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Abstract

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by Connor Scott

Auteur theory was first proposed in the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* during the 1950s. French for “author,” the term *auteur* conceptualizes the director as the creative and artistic force behind a film, ultimately responsible for the totality of the final image and product (Corrigan and White 544). Historically, the great English director Alfred Hitchcock has become the embodiment of that concept, widely considered by film critics and viewers as one of the twentieth century’s greatest directors and contributors to the medium of film. One of the most intriguing aspects of Hitchcock’s classic films, such as *Psycho* (1960), *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959), are how the shocking images of murder, beautiful women, and romance that captivate his audiences support the various themes, archetypes, and character traits that actually mirror his own fears and anxieties internalized by his strict Catholic upbringing. Hitchcock’s use of female sexuality as a threat to patriarchal male society reflect his own repressed upbringing, removed from the topical discussions and understandings of sex and society. Dominant female lead characters represent a manifestation of his own real-life fetishism. His projection of a dominant motherly character in a number of his films is an insightful reflection of the profound role his own mother played in controlling his activities from infancy to adulthood. Furthermore, Hitchcock’s lifelong fear of authority, and more specifically the police, is the direct result of a childhood incident perpetrated by his father. This theme, repeated in the majority of Hitchcock classics, would have a resounding effect on the young boy and plague him later on in life. This essay asserts that Alfred Hitchcock is a premier example of an *auteur*, embodying his own fears and anxieties in the characters in his films.

Hitchcock typically used beautiful Hollywood actresses in lead roles in his films, which under his influence would be molded into standard “Hitchcock blondes”: breathtaking, bold, and passionate patrician female characters. Moreover, the roles bestowed the women with positions of power and dominance within the plot rather than marginalizing them as the “arm-candy” of the male lead. In *Psycho*, after her boss’s drunken male client flaunts \$40,000 in cash in front of her, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is instructed to take the money to the bank for depositing. However, complaining of a headache, she leaves the office to return home, her male superior assuming that the good and honest secretary would willingly comply with the request. In the next shot, the audience surprisingly observes Marion wearing little more than a black brassiere (Hitchcock’s humorous implication of her transformation into a thief and a voyeuristic desire to see her naked which he shares with the audience), the envelope of money on her bed, and a suitcase full of clothes (Naremore 2). Crane, who lives at home with her sister, seized the opportunity to ensure the monetary security she required to live happily with her lover, Sam Loomis. The motivation to better her life was also prompted by Mr. Cassidy’s distasteful proclamation, “I never carry more than I can afford to lose” (*Psycho*). Driving out of Phoenix, Arizona, bound for her new home in Fairvale, California, Marion evades both her boss and the police but is defeated when she leaves herself vulnerable in a shower and is stabbed to death by “Mrs. Bates”; the knife representative of Hitchcock’s own desires to violate and penetrate her body. Similarly, in *Vertigo*, Gavin Elster hires Judy Barton (Kim Novak) to fake the death of his wife. Barton is able to convince former detective and infatuated lover ‘Scottie’ Ferguson (Jimmy Stewart) that she is in fact Madeleine Elster and is possessed

by the transcendental force of her great-grandmother “Carlotta Valdes.” By convincingly faking her own suicide, Barton dealt a mortal blow to Scottie’s masculine identity and drove him into the feminine world of madness, disintegration and death (Modleski 95). Driven by depression to the streets in search of his ‘dead’ love, he repeatedly mistakes other women for Madeleine until eventually rediscovering Barton and winning her over in a domineering fashion. He then sets out to completely re-constitute her appearance to match his perceptions of the ideal image - an act that directly parallels Hitchcock’s own fetishistic actions to re-constitute the images of his leading ladies. Additionally, in *North by Northwest*, Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) is a posh, patrician double agent who is able to use her looks and intelligence to seduce Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), setting him up to appear to an illicit organization as a CIA operative by the name of George Kaplan. Kendall eventually regrets her actions and saves Thornhill from the agents in a dramatic pursuit across the face of Mount Rushmore, while maintaining her exterior beauty and poise. Outside the shooting of the film, Hitchcock controlled the life and style of Eva Marie Saint to the extent that when he was unsatisfied with the clothes that MGM Studios had sent him for her role, Hitchcock personally took Saint to Bergdorf Goodman in New York City to shop for a new wardrobe. He picked out each article of clothing that she would be wearing in her upcoming role and even went about having the actress lower her voice register to fit in with past Hitchcock blondes (Taylor 250). Having grown up under the strict ordinance of Jesuit priests, Alfred Hitchcock was instructed to repress his sexual fantasies and emotions (Naremore 13). Banned from social interaction with girls at an early age, Hitchcock’s life was visibly undisturbed by his emotional needs and as he had claimed in a later interview, was completely celibate for all but one occurrence – the event which conceived his daughter Patricia (Taylor 242). Through Hitchcock’s domination of female actresses both on-screen and off, his sexual desires and fetishistic needs were fulfilled. It can therefore be seen that Alfred Hitchcock is a premier example of the cinematic *auteur* because of the projection of his own internal desires, as represented within the themes and actions of the characters of his films.

Another recognizable trait of Alfred Hitchcock’s motion pictures is the presence of overbearing mothers who attempt to control their children’s every action and thought. Within Hitchcock’s own life, his mother played a profound role in dictating every move that the famous director would make, from adolescence to adulthood. During his childhood in London, Emma Hitchcock would demand that her young boy stand at the end of her bed each evening and submit to a lengthy and detailed questioning about his activities that day; an event which would continue well into Hitchcock’s adulthood (Spoto 17). In addition, even in Alfred Hitchcock’s adult life, Mrs. Hitchcock would accompany him on holiday trips with his wife, compelling him to divert attention away from attending to the needs of his own wife in order to cater to her every whim (17). Throughout *Psycho*, Norman Bates is engaged in a constant struggle with the phantasm of his mother for the possession of his mind and body. In the film, the image of the murder becomes gradually clearer as the film progresses and Norman starts to slowly lose the battle for the possession of his body. From the early shower scene, Norman’s identity as the killer is left imperceptible to the viewer, leaving them with the assumption that Mrs. Bates was the one who viciously murdered Marion. However, as the story progresses, the audience is able to gradually see more and more of the distinguishing features of the killer, culminating in the cellar scene when the audience is able to finally observe Norman rush in after Lila, wearing a wig and his mother’s clothes. Culminating in the final scene in the Fairvale Courthouse, we see what is left of the defeated Norman,

huddled in a barred cell, speaking with the voice of his mother, signifying her total domination of his body and mind. Similarly in *Vertigo*, Madeleine Elster is engaged in a psychological battle for the possession of her body and mind with the phantasm of her great-grandmother, Carlotta Valdes. Representing the lost child whom the “mad Carlotta” had wandered the streets searching for aimlessly – later to be repeated by Scottie when he is also plunged into a world of psychological disintegration – Madeleine becomes the target of a figure that in death assumes unlimited power and control (Modleski 93). Effectively battling for the possession of Madeleine’s body, regardless of Scottie’s intervention, Carlotta has her revenge when her great granddaughter throws herself off the bell tower. Furthermore in *North by Northwest*, Mrs. Thornhill is implicitly projected as having a commanding grip over the psyche of her son. In an earlier scene in the film, when the audience is first introduced to Roger Thornhill hurrying to a cab with a secretary closely behind, he explicitly makes a point of asking her a number of times to remind him to call his mother. When Roger is later arrested for drunk driving and is being held by the police, the one phone call that he is allotted by the officer is used to call his mother. Speaking to her over the phone, he declares in a very apologetic manner, one which is unusually childish for an individual of his age, “Mother, this is your son, Roger ... No, no, Mother. I have not been drinking. These two men, they poured a whole bottle of bourbon into me. No, they didn’t give me a chaser” (*North by Northwest*). Roger’s child-like affection for his mother and the fact that he has married twice and divorced on both occasions suggestively alludes to the measures he has taken to insure the solidarity of their relationship; evidently reflective of the tremendous power she wields over his actions. Through Hitchcock’s use of the domineering mother character within his many classic films, he was able to project a dominant aspect of his own personal life and thereby represent in a distinguishing fashion the ideals of the cinematic *auteur*.

Additionally, the fear of societal authority, most commonly portrayed as a fear of the police, is used prominently within Hitchcock’s films to reflect the director’s own fears and anxieties developed from his childhood as a result of the mean-spirited actions of his father. When Alfred Hitchcock was five years old, his father sent him down to the local police station with a note (Truffaut 17). After the chief of police read the piece of paper he locked the young boy in a cell for five to ten minutes, declaring as he finally arrived back to unlock it that “this is what we do to naughty boys” (17). When questioned by the great French film critic Francois Truffaut, why he was being punished, Hitchcock asserted that he had no idea why he was being punished and even made a point of mentioning that his father used to call him his “little lamb without a spot” (Taylor 28). In the early scenes of *Psycho*, Marion Crane experiences similar feelings of fear and anxiety as she is running away from Phoenix, Arizona; trying her best to avoid all sources of authority that could dash her hopes of future happiness with her lover in Fairvale, California. After pulling off to the side of the road to sleep, she is awakened by a tapping on the window by a police officer who, as a result of Marion’s suspicious reaction to him, decides to follow her as she drives away. Fearing that the officer would learn of her crime, Marion quickly sells her car to a used car salesman along the road and speedily takes off, losing him in the process. Crane is still visibly shaken by the potential for trouble, even after she successfully eludes the law enforcement official and arrives in safe standing at the Bates Motel. Moreover, in the many scenes taking place within her hotel room, the camera repetitiously pans between a close up of Marion’s anxiety-stricken face and the envelope of money, signifying her fear of capture and imprisonment. In *Vertigo*, Scottie Ferguson is brought before

a county judge regarding his role in Madeleine's apparent suicide, accused of having used his vertigo as an excuse for not following her up to the bell tower and preventing her from falling into harm. An innocent man, and ironically a former police detective, he is chastised for failing to save her from death and is humiliated in front of his fellow male law enforcement officials, who observe Scottie to be lacking in masculinity and thereby inferior due to his psychological impairment. In the film, during Scottie's trial, the district attorney assigned to the case makes a point of declaring to the court in a snide manner, "it is a pity that knowing her suicidal tendencies he did not make a greater effort" (*Vertigo*). Having been finally dismissed of all charges, he is proven innocent and let go despite having undergone an overtly emasculating experience at the hands of the traditional legal authorities. Furthermore, in *North by Northwest*, after being wrongly accused of murdering United Nations Diplomat Lester Townsend, Roger Thornhill is driven into eluding authorities that are leading a nationwide manhunt for his arrest. Guiltless of the crime, he is then further set up by the CIA for the purpose of providing a physical body to their phony agent George Kaplan. Hitchcock utilizes the fear of an innocent man who is convicted of a crime he didn't commit to his advantage, fittingly combining it with his own fears and anxieties towards traditional societal authority for the purpose of imposing fear and uncertainty upon his audiences. In his adult life, Hitchcock's fear of the police reached such a climactic point that he hardly ever drove a car after his arrival to California and on one occasion he even experienced a prolonged anxiety spasm after the simple act of throwing a lit cigar butt out the window of a car (31). Clearly, the role that Alfred Hitchcock's own personal fears played in shaping the actions and emotions of his characters on-screen is visible proof of his status as a cinematic *auteur*.

Auteur theory is a philosophy that denotes a common belief and understanding within the world of film studies and cinema that a director, because of his extraordinary guidance and involvement in overseeing the totality of a film's creative content, is considered to be its author. Historically, only a small number of motion picture artists have had the distinct pleasure of being defined as an 'auteur,' largely due to the fact that few directors have discernibly impacted the film community in such a profound and ground breaking manner with their own unique styles and methods. Alfred Hitchcock is widely considered by both fan and critic alike as one of the twentieth century's greatest directors and contributors to film. Prominently displaying scenes of murder, beautiful women, and romance in classic films such as *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, and *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock enthralled his audiences with graphic images supported by a multiplicity of themes, archetypes, and character traits that mirrored his own fears and anxieties established by his tumultuous Catholic upbringing. Alfred Hitchcock's utilization of dominant female lead characters, enabled with prominent roles on screen and the ability to take decisive action, represent a manifestation of his own real-life fetishism. His need to have them controlled and dominated by their male co-stars represents Hitchcock's own sexual desires to dominate the beautiful leading ladies of his films both on-screen and off. In addition, the projection of a dominant motherly character throughout a number of his films is a detailed reflection of his own personal life and the overpowering sense of control that his mother imposed over it up until her death in 1942. Moreover, Hitchcock's lifelong fear of authority, most prominently represented in his films as the police, is the result of a traumatizing experience that Hitchcock had as a child. The repercussions of this incident would largely influence the irrational behavior that he displayed later in adulthood, as many of his films would implicitly validate. This essay has proven that Alfred Hitchcock is a premier example of an

auteur due to his extraordinary ability to embody his own fears and anxieties within the characters of his films.

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