

Oregon State University

L'Auteur ou l'Artiste:
Hitchcock and the Presence of Portraits

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Abstract

This research paper, "*L'auteur ou l'artiste?*", examines the films of Alfred Hitchcock and their importance amongst the canon of cinema. In an analysis of his three film periods (British, Early Hollywood, and Late Hollywood), the aim of this research is to uncover the significance of the consistent inclusion of portraits throughout his films. Recognized as an *auteur* amongst cinephiles, Hitchcock has been deemed the "Master of Suspense". Through specifically observing the looming and significant portraits in the films "The Lodger" (1927), "Rebecca" (1940), and "Vertigo" (1958), it becomes apparent that the unnerving presence of art, particularly portraits, is one of the main factors of Hitchcock's mastery.

The interviews between Hitchcock and François Truffaut will be applied to this claim, as well as Tania Modleski's "*The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*", Aaron Rich's "The Dark Galleries: A Museum Guide to Painted Portraits in Film Noir, Gothic Melodramas, and Ghost Stories of the 1940s and 1950s", and various other scholarly articles cited within the paper. While Hitchcock's creative implement of portraits help define him as an *auteur*, it also contributes to the established precedence for any future horror or suspense films, as well as demonstrates a filmmaker's ability to omit a unique and creative rhetoric.

- Clara Fulkerson

L'auteur ou l'artiste?

Introduction

Filmmaking may depict itself as inherently escapist, providing a portal into a universe made up of moving pictures where all the heroes are beautiful. It's true that the magic of filmmaking opens up the possibilities of immersion into these alternative worlds, but the camera alone does not brew creativity. Without the visionary implement of the director, the camera shows "truth twenty-four times a second"¹. With the creative authorship of the director, the deliberative construct of cinema can develop specific realities through repetitive details. This sense of authorship, or *auteurism*, was first recognized within Alfred Hitchcock's canon. Hitchcock may not have realized it himself, but the films he directed existed within a larger world that he created. His universe is governed by espionage narratives and intentional suspense, often narrated by the music of Bernard Herrmann. Within this fictional reality, the police force is explicitly incompetent and objects are fetishized. By constructing the first filmography that demonstrates this authorship, Hitchcock establishes the *auteurs'* ability to comment on reality through the exhibit of their specific tropes. Within many of Hitchcock's movies, there are painted portraits that play a significant role in the narrative. Hitchcock characterizes these portraits, establishing them as ghostly, inanimate subjects that have influence on the live characters, as demonstrated in *The Lodger*, *Rebecca*, and *Vertigo*.

The Author Himself

¹ "Godard Only Knows..."

Due to his background, Alfred Hitchcock utilized the influence art and expressionism had during his development to display his aesthetic expertise and cinematic power. While working for the Henley Telegraph Company, Hitchcock took courses at the University of London to study art², instilling an academic background of art theories and practice. He quickly applied this practice to the medium of film, illustrating by hand for Paramount's Famous Players-Lasky in Islington, London. Even though the new branch was rather unsuccessful, it was Hitchcock's first experience working with film and promoted him to head of the title department, and later scored him the job of an assistant director³. That artistic background, along with his time of living in Germany⁴, had immensely shaped his personal stylization.

His period in Germany instilled his taste for German Expressionism, most obviously noticed in his choices of deep spaces and *chiaroscuro*, framed by tilted corners and sharp, diagonal structures. When German Expressionism was developed in cinema, it needed to adapt from the forms of literature, painting, and theater⁵ into the spatial narrative in film. In literature, thematic details must be clearly described to even exist at all. In theatre, the restricted space of a stage required an innovative emphasis on props and set constructions. Because of this fact, the detailed objects within a space are necessarily important to an aspect of meaning within the art form. When adapted into film, Expressionism then allowed for these details to become multi-modal, but retained many of the original aspects. This artistic rhetoric can be exposed through music, spacial depth, narrative, *mise-en-scène*, and others.

² Truffaut, page 26

³ Truffaut, page 27

⁴ Truffaut, page 44

⁵ "German Expressionism in Film."

Alfred Hitchcock, notably, permeates his individuality into all of these modes. But, for the sake of this paper, we will be looking at his demonstrated *auteurship* in his deliberate characterizations of painted portraits throughout his films.

"The Lodger" (1927)

This early British film is a misleading thriller that contains convicting portraits, despite their inanimate nature. Alluding to the fear invoked by Jack the Ripper⁶, the narrative relies on a vacancy filled by a mysterious lodger (played by Ivor Novello⁷), and his blooming relationship with Daisy (June Tripp), the landlady's daughter. The majority of the movie suggests that Novello's character is the wanted serial killer in London, deceiving any fresh audience into believing he is guilty. Fifteen minutes into the film, Novello is shown to his room and his reactionary behavior is his first condemnation.

Throughout the room, portraits of fair-haired women line the walls. In a medium close-up, Novello looks perturbed. It cuts to a gliding view of the first portrait, displaying that the subject matches the fetishized serial deaths of "Golden Curls". Cutting back to the medium close-up shot of Novello's agitated reaction, this sequence establishes a shot reverse shot between Novello's character and the subjected portraits. These "enigmatic images" are characterized as "omniscient observers, staring eyes, as it were, dispassionately framing the action, gazing on it and us while provoking our own individual reactions and interpretations"⁸.

The countershots of Novello interrupt the shot panning over the portraits, allowing each painted girl their own reaction through continuing Novello's uneasy reaction to their

⁶ Truffaut, page 44

⁷ "The Lodger (1927)." *IMDb*

⁸ Strauss, "The Painted Jester"

gaze. Next, the frame shifts to a medium-shot of Novello in the foreground, with a fire mantle and mirror behind him. The mirror frames the reflection of a portrait, the same one that Novello's disturbed, wide eyes are locked on. Now, in an anti-montage moment, Novello shifts his gaze and slowly walks closer to the camera, still evolving his crazed expression. Keeping to the left of the frame, Novello suspensefully continues forth in a vampiric-like way, until his face is out of frame and the dominant image becomes the reflection of his backside amongst the portrait. Advancing in the scene, the cries of a newspaper boy (presumably about the serial killer) trigger Novello's enhanced reaction. The landlady can clearly see that he is distressed, which raises much suspicion.



Their interaction is suspensefully delayed, but her initial suspicion is overlooked when he gives her a month's payment on the spot. His shady behavior continues, but the shots of the landlady preparing him milk create a different tone. For the family, what is out of sight is out of mind up until the landlady returns to Novello. He has turned around the paintings, and when caught he says, "I'm afraid I don't like these pictures. Can't they be put somewhere else?"⁹ Daisy comes to help move them, introducing her to the lodger in this strange way (although she laughs it off).

The attitude of the lodger in response to these portraits instills the idea that he is the wanted serial killer, in both the landlady and the audience. It is purposefully set up to imply the lodger's guilt, and the evidence first exists in his reaction to the paintings. Within the

⁹ Hitchcock, Alfred, director. *The Lodger*. Gainsborough Pictures, 1927

film narrative, these paintings hold an element of judicial authority, foremost as misinterpreted material evidence that indicates his guilt. But beyond the landlady's perspective, the portraits maintain jurisdiction through their relationship to Novello's character. His interaction with these objects-as-subjects identifies them as a ghostly reminder to an ambiguous trauma, becoming an inanimate witness.

This ghostly presence reinstates the director's signature, as well as permits the way for further Hitchcockian tropes: mistaken identity, criminal mysteries, horrific suspense, and a grand plot twist. The eerily necessary portraits contribute to what makes him an *auteur*, and facilitate "the paradigms for reading evidence" so that they may be overturned and fabricate truth¹⁰. Hitchcock describes, himself, that "the whole approach to this film was instinctive" to him. In *The Lodger*, the portraits further Novello's character's presumed guilt, as well as exist as a seemingly omniscient presence, all accelerating Hitchcock's exclusive ability "exercise [his] style"¹¹ and build a web of fear and lies.

***Rebecca* (1940)**

In what has been described as feminine gothic, this romantic thriller seems simply melodramatic up until the turning point of embodying the portrait of Lady Caroline de Winter. When an unnamed heroine (hereafter referred to as "Mrs. De Winter") promptly marries the widowed Maxim de Winter, she finds conflict in the presences of the cold Mrs. Danvers and the memories of Maxim's dead wife, Rebecca. Rebecca's absence is restored through the grotesque preservation of her living space, suggesting her spirit is constantly looming about the lonely walls of the Manderley mansion. After significant character

¹⁰ Strong, "Reconstructing the Rose"

¹¹ Truffaut, page 44

development, when the protagonist proclaims to Mrs. Danvers, "I am Mrs. de Winter now", the heroine only temporarily asserts her dominance. She plans for a costume ball, and her naive and unsuspecting attitude results in her falling for Mrs. Danvers' lie, conceived by the familial portrait.

While panning across the top of the stairs, Mrs. de Winter leads and Mrs. Danvers ominously follows, commenting "this one for instance. It might have been designed for you. I'm sure you could have it copied", when they reach the large painting of Caroline de Winter. Pushing her advice upon the optimistically eager Mrs. de Winter, Mrs. Danvers continues, "I've heard Mr. de Winter say that this is his favorite, out of all the paintings." Despite Mrs. de Winter's enthusiastic response, Mrs. Danvers abruptly walks out of frame, abandoning the nervous girl and leaving her hopes crushed. But Mrs. de Winter is completely determined to take the reins of the Manderley home, and pursues her night of Cinderella's¹² ball. She believes this to be her chance of destroying Rebecca, an attempt to "dispose of these talismanic objects" that immortalize her. These objects "live in these spaces, immovable and heavy with memories and psychological attachments, as weights around the psyches of the living"¹³. The ignorant Mrs. de Winters fails to see that, besides the expired master bedroom, the grand portrait is the most tainted by Rebecca's wraith. The camera lingers as Mrs. de Winters follows Mrs. Danvers' direction, gradually zooming in on the life-sized painting bordered by an extensively elaborate frame.

The portrait doesn't reappear until the night of the ball, when the lush fabrics of the skirts are seen in the corner of the painting, in the right foreground. Mrs. de Winters,

¹² Truffaut, page 132

¹³ Rich, "The Dark Galleries"

mocking the same lush dress, hurries down the hall. Her costume billows as she excitedly focuses on embodying the portrait before she descends the stairs. While mirroring the Cinderella fairytale, Hitchcock demonstrates his desire to convey “dreams with great visual



sharpness and clarity.” While the fantastical scene feels whimsical, it is established through the live presence of the portrait in a reality made of “long shadows, the infinity of distance, and the converging lines of perspective”¹⁴. The

surrealist dream, of course, becomes a nightmare after the continual “cuts back to her smiling face, radiant with the anticipation of her husband’s approval”¹⁵. She realized that her body became “the site of a bizarre fort/da game” by Mrs. Danvers to enforce her inferiority to Rebecca¹⁶ “during a masquerade ball, in which the heroine dresses up like Rebecca, who had dressed up as Caroline de Winter”¹⁷ just a year before. It was an attempt, by Mrs. de Winter, to rid of her “problems of ‘overidentification’ with another woman”¹⁸, but the interference of characterizing this portrait only resulted in empowering the ghostly presence.

***Vertigo* (1958)**

The plot of *Vertigo* is codependent on the participation of the *Portrait of Carlotta*, who is perceived as having some form of immortal authority. The painting of Carlotta Valdes is first introduced when Scottie investigates Madeleine Elster at the request of her

¹⁴ Truffaut, page 165

¹⁵ Modleski, page 47

¹⁶ Modleski, page 46

¹⁷ Modleski, page 52

¹⁸ Modleski page 42

husband, Gavin. Madeleine is the great-granddaughter of Carlotta, who had committed suicide. Gavin suggests that Madeleine is possessed by Carlotta, and as Scottie follows her to a San Francisco art museum, her interaction with the portrait confirms the suspicion. The painting immortalizes a part of her ancestry, since "once their subjects have died, these pictures remain for the survivors, being almost more present than the living people were previously"¹⁹. Hitchcock's mind trap leads us to conclude that Madeleine is haunted by Carlotta.

As she is staring at the large portrait of Carlotta, Madeleine stiffly sits on the bench in the reoccurring grey suit with a bouquet of flowers laid next to her. Carlotta, in a lavish, pale dress, solemnly gazes down with a bouquet between her loose arms. As Scottie realizes the bizarre obsession, a shot zooms in on Madeleine's bouquet and pans up to the portrait's, confirming that they are the same arrangement. After returning to Scottie's inquisitive expression, his inspection leads to a medium close-up shot of Madeleine's hairdo that is built into a noticeable swirl. Zooming in on the curl, the camera then pans back to the portrait, and zooms in on the same curl that Carlotta is wearing. The imitation sparks an uneasy feeling of déjà-vu, provoking "thematic links [to] emerge" in how the "portraits depict the deceased or foretell death"²⁰. Even though it turns out that the observer is not even Madeleine at all, her purposeful embodiment of the portrait revives Carlotta as a conceptual metaphor, and foreshadows the repetitive death. It is Carlotta's portrait that presents the "ghost's emerging status as an analytical tool that does theory" and leads Scottie to be lured by Madeleine's possession. The "dynamic comparative interaction" between Madeleine and

¹⁹ Rich, "The Dark Galleries"

²⁰ Rich, "The Dark Galleries"

the *Portrait of Carlotta* evokes “a discourse” and “a system of producing knowledge”²¹ and contributes answers to Scottie’s investigation.

The portrait represents “an uncanny liminal space between life and death”²², and facilitates the false conclusions that Scottie develops regarding its relationship with Madeline. It brings to life the supernatural phantom and leads its victims to their death. It also exists as a material witness, although deceitful, providing evidence for judgement through repetitive, conceptual metaphors.

Conclusion

The aesthetic and narrative choices made by Hitchcock results in an emphasis on objects-as-subjects, and projects the inanimate disturbance of portraits through embodiment. These paintings permeate the feeling of a ghostly presence, administering a threatening judicial authority among those who notice them. In the case of *The Lodger*, the various portraits initially arouse a sense of material evidence against Novello’s character. It is the direct acknowledgement, combined with the role the paintings have, that allow the judgement of guilt to be passed (since the lodger’s ludicrous reception suggests that he is the serial killer). Even when proved otherwise, the presence of the portraits remain through embodying the lodger’s dead sister. In *Rebecca*, with the painting of Caroline de Winter, and *Vertigo*, through the *Portrait of Carlotta*, the dead continue to prevail and partake in the narrative manipulation.

Hitchcock’s accentuation of visual arts can be spotted in more than these three films, like the important familial portrait of Lydia’s dead husband in *The Birds* (1963). This

²¹ Blanco, “Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities.”

²² Rich, “The Dark Galleries”

abstract necessity of what is contained within a frame expands to *Rear Window* (1954), when the morally ambiguous observations are all restricted by window frames. The various windows both permit and prevent the voyeuristic investigation into the neighbors' lives, allowing them the same spatial dynamic as a painting. Hitchcock purposefully constructs these "paradigms for reading evidence" so that the audience "necessarily admits the possibility that an interpretation may not only be made, but also fabricated or otherwise wrong"²³. His creative and deliberate use of "artworks with plot import[ance]... reveal[s] a sensitivity to the visual arts that richly complement the director's signature concerns for mistaken identity, ambiguous morality, romantic drama, and objects-as-subjects"²⁴. The characterization of the portraits in Hitchcock's movies advances the suspense, collaborates with alternative truths, misguides towards mistaken identity, embodies the supernatural, while still existing as an aspect of Hitchcock's *auteurism* alone. His individuality is immortalized through his cinematic innovation and unique tropes, preserved through the featuring of portraits and governed by his personal relationship with the visual arts.

²³ Strong, "Reconstructing the Rose"

²⁴ Strauss, "The Painted Jester"

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