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On the Margin of Male Gaze: An Analysis of a Typical Category of Female Supporting Characters in Hitchcock's Works

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Abstract: Gender concepts within Alfred Hitchcock's films have long been a focal point of interest for feminist film scholars. This analysis delves into a recurring archetype of young, rejected women in Hitchcock's cinematic works, exemplified by characters like Miriam in *Strangers on a Train*, Midge in *Vertigo*, and Danielle in *To Catch a Thief*. The essay seeks to unravel the underlying gender ideologies associated with these characters. Through this examination, it becomes evident that Hitchcock situates these subversive female figures at the margin of the male gaze, using their misfortunes as a form of retribution for transgressing patriarchal norms. In doing so, male viewers can reaffirm their own gender identity by witnessing the punishment inflicted upon these women. On the one hand, these portrayals serve to reinforce gender stereotypes, perpetuating a well-established pattern that aligns with the collective subconscious of the mainstream male demographic, which fears the prospect of women gaining autonomy or challenging the existed power dynamics. On the other hand, the stark contrast between these marginalized characters and the heroines in Hitchcock's films can inspire alternative perspectives and independent interpretations among different audience segments.

Keywords: Feminist Film Theory, Hitchcock, Male Gaze

1. Introduction

Gender issues have been increasingly addressed with the recognition of affirmative action. In our modern society, where patriarchy still plays an inevitable role, how women are shaped into women and what kind of women they are shaped into have become the focus of reflection for both scholars and the public. Among different branches of topics, feminist film study can effectively provide insight into the gender concepts held by cinematic works both as a transmission medium and a reflector of popular culture. Such notions of gender, especially those reflected in genre movies and commercial ones, can help researchers reveal how the collective subconscious deals with its attitudes towards women in a certain period.

The male gaze theory was conceptualized by British feminist movie theorist Laura Mulvey in her famous essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* [1]. The essay pioneered psychoanalytic feminist film theory and constituted one of the foundations of contemporary film study, providing

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many insights that are still frequently used today. In her essay, Mulvey appropriates a Lacanian concept of the gaze to critically point out that mainstream cinema is constructed around the male gaze [1]. The female, as the object of the male gaze, assumes the role of satisfying the male's fetishistic scopophilia and imaginatively resolving the internal contradictions of the patriarchal society [1].

Alfred Hitchcock is known worldwide as a master of film, especially in thriller and suspense movies. His art of creating suspense, mastery of the camera, and penetrating insights into human nature have made him epochal as a director in film history. At the same time, however, the significant sexism and phallocentrism in his works have also brought him criticism from feminists. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey illustrated how the female protagonist acts as the recipient of the male protagonist's voyeurism, using three well-known Hitchcock films, *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, and *Marnie*, as examples. Since then, explorations of female figures in Hitchcock's works have mainly focused on his heroines, who are often played by beautiful blondes, and feminist film scholars have critically pointed out the stigmatization and objectification of women behind those figures.

Although most critics tend to skim over Hitchcock's female supporting characters, a few have noted some of these females. For example, Midge in *Vertigo* has been studied by different reviewers. Robin Wood discussed that Midge's sense of motherhood and her being "an entirely known quantity" made her "a poor romantic option"; while a more recent study refuted the analysis that Midge is maternal or boyish and suggested that she is also an important figure who offers the audience skepticism [2][3]. Another paper examined the female gaze represented by the ex-wife Miriam and the young girl Barbara's glasses in *Strangers on a Train* [4]. These studies are framed in terms of a particular movie instead of horizontally exploring the commonality of female supporting characters as a general characteristic across Hitchcock's productions in the same way as they explored his female protagonists.

This essay intends to explore Hitchcock's gender concept by comparing the similarities and differences between the supporting female characters, who are usually located in the negative space of the protagonists' desiring gaze, in three of his films, *Strangers on a Train* (1951) [5], *Vertigo* (1958) [6], and *To Catch a Thief* (1955) [7]; and, by inserting their images into Mulvey's model of the male gaze, to explore their real-life influence and the role of warning.

2. *Strangers on a Train* (1951)

2.1. The woman who brings trauma

In *Strangers on a Train*, Miriam's first appearance is as follows: Guy, the male protagonist, has returned to his hometown and looks at Miriam, the wife he wants to divorce, through the window of Miller's Music Store. In this close-up shot, Guy's face is hidden behind the giant black letters on the window while he is peering at his wife, who is working on the other side of the glass, and his expression conveys repulsion and alarm. In the subsequent point-of-view (POV) shot featuring Guy, two distinct female silhouettes emerge through the window while the identity of Miriam remains concealed. One silhouette portrays an elderly female customer deeply engrossed in reading, whereas the other silhouette belongs to a blonde clerk stationed at the counter, ultimately revealed to be Miriam herself. This mise-en-scène, resembling a showcase, effectively delineates a division between Guy and his patriarchal values on one side and the women, who challenge traditional norms by participating in cultural practices and social production, on the other. This division accentuates the dual nature of Guy's aversion.

The ambiguity portrayed here mirrors the same underlying logic evident in Bruno's father's dissatisfaction with his son. In Bruno's case, it becomes challenging for the audience to ascertain whether his wastrel demeanor or his homosexuality irks his father, or perhaps a combination of both.

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This parallel between the two marginalized figures in society, Miriam and Bruno, stands as one of the most profound undertones in the film.

Upon Guy's entrance to the store, Miriam is engaged with a customer at the checkout counter, diligently counting bills: "One-fifty, 2,3,4." This initial tone lays the foundation for what follows, as Miriam's acumen in financial matters is consistently underscored through her dialogue with Guy, her insistence on his attorney fees, and her meticulous money counting. These cumulative actions collectively craft a potent initial impression, portraying Miriam as acutely money-minded and shrewd.

Miriam's assertive persona is further accentuated. When conversing with Guy near the counter, the sequence in which Guy is the subject is the traditional over-the-shoulder shot. In contrast, when the focus shifts to Miriam, the cinematography intentionally employs low-angle shots that capture Miriam over Guy's waist rather than his shoulders. This deliberate choice aims to accentuate Miriam's aggressiveness and negative demeanor.

Moreover, Miriam's assertiveness is exemplified through her behavior. She exhibits traits traditionally associated with masculinity, which is a stark departure from the typical Hitchcockian heroine. Her ruthless confrontation with Guy, coupled with her loud and gruff mannerisms during their breakup, contrasts Anne Morton (played by Ruth Roman), who gently comforts the infuriated Guy over the telephone. Likewise, Miriam's ambition and unwavering determination, evident in her small, steely-eyed gaze behind thick lenses, sharply contrast with the worries and sentiments reflected in Ruth's eyes. These opposing attributes serve to underscore the directionality of Guy's romantic choice: Anne emerges as his angel, while Miriam stands as the antithesis of a sweetheart.

Another notable feature of Miriam is her entitlement to the public space, portrayed as a shameless debauchery. Her loud giggling and singing at the carnival are way too shrill for a Hitchcock film, where such volume is typically reserved for screams of terrified female victims. She also expresses her "craving for" food at a vending cart. This craving impulse of Miriam is portrayed to be so exorbitant that even one of her male companions starts to tease her with the words, "I never saw a girl eating so much in all my life", after she orders an ice cream and a hotdog. It presents that Miriam's appetite, extending from food to public places, threatens men. Above all, her sexual desires are entirely independent of the fetishism of the male protagonist and the audience, who project their desires onto him, making her a demonic other to mainstream society.

Miriam's form of existence departs from the silence and passivity of an ideal woman in a patriarchal system. She is too active to be immobilized and cut into several sexual spectacles, while her drive for possession and pursuit of pleasure make her a desirer and an operator. The fact that she, as one of the "castrated", overtly displays the characteristics of a male subject brings about fear of hierarchical confusion among male subjects. Hence, the elimination of Miriam becomes, to some degree, an expected punishment. The moral condemnation of murder is downplayed, and the viewer can be sewn into the first-person perspective of Bruno's killing process and experience the pleasure of defending the order. Since Bruno serves as Guy’s shadow archetype, the elimination of Miriam can be seen as conducted by Guy as well as the mainstream society that he represents [8]. This urgent need and rationalization for her death is accomplished by depicting Miriam as lustful and greedy: the former threatens patriarchal society on a conceptual level by subverting family values, while the latter does so on a realistic scale. The narrative could return to conventional values solely through Miriam's demise. Within this framework, the boisterous and crude playground is supplanted by the refined social gatherings of the senator's family in Washington D.C., where a strict adherence to patriarchal gender roles prevails.

2.2. The narrative that expunges the trauma

In terms of the plot, Miriam's death marks the onset of a series of complications, since the innocent Guy is considered guilty for the crime committed by the wicked Bruno. But in essence, her being

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murdered is precisely the lifting of the real crisis. The insurmountable dilemma posed by Miriam is irresolvable for both Guy and the senator's family, who are firmly entrenched within the bounds of civilization. The only way to eliminate Miriam's threat to Guy's idyllic life is through an unforeseen catastrophe, thus ensuring Guy's integrity remains unblemished. Bruno, a psychopath with oedipal and homosexual tendencies, serves as this very catastrophe, which paradoxically becomes the indispensable element in reuniting Guy and his beloved [9].

As Sedgwick proposed in her work *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, homosocial men habitually belittle women and homosexuals to uphold their patriarchal social order [10]. The film aptly exemplifies Sedgwick's theory, as it portrays the destruction of an "unqualified" woman and a homosexual man, ultimately reinforcing the traditional family hierarchy and allowing it to endure the crisis.

Furthermore, the disorientation resulting from Miriam's actions is rectified through the introduction of Barbara, Anne's younger sister. Bearing a striking resemblance to Miriam and characterized by symbolic eyeglasses, Barbara serves as a reminder of Miriam. They share a common trait in their androgynous demeanor that unsettles patriarchal norms. However, Barbara's lack of gender conformity is rationalized by her status as a child rather than a woman. This is achieved through her portrayal in a familial context, especially when contrasted with her mature and glamorous elder sister. Barbara's eccentric interest in criminal investigations is explained by implying her infatuation with Agent Hennessy. In this manner, the disquiet caused by Miriam is thoroughly alleviated. Women's attempts to subvert traditional norms are demystified and replaced with a patriarchal comprehension—it's not a rebellion but a consequence of immaturity.

3. *Vertigo* (1958)

Midge makes her initial appearance in her own apartment, wearing a pale yellow blouse that complements the colors of her walls and carpet. Meanwhile, Scottie playfully performs tricks with his walking cane on the opposite side. The room exudes a cozy ambiance, thanks to the haphazard design sketches and furniture. However, the cityscape outside the window leans ominously toward the screen. In this context, Midge's apartment, an extension of her spirit, serves as Scottie's sanctuary.

The relationship between Midge and Scottie can be seen as a variation of Hitchcock's classic mother-son dynamic. It is intimate but devoid of any sexual tension. The subtle hint of this relationship is evident from the very beginning when Midge, positioned slightly above Scottie on the left side of the frame, shares the same space with him. This dynamic is further affirmed through their subsequent conversations and actions.

However, unlike the relationships between characters such as Bruno in *Strangers on a Train*, Norman in *Psycho*, or Sebastian in *Notorious* and their respective mothers, Midge neither serves as Scottie's actual mother nor embodies what Žižek refers to as a maternal superego operating under the guise of a paternal metaphor. She merely represents an element of Scottie's mundane daily routine and is already an integral part of his life, rendering her neither the desired nor the threatening other.

Midge's plain and unassuming appearance, lacking an excessive desire to be gazed at, is exemplified by her inability to fit into the classical oil painting during her imitation work. Her vitality and swiftness during her visit to Pop Leibel also contrast sharply with Madeleine's melancholic vulnerability. Consequently, Scottie finds neither the satisfaction of voyeurism nor the thrill of uncovering feminine allure in Midge.

As the conversation in this apartment scene progresses, the topic of corsets is broached. The camera naturally zooms in on Midge's manuscript, featuring a female brassiere she is designing. Notably, the female model depicted in the manuscript closely resembles the iconic image of Madeleine's profile at Ernie's. This serves as a reminder that Madeleine exists solely in the realm of the ideal, in stark contrast to the realities of life. When faced with the choice between the painted

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Madeleine and the real Midge, Scottie willingly steps into the realm of fantasy without hesitation. Without the presence of Madeleine, Midge might have been an acceptable alternative. In fact, before encountering Madeleine, Scottie made several attempts to evoke Midge's femininity, including inquiring about her dating life and asking her out. Nevertheless, Midge's rejections served as a stark reminder of his failure.

Midge's career as a designer is intricately tied to the female body, and her living space is filled with symbols such as a new type of bra and high heels. Strangely, the presence of these classic erotic symbols manages to de-eroticize Midge's apartment entirely. This observation sheds light on the fact that Midge's space functions as a backstage for the theatrical performances of desire. While fantasy is the foundation of sustaining desire, the constant presence and reminders of the very structure of these fantasies disrupt immersion. This revelation implies a breakdown of the fantasy and, in this case, the impossibility for Scottie's sexual projection to be built upon Midge.

Even in the imaginary realm of cinema, Madeleine remains a fictional character, impersonated by the ordinary Judy. However, in contrast to the situation with Midge, Scottie's constructed fantasy surrounding Madeleine overpowers reality. The world on the screen is so subservient to this fantasy that even physical properties change in response to it. Scottie's idealization of Madeleine in Ernie's restaurant brightens the red wallpaper, while the ominous tale of Madeleine's ancestry recounted at the Big Ship bookstore rapidly darkens the setting [11]. The dominant on-screen fantasy and Midge, who resides entirely in reality, are inherently incompatible. Midge's efforts to weaken Scottie's fantasy by parodically portraying Carlotta, Madeleine's ancestor, only serve to irritate Scottie, who is already deeply entrenched in the realm of fantasy.

When Madeleine's death propels Scottie into a state of mourning and institutionalization, Midge once again takes on the role of caregiver. Scottie is not passively ensnared but instead voluntarily remains deeply immersed in the world of fantasy through his mourning. Consequently, Midge's attempts to bring Scottie back to reality through music therapy are inevitably futile, and she soon realizes this fact. She experiences loss in the same way that Scottie does: his love for Madeleine pulls him into another world, a world that Midge cannot reach, despite her desperate efforts to "pull him out of this." This gap between the real world and the fantasy world, as Maxfield pointed out, leads to Midge's disappearance from the film after talking to Scottie's doctor because there is nothing more for her to do [12].

The comparison between Midge and Madeleine is evident, but the contrast between Midge and Judy, the actress behind Madeleine's facade, is even more striking. Judy's tragic destiny lies in the fact that she occupies the position of Scottie's sublime object and then undergoes a fall as he confronts reality. In this case, the fall is not just abstract; Hitchcock materializes it as Judy's literal fall from the tower. Judy, like Midge, is a part of everyday life, and both are in love with Scottie. However, Midge manages to evade a tragic ending. The reason for this outcome is clear: Midge's antagonistic relationship with fantasy protects her from the potential for exaltation and mystification, thereby averting the catastrophic consequences that arise when the ugly truth is revealed.

4. *To Catch a Thief* (1955)

4.1. Another man's daughter

Just like Midge, Danielle in *To Catch a Thief* is also the protagonist's admirer who is rejected over his choice of another lady. However, unlike Midge's initial portrayal as a "boring mother," Danielle's introduction highlights her role as "someone else's daughter." Her father, Foussard, who is crippled, visits the underground wine cellar to ask Danielle to help Robie (portrayed by Cary Grant) escape from a restaurant under police surveillance. She sits in front of the liquor cabinet while her father

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stands beside her, his hands gently grasping her shoulders as he gives her instructions in French and affectionately tickles her chin. In the meantime, Robie remains in the shadows, like an outsider.

In terms of the story's structure, *To Catch a Thief* bears similarities to *Strangers on a Train*. Both films depict a wronged man taking action to expose a criminal in order to defend his freedom and ultimately find happiness with his lover. In *To Catch a Thief*, Robie, a reformed jewel thief, is dragged into a criminal investigation by his copycat, who eventually turns out to be Danielle and his old friends.

Despite her deception of Robie regarding her crime, Danielle's unrequited crush on him is genuine. When Robie finds his true love in the beautiful and wealthy American lady, Frances (played by Grace Kelly), Danielle, filled with jealousy, questions him, "But what does she have that I don't, besides money?" Robie's response, "Danielle, you are just a girl. She is a woman," provides insight into his standard of love.

What make Robie think of Danielle as a "girl" are her connection to her father and her subjectivity. From Foussard's body language during her initial appearance to her involvement in jewelry theft as her disabled father's agent, a part of her father's will has always been carried out through Danielle. This paternal connection makes her a possession of another man, preventing her from fully satisfying Robie's desire for male domination. Additionally, her strong bond with her father weakens her future husband's authority, which is a nightmare for any male subject in a Hitchcock film. Robie often seems like an intruder while facing Danielle and the French crew, especially when Foussard is present. Even after Foussard dies, it can be observed at the funeral that Danielle does not disconnect herself from her father because of his death, and that the rejection Robie experiences is even stronger when Danielle shouts at him in French [13].

In contrast, Frances's father had passed away before the family acquired its wealth. Her easygoing, extremely wealthy widowed mother is more than happy to introduce Robie to her daughter. This comedic old lady does not pose the same threat of power-sharing between men. Unlike Danielle's father-daughter bond, Frances's intimate mother-daughter bond simply suggests a substantial inheritance and reinforces the sanctity of traditional heterosexual marriage in the form of a parent's blessing. Moreover, Frances seamlessly transfers her dependence on her mother to Robie when she falls in love, aligning with male fantasies in a typical "Hitchcock heroine" fashion.

4.2. Unobtainable subject

Danielle and Frances's identity as daughters also implies submission, which gives the male an opportunity to guide a woman's transition from being submissive to her parent to being submissive to himself as her husband. However, Danielle's subjectivity hinders this transition. She and Robie share a dialogue on the boat, mentioning that Robie had taught her English, which implies a mentor-student relationship. Moreover, Danielle imitates Robie's criminal methods and even mirrors his attire with their matching pinstripe shirts. Such a relationship would typically be favored in Hitchcock films as a model for the romantic dynamic, similar to Mark teaching Marnie to accept love or Jeffries guiding Lisa (in *Rear Window*) to take his theories. In these cases, male pleasure derives from the reassertion of dominance and influence.

However, the difference in Robie and Danielle's relationship lies in the fact that, while Danielle absorbs Robie's teachings, she does not accept his dominance. In fact, she asserts her own viewpoint, such as addressing Robie as "Cat" and suggesting that they go to South America. Robie is not elevated to the status of a deity due to his teaching role. His jest, "I only regret one thing... that I ever took the time to teach you English," subtly conveys his genuine disappointment. Danielle's subjectivity also gives her initiative, making her possession even more unlikely. A symbolic detail is that Robie only taught Danielle English nouns, while she learned verbs on her own. Her spirited body language during the day and her agile secret operations at night both indicate that she cannot be satisfied with passivity.

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What Robie seeks is a "good woman," one who is static and can be observed, just like Frances in her golden gown at the masquerade ball, standing by the window, exuding elegance. In contrast to Danielle, who is engaging in active rooftop chasing, Frances fulfills the traditional role expected of a "woman."

Through Robie's comment, the film invites the audience to embrace the traditional gender concept while warning against behaviors that reject entering this system. Hitchcock's message here is that characters like Danielle, who do not conform to patriarchal gender roles, are unattractive "girls" and are deemed ineligible for love, in contrast to "women" who adhere to patriarchy.

4.3. Sins and the dishonorable origin

It is essential to emphasize that categorizing Danielle as a "girl" does not imply de-eroticization. On the contrary, the low-angle shots capturing her body curve and her sexually suggestive metaphor regarding new and old cars show that she is hypersexualized. However, in contrast to Frances, who abruptly kissed Robie after ignoring him all night, Danielle's eroticism is overt and lacks depth, appearing as a mere compilation of clichés and stereotypes. Similar to many French women in American cinema, Danielle's sexual portrayal primarily serves to enhance the image of eroticism, acting as a marginal stimulus and a novel embellishment with a sense of mystery rather than an object of actual romantic desire.

However, Danielle's portrayal of sexual attraction, though not as compelling as Frances's, serves as a reminder of the deeper reason for Robie's choice between the two. Danielle and the French restaurant crew have witnessed Robbie's tainted past, which haunts him whenever reminded of, whether by police's suspicions or Danielle mentioning the nickname "Cat." Furthermore, Danielle and the French crew embody Robie's sinful origins that constantly fuel his self-doubt. By revealing Danielle's identity as a thief and antagonizing his old associates, Robie discards his immoral past and embarrassing record by the movie's end. Danielle believes in reconciling with one's history, stating to Robie, "A man should never regret his past." In contrast, Robie insists on reconstructing or discarding the past. Through rediscovering sin in Danielle, he transforms from a criminal into a law-abiding, upper-class citizen.

Danielle poses more than just a threat of stealing insured jewelry; she embodies elements that unsettle male subjects, including autonomy, anti-modernity, and disregard for societal rules. Robie aims to return to mainstream society, upholding his reputation for innocence within the justice system. Danielle, on the other hand, seeks a chivalrous thief's life in uncultivated South America. Her disconcerting fondness for a barbarian lifestyle and her primitive-feminine vitality that challenges the male gaze jointly result in her facing punishment from not only patriarchy but also the so-called civilized society.

Towards the film's conclusion, Danielle, hanging from the eaves, pleads with Robie for forgiveness and confesses her crimes under the threat of falling to her death. This allows Robie to reassert his male dominance and compels her to admit that her father's orders drove her subversive actions. This ensures that power remains in the hands of males, the scheming restaurateur Bertani and the deceased Foussard, in this case. The parts of Danielle that break free from the patriarchal frame are depicted as illusory shadows, and beneath these shadows lies nothing more than the clichéd Electra complex.

In the final scene, the hero, Robie, is offered "the help of a good woman" by Frances. She is still dressed in an attention-grabbing masquerade dress, and the two embrace for a kiss. Ironically, they stand on a balcony that is part of the mansion Robie acquired with the fruits from his earlier jewelry thefts. The desire in Robie's eyes for Frances's necklace from a prior scene also raises doubts about whether his wicked history has genuinely been exorcised.

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5. Conclusion

Through examining the films mentioned above, this study reveals Hitchcock's deliberate creation of supporting female characters who disrupt the confines of the patriarchal society or refuse to conform to its norms. These characters are subsequently punished, either through abandonment by the male protagonist, the exposure of their transgressions, or their own demise. Their punitive outcome serves to provide male viewers with the satisfaction and thrill of seeing dominant values reasserted after facing adversity.

The male viewer, closely aligned with the protagonist, derives an enhanced sense of subjectivity and the authority to uphold the established social order by observing the desire of women with to-be-looked-at-ness while dismissing those with subjectivity. Simultaneously, the broader audience, encompassing individuals of different ages, genders, and sexual orientations, receives an implicit education that reinforces patriarchal gender perceptions.

Nevertheless, it is still worth noting that Hitchcock's portrayal of these female supporting characters exhibits a degree of depth by creating relatively multifaceted images, and their subjectivity is much more enlightening than that of the fully eroticized Hitchcock heroines to female audiences. Furthermore, Hitchcock's narrative acutely captures the collective subconscious of mainstream males during the 1950s and 1960s, providing future generations with valuable analytical material and historical insights into the gender ideology profiling of that time.

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