

Conscious and Unconscious Symbolism in Alfred Hitchcock's Films

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Abstract

Alfred Hitchcock claimed in 1963 that "When people ask me what I think of movies that administer philosophic and moral lessons, I say, "Don't you think it's up to the philosophers to teach philosophy and priests to teach morals." People don't go to the movies to listen to sermons." Yet, according to Žižek, "...everything has meaning in his films, the seemingly simplest plot conceals unexpected philosophical delicacies..." This is paradoxical if we accept Hitchcock's words as a description of his intentions. Therefore, why would a psychoanalyst, like Žižek, and others, from Truffaut onwards, persist in exploring his texts from various perspectives, including psychoanalysis? My thesis examines whether Hitchcock consciously or subconsciously used universal motifs or symbolism visually in his films. Furthermore, it will attempt to establish if elements of his personality were displayed in the mise-en-scène and screenplay. It draws on Freud's notions of the Ego, Superego and Id and his dream symbolism. Furthermore, Jung's ideas of the collective conscious, persona, anima and animus are used to discuss elements of Hitchcock's personality that may have affected his personality. Also explored is a theoretical line from Freud and Jung through Lacan's work on the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, as well as *lalangue* and the Other to analyse 18 Hitchcock films. It also draws on Žižek's reflections on these aspects to explore these issues. The films discussed here form part of 6 films in 3 groups: Group One - *The Wrong Man* (1956) and *North by Northwest* (1959); Group Two *Notorious* (1946); Group Three *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963). Group One can be categorised as "The Quest of an Accused in Public and Private Trials"; Group Two as "The Selznick Years and the Domestic Sphere" and Group Three as "The Psychoanalytic Pictures". However, it is argued that there is significant overlap in the categories and that there is a consistent thread of fear running through them and that this fear is Hitchcock's own.



THE SUPEREGO

METHODOLOGY

Since Hitchcock was of the generation that experienced Freudian ideas as being *avant-garde*, I am using Freud's concepts of the Ego, Superego and Id, as well as his work on dreams and dream symbolism, to explore Hitchcock's mise-en-scène and screenplays and seek both conscious and subconscious expressions of these ideas. Furthermore, through Jung, I explore to what extent Hitchcock's neuroses made him "a person who owed his entire usefulness and reason for existence to a neurosis", to quote Jung, and were axiomatic in his filmmaking process. In addition, Lacan's re-reading of Freud and his concepts of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary is considered in relation to Hitchcock's films, so that a connection can be made between psychoanalytic thought and Hitchcock, while questioning Žižek's view that Hitchcock is "a God-like demiurge who masters even the smallest detail of his work."

EXAMPLES

In the space allowed by this poster I can only proceed by exemplification and illustration.



HITCHCOCK'S CAMEO IN THE WRONG MAN. IS IT HIM?

Fig. 1. In a film whose secondary theme is that our perceptions can deceive us, Hitchcock's cameo at the beginning illustrates this. A rotund individual appears on an empty set in shadow and the voiceover announces "This is Alfred Hitchcock." However, for somebody whose face is so familiar to us, why swathe himself in shadow? It is, I believe, because the figure we see is *not* Hitchcock. He thus demonstrates that appearances are deceptive. Or, in the words of Lacan, he offers an example of the "oblique imaginary means the symbolic takes hold in even the deepest recesses of the human organism."



THE SEXUAL METAPHOR BEGINS IN NORTH BY NORTHWEST...

Fig. 2. This sexual metaphor, Hitchcock's best known, shows the Freudian train entering the female tunnel just after Cary Grant has elevated Eve Marie Saint to the marital bed.



... AND CLIMAXES IN THE LIVING ROOM IN THE BIRDS.

Fig. 3. The climax of the sexual metaphor of Fig. 2 is achieved with the (misogynistic) attack in the living room in *The Birds*. Using Freudian dream symbolism, the scene is as follows: the birds (semen) enter by the chimney (phallus) via the fireplace (vagina) in the room (womb). The characters, 3 females of different generations and 1 male, whose attention is sought by all, are positioned so the 3 women are together and the male tells them to "cover your eyes" as he thrashes around. Thus, he doesn't want them to watch his "performance". As the act of symbolic intercourse is finished, the 3 women leave by one door and the male by another, and so the coupling is broken.



THE EGO...



...AND HIS HALO



VERTIGO IN THE FOREST OF THE ID: THE SEQUOIA SEMPERVIVA (EVERLASTING)



THE SUPEREGO: GAVIN ELSTER – AN ANAGRAM OF "EVERLASTING" VERTIGO.

Fig. 4/5. Conscious elements are on display here of what Lacan called "*lalangue*", or word play. That is to say Hitchcock was aware of the significance of the word "everlasting" in both Latin and the anagram of Gavin Elster. However, I believe the subconscious is displayed, if we interpret these linguistic elements as "a primordial image that was dormant in the collective unconscious", according to Jung. Thus, by using Freud and Jung, the forest of Sequoias are a representation of the Id, with their name suggesting the Id has always been present, just as the Superego has always been present. It is Scottie's, (James Stewart), Ego, frail in the face of such forces, which is cracked by contact with his commands and desires.



THE SUPEREGO, EGO AND ID OBSERVE MARION DRIVE AWAY IN PSYCHO.

Fig. 6. The mirrored sunglasses and uniform allude to the blind duty of the Superego, suggesting Lacan's notion of Father, and Norman's Id in Mother's hollow eye sockets (dis)appearing in the cellar, in a metaphorical reading. The middle figure, or Ego, is the outwardly confident Marion/Salesman, while the Id is the mechanic, who looks into the cellar of the car, the engine: the place where no-one goes.



CARY GRANT PLAYS ROGER THORNHILL WHO PLAYS GEORGE KAPLAN IN NORTH BY NORTHWEST.

Fig. 7. Role-playing is personified and revealed. Kaplan is an anagram of the Swedish verb "*planka*", meaning "to travel on public transport without paying", which is precisely what Thornhill does in the film. Also, the Professor, or puppetmaster, says that he is, "FBI, CIA, ONI. All part of the same alphabet soup." The acronyms are an anagram of the Latin "*bonifacii*", meaning "doers of good deeds." Therefore, hidden within the acronyms, an ironic political and moral statement is made. However, the degree of conscious intention in these etymologically rather obscure anagrams is open to debate.



ÚNICA: THE NOTORIOUS KEY TO FIT THE UNIQUE LOCK

Fig. 8. The key, which Žižek believes is "the index of the father's impotence", is, I would suggest, a Freudian phallic symbol transferred from the husband, Sebastian, to the lover, Devlin, via the wife, Alicia. Its opening of the lock in the cellar, or Id, is an indication of this. Furthermore, Hitchcock highlights its symbolic status by using the Portuguese word "*única*" to indicate its uniqueness in this film set in Rio de Janeiro.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Despite Hitchcock's reticence in talking about his work, which Robin Wood reacted to with "I used to find maddening Hitchcock's refusal to discuss his work with interviewers on any really serious level", it will be argued that, since Hitchcock had such a high degree of control of the material he shot, he was consciously aware of a great number of the symbolic elements in his work. However, given that most of his films have repeated symbols and motifs, it is believed, by using the theoretical apparatus suggested, that many subconscious elements will become apparent in the films of Alfred Hitchcock.



THE ID