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A Gaze into Hitchcock through Lacanian Eye

The Haunting Maternal Superego

Patrick Bateman confesses in *American Psycho*¹,

There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman. Some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me. Only an entity—something illusory. And although I can hide my cold gaze... and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours, and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable, **I simply am not there ... I think my mask of sanity is about to slip.**

The horrors of possessing psychical duality lie in the fact that whenever the double personalities coexist, they are always accompanied by conflicts and battles. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, in a similar way, tells of a story in which a seemingly normal and decent hotel owner Norman Bates, haunted by his deceased mother and remorse from the past, takes up the persona of his mother and begins life as a serial killer. In Norman Bates' case, the battle is over and the dominant personality won. Norman Bates never exists as a whole from the start—he merely half-exists; in other words, he was never all Norman. But he is often only his mother. The matricide explains the protagonist's guilt, which in turn, aroused his desire to erase his memories and thus stole her corpse, striving to keep the corpse around, and even doing everything to become his mother thoroughly. Nevertheless, while dressed in his mother's clothes and speaking with her voice, Norman Bates is not seeking to resuscitate her figure in his own mind nor recreating a scene in which the mother's image still remains in his life. Instead, he desires to take her place in the Real, which is an evident symptom of

psychotic mindset. This is one of the archetypes of Hitchcockian suspense: the absence of the father figure or the dysfunctional paternal relationship that renders a dilemma for the son to deal with. Once the function of the Name-of-the-Father is absent, the lack appears to be filled by the “irrational maternal superego, arbitrary, wicked, blocking normal sexual relationship (only possible under the sign of the paternal metaphor)” (Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 99).

This psychical mechanism thus indirectly triggers the motive for killing: a mutual jealousy which Norman Bates experienced 20 years ago when his mother entered a second relationship, resulting in his feeling abandoned, and which he later on revisits. When Norman encounters numerous other potential partners of the opposite sex, he immediately assumes and adopts his mother’s jealousy of these women, thus leading to the murders.

In the celebrated discourse of the documentary *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*², Žižek explicates the disposition of the mother’s room with the Freudian approach: the three levels, respectively the first floor, the ground floor, and the basement, recreate the three levels of human subjectivity. To be more explicit, the first floor symbolizes Norman’s superego, which is also the exact location he chooses to keep the mother’s corpse. While the ground floor represents his ego, the cellar appears to be the id— in Žižek’s words, “a reservoir of the illicit drives.” The three intertwined layers of mind constitute a certain transference when Norman carries the body from the first floor to the basement, which is a connotation of his “transporting her mother in his own mind as the psychic agency from superego to id” (*Guide*). According to Freudian theory, superego and id are fundamentally related. During the process of moving the corpse, the mother complains as a figure of authority at the beginning (“How can you be doing this? Aren’t you ashamed?” “I don’t want to stay in a fruit cellar!”) and later on turns into obscenity (“Ha! Do you think I am fruity? ”). Hitchcock, by using the transformation, is trying to deliver the idea that superego is an obscene agency rather than an ethical one. As Žižek stated, “Superego is always bombarding us with impossible orders, laughing at us when we cannot ever fulfill its demand. The more we obey it, the more it

makes us guilty” (*Guide*). If Patrick Bateman has long been struggling to keep the mask attached, Norman Bates confronts a complete blockade of communication with the world, and thus a psychotic split occurs, in which Bates’ mask is literally nothing but a mask. This is exactly what Žižek defines as where the subject maintains the sort of distance from the symbolic order that is typical of psychoses (74).

An incarnation of the familial discords is also presented by the tempestuous flocks of birds in *The Birds*, in which the leading male character is also caught in the similar predicament between the stern, demanding mother figure and a girl as the intruder. The Oedipal nightmare has never been stranger to Hitchcock, and is in fact often the major constituent in his works. To examine *The Birds*, Žižek suggests readers begin with the fundamental question: Why do the birds attack? The most psychological interpretation is that the attacks of the birds embody a disharmony, the frantic disturbance of the three characters’ (Melanie, Mitch, and his mother) relations. According to Žižek,

The dead end *The Birds* is really about is, of course, that of the modern American family: the deficient paternal ego-ideal makes the law “regress” toward a ferocious maternal superego, affecting sexual enjoyment—the decisive trait of the libidinal structure of “pathological narcissism”: “Their unconscious impressions of the mother are so overblown and so heavily influenced by aggressive impulses, and the quality of her care is so little attuned to the child’s needs, that in the child’s fantasies the mother appears as a devouring bird.” (99)

Accordingly, the entire structure of the film can be interpreted as the standard Oedipal embroilment of incestuous tension between mother and son, with the son splitting between the possessive mother and the intrusive girl. On the other hand, the birds are not only part of the natural setup of reality but rather a foreign dimension intruding which literally tears apart reality. In *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, Žižek reiterates that humans are not born into reality, and in order to act as normal individuals who interact with other individuals within

social reality, people should be properly equipped with the symbolic order. Whereas, when the proper dwelling within a symbolic space is disturbed (as in *The Birds*), reality disintegrates. As Žižek puts it, “the violent attacks of the birds are obviously explosive outbursts of maternal superego—of the maternal figure preventing sexual relationship. So the birds are raw, incestuous energy.”

The Sublimation Process

Under Lacanian structure of psychoanalysis, the radical contingency of events in films is what contributes to the conclusion that “the unconscious is outside.” To begin with, Deleuze has pointed out that *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* is in fact a Hitchcockian movie. A married couple accidentally reveal the facts that their marriage is a fraud and the two of them are both professional assassins who turn out to be each other’s targets. Therefore, the same activity automatically picks up a totally different symbolic value. The characteristic that cannot cling to a certain positive quality is the thing Lacan expresses as “the unitary feature” (*Looking Awry* 48) – a spot of symbolic identification to which the Real of the subject attaches. This is usually when a *femme fatale* emerges. As long as the subject maintains this attachment, he is enthralled by a sublime/ideal figure; once the attachment is broken, the figure will vanish without a trace. Hitchcock corresponds with this notion of “externality” in his movies, particularly in his work *Vertigo* in 1958. *Vertigo* recounts the story of a retired detective John ‘Scottie’ Ferguson, who has acrophobia and is later on hired by an old friend to follow/protect his wife Madeleine, who is claimed to be possessed by the ghost of a Spanish maid Carlotta Valdes and attempts to commit suicide several times. The trick about this arrangement lies in the fact that the protagonist is set up to have accidentally taken up the infamy and responsibility of Madeleine’s death while the husband has planned the death of his wife and hired another woman Judy Barton to impersonate her wife (who bears the identical appearance of Madeleine) so as to get the inheritance. The surprising and yet not surprising

twist moves forward as Scottie meets Judy and the two fall in love.

Here the “externality” intervenes. In both Hitchcockian and Lacanian points of view, the Other is not simply a universal formal structure stipulating the subject’s private self-experience, abounding with contingency/ imaginary events. It is, on the contrary, already present when the subject encounters the outbreak of what it appears to be “the purest subjective contingency”(*Looking* 76). Take love in Hitchcock’s movies for example. A couple can only attain salvation through a miraculous explosion of contingent events; that is, the element of love is what is phrased as “states that are essentially by means of a conscious decision (I cannot say to myself “I shall fall in love that woman”: at a certain moment, I just *find* myself in love)”(76). To put this in a Lacanian term, the by-product of our activity is *objet petit a*³, through which we are capable of clutching the matrix of all the others: the transference. According to Žižek, the subject can never fully overrule and maneuver the way he triggers transference in others. The states that are essentially “by-products” are in reality states that are fundamentally produced by the big Other—

the big Other designates precisely the agency that decides instead of us,... we find ourselves occupying a certain transferential position, i.e. when our mere presence provokes “respect”, or “love”, we can be sure that this “magic” transformation has nothing whatsoever to do with some “irrational” spontaneity: it is the bit Other that produces the change. (77)

In *Vertigo*, Scottie tries to recreate the scene of Madeleine’s suicide and accordingly transforms Judy into a fantasized object, a sublime figure. Coincidentally, Hitchcock here seems to support the Lacanian thesis that sublimation has a deep connection with death—the power of obsession with a sublime image often implies a lethal destination. Based on psychoanalytic groundwork, the process of sublimation often parallels with “desexualization”—to elaborate on this, with “the displacement of libidinal cathexis from the brute object alleged to satisfy some basic drive to an elevated, cultivated form of satisfaction”

(*Looking* 83). Hence, the primal void that the drive circulates around/ the lack which presumes positive existence of the Thing⁴. In Freudian term, *das Ding*, becomes the central issue in the analysis. The elevation of the mediocre woman to the sublime, heavenly figure always implies deadly danger, for the woman chosen to embody the Thing never exists. In Judy's case, she went through a similar transformation in which she was deprived of her "element" and once she no longer occupies the place of the Thing, her entrancing quality as a sublime image collapses at once.

Thus, for Judy, if she herself resembles Madeleine, that is because she is to some extent already dead, as recited in *Looking Awry*, "... the sublimation of her figure is equivalent to her mortification in the real. This would then be the lesson of the film: fantasy rules reality, one can never wear a mask without paying for it in the flesh" (*Looking* 85). If Judy in the gray suit of Madeleine is Scottie's fantasy realized, this can also be read as a mortification of the woman's desire. Besides, considering the fact that fantasy is always sustained by a brutal violence, the love of Scottie would immediately be reduced to the male libidinal economy. The first loss of Madeleine is purely a loss of the ideal-object, which doesn't entail a loss of her fascination as a romantic ideology, while the second loss (when Judy fell off the church and repeats the tragedy) can be considered the Hegelian "loss of loss⁵", which is the most devastating form of disillusionment—the figure of Madeleine falls apart, and the entire fantasy structure that supports his being disintegrates for good.

The Gaze

A common signature of Hitchcockian films is the employment of the "tracking shot." In *Psycho*, the murder scene of detective Arbogast is in itself an emblem of 'the gaze' in Lacanian terms. At first, Arbogast looks up the stairs and the shot moves to focus on the stairs. This exchange creates the Hitchcockian tension between the subject's look and the stairs themselves, or rather the 'void' on the top of the stairs. The stairs return the gaze, radiating a

certain ominous threat. This technique of using the ‘God’s point of view shot’ inevitably leads to Žižek’s conclusion: “... as if we pass from God as neutral creator to God in his unbearable divine rage” (*The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*). This directly links to another film *The Birds* in which we witness a fire accompanied by the same shot of the birds flocking into focus. If the birds can be viewed as the excessive energy of our minds, in this case, the “libido,” the shot presents the “evil gaze” from the birds’ perspectives. Another example is demonstrated in the closing scene of *Vertigo*. Upon Judy’s fall, Scottie immediately (and also eventually is able to) looked into the abyss. The abyss, according to Žižek,

is the very abyss of the hole in the Other (the symbolic order), concealed by the fascinating presence of the fantasy object. ... Scottie is finally able to “look a woman in the eye”... This abyss of the “lack in Other” causes the profound “vertigo” that troubles him. (87).

Namely, the ultimate abyss is none other than the abyss of the depth of another person’s gaze. Also, earlier in this film we see the shot of Scottie in the position of a “peeping Tom,” observing Madeleine through a crack. This is the very starting point of an imagined, fantasized gaze. If gaze is the obscure point, the blind spot, from which the object looked upon returns the gaze, Scottie has never been able to face the blind spot until Judy’s death.

In typical Lacanian psychoanalysis, ‘the gaze’ is viewed as a subject’s identification of the symbolic order during the mirror stage. According to Lacan, this gaze gives a child an illusory mastery, a mastery to dominate his/ her own body, which the child does not yet possess in the Real. This, in turn, forms the filmic experience—as Todd McGowan explicates, “According to Lacanian film theorists, film, like the mirror stage, is an imaginary deception, a lure blinding us to an underlying symbolic structure. The gaze is a function of the imaginary, the key to the imaginary deception that takes place in the cinema” (28). However, he also points out that the problem of entirely relying on theoretical presumptions is that by focusing merely on the relationship between the fantasy and the symbolic order, Lacanian

film theory “overlooks the role of the Real-- the third register of Lacan's triadic division of human experience-- in the functioning of the gaze and in the filmic experience. This omission is crucial, because the Real provides the key to understanding the radical role that the gaze plays within filmic experience” (27). In fact, despite the writings on ‘the gaze’ as a mastering gaze, Lacan himself later reversed his theory as he discovered the gaze becomes something that the subject confronts in the object; it adopts the new role as an objective, rather than a subjective, gaze.

As the audiences may observe in *Vertigo*, identification with the male protagonist as if identification with the camera -- provides a sense of thorough mastery. Spectators accept and even pursue identification with this cinematic and male gaze due to the fact that they are seeking mastery. In traditional Lacanian film theory, this desire for mastery is the desire dominating human behavior. On the contrary, as presented in Žižek’s viewpoint, Lacan in his Seminar XI redefines, “The objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze.” The gaze is no longer the gaze of the subject at the object, but instead, the thing at which the object looks back. McGowan also furthers this notion: the existence of the gaze as a stain in the picture, in Hitchcockian word, “the blot,” serves as an objective gaze, which the spectators never observe from a safe distance but are in themselves present in the picture in the manner of the stain. Despite traditional Lacanian film theorists’ perspective that the gaze is a fulfillment of imaginary mastery, it is, according to McGowan, in essence the site of traumatic encounter with the Real. The crucial point here is that not only is this failure of mastery possible in the cinema, but it is what spectators desire when they go to the movies (29). It is vital to bear in mind that while Lacanian theory is universalized, empirical experience is still required when applied to film analysis.

Notes

¹ Psycho is a 1960 psychological thriller directed by Alfred Hitchcock. It is often considered the most identifiable work of Hitchcock. The story of Norman Bates is based upon Ed Gein, a fairly notorious American murderer whose story has been the inspiration of several fictional characters in theatre. The overall synopsis is accessible here:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054215/> (2010/ 01/ 08)

²*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* is a documentary contributed by Žižek. It offers an introduction into some of Žižek's most philosophical reflections on fantasy, reality, sexuality, subjectivity, desire, materiality and cinematic form and applies Žižek's ideas to the cinematic canon, in what *The Times* calls "an extraordinary reassessment of cinema." The list of films discussed in it are as follows: *Possessed* (1931), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Birds* (1963), *Psycho* (1960), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Alien* (1979), *The Great Dictator* (1940), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *Fight Club* (1999), and so on. (2010/ 01/ 08)

³*Objet petit a* is an expression of the lack inherent in human beings, whose incompleteness and early helplessness produce a quest for fulfillment beyond the satisfaction of biological needs. The *objet petit a* is a fantasy that functions as the cause of desire. A further definition can be found on :

<http://www.pep-web.org/document.php?id=apa.053.0083a> (2010/ 01/ 09)

⁴ In Sean Homer's *Jacques Lacan, das Ding*, as is compared to Freud's own explanation, is the thing that is the repressed, impenetrable core of the real that is missing from the Symbolic, while all other representations, images, and signifiers are no more than attempts to fill this gap. In Seminar VII Lacan identified this repressed element as the representative of the representation, or *das Ding* (the Thing). (2010/ 01/ 09)

⁵ The "loss of the loss" is the moment in which loss ceases to be the loss of

“something” and becomes the opening of the empty place that the object (“something”) can occupy, the moment in which the empty place is conceived as prior to that which fills it - the loss opens up a space for the appearance of the object. In the “loss of the loss”, the loss remains a loss. It is not “cancelled” in the ordinary sense: the regained “positivity” is that of the loss as such, the experience of loss as a “positive,” indeed “productive,” condition. The concept is introduced by Hegel, for further details, see:

<http://www.lacan.com/zizlacan2.htm> (2010/ 01/ 10)

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