosemary’s emancipation never proves long. As the film’s tragicomic conclusion indicates, the lure of consumerism is no match for that self-reproaching part of Rosemary’s psyche manipulated so masterfully by the coven.

IV. The Chosen One

Throughout the film, Catholicism promotes the Satanists’ plot; in its final scenes, the Satanist plot returns the favor. After days of confinement to her bed following what she is told was a stillbirth, a doubtful Rosemary resolves to infiltrate the Castevet apartment to find her baby. When she enters the secret passage connecting the two abodes, she crosses over into the world of the Satanic coven. One the other side of the labyrinth, Rosemary not only recovers her captive infant, but finds her religion there, too. In the grotesque final scene, the traumatic truth of Rosemary’s situation is revealed to her, the disclosure of which confirms the truth of Catholic theology, in which Rosemary is to play a key—yet despicable—part. The final scene, as supernaturally inflected and outlandishly conceived as it is, keeps a disciplined focus on the final choice offered to Rosemary, without doubt the most horrifying and morally impossible one presented in the film.

The most twisted ironies of the film’s climatic revelation result from the screenplay’s knowing manipulation of Catholic theology regarding the Incarnation and the Apocalypse. The disclosure that Rosemary was raped while unconscious is, for instance, opportunistically couched by the coven in Messianic rhetoric. Rosemary did not choose pregnancy, but that is because she has been chosen by Satan. In a garbled citation from the Gospels, Minnie joyfully
pronounces, “He chose you out of all the world; out of all the women in the whole world, he chose you. … he wanted you to be the mother of his only living son.” This scriptural misquotation, which punctuates a sequence of earlier parallels drawn between Mary and Rosemary, is uttered with the intent to mislead. One could expose the sham nature of the analogy by pointing out that Mary knew from the start whose child she was carrying, while the annunciation to Rosemary occurs after she has given birth, and only then because she forces the point. Otherwise, the coven and the dark lord they serve seem perfectly content treating Rosemary, without her knowledge, like a disposable rent-a-womb.

More troubling, these claims about Adrian’s paternity offer Rosemary confirmation of the truth of the religion of her upbringing, knowledge that comes at the price of acknowledging the despicable role that has been chosen for her in the drama of cosmic history. Here, the parallel between Mary and Rosemary is crucial, but its nature, contrary to what Minnie suggests, is that of an inverted, or perhaps perverted, analogy. In Christian typology, Antichrist was both an enemy and a parody of Christ. Valerius describes this dynamic well and notes the conception of Antichrist as “a perversion of the Christian narrative of the Immaculate Conception in which Satan impregnates a mortal woman in order to become human and intervene in world history.”

From Valerius’s Neo-Platonic perspective, Rosemary’s situation is all the more debasing, because she is impregnated corporeally, whereas Mary conceives through spiritual means. This inversion of hierarchy is typical of the carnivalesque antics attributed to Satan and Antichrist, which is why—in this scene—there is an upside down crucifix hanging from Adrian’s black cradle.

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70 Valerius, 118.

71 The Antichrist is, thus, not just a replay of the life of Jesus, but also a burlesque parody of it, as is true of the carnal basis of the former’s conception. The same is true of the inverted Latin cross: it is a parodic inversion.
Rosemary is asked to accept a position that is fraught with the “necessary evil” paradox that constitutes Biblical figures such as Eve and Judas. Had these parties not committed themselves to villainy, the argument goes, the chain of events that will one day end in human salvation would never have been set into motion. Thus, for the good Christian, there is grim consolation to be had in embracing Rosemary’s hateful, yet logically necessary, place in the Grand Design. To do such a thing, Rosemary would have to own the abysmal choice that was made on her behalf and without her knowledge—in effect, to choose it retroactively for herself. Perhaps only the inversions and paradoxes of Christian theology—combined with guilt and internalized misogyny—could find hope in this revolting predicament.

And this is precisely what Roman counts on in the final moments of the film, when he calls on Rosemary to “Be a real mother to Adrian. … just be a mother to your baby.” This is a staggering exchange. For most of the film, the audience has seen Rosemary fight and claw to bring the baby into the world; it is hard to picture a more decisive indication that one has chosen motherhood. Yet, this ending presents the audience with a situation that is impossible to read: does Rosemary really choose when she reaches for her baby, and if so, what is she really choosing?

In its final moments, Rosemary’s Baby shifts the problem of choice into terrain that shatters the frameworks that it has previously imposed on choice. The difficulty involved in reading Rosemary’s final choice suggests the radical, impossible existential position associated with the Biblical Abraham in Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling. In Kierkegaard’s self-

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72 Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, in Kierkegaard’s Writings, ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong, vol. 6 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Interestingly, Kierkegaard, 64–6, compares the relationship of Abraham and Isaac to that of Mary and Jesus. He describes Mary as exhibiting a position comparable in its difficulty to that of Abraham. It is a position that requires supreme, unquestioning faith, and it is a position beset by anxiety, distress, and paradox.
revising series of retellings and analyses, the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac presents the radical possibility of a choice positioned beyond any known moral framework or judgment.\textsuperscript{73} This command places the individual in the paradoxical position of surpassing the universal and being in absolute relation to the absolute.\textsuperscript{74} In other words, one is capable of surpassing the universality of ethical demands and existing in an unmediated position with respect to God (the absolute). Polanski’s film thus finally transcends the dueling ethical frameworks that shape and tear at its protagonist, to singularly terrifying effect.

\textsuperscript{73} Kierkegaard, \textit{Fear and Trembling}, 56, refers to this for the first time as “a teleological suspension of the ethical.”

\textsuperscript{74} Kierkegaard, \textit{Fear and Trembling}, 55–6, first states this paradox at the beginning of Problema I; he explores it throughout and gives a summary form at the conclusion of Problema II, 81.
Conclusion

While *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Rosemary’s Baby* each take unique, and sometimes even opposed, slants on the problem of choice, they also exhibit a rather striking structural similarity. Succinctly put, the films’ very frameworks—ontological and ethical—remain undecided until the final scenes. Of course, all three films are adapted from suspenseful novels, but there is more at stake than maintaining the momentum of a page-turner. The extent to which the analyses offered in this essay largely hang on the final actions of the characters—how the characters cope with what seem to be their first real choices—signals the degree to which the films oscillate between the philosophical positions of extreme fatalism and various flavors of humanist self-determination. Relatedly, the plot resolutions of the films considered in this essay are remarkably indeterminate. Their conclusions readily admit, with little cajoling, alternately optimistic readings that affirm the unalienable freedom of choice and fatalistic readings animated by some admixture of pessimism, absurdism, and supreme skepticism.

It is revelatory to view the films’ indeterminacy as a response to the problematizing of choice in the Cold War polemic insofar as the emerging conditions of choice—televised races for political office, paranoid-rational interpretation, and consumer and bodily agency—that inform the films are themselves indeterminate with respect to freedom. The films place themselves in the position not just of assessing whether the characters have chosen, but of assessing whether the choices somehow exhibit genuine self-determination. While elections, interpretation, and consumerism afford moments of choice, there is the underlying need to evaluate the status of those choices within the systems that condition them. For instance, while *Rosemary’s Baby* stages consumer choice as a resistive position, one could equally contend that buying into all the
market trends in fashion and homewares is far from an expression of freedom. The indeterminacy of the films comes from the frustrating realization that increasing opportunities and options may not be the same as increasing choice in the ethically relevant sense. There is an uneasy coming to terms with the fact that the problem of choice is not easily solved through the opposition or substitution of systems (political, interpretative, religious, economic, and so on) but arises variously as a problem internal to each system. The films visualize the position that no system admits convincingly of substantive choice and, yet, each system affords ample opportunities to choose.

Behind these unresolved tensions finally lie two related philosophical issues, namely, the relation between narrativity and deliberation and between the ontological and the ethical. While the fatalism–self-determination tension most characteristic of the films’ quandaries seems to encompass the possible extreme positions in the problem of choice, this problematic is only the external perspective on the matter. That is, to assess something as either fatalistic or self-deterministic is to judge the matter externally. Even in films as psychologically colored as these, the audience is always at a distance from the characters and lacks the internal term: deliberation. The audience lacks introspection, for instance, even in the moments of retrospection that come in Raymond’s summer love flashback. The audience faces a problem that lies at the heart of cinema and, more generally, of narrative: the problem of perspective, namely, the conflict of the internal first-person and external third-person. In dramatizing the tension of fatalism and self-determination and in effacing internal deliberation, the films—whether they exonerate, bemoan, or condemn characters’ decisions—are squarely in the third-person position of moral judgment. While choice has psychological and ontological components, the films evince that it is primarily an ethical condition disproportionately defined by the ratification and valuation of others. The
films’ shared positon can likewise be characterized as the problem of the noncorrespondence between the ontological and the ethical. The entire structure of the problem of choice seems to depend on the intimate relation of the ontological and the ethical: if choice exists for someone, then that person is responsible; if it does not exist, then that person is not responsible. If, however, choice is dependent on the retrospective assessment of others that a choice has been made and is dependent on the corresponding valuation of others, then there seems to be no consistent ontological base. The being and the morality of choice are uncannily noncorrespondent—parallel but incommensurate systems. Choice is ontologically internal and individual while being ethically external and universal.
Works Cited


