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Auteur and Author: A Comparison of the Works of Alfred Hitchcock and V. S. Naipaul

At first glance, the subjects under scrutiny may appear to have little in common with each other. A great deal has been written separately about the works of both Alfred Hitchcock and V. S. Naipaul, but the objective of this article is to show how numerous parallels can be drawn between many of the recurrent ideas and issues that occur within their respective works. Whilst Naipaul refers to the cinema in many of his novels and short stories, his most sustained usage of the filmic medium is to be found in the 1971 work *In a Free State*. In this particular book, the films to which Naipaul makes repeated, explicit reference are primarily those of the film director Alfred Hitchcock. Furthermore, a detailed textual analysis shows that similarities exist between the thematic preoccupations that have informed the output of both men throughout much of their lengthy careers. As this article will demonstrate, the decision to contrast the works of these two men has, therefore, been far from arbitrary.

Naipaul's attraction to the world of cinema can be traced back to his childhood in Trinidad, an island where Hollywood films remained the predominant viewing fare throughout most of his formative years.[1] The writer's own comments in the "Trinidad" section of *The Middle Passage* bear this out: "Nearly all the films shown, apart from those in the first-run cinemas, are American and old. Favourites were shown again and

again…"[2] Before the advent of local television in the early 1960s, the cinema had been the primary form of mass entertainment throughout the region. The impact of the filmic medium upon islanders was, in Naipaul's own terms, "incalculable," with many of Hollywood's leading actors venerated (and often emulated) by many members of the local populace. In Naipaul's *Miguel Street* the character of "Bogart" with his "hard-boiled attitude" testifies to the intensity of local identification with the Hollywood formula, as does a scathing comment by one of Anand's classmates in his later novel, *A House for Mr Biswas*: "'How you mean, you don't like Fonda. Anybody would think that you never see Fonda walk.'"[3]

Between the years of 1942-1950, a period when, according to Theroux, Naipaul claims to have "seen every film that came to Trinidad,"[4] Hitchcock released eight films including *Spellbound* (1945) and *Rope* (1948). Naipaul makes specific reference to both of these films throughout *In a Free State*. In the "Tell me who to kill" section of that book, the nameless narrator (an overt comment on his very lack of identity) lives and operates in a world that is formulated by half-remembered images from films by Hitchcock such as *Rope* and *Rebecca* (1940). *Rope* is a particularly telling choice of memory as the film deals with issues of amorality and insidiously encourages the audience to side with the homosexual killers, Brandon and David. In a similar manner, Naipaul encourages his readers to sympathise with the narrator, Dayo's brother, as he stabs the white boy who taunts him in his shop. At the precise moment of the fight, he blanks out reality and returns to a previously recounted nightmare that had its basis in the Hitchcock film: "Nothing making noise now. The body is in the chest, like in *Rope*…"[5] In this supreme moment of crisis, his entire personality, moral standards and values are wholly subsumed into the filmic imagery with which he identifies.

It is also significant that Naipaul chooses to make reference to another Hitchcock film, *Spellbound*, in the title section of *In a Free State*. Both Bobby and Linda are characterised as shallow and selfish, without any true sense of identity, and

are sexually promiscuous in a manner that is reminiscent of another of his characters, Jane, in the later novel *Guerrillas*. Much of the time they talk at, rather than with, each other, but on one of the rare occasions when they do engage in conversation it is to discuss the above mentioned film: "I didn't know anything about anything. I thought psychiatry was an American joke and a psychiatrist was someone like Ingrid Bergman in *Spellbound*."[6] In *Spellbound* Bergman's employer "Dr. Edwards"/John Ballantyne is suffering from an identity crisis—he has blocked out his past and may have been a killer—and sequences of dream and reality are often blurred. The implication of the reference to the film seems to be that Bobby is operating in a similarly blurred fashion, with a shifting identity and a failure to distinguish between reality and the fictional representations of the cinema.

During an interview conducted in 1971, the same year as *In a Free State* was published, Naipaul stated that the work "came out of this great panic, it went on in this enormous pain and anguish for months and months."[7] The following year, Theroux went so far as to suggest that "*In a Free State* is the first book of Naipaul's in which a fear of death and a preoccupation with failure are considered as being final."[8] Hitchcock's *Spellbound* was itself partly based upon the mental breakdown suffered by the producer, David O. Selznick, for whom Hitchcock was working at the time of shooting the film. The sufferings with which both the book and the film concern themselves suggest that Naipaul's choice of reference was far from arbitrary in identifying Bobby with Dr. Constance Petersen, the character portrayed by Bergman in Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. It is also interesting to note that Hitchcock's earlier work *Rope* was experimental in terms of its form—a series of lengthy takes without normal editing techniques[9]—whilst *In a Free State* also marks a distinctive move away from the conventional novel form that Naipaul had previously adopted. Whether Naipaul would have been aware of Hitchcock's technical methods is a matter for conjecture, but it does offer a further point of comparison between the works of both men.

Although *In a Free State* is the only work by Naipaul that contains specific references to Hitchcock, it is by no means the only book of his in which film is used to explore identity. In *The Mimic Men* the main protagonist, Ralph Singh, both recognises and comments bitterly about the imposition of cinematic imagery upon the Caribbean psyche, with its obvious implications for his own lack of self-esteem: "The camera was in the sky. It followed the boy…"[10] Naipaul does not specifically refer to Hitchcock's work within this novel, yet Singh's notion of being tracked by an "airborne" camera can be seen to parallel that experienced by several of the film director's own disempowered males. Roger Thornhill, the main character in *North by Northwest* (1959), suffers a similar experience to that described by Singh when he is hunted ("watched") by a light aircraft in a scene that is particularly memorable for its visual impact upon the audience.

In a 1966 article by Russell, Hitchcock's view or vision of the world was defined as being "intensely pessimistic, in a sense almost nihilistic…"[11] Similar statements have been made about the writing of V. S. Naipaul. Examples include Joshi's 1994 comment that "Naipaul's is one of the most pessimistic and bleak visions among contemporary writers"[12] or King's, "There is a contest in Naipaul's writing between two ways of regarding the world. One might be described as existential. Life in itself has no essential, pre-determined significance. We are born, struggle to survive, die and are forgotten…"[13] It is, however, the way in which Naipaul repeatedly used cinematic imagery to explore that underlying pessimism, that provides the strongest linkage between the disparate output of both men.

Naipaul's use of cinematic references and, more importantly, of his characters' inability to distinguish between film and reality, are employed throughout his writing as a powerful tool for exploring the complexity of those characters' identities. Issues of identity are never far from the surface in the works of Naipaul, as can be seen in many of his novels and short stories. Apart from the more explicit examples there is a sense

in which his whole body of writing has been undercut by the notion of a loss of individuality. In numerous interviews, Naipaul has discussed his continuing struggle to retain a sense of self in a post-colonial world that insists on labelling him—as "a West Indian writer" or "a Caribbean novelist," for example—and thus denying his true sense of identity. It is hardly surprising that so many of his characters suffer from a personality crisis of some sort, often to the extent where they can only be defined by the way others ultimately view them or through their own identification with the illusory world of the cinema.

In Naipaul's 1965 novella *A Flag on the Island*—subtitled *A Fantasy for a Small Screen*—issues of identity and the assimilation of American "values" and "culture" throughout Trinidad are the central focus for the entire narrative. All of the main male characters—Frank, Leonard, Henry, H. J. B. White ("Blackwhite") —are shadowy, indistinct, fluid figures whose behaviour continually shifts to accommodate their changing circumstances. The hopeless search for a sense of self in an island dominated by an overpowering American presence—the cinematic imagery, the physical presence of the military and the later, cash-rich tourist—is encapsulated in the brief extract from one of White's books: "'I am a man without identity. Hate has consumed my identity. My personality has been distorted by hate.'"[14] Local aspirations, as exemplified in Frank's "girlfriend" Selma, are shown to extend no further than wishing to emulate the behaviour of Hollywood film stars: "I'd buy a nice counterpane, satiny and thick and crisscrossed with deep lines. I saw Norma Shearer using one in *Escape* [a 1940 wartime 'weepie']."[15] Inevitably, the desire to try and live up to such an idealised fantasy world, as promulgated by Hollywood, is doomed to eventual failure.

The cinema is used by Naipaul in several other works to provide a distorted mirror through which characters try to shape their own identity and, as a result, are duly mocked by the author for their naivety and ignorance. Lorkhoor in *The Suffrage of*

Elvira explicitly alters his appearance as a result of seeing a particular film starring the Mexican actor Pedro Armendariz. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, Mohun's brother-in-law Owad emulates Lorkhoor in the earlier novel by returning with an altered appearance based on another film star, Robert Taylor. Although Naipaul plainly does not carry his exploration of identity to the extremes to which Hitchcock operates, the similarities in their line of thinking are nevertheless apparent.

In Hitchcock's films the notion of shifting identities has been pinpointed as one of the most recurrent themes throughout his lengthy career. From early works such as *The Thirty Nine Steps* (1935) to later, more psychologically informed films like *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* or *Marnie* (1964), the issue of what constitutes identity has been explored by the director with an almost obsessive degree of interest. In many of his earlier films, identity was examined in a relatively straightforward physical or social sense and the "disappearance" of Miss Froy in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) is a prime example of this. In a crucial scene on the train, aspects of her appearance are superimposed in a sinister way on other characters to reflect the confusion, both within the film and among the audience, about who she really is. In the later and much more disturbing works such as *Vertigo* and *Marnie*, a change in appearance is, however, merely an accompaniment to a merging of personalities or disintegration into separate, parallel identities. Madeleine/Judy is "created" by Scottie Ferguson in *Vertigo* to meet his destructive desire to bring someone back from the dead. By the end of the film (and Judy's "second" death), she not only resembles Madeleine in appearance but has been "taken over" by the latter's personality as well. The most extreme example of changing identity must, however, be that of Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960). By the closing scenes, we learn that Norman's identity has been completely subsumed by that of his mother, the ultimate and perhaps inevitable outcome of Hitchcock's lengthy exploration of the loss of a sense of self.

Whilst issues of identity provide a pivotal link between the two men, it is by no means the only thematic preoccupation that they share. An overwhelming sense of pessimism about human relationships also clearly pervades their collective works. Lesley Brill has written that "in many of Hitchcock's [films], distrust is inevitable in the fundamental structure of relations between women and men"[16] and this is apparent throughout his work. His portrayal of the inherently destructive nature of relationships is notorious for its manifestation in films such as *Strangers on a Train* (1951) or, in its most macabre manifestation, in *Psycho*. *Strangers on a Train* concerns a murder pact between two men who agree to "swap" murders—one's wife in exchange for the other's father—whilst Norman Bates' murderous behaviour as a result of his late mother's domination is too well known to discuss in further detail here.

Naipaul's own vision of relationships bears a marked resemblance to several of the scenarios visualised by Hitchcock. In its most extreme manifestation, the sodomy and brutal murder of Jane in *Guerrillas* is portrayed as the inevitable outcome for a life of casual sexual encounters and failed relationships. In a similar fashion to Judy in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Marion in *Psycho* or Melanie in *The Birds* (1963), the promiscuous female in Naipaul's novel is made to pay the ultimate price. Furthermore, the doomed nature of Jane's dalliance with Jimmy is ironically contrasted with the idealised images of interracial sex that Bryant, Jimmy's homosexual partner, watches so avidly in the local cinemas. The failure of relationships between members of different racial groupings is a recurrent theme in several other novels by Naipaul, as Mustafa has suggested—"Naipaul seems impelled to depict the betrayal of postcolonial history in stylized scenes of sexual humiliation between men and women, or men and men, of different races"[17]—and relationships in *The Mimic Men*, *In a Free State* and *A Bend in the River* would certainly bear this out.

It is not, however, just interracial relationships that fail to work in Naipaul's fiction. There is a pervading sense of dislike for marriage itself between the characters

of Mr Stone and his wife Margaret in the novel *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*: "Twice a day…he faced her across the dining table; and these moments…were moments of the greatest strain…Reflecting…on her idleness and frivolity…he feared he might say something offensive."[18] Hitchcock's views on the state of marriage can be seen to be imbued with a similarly pessimistic tone. His 1954 film *Rear Window* is riddled with couples whose relationships have failed, whilst the main character Jeffries views his impending marriage as an unwarranted encumbrance and a serious threat to his freedom. Through the "rear window" of the film's title, the viewer is forced to adopt a voyeuristic stance in looking with Jeffries at the tenants opposite, each of whom offers a frightening glimpse of what his relationship with Lisa might become. As Wood says, "Each apartment offers a variation on the man-woman relationship or the intolerable loneliness resulting from its absence…The difficulties of human relationships, the horror that marriage can be and the comparable horror of frustrated singleness, are much stressed…"[19]

Such a negative view of relationships occurs repeatedly in both Hitchcock's and Naipaul's work, even from an early stage in their respective careers. In Naipaul's 1958 novel *The Suffrage of Elvira,* female sexuality is already being portrayed as a threat to fathers and husbands alike. Other married couples in his fiction, such as Ganesh and Leela in *The Mystic Masseur* and Mohun and Shama Biswas in *A House for Mr Biswas* endure relationships in which neither is fulfilled and lengthy separations plus the occasional beating are depicted as the norm. Even Salim's engagement to Kareisha in *A Bend in the River,* offers neither partner any sense of fulfilment—he instantly returns to Africa, picking up a whore en route, whilst she simply awaits him in London if, and when, he should eventually decide to return. In a similar manner to Hitchcock's films such as *Vertigo, The Birds* or *Marnie,* it is almost impossible to find a relationship in Naipaul's fiction that offers any true sense of satisfaction to either partner, be it parent and child, husband and wife, or lovers of either sex.

To date, Bobby from *In a Free State* and Jimmy in *Guerrillas* are the only overtly homosexual characters about whom Naipaul has written.[20] Equally, Hitchcock's *Rope* with its linkages to the former novel and *Strangers on a Train* are his only films to have seriously explored the subject, albeit in less explicit detail in keeping with notions of taste (and censorship) prevalent at that time. As well as the somewhat homophobic attitudes which are manifest in these works, there is, elsewhere, a significant level of negativity displayed towards male/female relationships in the works of both men, with much ambiguity towards women and female sexuality in particular. Their respective works are, in fact, usually based around one or more disempowered men, who lack control over their personal relationships, their family, their careers, and ultimately their very destinies.

Within Hitchcock's body of work, there are numerous examples that serve to illustrate his pre-occupation with exploring the fragility of the male psyche. Scottie in *Vertigo* suffers a complete nervous breakdown on screen—graphically illustrated with striking colour and camera work—due to his inability to act positively when called to do so.[21] Christopher Balestrero in *The Wrong Man* (1956) and Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest* are both powerless victims of circumstances over which neither can exert any control. Jeffries in *Rear Window* is disempowered both physically (by his broken leg) and mentally through his inability to commit himself to his girlfriend, Lisa. In *Spellbound*, the psychiatrist John Ballantyne is shackled to his past with a misguided guilt complex from which he is—ironically, given his profession—unable to liberate himself. Even at the closing stages of his career, Hitchcock continued to explore the subject at length, with his darkest rendition of the impotent male (both literally and metaphorically) in his last but one film, *Frenzy* (1972).

Naipaul's own vision of the disempowered male is so pervasive that it is difficult to think of any of his work in which a less pessimistic view is adopted. From his first published novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, the tone had been set in which his

leading male character suffers set-backs, defeat and humiliation at the hands of his family, friends and even the local populace. Although this particular novel ends on a positive note for its protagonist, the mocking, ironic tone that the narrative voice adopts only serves to highlight Ganesh's futility in struggling against forces far more powerful than himself. Despite his failure as a benevolent politician, Ganesh possesses the one attribute (dishonesty) that allows him to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and turn his failure into a measure of personal success. Significantly, the novel that followed just one year later, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, plays out a similar scenario of personal inadequacy in a tragi-comic tone. Chittaranjan fails in his role as both a father and husband and, once again, as a would-be politician who loses much of his money, his daughter and ultimately his political ambitions in a ceaseless round of personal incompetence. The twin themes of failure as a man and failure as a politician are picked up again in the later novel *The Mimic Men*. In this work, the overall tone is significantly more pessimistic with Ralph Singh eventually losing his marriage, his money, his status and his homeland in a narrative of personal helplessness, devoid of hope. Unlike the honorary title that is conferred upon the compliant Ganesh, Singh's failure as a politician forces him into an ignominious role, permanently exiled from the country of his birth.

In Naipaul's novels the portrayal of failure and its accompanying guilt often leaves the reader with a sense, if not of complicity, then at least of ambivalence towards the characters in question. With little or no moralistic point of view to his novels, Naipaul fails to condemn or condone and the reader is left to share in or dismiss the notions of guilt as they choose. A parallel situation can be found to exist in several of Hitchcock's films. In *The Wrong Man* the audience itself is compromised by its identification with the hero who, although wrongly accused, could very well have been guilty of the crime in question. In both *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*, guilt prevents the main character from acting in a positive fashion that might have saved another's life.

Rope and *Strangers on a Train* feature characters that play with relish at the idea of murder without knowing that they are conversing with someone who has already committed such an appalling crime. As in many of his films, there is no clear delineation between guilt and innocence; it is only the actions of murderers that separate them from the rest, who thus remain ambivalently tainted or morally implicated by their words alone

The selection of areas for comparison has been restricted to those primary thematic recurrences that inform the works of both men, though this is not to suggest that they deal with those themes in an altogether similar fashion. Further, it cannot be assumed that Hitchcock necessarily had the same artistic freedom—to determine the nature and content of every one of his films—that a writer such as Naipaul would have had over the characterisation and events in his novels. If it is possible to generalise over such a broad body of work—a comment that encompasses the output of both men—then it has to be said finally that Hitchcock's work generally leaves little room for ambiguous interpretation on the part of the audience. On the other hand, Naipaul's work tends not to provide the level of narrative closure that characterises most of Hitchcock's output. Nevertheless, despite such stylistic differences a high degree of correlation can be seen to exist in the choice of themes that their respective works repeatedly explore.

Notes

1. The first Hindi films had been imported into Trinidad during the 1930s and throughout the next thirty years they were to become an increasingly important element in the local filmic mix as the absolute domination of Hollywood declined correspondingly. Although outside the scope of this particular article, it is interesting to note that Naipaul does make limited references to Hindi cinema in a number of works that were published during the 1950s and 1960s when the Hindi film was at its peak of popularity in the island.
2. V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (London: Penguin, 1969 [1962]), 63.
3. V. S. Naipaul, *A House For Mr Biswas* (London: Penguin, 1992 [1961]), 465.
4. Paul Theroux, *Sir Vidia's Shadow* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998), 41.

5. V. S. Naipaul, *In A Free State* (London, Penguin, 1973 [1971]), 97.
6. Ibid., 153.
7. Adrian Rowe-Evans, "V. S. Naipaul: A *Transition* Interview" (*Transition* 40, 1971), 56-62, reprinted in Feroza Jussawalla, ed., *Conversations with V. S. Naipaul* (Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 34.
8. Paul Theroux, *V. S. Naipaul: An Introduction to his Work* (London, André Deutsch, 1972), 125.
9. For a more detailed discussion of Hitchcock's techniques in this film see Peter Wollen, "*Rope*: Three Hypotheses" in Richard Allen and S. Ishii-Gonzalès, eds., A*lfred Hitchcock Centenary Essays* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 75-85.
10. V. S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (London: Penguin, 1969 [1967]), 31.
11. Lee Russell, "Alfred Hitchcock" in *New Left Review* (January 1966), 92.
12. Chandra B. Joshi, *V. S. Naipaul: The Voice of Exile* (New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers, 1994), x.
13. Bruce King, "V. S. Naipaul" in Bruce King, ed., *West Indian Literature* (London, Macmillan, 1995 [1979]), 217.
14. V. S. Naipaul, *A Flag on the Island* (New York: Macmillan, 1967 [1967]), 154.
15. Ibid., 178.
16. Lesley Brill, "Redemptive Comedy in the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Preston Sturges: Are Snakes Necessary?" in Richard Allen and S. Ishii-Gonzalès, eds., A*lfred Hitchcock Centenary Essays*, 211.
17. Fawzia Mustafa, *V. S. Naipaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 151-152.
18. V. S. Naipaul, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (London: Penguin, 1973 [1963]), 37.
19. Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989), 102.
20. Due to its very recent publication, references to Naipaul's latest novel *Half A Life* (2001) have not been included in any section of this article.
21. The sets for these now famous sequences were designed by the artist Salvador Dalí.