THE DEPICTION OF THE LEADING MALE CHARACTERS
IN THE FILMS OF ALFRED HITCHCOCK

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Introduction

The treatment of the characters is a very important element of a good story presented through the motion picture medium. According to Hitchcock (Koszarski 1977:160):

> "The motion picture is not an arena for a display of techniques. The audience is never going to think to itself: "What magnificient work with the boom" or "that dolly is very nicely handled;" they are interested in what the characters on the screen are doing, and it's a director's job to keep the audience interested in that."

This does not imply that technique is unimportant in the production of a film. To the auteur the mark of a good technique is that it is unnoticed to the viewer.

The audience must be acquainted with the central characters right in the early part of the film (p. 187). For example, in the film *Vertigo*, the audience are with the leading character Scottie all the way after his beloved Madeleine died, because they want to be sure how he would solve the mystery which arises from the deception conspired between Elster and his mistress Judy. According to Charles Walcutt 1968:7):

> "This interaction between ourselves and the character we are identifying is fundamentally an involvement, i.e. we are concerned with those of the other person. These element of personal involvement make our direct reaction to a new acquaintance a different kind of experience from our judgment or understanding of a character."

These characters can only come from good writing (Koszarski, p. 336), and the cameraman, under an experienced director, brings them to live on the screen through fine camera work.

Objective

This article aims at discussing how Hitchcock portrays the leading male characters. What behavioral aspects are important to our understanding and perceptions which contribute to the film's popularity.

Leading Character

The words "leading character" are used instead of "main character" because as Syd Field (1981:110) points out the designation "main character" does not refer only to an actor assigned with a major role. Joan Tewkesbury (p. 109) in researching for her screenplay *Nashville* realized that the main character of the film, i.e. who the movie is about, is the city of Nashville. It is the main character. In the same way, in the movie *Network*, the network is the main character. The actors, William Holden, Peter Finch, Faye Dunaway and others assumed roles which become parts of the whole picture (p. 111).

For our purpose, we are focusing on actors such as Joseph Cotten, Cary Grant, James Stewart, Farley Granger, Anthony Perkins and others who have played the lead roles in Hitchcock's productions.

It should be noted that the effectiveness in the manifestation of the leading character or other characters is not determined by the actor alone. It is also dependent upon the screenwriter, cameraman and director. According to Vale (1973:109), in order to make the character manifests, we must show the character in action. A good screen writer will choose the action or actions that will make the

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Guy and Bruno are *Strangers on the Train*

character come alive on the screen (p. 113). The director has the task of overseeing that this is effectively executed, although, as in the case of Hitchcock, on occasions he would let the principal actor like Cary Grant to exercise his acting talent without much direction (Taylor 1980:255).

> "Hitchcock and Grant worked together so long, there was a great mutual trust and respect between them. He would even take suggestions from Grant with good grace."

For an example of camera work, Robin Wood (LaValley 1972:71-72) cited the visually grim moment in *Psycho* when Norman Bates carries his mother down to the fruit cellar. He said:

> "In literary terms, there is almost nothing there: a young man carrying a limp body out of a room and down some stairs. Yet in the film, the overhead shot with its complicated camera movement indicates to us precisely that sense of metaphysical vertigo that Hitchcock's subject requires at that moment, placing us in a certain position in relation to the action or the movements of the actor."

In order to create a plausible and life-like characterization, the screenwriter needs a deep understanding of human nature, a knowledge of psychological and dramatic characterization. His job is to convey to the audience this plausible and life-like characterization making them to believe strongly in their reality that they become friends or enemies within the short space of 120 minutes (Vale, pp. 101-102).

Characters in Psychological Thrillers

Despite his poor movie track record, Joseph Cotten is well-suited for the role of Charles Oakley. His Handsome "tooled-leather" face (Shipman 1973:96) balances well with the suave, elegant and dashing figure he portrays in *Shadow of a Doubt*. These attributes are used as a means of deception to lure unsuspecting rich widows as his victims. Hitchcock departs from the common stereotype, that killers are scarfaced and shabbily attired. The audience do not see the alleged killings whatsoever; they only hear them from the detectives who relate the story to his niece, Charlie (Teresa Wright). The newspaper does not specifically point a finger at Uncle Charlie, as he is better known in the movie. We are not even shown how and when the treacherous traps meant for his beautiful niece are set up. In fact, initially, we are not oriented with the darker side of the person. Thus Hitchcock makes us to follow Uncle Charlie closely to determine his guilt. We sense, however, that he is covering something when he speaks against the widows who were wasting away their wealth irresponsibly. We realize that his relationship with his niece is worsening when he grips her hand on the staircase, etc. Our attitude towards Uncle Charlie gradually changes when there is reason to believe he is somehow responsible for sawing the wooden step which almost killed Charlie, and the carbonmonoxising of the garage which almost claimed her life.

Hitchcock is thus able to hold our interest on the character. He creates a psychological atmosphere by manipulating the audience into sympathizing with a man he has shown to be reprehensible (Harris 1976:117). As if to show his crimes are just, that when he tries his evil craft on the innocent Charlie his crusade seems no longer tenable. This self-appointed guardian of morality has gone against his code of principles and judgment comes swiftly when the appointed time arrives.

Cotten has played many roles, but usually in the "good-guy" category. The other memorable film in which he is the villain is *Niagara Falls*. Probably, Hitchcock was thinking of Cotten's future star value. His treatment of the character as well as the plot has left the actor's image unharmed. Otherwise, he might have been typecast as a villain in his subsequent movies. Robert Walker, for example, is seldom seen in the role of the hero. He is usually the spoilt and conniving youth, a person we very much love to hate.

Uncle Charlie's final exit is in itself of psychological importance because obviously Hitchcock,

who has good religious grounding, does not want to contradict the moral conventions of society, i.e. that good shall triumph over evil.

The depiction of the suave and elegant villain reoccurs in *Strangers On a Train.* Most of the analysis on this movie centers on the element of criss-crossing (the proposed exchange of murders, the tennis match, etc.) (Spoto 1976:210) or the transference of guilt (the attempt to implicate Guy Haines for Bruno's crime) (Perry 1965:104) and doublings (good and evil characters, the fact that this is in Black and White, etc.). Donald Spoto (p. 213) points out that these doubling elements do more than establish identities. Hitchcock provides an interesting character study between two contrasting personalities: one, an aspiring tennis player Guy Haines (Farley Granger) who no doubt wishes to reach the apex of his career via an honest route; the second, is one who prefers the easy way of life, contemplates to inherit enormous wealth by killing its owner, his own father.

When these two perfect strangers meet on the train, Guy's existence is a life of harassment. Granger portrays the nice-looking with a neatline in both under-privileged heroes and wealthy weaklings (Shipman, p. 411). He fails to detect the cool seriousness of his opponent. The transaction, the exchange of murders, is an attractive proposition, although preposterous. He does not reject it specifically. Hitchcock has in effect, portrayed a character who is indecisive and weak-minded in comparison to Bruno, thus, less appealing to us. We tend to focus more on the exploits of the enterprising Bruno, because we can provide the justification for his deed, looking from his point of view. Furthermore, his style of killing is obscured by the cover of darkness, in contrast to the stark reality of the stabbings of the victims as in *Torn Curtain* and *Psycho.*

Psycho is the only other picture in which the central figure is a villain (Truffaut 1967:111). Anthony Perkins' "gulping and twitching" manner in Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959) and the *Tall Story* (1960) fits in perfectly with the Norman Bates character, the twisted psychopath motel keeper (Shipman, p. 411). In contrast to *Shadow of a Doubt,* the stabbing of Marion (Janet Leigh) is graphic and this scene is considered exceptionally violent (Harris, p. 188). Even one who has read Robert Bloch's book but were seeing the movie for the first time will be struck by the traumatic suddenness of the action. Firstly, it does not occur to him that this little old lady would resort to such a hideous deed, pouncing upon this trapped animal! This cannot be Norman Bates. The switching of roles from mother to the dutiful son is so swift. Norman works conscientiously to cover any incriminating traces. We question such extreme filial piety. How many previous acts had been committed where the son had to do the cleansing? Even the explanation of the police psychologist does not satisfy us. We wonder whether it is possible for a person to have a partially-disturbed soul. Such Jeckle and Hyde characterization never failed to impact upon us. It is not surprising that when *Psycho* was screened throughout the United States, weary travellers most assuredly would avoid rooming in isolated motels. This is why perhaps the Hitchcock movie generated a hue and cry across the United States. Norman, who also works as a motel keeper, shoulders a heavy responsibility in caring for his "sick mother" rather than sending her to an asylum, and he has a serious hobby in taxidermy. This latter preoccupation requires a person of great patience and craftsmanship. As such, the sudden violent outburst at the shower provides an inconsistency in his normally calm self, i.e. upon the revelation of the assailant's identity, thus confusing the spectator at the utmost. Norman can never be a normal human being again. Scottie (James Stewart) engages in a fight against acrophobia, i.e. the fear of heights which is the result of *Vertigo* (1958) (Harris, p. 188). He has no hobbies, and even shows a lack of interest on Midge who yearns his affection. The detective job he once held no longer suits his neurotic state of mind. He is lucky enough to be hired by an old college buddy Gavin Elster to shadow his wife Madeleine (Kim Novak), but instead Scottie falls in love with her. He gives a contrasting attributes to the pathetic man in *Psycho.* Perhaps, there is no one else better for this part. Shipman (1980:506) pictures Stewart as the all-American type who endeared himself to audiences for being comfortable, cool-headed and trustworthy. He is the ideal Hitchcockian hero.

In the beginning, Hitchcock brings us on a mysterious excursion. He establishes the character

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Scottie clinging to a rooftop gutter, uncertain whether to climb for safety or fall to his doom. To the beholder it is equally uncertain as to how Scottie manages to pull himself to safety. After seeing several Hitchcock movies, it is not unusual for us to come across some illogical incidents like this. The cliff-hanger scenes in *North by Northwest* and *Saboteur* also seem implausible. LaValley (p. 6) gives this explanation:

> "Hitchcock is not organizing our experience into structural systems, but rather using structures to release a kind of absurdist logic in life. "Logic is dull," says Hitchcock. "The fact is I practice absurdity quite religiously."

This Hitchcockian style of suspense reoccurs in *North by Northwest* when Thornhill tries to pull Eve Kandall from a precarious hanging position, and in *Saboteur* when Barry Kane tries and fails to grab a Nazi spy from falling off the Statue of Liberty.

One can provide some solution, however, to make it sensible. We become emotionally involved with Scottie's attempts to regain his confidence, e.g. Midge's therapeutic exercise that ended in failure. He is almost in a wreck when he loses Madeleine. But his detective instinct works for his betterment this time. He tries to retrace Madeleine's memory and in the process stumbles upon the probable truth. This revelation turns him furious. He was fooled by the conspiracy between Elster and his mistress Judy. When truth takes over, the mind reorders itself and Scottie is cured of his vertigo.

For what it's worth, the Scottie character is significant for its role-model value. He succeeds through preserverance. As for the controversial ending, it is unlikely that he should be fatalistic although we see him standing on the edge of the tower. Hitchcock is in fact showing an image of a victor in his moment of glory for he no longer suffers from the dizzy spells. He can now resume his professional career in complete safety. As Hitchcock says:

> "*Vertigo* is fraught more with mystery than suspense - the film is imbued more with intellectual labyrinths and psychological implications than straightforward plot development."

(Harris, p. 140)

The Leading Character In Mystery-Suspense Thriller

Like Stewart, Cary Grant is Hitchcock's favorite actor. After more than a decade of professional association with the master of suspense, Grant becomes a veteran of Hitchcock's movies. There was a great deal of mutual trust and respect between them. The casting of Grant instead of Stewart (as was originally intended) for the leading male character in *North by Northwest* (1959) is indeed a wise decision (Taylor, p. 255).

Hitchcock is always at his best with actors who have an understated style (Perry, p. 65). Grant's elegance and gracefulness coupled with his reputation as a polished player makes him suitable for the advertising executive role. The plot is a mixture of comical situations and the probing of deceitful identities (Solomon 1976: 285). The story takes on a quick pace, tongue-in-cheek odyssey (Harris, p. 191). It would gladden the feminist movement to see one of their kind having her sweet revenge on Grant who as agent Devlin in *Notorious* risks Alicia's life by sending her to infiltrate the Nazi spy ring in Rio. Now he is sent off a false but dangerous mission by CIA agent Eve Kandall (Eva Marie Saint) to the open prairie to meet the non-existent Kaplan. Thornhill is almost killed in the process.

Hitchcock gives a unique treatment to his character Thornhill. He faces the antagonist Vandamm (James Mason) who is as equally charming and cultured as the Nazi sympathizer Sebastian (Claude Rains) in *Notorious*. Eve's association with Vadamm makes Thornhill to believe that she has a divided loyalty since now he adores the woman. When the professor (Leo G. Carroll) reveals the true nature of her relationship with Vandamm, only then Thornhill realizes the dangerous situation Eve is in. He seeks to rectify this by rescuing her from the undesirable elements.

Rescuing a damsel in distress is a theme in *Notorious* whereby Devlin rescues Alicia from being poisoned by her husband and mother-in-law. Such heroism is also evident in *Under Capricorn* when Charles Adarc (Michael Wilding) literally rescues Lady Henrietta (Ingrid Bergman) and restores her self-confidence.

Such chivalrous personalities have always been the staple of classical novels. Hitchcock relives these tales of masculinity by putting it in an innovative and suspenseful narrative form.

Conclusion

One of the difficulties in casting an actor to fill the lead role is the availability of the actors to meet shooting schedule. For a few times Hitchcock had to settle for the second best. He is careful in his choice, however. Perhaps, that is the reason why only a handful of stars have ever been made the leading characters in his movies. For instance, he felt that Joseph Cotten was not the right type for the Sam Flusky part in *Under Capricorn*. He would rather have had Burt Lancaster. For *Strangers On a Train* (Truffaut, p. 137) he had conceived a character of the tennis player Guy Haines ideally as a stronger William Holden type (Taylor, p. 219). Hitchcock was unsuccessful in both instances. Nevertheless, Farley Granger who assumed the part of the latter turned out pretty satisfactorily (Taylor, p. 219). As can be seen, Granger had worked for him previously in the film *Rope* (1948). The extent of his effectiveness in portraying his characters is evident by the reports of murders allegedly committed by some individual after watching Psycho (LaValley, p. 45) and the complaint by a parent whose daughter refused to have a conventional bath or shower after seeing the film (Taylor, p. 263).

Due to his contribution in establishing the psychological-suspense genre, it was a fitting tribute when Hitchcock was awarded the coveted Irving Thalberg Award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1967 (Harris, p. 247).

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