

Psychoanalytic Theory
and the Narrative Trajectory
of Alfred Hitchcock's Films

In the review of narrative trajectories across several of Hitchcock's films, the theme of order/disorder/order restored can be argued to be modeled after Freud's psychoanalytic theory, where the manner in which the plot unfolds is akin to the experience of witnessing a patient's recantations and subsequent catharsis. The order being the normative state, the disorder being created by the repressed story which eventually is revealed, which in turn facilitates the restoration of order.

Psychoanalysis was pioneered by Sigmund Freud as a method by which the patient would engage in free associative speech or hypnosis to "produce clues to the source of their symptoms... unconscious information could be brought to the surface and made available for interpretation. In the gaps and patterns produced by talk, the therapist could help the patient piece together a repressed story and, in doing, effect a cure (Cohen, 1995, 56)."

For the purposes of this essay I will demonstrate how the narrative of Hitchcock's films follows the same trajectory as the psychoanalytic process, evidenced by the manner in which information is revealed and withheld from the viewer and the presence of a repressed story (or stories). I will also provide further examples of where this trajectory is present but in a more complex form –

where the process of discovery and revelation is repeated, and overlaps within the plot.

Assuming the role of viewer, we enter Hitchcock's films much as a psychoanalyst would a new case study: with limited knowledge of what to expect. As the film gets underway facts are slowly revealed to us – while others are conspicuously withheld until later on in the story, for example Barton's identity is not revealed until the very end of *Number 17*. However, our position of authority as viewers is retained by our being granted a piece or pieces of information before they are revealed to some or all of the characters on the screen – such as our learning the truth about Judy in *Vertigo* while Scottie is left in oblivion.

Similar to the patient on the couch, there comes a point where repressed (unconscious) information makes its way to the surface (consciousness). It is at this point we discover that things are not as they seem. A concept, fact or character is revealed to be contrary to what we have been lead to believe thus far. That a character is operating under false pretense such as Nora in *Number 17*; an imposter such as Judy in *Vertigo* (who we discover had been impersonating Madeline); a character we believe to be alive is actually deceased such as Norman's mother in *Psycho*; or vice versa where a character we believe is dead

(or has died) is revealed to be very much alive such as Judy (Madeline) again in *Vertigo*.

The repressed information shatters our assumptions by disproving what we believe to be true – this revelation casts a shadow of doubt upon everything. It is this uncertainty which is vital to the creation and maintenance of suspense, and also acts to propel the narrative forward. The revelation(s) and the seeds of doubt that they plant in the mind of the viewer keep everyone guessing until the final scenes of the film, where the remaining repressed pieces of information are revealed and the story is finally able to come into focus.

In Freud's model of psychoanalysis, it is the excavation of that which has been repressed which is pivotal to rehabilitation. In the films of Alfred Hitchcock, the excavation of that which has been repressed is pivotal to the narrative trajectory of the film.

Rebecca opens with a retrospective voice-over which serves as our introduction to the story. As the camera weaves its way toward the ruins of an enormous estate, our female narrator provides us with a vague introduction to what is left of Manderly, and gives us the impression that something must have happened to her there as she laments never being able to return. As we are taken back in time to the South of France where the story of *Rebecca* begins, we do so

with the knowledge that somehow the female lead is going to end up at Manderly, and that bad things are going to happen.

Curiously, Joan Fontaine's character is never properly introduced by her own name, she remains nameless until she marries Maxim and becomes the second Mrs. de Winter.

Maxim and Rebecca (the first Mrs. de Winter) remain mysterious characters to both the second Mrs. de Winter and us the viewer. As the story unfolds much of what we learn about Maxim and everything we learn about Rebecca is volunteered to us (and the second Mrs. de Winter) by other characters. We learn that he has lost his wife from Edythe Van Hopper, who we also overhear describing how she died. Once at Manderly details about Rebecca are eagerly supplied by Mrs. Danvers.

As viewers we learn this information in step with the second Mrs. de Winter as details about both Maxim and the late Rebecca de Winter are revealed through her dialogue with the characters on the screen. We gather information and form similar assumptions – that Rebecca was the perfect wife, and that Maxim is obsessed by her and loved her in a way that he will never love the second Mrs. de Winter. The evidence to support our assumptions is present in the details supplied by the supporting characters, and the *mise-en-scene*, for example Rebecca's monogrammed towels and napkins still in circulation.

Manderly seems like a personification of what we are lead to believe about Rebecca in its grandeur, and in details such as the height of the doorknobs on the enormous doors which effectively dwarf the second Mrs. de Winter providing a visual representation of how she is feeling on the inside: lost in the shadow of the first Mrs. de Winter.

Maxim's true feelings about Rebecca remain concealed until we near the end of the film, when he finally reveals his hatred for her during a confrontation with the second Mrs. de Winter in the cottage after Rebecca's body turns up. In addition to discovering that we have been falsely led to believe that he still loved and idealized Rebecca, we then learn the details of Maxim's actions on the night of her death. With this new information, the plot then steers toward its conclusion – where the truth about Rebecca's illness is revealed by her doctor. This second repressed story exonerates Maxim of suspicion for her murder, and he realizes that Rebecca wanted him to kill her. The film finally concludes with Mrs. Danvers destruction of Manderly and consequently herself, as she sets the estate ablaze – which finally explains the burned out shell of Manderly we were shown at the beginning of the film.

Rear Window is an excellent example of the narrative assuming the pattern of the psychoanalytic process, as our protagonist Jeffries assumes the role of therapist, and proceeds to relate to the world visible through the rear window

of his apartment as his patient. The plot of the film follows Jeffries as he engages in the analysis his neighbours – observing their behaviors, attempting to identify patterns and gaps that suggest a hidden truth, the same manner in which a therapist observes and analyzes a patient.

The narrative of *Rear Window* revolves around the assumptions Jeffries has formed based on his observations of his neighbour Mr. Thorwald whose wife seems to have disappeared, and his crusade to convince the people around him of what he believes to be going on under the surface. Jeffries is eventually joined by Lisa and Stella. This entire film is enormously informed by the science of psychology, in Jeffries active pursuit of the repressed story which he believes will reveal the truth about the sudden departure of Mrs. Thorwald, and in his observations and discussions about the other neighbours within his field of view.

As viewers, we are privy to an additional piece of information which eludes Jeffries early on in the film: while he is asleep, we witness his neighbour Mr. Thorwald departing the building in the company of a woman (who we logically presume to be Mrs. Thorwald). This nugget of information serves to cast a shadow of doubt over Jeffries wild assumptions about the fate of Mrs. Thorwald when he awakes and notices that she is gone.

Number 17 is a very straightforward example of this model, despite being regarded as one of Hitchcock's lesser films, to put it gently, the pattern of

the repressed story remains present. In this case the first repressed story is that Nora is neither deaf nor dumb as we have been lead to believe. Just as the group of crooks are about to depart to catch the Number 17 train – leaving Barton and Rose tied up to the railing on the stairwell and Ben in the locked in the bathroom – the supposedly deaf and dumb Nora surprises them (and the viewer) by revealing that she can speak when she turns to Barton and Rose and discreetly whispers that she will be coming back. Finding an unexpected ally in Nora (who we now know is neither deaf nor dumb) facilitates their escape from the house, which propels the narrative forward making the chase scene on the train possible. In this case, had Nora not presented herself as an ally to Barton and Rose and simply left them behind, the story would have been over. The second repressed story in *Number 17* is Barton's identity – which is not revealed until the very end of the film.

This pattern of some form of repression coming to light providing supplementary information serves to strengthen the plot and casts a shadow of doubt. This engages the viewer and propels the narrative to the finish line is at times. In some cases, this pattern appears in a more complex form. In many of Hitchcock's films, there is more than one repressed story, and the pattern of order/disorder/order restored repeats itself or stops and starts. *Vertigo* and

Psycho are both good examples of complex variations on the psychoanalytic trajectory theme.

Vertigo opens with the chaos of the chase, Scottie finding himself paralyzed with fear dangling powerlessly from the gutter of a building as he witnesses his colleague plunge to his death below. Order is seemingly restored when Scottie is forced to retire from the force, until he receives call from an old friend who hires him to keep an eye on his distraught wife. This part of the story follows Scottie in his pursuit of Madeline, trying to get to the bottom of her supposed possession by Carlotta Valdez while grappling with his burgeoning feelings for her. This narrative arcs and closes when she dies at the Mission Delores.

Next we witness Scottie in the aftermath of her death, in the asylum completely incapacitated with grief. Then the narrative picks up with Scottie's return to the outside world, where soon we find him wandering around searching for and seeing Madeline everywhere – a doubling of Madeline's reenactment of Carlotta's search for her child earlier.

After he meets Judy, follows her back to her hotel room and succeeds in persuading her to agree to meet him for dinner – the camera abandons Scottie and allows the viewer to witness Judy's reaction. It is at this point we learn that Judy is in fact Madeline – rather, we learn of the repressed story of Judy

impersonating Madeline to facilitate Gavin's murder of the real Madeline as Judy writes a letter of confession revealing everything. This revelation tosses everything we know so far into question. Judy decides to destroy the letter and keep the truth hidden, which creates even more suspense, as we as viewers know the truth and are forced to bear witness to Scottie's ignorance.

This film contains three overlapping stories within the narrative, the story of Scottie and who he believes to be Madeline, the story of Scottie's recreation of Madeline through Judy, and the real story of Judy of which the viewer is aware. These trajectories intersect in the very last moments of the film as Scottie brings Judy back to the Mission Delores, and finally comes to realize the truth.

In *Psycho*, we are initially misled as we appear to be following a story about Marion, which in reality is an elaborate segue into the real story – which is all about Norman Bates. We are initially introduced to Marion in a hotel room with her lover, who we understand based on their exchange – will never marry her. Establishing that Marion's life is not ideal supplies feasible enough motive for her impulsive decision to steal a customer's money and flee so that we may remain sympathetic to her character. Marion's impulsive thievery facilitates her arrival at the Bates motel. Once she is there, she encounters Norman Bates. Later, once she has made the decision to return the money she is suddenly

murdered. Marion's murder is shocking on two levels, first – it seems unlikely that she would be killed after making a good moral decision to return the money, secondly – the movie has just begun! It is at this point that we discover that the story is about Norman, who until this point appeared to be a supporting character. These two parts form a whole in the sense that Marion's actions provide the motivation for Lila and Sam to descend onto the Bates Motel, which propels the narrative of the story forward, leading us to discover the truth about Norman and his mother.

From the point of Marion's murder forward, we possess information which is not available to Lila and Sam. We know that Marion has been murdered, and we believe Mrs. Bates to be the murderer – which creates a great sense of anticipatory anxiety, as the characters on screen are oblivious to the danger they are in.

In the films of Alfred Hitchcock, these revelations and plot twists are the very life of the story – they create the suspense that engages the viewer, and demands their intellectual participation by deliberately challenging their assumptions. As Hitchcock admitted: "I am out to give the public good, healthy, mental shake-ups. Civilization has become so screening and sheltering that we cannot experience sufficient thrills at first hand. Therefore, to prevent our becoming sluggish and jellified, we have to experience them artificially, and the

screen is the best medium for this... I have been all out for wholehearted thrills, the more exciting the better. But my thrills are not horror thrills, but full-blooded, healthy stuff for which there is always an eternal demand (Hitchcock and Gottlieb, 1995, 249)."

While on occasion there are loose ends which are left untied, characters whose motives are never fully explored or explained, in our position as viewers, Hitchcock routinely grants us information which is not made available to the characters on screen. For example, our witnessing Mr. Thorwald's exit from his building in the company of a woman (who we believe is Mrs. Thorwald) while Jeffries is asleep in *Rear Window*, or our discovering the truth about Judy in *Vertigo* while Scottie remains ignorant. These are moments where we are granted access to the repressed story before the characters learn the truth, much as a psychiatrist may figure out the root cause of a patient's suffering before the patient is ready to make the connection themselves. Granting his audience more information than the characters on screen is one of his most clever techniques in creating suspense, which Hitchcock felt allowed the audience to play God. "If the audience does know, if they have been told all the secrets that the characters do not know, they'll work like the devil for you because they know what fate is facing these poor actors (Gottlieb, 1995, 113)."

In addition to Hitchcock's conscientious granting of intellectual authority to his audience (by which it may be argued that he places us in the role of the psychoanalyst) it is important to note that Hitchcock not only studied Freud, but that the science of psychology greatly informed his work. References to Freud and psychiatric disorders (i.e. Scottie's Vertigo in *Vertigo*) are peppered across his films, present within his characters and referenced in their dialogue. Taking this into consideration, it is a logical progression to connect the narrative trajectories in Hitchcock's films to the psychoanalytic process.

Works Cited

Allen, Richard, and S. Ishij Gonzalès, eds.

1999. *Alfred Hitchcock Centenary Essays*.

London: The British Film Institute

Conrad, Peter. 2000. *The Hitchcock Murders*.

New York: Faber and Faber, Inc.

Hitchcock, Alfred and Sidney Gottlieb (ed). 1997.

Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews

London: University of California Press.

Marantz Cohen, Paula. 1995. *Alfred Hitchcock. The Legacy of Victorianism*.

Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

Modleski, Tania. 1988. *The Woman Who Knew Too Much*.

New York: Routledge Kegan & Paul

Sterritt, David. 1993. *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*.

New York: Cambridge University Press.