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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 deta

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

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

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

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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

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
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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

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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.

