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Alfred Hitchcock and the Oppressive Theatricality of Normality

Theatricality is an undeniable staple in the Hitchcock oeuvre. Hitchcock consistently plays with references to costuming, acting, and directing in the world of his movie. Added to this, Hitchcock was one to explore the more deviant side of life, exposing his audience to taboo topics such as voyeurism, unusual thoughts on sexuality, and numerous types of fetishes. Certainly, a Hitchcock film is not what one would deem as “normal.” Alfred Hitchcock has somewhat of a disdain for normalcy, as “he typically equates normality with a bourgeoisie life in whose values the creative side of him totally disbelieves” (Duetelbaum 45). This “bourgeoisie normality” was empty and unsatisfying to him, and everything within its territory was absolutely terrifying (45). Hitchcock utilizes theatrical situations in his films to demonstrate the confining artificiality of normalcy, and to expose and let free the more deviant and creative aspects of the human mind. Hitchcock’s dangerous theatre motif highlights the danger of falling into the less than creative, and horribly dull, performance of the ordinary.

One film in which Hitchcock uses the theatrical motif to exploit the suffocation of normality is *Vertigo*. The main character, Scottie Ferguson, begins to fall into an abnormal obsession with the highly erotic “Madeline Elster,” conveying the dangers of losing the self in theatrical *fantasy*. However, there are overlooked scenes within the film that depict the oppressive nature of following the script of sexual norms.

The second scene in Midge’s apartment is certainly an example of Scottie being forced into the confining roles of normal sexuality. Right away, the feeling of the theatre is present in the *mise-en-scène*. Scottie and Midge are placed in front of an open window with the shades rolled up to expose the San Francisco skyline. Midge is toiling away on fashion sketches for a

brassiere, and Scottie is balancing a cane whilst being restrained by a corset. The fact that Midge is working on drawings and models of brassieres places her as a theatrical costume designer. With the model brassiere on a very formal wire display, and Scottie's corset binding against his skin, it can be said that Midge is designing and dressing for the façade of a normal and restrained sexuality. She intends to be his anchor of normality and ordinary behavior. Obviously, Scottie does not want to be restrained, "he wants to work out a future that doesn't involve being sedentary and tied down" (Barr 53). To Scottie, this act of sexual normalcy is oppressive, and the theatrical "prop" cane on which he balances and leans throughout the scene (like some kind of vaudeville dancer) is a manifestation of his oppression in the theatrics of Midge's normality; "I'll throw this miserable thing out the window and I'll be a free man," says Scottie about the cane as he dreams of the day that the corset will come off as well. Scottie does not want to be confined to the laced and wired formalities of an ordinary relationship with Midge. He wants to break free from his forced performance, and discover his more deviant desires.

After Scottie has already gone through his ordeal with the more exciting and sexual character of Madeleine Elster, he is temporarily placed inside an institution in order to assimilate back into his normal self. However, this scene is filled with theatrical references which ultimately demonstrate Scottie's "rehearsal" and practice of returning to his performance of normality with Midge. For Scottie, Madeleine represented a different form of sexuality, one much different from Midge's demonstration of the latest brassiere (Wood 113); Madeleine was a higher power for Scottie, something more erotic (114). After being pulled into Madeleine's hypnosis of deviant sexuality, it is up to Midge to rehearse him back to normality. The scene is once again focused in front of a stage-like window. Midge takes her performance of normality and costuming skills the next level as she has, it can be inferred, chosen the incompetent

Scottie's clothing to match her nice and normal, blue top and skirt. She is relentless in trying to keep in line with the smothering façade of normality. The idea of rehearsal into normality is furthered with the use of music within the scene, as it can be "clearly identified with the superficial externality of Midge's world" (Wood 119). After "rehearsing" for a while, Midge leaves the room, turning the music off, and leaving Scottie to find his way back into his role and back into the performance as Midge's ordinary and conforming intimate.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie* is another film that demonstrates this theory about the theatricality of the normal. The focal point of this theory is found in the very different performances of Mark Rutland and Marnie Edgar. While Marnie is conveyed as having an issue with identity, an issue that Mark is determined to resolve and make "better" for Marnie, it can also be said that the film demonstrates a conflict between deviant female independence and society's confining and restricting script of the "ordinary" woman.

When viewers first meet Marnie, her introduction possesses a sense of theatricality. The opening of the film depicts Marnie as one of her fictional façades, a woman with raven hair, luggage, and a very bright yellow purse. Further into the film, Marnie, or "Marion Holland," according to one of her many social security cards, is depicted with her suitcase of multiple identities. As the camera focuses on Marnie, delicately laying out her stockings, gloves, and purses, one cannot help but get the sense that she enjoys her changing identity. While some may argue that Marnie struggles with identity in the film, it can be argued that she does not want to be pigeon-holed into one specific "role;" she enjoys being an ever changing chameleon without any definition. In contrast with the restraining roles available for the women around her, one can say that she has every right to protect her individuality; Marnie's criminal tendencies are supported by her fantasy of power that responds to the subordination of women in the work place, where

objectification of a woman is a normal part of the job (Leitch 464). Marnie faces the harsh business world where the social construct of a submissive female is expected, and the performances that she puts on allow her to freely move and define herself within a society where her only other option would be to fill the permanent, horrifying role of the victimized office secretary.

In seeing as how Marnie's theatricality sets her free from the confining role of the victimized office girl, her introduction to the theatricality of Mark Rutland is certainly an opposition. Specifically, the scene in which Marnie privately types for Mark Rutland highlights Mark's role in the bourgeoisie performance of social normalcy. As Marnie enters the office of Mark Rutland, the *mise-en-scène* conveys Mark's office as his stage in the world of business. As Marnie walks towards Mark, the camera switches to a shot that closes in on him, catching him as he stands up from his chair in front of a green curtained window overlooking the city's skyline. Mark is a significant power in the business world; his influence is found in his secretaries, in the business that bears his name, and in the books published by his company (Deutelbaum 288). The fact that his office is conveyed as a stage demonstrates Mark's upholding of the formalities and scripts of the business world. Added to this, professional roles are not the only types of roles exhibited on Mark Rutland's stage. The conversation between Mark and Marnie turns into a discussion about the behavior of the animal kingdom, specifically predators. The theme of roles in the animal kingdom highlights the predator role of Mark towards Marnie; he is to hunt her down and make her submit to nature's roles of normalcy, to act as the submissive female (secretary and wife) to the domineering male predator (powerful business man).

The infamous honeymoon scene is where Marnie and Mark's performances clash. The theatricality of the scene provides an interesting perspective on the way that Mark forcibly places

her into the normal societal role of “wife.” Marnie’s wardrobe in the honeymoon scene is multilayered, a green gown over a white gown, perfect for her multifaceted personality. As it has been established before, Marnie’s deviance from normal societal roles is defined by her chameleon-like transformations between facades and performances; she refuses to be defined into one single identity, as it confines her own free and changing self. Clothing and costuming are Marnie’s trademarks; it is the one thing that defines who she is as an independent and ever changing woman. After arguing with Mark over the bothersome sitting room light, Marnie rushes into her room and strips off the green robe, already making her identity vulnerable. Mark rushes in after her and rips off the final layer of her own independence, replacing it with his golden robe of marital normalcy. Mark is determined to strip her of everything, break her, and build her into the image of the normal societal female (Deutelbaum 288). Marnie’s theatricality has been taken from her; she no longer directs, designs, and acts in her own personalized show. She has been suffocated and placed in society’s performance of female and familial normalcy.

When it comes to demonstrating Hitchcock’s commentary on the confining and restricting theatrics of social normalcy, *Psycho* is placed at the top of the list. The film is known for driving the audience deeper and deeper into the world of the abnormal (Wood 142-143). In order to explain this theory, one must take a closer look into the world of Norman Bates. Norman is not just a victim of a guilt-ridden psychological hell; he is also a victim of confining social norms. He is a good boy who must conceal the darkest parts himself to follow the correct script of society’s ordinariness, the parts that Hitchcock would consider the most interesting and creative aspect of the human mind.

It is when Marion first arrives at the Bates Motel that viewers get the sense of Norman as a victim of the theatrics of normalcy. The glowing motel sign appears out of the rain like a

marquee of an old theatre. It is a vacant theatre that strains to keep up the performance of a normal business, just as Norman struggles with keeping up his performance as a functioning human being. Marion catches a glimpse of Norman as “Mother” in the window of the house, and honks the horn to request service to the motel. What follows is Norman’s denial of his abnormality to attain the more socially acceptable theatrics of the service industry as “he appears as himself, hurrying down the stairs from the house, having cast off his wig and dress very quickly indeed” (Deutelbaum 369). Furthermore, as Marion checks in, Norman discusses the bleak state of the motel business, stating that “there’s no sense dwelling on our losses; we just keep lighting the lights and following the formalities.” Norman is very much dedicated to his role in normality. He does everything that he can to stay in character and uphold his role in society; he follows the rules and “runs the office, tends the cabins and grounds, and does errands for his mother”, all while forcing his unacceptable self in the darkest corner of his mind, like the good member of society that he should be.

As Norman settles Marion into her room, the importance of windows becomes critical to explaining Norman’s oppressive performance on life’s stage of normality. According to David Sterritt in *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, Hitchcock signals Norman’s performances through the imagery of windows and curtains (113). His book mentions the importance of windows throughout the film, citing the peeping of Sam and Marion, and Hitchcock’s window cameo; however, the significance of the window in Marion’s hotel room seems to be overlooked. As Norman sets Marion’s bags down, he comments that the room feels “stuffy,” and proceeds to open the window, highlighting his suffocation and inner struggle to hide his abnormalities. Further into the scene, Norman continues his performance by acting as a host, inviting Marion to his house for an ordinary meal. Undoubtedly, the window is made to look like a small and

private stage for Marion. When Marion hears the fight between Norman and his mother, she looks out of the window and to the house at the top of the hill. The window has now become Norman's way of exhibiting his "ordinary" family relations. Norman and Mrs. Bates may fight, but at least the performance leads Marion to believe that Norman and his mother are two separate people, not a split personality.

The murder of Marion is not only Norman's slip into complete psychosis; it symbolizes the release of desires that have been repressed by the façade and theatrics of bourgeois normalcy. In the events leading up to Marion's death, Norman begins to slip out of character, as his real self, his deviant and creative personality, begins to push through to the surface. For example, Norman's act begins to slip as he trips over words, demonstrating what seems to be Norman's struggle to face the truth about the state of his mother (Deutelbaum 370-371). On the other hand, his cluttered sentences are more apparent as he becomes more intimate with Marion. This, then illustrates his struggle to keep his socially acceptable role intact, and to suppress his deviant and abnormal desires for the attractive Marion Crane. After seeing Marion undress, Norman becomes aroused, creating conflict between his "normal" performance and his desire to free his suppressed, deviant self. This is where "Mother" is created. She is a representation of Norman's oppressed and neglected human eccentricities. She is the tight little knife-wielding ball of repressed abnormality that has been censored by the script of social norms. When Norman reverts back to his ordinary façade and finds the body of Marion Crane, it can be theorized that he is shocked, not only because of the horror that "Mother" has committed, but the fact that he has strayed from the script of social norms. He quickly closes the window on his failed performance and begins to convert the scene back to its proper format: clean, spotless, and ordinary.

Hitchcock's references to theatrical practices provides deeper insight into his disdain for the act and superficial performance of bourgeoisie normality. He was a creative artist that understood the more deviant aspects of the human mind, and felt that normalcy was unhealthy and oppressive. The only way for one to confront his true self is to come into contact with the darker aspects of the mind, to tap into a creativity that has never been opened before.

Hitchcock's greatest fear had nothing to do with suspense or the horror of film; it was falling into the formalities and mind-numbing performances of societal expectations, pretending to be someone else and falling into an act where, no matter how hard you scratch and claw, you can never escape.

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