

Hitchcock and His Audience: Creating and Manipulating Reality

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In review of the scholarly literature that has been written regarding Alfred Hitchcock and his films, several of the most intriguing arguments are presented by the examination of Hitchcock through philosophical paradigms. Hitchcock has been described as a formalist, enamored of the technical devices he employed in his films. However, he created meaning through the scenes and characters in his films in such a way that provide relevant and profound insights about humanity, and the values that give meaning to life.¹ As cinematic exposition has changed dramatically in respect to both aesthetics and technical requirements over the last fifty years, Hitchcock's influence is still evident in the artistic aspirations of modern directors, as well as the criteria by which the thematic or cinematic quality of films is determined.

Hitchcock's deconstruction of mainstream western values is well documented—he has registered and prophesized his opinions of love, marriage, gender roles and domesticity, shame, masculinity, morality, and homosexuality through his films.² In doing so, Hitchcock effectively created new relationships between form and content, and was among the first filmmakers to include rich philosophical subtext in his art, using entertainment to achieve artistic truth, and evoking reactions from the audience as he 'estranged' the most banal content to offer insights into the nature of reality.³ In this sense, Hitchcock borrowed from Sergei Eisenstein the conviction that a filmmaker's use of the camera can grip the impulses and attitudes of the audience. Where Eisenstein may have hoped to engage people into action as moral social beings, Hitchcock's work seems more interested in provoking the natural responses of the audience through his use of

¹ Singer, 4-6.

² Freedman, 5.

³ Singer, 8; Zizek, 3.

mise en scene, or “pure cinema”.⁴ Of course, the denotation of Hitchcock’s work depends on the acumen of the audience, and the director’s own opinions of them are well known, as he once asked an interviewer, “Are there intelligent picturegoers?”⁵

Hitchcock’s unique approach to filmmaking and his intentions as an artist have been used in support of Auteur Theory, which espouses that a film reflects the director’s personal creative vision. While Hitchcock is often presented in the context of Auteur Theory, it is important to distinguish that Hitchcock’s films had been in circulation since the 1930s, well before the creation of *Cahiers du cinema* and the French New Wave Movement.⁶ In my opinion, Auteurist expostulations of Hitchcock must move forward on the basis that cinema critic Francois Truffaut based Auteur Theory on the work of Hitchcock, as well as others such as Howard Hawks and Jean Renoir.

Some of Hitchcock’s own writings regarding his craft lend credibility to the legitimacy of Hitchcock’s role in the development of Auteur Theory. In *On Style*, he discusses the process of designing each film completely in advance, with drawing or by creating an outline of how the mood of the film will slowly build.⁷ *Some Aspects of Direction*, he discusses the pre-visualization phase of his work, including spending up to two months working with writers on a script.⁸ One of the most outstanding aspects of Hitchcock’s work is his attention to music, which only serves to strengthen his position as an auteur, creating a complete environment in which to immerse the viewer. For Hitchcock, music

⁴ Singer, 10.

⁵ Gottlieb, 284.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auteur_theory

⁷ Gottlieb, 293.

⁸ Gottlieb, 262.

was not merely an accompaniment to his films; it was a focus, not only useful in revealing something about the characters, but seemingly a character in itself. *Rear Window* features a ballad of street sounds that make up the film's score, maintaining the environment in the mind of the audience through an auditory presence.⁹ Music was often employed as a source of humor, as when a carnival organ plays "Baby Face" as a murder is plotted in *Strangers on a Train*, or as Muzak plays "It's a Most Unusual Day" as Cary Grant walks through the hotel lobby in *North by Northwest*.¹⁰ In his lecture, *On Music in Films*, Hitchcock noted the inherent connection between aural and visual aspects of film, stating, "The basis of the cinema's appeal is emotional. Music's appeal is to a great extent emotional, too."¹¹ In situations where word or photograph could not adequately convey the mood, Hitchcock considered music the medium by which he could "make it possible to express the unspoken."¹²

Hitchcock, perhaps more than any director before him, possessed an intimate knowledge of his audience that bordered on precognition. It was his connection to the social malfunctions of the masses that allowed Hitchcock to manipulate audiences to a dehumanizing degree. Using the tools of suspense, Hitchcock made his audience aware of plot details that were unbeknownst to the characters, and then artfully built tension as the truth began to unfold on screen. Hitchcock was unabashed in his exploitation of the emotional responses of his viewers, which led critics to dismiss many of his camera

⁹ Spoto, 221.

¹⁰ Rothstein.

¹¹ Gottlieb, 245.

¹² Gottlieb, 244.

techniques and thematic, visual stylizations as contrivances.¹³ Indeed, they may have been, in the sense that Hitchcock is one of the most deliberate filmmakers to have ever lived. It is arguable how much he relied on the conditioned responses of audiences and how much he sought to condition them.

Hitchcock addressed his subliminal provocation of audiences in an essay entitled “The Enjoyment of Fear,” in which he defended his approach to employing terror not only as a necessity, but the product of demand. Hitchcock recognized that audiences were sheltered from danger in their personal lives, but sought it out in the darkness of movie theaters.¹⁴ The notion that the appropriate response to tragedy is pity and terror is expressed by Aristotle in *Poetics*, and effectively demonstrates the lineage of Hitchcock’s melodramatic cinematic techniques dating back to the foundations of classic literature.

Inventive camera angles and shooting techniques are a defining characteristic of Hitchcock’s work. The film *Vertigo* features a unique visual maneuver in which the director zooms in on an object while tracking backwards with the camera. Hitchcock used this technique to make it appear as if the foreground and background were moving in opposite directions, effectively extending the perspective of the viewer. These stylistic touches not only provide emotional emphasis to the terror or tension that the director sought to create, but also lay the foundation for the subliminal connection between the director and the audience.

¹³ Singer, 25.

¹⁴ Gottlieb, 118.

To fully appreciate Hitchcock's understanding of human nature and the desire for fear, consider his horror classic and most infamous film, *Psycho*. Hitchcock himself considered the shower murder scene in *Psycho* to be purely an illusion, as the knife never makes contact with the body of actress Janet Leigh.¹⁵ Instead, the murder is shown as a 45-second sequence of 78 rapidly cut shots, each lasting only a fraction of a second.¹⁶ It is the fragmented slashing of the knife and shrieking of Leigh that created within the minds of the viewers a murder of a more graphic nature, and rendered women across America unable to shower with confidence. The construction of such sequences is not due to any happenstance of editing, but rather to Hitchcock's adherence to a very strict set of rules about the use of the camera, lighting, the creation of mood, and having a clear purpose for every shot.¹⁷ As a result of Hitchcock's ingenious manipulations, the scene is more than simply a murder, but also serves as an allegory for traditional values and gender roles in relationships through the context of popular psychology.¹⁸

Hitchcock often used the theme or premise of a film to drive the plot in ways that would include the audience and make them implicit in the events of the film. *Rear Window* is infamous for placing the viewer into the role of the voyeur, witness and party to all that unfold. Through unconventional storytelling and plotlines, Hitchcock allows the audience to view the world through the perspectives of the characters. *Vertigo*, contrary to most thrillers, is not constructed to guide the audience swiftly from point A to point B. Instead, the plot circles around a specific set of visual, verbal, and musical motifs — spirals,

¹⁵ Singer, 15.

¹⁶ Spoto, 320.

¹⁷ Singer, 56.

¹⁸ Spoto, 314.

towers, bouquets, the phrase “too late” — which repeatedly return the audience to the same place.¹⁹ For example, an extended scene in *Vertigo* features Jimmy Stewart following Kim Novak through the winding streets of San Francisco to his own home. Stewart appears puzzled and disoriented, which reflects emotional response Hitchcock sought to build among the audience.

In *Sabotage*, Hitchcock once more uses suggestive montage to build suspense in the climactic scene in which Sylvia Sidney kills her husband. In interviews, Hitchcock stated that his desire was “to make the murder seem inevitable without any blame attaching to the woman.”²⁰ Hitchcock’s intentions are of the utmost importance, as they demonstrate his goal to construct meaning while maintaining an entertained audience. His foremost tool in engaging the audience was realism, insofar as Hitchcock was able to create superficially realistic situations drawn from ordinary life, specifically those which he could then subvert and use a device to exercise subliminal control over his audience.²¹

The reality aesthetic is evident in Hitchcock’s emphasis on certain objects or body parts. This focus on material objects serves to augment the reality effect, such as the knife in *Sabotage*, the handcuffs in *The 39 Steps*, and the prominence of hands in both of the aforementioned films. Hitchcock believed that subtle close-ups could, in certain situations, be more effective in generating a sense of tension and drama than direct, overt action. In his 1937 lecture, *Direction*, Hitchcock stated, “You can use the camera to give emphasis whenever the attention of the audience has to be focused for a moment on a

¹⁹ Spoto, 268.

²⁰ Singer, 11.

²¹ Singer, 25.

certain player. There is no need for him to raise his voice or move to the center of the stage or to do anything dramatic. A close up will do it all for him—will give him, so to speak, the stage all to himself.”²²

Hitchcock’s work emphasizes normal, everyday objects in the course of utilizing them as tools to deviate from normality in a suspenseful and stylistic fashion. He once stated, “I like to keep the public guessing and never let them know what is going to happen next.”²³ Much of this sense of surprise relies on the realism of the surrounding environments, the humble foundations from which the stain of evil springs. In *Shadow of a Doubt* or *The Birds*, picturesque small towns in Southern California are dichotomously presented as safe havens from, and sources of, corruption. An important aspect of these depictions of reality is that his films never slip into the chasm of cliché. Hitchcock’s films are grounded in natural settings and iconic but accessible characters, and the dramatized locations never remain as only a part of the background, but become indigenous to the whole picture.

In *Shadow of a Doubt*, the traditional American town of Santa Rosa is a multi-faceted universe that simultaneously fosters young Charlie’s goodness while fueling the wickedness of her uncle Charlie. The same strength that drives young Charlie’s independence makes her capable of murder.²⁴ Hitchcock ensures that Santa Rosa remains prominent in the story by juxtaposing the inviting sunny exteriors of the town against interiors such as the garage in which young Charlie is almost murdered, and the seedy bar

²² Gottlieb, 257.

²³ Gottlieb, 248.

²⁴ Spoto, 120.

that causes her to exclaim, “I’ve never been in a place like this before.” Hitchcock’s explorations of the relationships between opposing elements, part and counterpart, take place in vividly realistic environments, which allow the audience to suspend their disbelief and accept conflicting dualities. The prominent landscapes in which his stories are staged work together to comprise a universe that is singular to Hitchcock, and he described the basis for realistic photography as his desire to “make everything look as real as possible, because the effects ... are really quite bizarre. The audience responds in proportion to how realistic you make it ... [and] gets involved and believes ... what’s going on up there on the screen.”²⁵

Hitchcock’s most celebrated usage of real setting to counterpoint normal functionality is seen in *North by Northwest*, as Cary Grant makes a rendezvous with death ... in a cornfield. Hitchcock himself acknowledged, “The cliché treatment would be to show him standing on the corner of the street in a pool of light.”²⁶ Instead, Hitchcock creates a sinister mood in the most auspicious of settings, as a crop duster appears from out of nowhere to chase Grant across open spaces under bright sunshine, forcing him out of the cornfield by spreading dust everywhere. The director described how elaborate production design could be used to build a sense of fear, stating, “This sequence is very carefully designed step by step both visually and to some extent in its menace ... the menace of its content.”²⁷ The implausibility of the scene—not to mention the impracticality of running someone down with a crop duster—is abated by the natural circumstances through which events unfold.

²⁵ Gottlieb, 314.

²⁶ Singer, 57.

²⁷ Gottlieb, 286.

The creeping sense of terror that Hitchcock evokes in *The Birds* slowly builds as more and more fowl creatures fill Bodega Bay, and is visually dependent on the sheer number of birds that fill the screen and take over the environment. Of course, everything in Hitchcock's films has underlying context and meaning, and so the flying agents chaos in *The Birds* appear any time human relationships take a shallow turn. Hitchcock used to serenity of the bay to contrast the chaos of the bird attacks, using skewed camera angles "chosen to express fear of the unknown."²⁸ Not satisfied in relying on the camera alone in this case, Hitchcock used a variety of animated layering techniques, giving the action scenes a sense of depth and ultimately immersing the audience, visually, in the midst of the birds. Such meticulous thematic and cinematic presentation allowed Hitchcock to combine various allegorical subtexts into one cohesive idea, and then transfer it into the intimate perceptive space of the viewer's mind. This type of mental and visual stimulus-response is comparable to the experiments of B.F. Skinner, in that neither is quite a scientist of behavior but rather a proctor of conditioning. Hitchcock's artistic longevity is testament to his ability mentally engage audiences.

Hitchcock work was always layered with meaningful subtext. The social commentary that Hitchcock made so well in his films must have been the result of a lifetime's accumulation of personal experiences. That those experiences ultimately led to so much on-screen misogyny and abuse of actresses has become a blemish on Hitchcock's reputation. Hitchcock's ideal woman is well documented; she appears regularly in his films as the cool, willowy blonde, presented so dominantly on screen yet eternally elusive

²⁸ Gottlieb, 291.

and inaccessible. Eva Marie Saint, Grace Kelly, Ingrid Bergman, Tippi Hedren, Janet Leigh, Kim Novak and Joan Fontaine have all portrayed this generic heroine on screen, and each time, the character suffered some twisted malady at the hands of the director. Kelly is dismissed in *Rear Window*, Novak is transformed in *Vertigo*, Hedren is tortured in *The Birds*, and Leigh is murdered in *Psycho*.

One admirer and critic of Hitchcock's, Donald Spoto, author of "The Dark Side of Genius," has attempted to delve into the reasons behind the directors' misanthropic tendencies. Spoto characterizes Hitchcock as "a man so unhappy, so full of self-loathing, so lonely and friendless, that his satisfactions came as much from asserting power as from spinning fantasies and acquiring wealth."²⁹ The director obviously had some issues with women, particularly blondes, and most likely his mother, as his films infer. Spoto specifically mentions Hitchcock's dehumanization of Tippi Hedren in *The Birds*, and alleges that Hitchcock attempted to blackmail Hedren into sexual submission.³⁰

Ultimately, Hitchcock's obsession with Hedren led to a breakdown that some critics mark as the beginning of the director's decline as an artist, as the majority of his successive films, including *Marnie*, *Torn Curtain*, *Topaz*, and *Family Plot*, were not nearly as commercially or critically acclaimed as his previous works.

I am repeatedly tempted to refer to the broad range of genres that Hitchcock chose to engage through his films: mystery, suspense, horror, and drama. However, it is my inclination to state that Hitchcock was the pioneer of the mys-susp-hor-roma-dram-edic

²⁹ Maslin.

³⁰ Maslin.

genre. He recognized the natural capacities and motives of human desire and the functions of humor and love as coping mechanisms. To this end, Hitchcock would often allay the sense of subliminal dread that built in his films by using elements of comedy and romance.³¹ These genre-bending disseminations—the tension-breakers—are the mechanisms which allow the audience to see their lives reflected on screen, adding to the effectiveness of the realism that Hitchcock created so well.

The blending of various thematic and dramatic elements in Hitchcock's films is the primary reason for the difficulty in the analysis and direct classification of his work. Various attempts at defining Hitchcock's precise place in the context of artistic theory have resulted in at least three conclusions. Hitchcock's work belongs to a category of realism due to their natural environments and logical narrative frameworks. His work is modern in that it subverts the narrative codes of cinema while remaining theoretically influential. Finally, Hitchcock fits the definition of postmodernism in a variety of ways, from the multiple truths evident in his films to the transference that takes place within the audience.³² Dialectical, epistemological interpretations or deconstructions of Hitchcock's work inevitably tend to become as fragmented as the body of work itself.

³¹ Singer, 74.

³² Zizek, 3.

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