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“Gender Flip-flopping in Hitchcock”: A Closer look at Rear Window, Vertigo and Psycho

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Gender Flip-flopping in Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock has long been known as a master of mystery, a connoisseur of charismatically cryptic suspense. Through his renowned style of directing in films such as *Vertigo*, *Rear Window* and *Psycho*, Hitchcock twisted reality, expectations and the accepted conventions of society. In his films, Alfred Hitchcock works to contort, spiral and even reverse stereotypical gender roles.

Established in the pre-1950's, gender stereotypes set different standards for men and women, and integrated the ideas of those ideals into society. From infancy, it is projected upon people that they must behave a certain way- it starts with pink and blue baby blankets, all the way up into adulthood, where Wal-Mart still pays their female employees less than male employees. In the 1920's, the author Virginia Woolf stated "It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail". Women are expected to be more empathetic and emotionally responsive than men. They are supposedly more cheerful and able to determine emotions from nonverbal communication, whereas men are apparently rather stoic, preferring not to show emotions to the extent that females do. This essay will examine the different roles and stereotypes with respect to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, *Rear Window* and *Psycho*.

Vertigo, created in 1958, stars James Stewart and the transcendent Kim Novak in a tale that is hauntingly reminiscent of Orpheus and Eurydice. In it, former detective John 'Scottie' Ferguson falls for the beautiful Madeleine Elster, who believes that the spirit of her great-

grandmother, Carlotta resides within her and wants her to die, thus causing Madeleine to nearly commit suicide on multiple occasions. However, as soon as the couple seems to have reached their happy peak in the film (as most film couples eventually do), the spirit of 'Carlotta' compels her to commit suicide by throwing herself off the top of the tower. Scottie remains devastated for a few months, partially blaming his own sense of vertigo for stopping him from chasing after her. However, his Galatea appears in the form of a woman named Judy Barton, and Scottie is revived, throwing himself into turning Judy into Madeleine in an attempt to regain his lost love.

In *Vertigo*, women are characterized in two very different ways, and both of the women found in the film take turns with the role of women as submissive domestic females, and the idea of females being independent and able to turn the tables on men who have held the upper hand for so long. Since coming back from World War II, the role of gender roles had been highly in question: Women had been expected to take over men's jobs while the men were fighting, and many men returned to find that some women had no intent of giving up their newfound careers (Busam).

At the beginning of the film, we see Midge sitting behind her desk, with the sketching board held at such an angle that it almost seems to represent a phallus, indicating that she has no need to be 'completed', as Freud would put it, but rather she is both sexes in one, providing self-fulfillment through her career. Ironically, she is a lingerie designer, and when Scottie spots a backless bra on her desk, she proudly explains that the bra was designed by an aircraft engineer using the same principal as a cantilever bridge, thereby having no back, or as one could look at it, needing no support, perhaps drawing a parallel to Midge herself.

However, the bra can also be contrived as a symbol of Scottie and the typical 1950's male. Now that women demand equal rights as males, Scottie seems to be a reference to the 'weak' male of the 1950's. When Midge and Scottie go to a bookstore to discover the history of Carlotta Valdez, they discover that after she had a child, her lover took the baby and tossed Carlotta aside. At this point in the film, the shopkeeper comments that, "men could do that in those days, they had the power", insinuating that men do not have the same power they used to. This can also relate to Scottie himself, since Scottie was stuck in a corset when the viewers saw him after the rooftop scene, thereby making Scottie a symbol for all the 'spineless' men with no backbone in the 1950's.

In the first portion of the film, Madeleine is easily portrayed as the damsel in distress, who must be rescued by Scottie, and Midge is the more masculine figure (phallus and all), making it understandable why Scottie would fall for the more feminine figure in the film, but during the second portion, the roles are reversed when Judy writes Scottie a letter after finally meeting him as herself, not as Madeleine. Judy reveals that the whole time, she had been manipulating Scottie, switching herself to an almost masculine role, in contrast to how Midge is portrayed in the asylum as a soothing (if slightly creepy) mother figure. Scottie's guilt at this time feminizes him, in the magnitude of his affections for Madeleine. It is very strange to see a man broken down to this extent in film- for him to end up in an asylum after Madeleine's death is rather reminiscent of the female protagonists of the Gothic and Regency eras falling ill after having their hearts broken (Busam).

Once Scottie finds Judy, he becomes obsessed with turning her into Madeleine, starting his own Pygmalion fantasy, and also fighting for his own masculinity. We see his struggle for the idealized personality of Madeleine, the vulnerable women in distress to come back and bring

back with her his masculinity, which Judy does in this case by letting him dictate her hair and clothing, letting Scottie (and men) symbolically exercise 'power' over women and their freedom.

The ending leaves gender roles still open in that while Madeleine is made to pay for her manipulative lifestyle by being destroyed, Scottie on the other hand seems to overcome his vertigo and recover his masculinity. However, after Judy takes her fall from the mission tower, we see Scottie standing in the same position that Judy's body landed, insinuating that perhaps he is the next to fall from a position of dominance.

Alfred Hitchcock was a master of mise-en-scène, where in his films, almost every single move; every color scene had a specific purpose behind it. *Rear Window* is no exception, and also plays fascinating games with the idea of gender stereotypes. While viewers in the 50's were used to seeing the damsel in distress, a gentleman in distress must have been a definite change for them. In *Rear Window*, professional photographer L.B. "Jeff" Jeffries is confined to his apartment due to his broken leg (hurt while getting an action shot at a race). While confined, Jeffries spends most of his time observing the neighbors with his camera through his rear window. When he begins to suspect that a man across the courtyard may have murdered his wife, Jeff enlists the help of his high society fashion-consultant girlfriend Lisa Freemont and his visiting nurse Stella to investigate

The opening scene shows that the film is shot from Jeff's point of view, putting him in the position of a passive viewer rather than that of active go-getter. His broken leg is in a cast from the hip down, and is elevate at an angle that not-so-subtly coincides with the phallus, making it seem as though throughout the film Jeff suffers from having a rather uncomfortable erection. What really brings the similarity glaring into the viewer's face though, is the scene

where Jeff has ‘an itch that he can’t scratch’ so to speak. In the film it is portrayed in such a way that when Jeff uses the scratcher to itch himself, the angle of that stick makes it look like Jeff is groping his penis rather than holding a scratcher. Finally, the cherry to top the cake- when Jeff finally manages to scratch that itch, the expression on his face can only be described as positively orgasmic, and that sigh he gives is clearly indicative to reference of a post-coital sigh of release.

However something else can be understood from the opening scenes as well- as Stella says to Jeff: “You have a woman deficiency”. Jeff has been watching the beautiful dancer, named ‘Miss Torso’, through his window, but his temperature has not increased at all. In combination with Hitchcock’s symbolism of Jeff’s broken (impotent) leg, one might make the assumption from the hints in the film that Jeff is gay, and not interested in women at all, hence his apprehension at being married to his beautiful girlfriends Liza Freemont, who has looks, brains, money and class- all the things a man could ever want from a woman.

Somehow Hitchcock uses this film to make fun of women, doing what he does best- placing them into the gender stereotype for most of the film, reversing it just long enough to make the audience think, and then flipping everything back to the way it was before in time for the ending. In *Rear Window*, Lisa Freemont has a job, as Midge does in *Vertigo*, yet the portrayal of her career goes as far as emphasizing her womanhood even more as she comes swooping into Jeff’s apartment in the latest fashions from Paris, gliding around the room gracefully in her tulle skirt.

Lisa’s pressure on Jeff for them to get married, places her even more in the idea of the stereotypical woman who wants to get married, have babies and live happily ever after as a drab

little housewife. However Jeff's apathy and even at times revulsion towards the idea all seem to indicate that she is not quite what he is looking for. If the scene with the back scratcher is any indication, he might be happier with her if she went and bought a strap-on. When Jeff is shaving, the ad on the radio is for a type of stimulant, perhaps the equivalent of modern-day Viagra to help boost the 'activity' so to speak and help Jeff with his frustration. It is also noticeable that the musician Jeff enjoys watching never seems to have any intimate events with females, perhaps indicating that he also is interested in men more so than women and is the object of Jeff's phallus-camera desires.

When Jeff begins to suspect his neighbor Lars Thorwald of murdering his wife, he calls an old friend, Detective Thomas Doyle, with whom it is implied that Jeff may or may not have had relations with. When Doyle raises his eyebrows at Lisa's overnight case, it might not be a matter of the impropriety of having a woman stay the night, but rather the idea of Jeff sleeping with a woman when Doyle knows he is not attracted to women. Also, after observing the Thorwalds after the apparent demise of Mrs. Thorwald, Lisa and Stella make assumptions that 'prove' her murder based upon feminine frills such as makeup and jewelry. Hitchcock pushes the women into the stereotype.

When Lisa sneaks into Thorwald's apartment, it is based on her suspicions of his wife's demise. The primary reason she thinks that Mrs. Thorwald has not gone on a trip is because she left her purse behind, and her husband is packing up her jewelry to sell. Stella mentions that she would never be caught without her wedding ring, and when Lisa sneaks over to Thorwald's apartment, she finds and steals the wedding ring as proof. This is a fascinating scene because when Lisa goes to the apartment and puts on the ring, it is a sign of two things. First, it is an indicator of her desire to get married, second, the ring makes the shape of a hole. When Lisa

inserts her finger into the ring, it is a sign to Jeff saying that she would be willing to act as a phallus to his asshole in exchange for the marriage she so desires (Elliot).

In the last few scenes, Lisa saves Jeff from falling. Jeffries is completely helpless, passive almost, whilst his female counterpart is active and ends up saving him. Thinking about the idea of femme fatale, this goes to prove Hitchcock's ideas of women. The very last image we get is one of Lisa on the bed, reading a travel book and wearing men's clothing, while Jeff is asleep in the wheelchair. While at the surface it seems as if they're a normal, happy couple, the minute Lisa sees Jeff is asleep, she picks up her fashion magazine again and starts reading. The temperature has decreased from the original sweltering heat, and Jeff looks satiated at last. This may be indicative that Lisa went out and bought a strap-on or has found some other way to fulfill her boyfriend's phallic desires.

The last film we examine will be what may be Hitchcock's most notorious film ever: *Psycho*. *Psycho* tells the tale of Marion Crane, a working girl in Arizona who is tired of having to sneak away during lunch breaks to meet her lover, Sam, whose excuse for not marrying her is that most of his money goes towards alimony checks to his ex-wife. When Marion's employer asks her to take \$40,000 in cash to a local bank for deposit, she snaps, impulsively leaving town with the money, and heads toward Sam, determined to start a new life with him.

As night falls and a torrential rain obscures the road ahead of her, Marion turns off the main highway. Exhausted from the long drive and the stress of her criminal act, she decides to spend the night at the desolate Bates Motel. The motel is run by Norman Bates, a peculiar young man dominated by his invalid mother. After Norman fixes her a light dinner, Marion goes back to her room for a shower, and gets stabbed to death by Norman's 'mother'.

From the start of the film, Marion seems to be portrayed as a typical female. When she and Sam are in bed, she is lying down in a more submissive position, and Sam is above her, clearly more dominant. Although Marion is in a post-coital state, she seems to be upset that she has breached her sense of feminine values. She tells Sam that she hates to be seeing him in such a degrading place, and pushes for their marriage, clearly a topic that has been mentioned before between the couple. Sam waves it off, placating her, but is obviously more sexually aggressive, saying he'll come visit her at home, but that "after the steak, we can send sister to the movies, turn Mama's picture to the wall..." to which Marion is obviously dismayed. The image pulls across as Marion being needy and desperate for Sam's affection, while Sam retains the upper hand, a typically Hitchcockian stereotype.

After Marion steals the money, her wardrobe shifts to darker colors, signifying her change of morality from pure to sullied. When Marion gets caught in a rainstorm, she pulls over to the practically abandoned Bates Motel, meeting the proprietor, Norman Bates, a young man. Norman seems to take well to her, but his mother does not. Later on, we discover that Norman Bates is mother. He had poisoned his dominating mother years ago when he found her with her lover, but couldn't bear to let go of her in his mind, so he had preserved her corpse, and his brain took over her role in his life (Elliot).

This again plays into the flipped gender stereotypes with Norman only being able to act as a dominant character through his mentality of 'Mother', thereby feminizing him extremely, and giving women more power. Furthermore, the extreme emotions he felt are also characteristic of stereotypical females. Men would not be expected to act out of jealousy as much as women, and the fact that Norman first killed out of jealousy when he was himself, a young teenage boy, further de-masculinizes him. Hitchcock chose Tony Perkins for the role based on his elfin

features which when contrasted with Sam's burlier figure, places Norman further down the line of lost masculinity. By the end, gender stereotypes are back to normal, with 'Mother' speaking of what a terrible person her son was and she could not bring it in her to even swat away a fly (Cohen).

In the 1950's when genders were still trying to find ways to resume the life they had before WWII, Hitchcock's films played with the minds of viewers, and truly were pieces of directorial art. In use of his auteur method of directing, Hitchcock's work in gender roles and stereotypes was incredible, and forged the way for gender studies in future times. Through *Vertigo*, *psycho* and *Rear Window*, he raises questions about sexuality, gender roles and stereotyping in methods that are still very much applicable today.

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