The Hitchcock Monomyth: The Perfect Recipe For a Hitchcockian Thriller
By Zachary Pruitt

People tend to have a favorite movie genre. Romance, comedy, science fiction, fantasy; the list of genres and sub-genres is lengthy, and more are being formed in today's film industry. But what makes a movie fit into a genre? Romance is not exclusive to romance films, just as action is not exclusive to action films. To distinguish films, there is a complex pattern, a recipe that a film must follow to fit into its genre. John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewitt explore this idea in their book *The Myth of the American Superhero*. In it, Lawrence and Jewitt analyze the origins of the American Monomyth, a uniquely American "recipe" that is followed notably by American action and western films. It follows that other genres also have unique "monomyths" that help define them.

I argue that there is a sub-genre of thriller films called the Hitchcockian Thriller that follows the unique Hitchcock Monomyth. In addition to this monomyth, cinematography and music are also important to the Hitchcockian Thriller. The Hitchcock Monomyth contains several key elements: the protagonist finds that he is at a plateau or crossroads; an evil or dangerous force is introduced; a MacGuffin propels the narrative; dramatic irony results in suspense; the protagonist is doubted, but a twist in the plot proves him right; in the end, the evil is defeated and the protagonist is left permanently changed, no longer at a crossroads.

The Hitchcock Monomyth was developed over Alfred Hitchcock's long career, starting in the silent film era of the 1920s. In the '30s, Hitchcock's collaboration with playwright Charles Bennett helped to shape his future films and the resulting monomyth. In the article, "Charles Bennett and the Typical Hitchcock Scenario," John Belton proposes that the three-year collaboration between Bennett and Hitchcock created a pattern that Hitchcock continued to use

on many of his films. Bennett also used themes of false accusations, guilt, and doubt, which

Hitchcock continued to use in many of his films (Belton). In "Hitchcock's Innocence Plot,"

Reidar Due notes the theme of false accusations in Hitchcock's films, stating that "a situation is

constructed in which a central character is falsely accused and thereby displaced from his social

identity" (56). With these false accusations comes the theme of doubt; society doubts the

protagonist. Although only a small number of Hitchcock's films from early in his career contain

the "falsely accused protagonist" plot, nearly all of his subsequent films contain the theme of

doubt. This theme remained evident throughout Hitchcock's career, and is therefore an

important part of the Hitchcock Monomyth.

After the collaboration with Bennett, Hitchcock continued to grow as a director.

Hitchcock perfected the use of the MacGuffin, a term used to describe an object or event that

drives the action in a film ("What is a MacGuffin?). Along with this evolution came the familiar

scores composed by Hermann Bernard and new filming techniques that enabled Hitchcock to

capture the quintessential shots that help define the Hitchcockian Thriller. Over the course of

forty-four years and sixty-six directing credits, Hitchcock developed the Hitchcockian Thriller in

its entirety. Three of Hitchcock's most famous films, *Vertigo, Psycho,* and *Rear Window* can be

used to illustrate the Hitchcock Monomyth and the Hitchcockian Thriller.

In *Vertigo*, John "Scottie" Ferguson, played by James Stewart, begins the film recovering

from the traumatic end to his career as a detective. Like the Monomyth suggests, the protagonist

is at a crossroads. The second step is fulfilled when an old friend, Gavin Elster, offers Scottie a

job. The true "evil force" is revealed late in the film. A mysterious portrait that Gavin's wife,

Madeleine, is mysteriously obsessed with becomes the MacGuffin that the third step requires.

Later in the film, after Madeleine appears to die, the audience finds out the truth, long before

Scottie does; this is the dramatic irony for the fourth step. The doubt for step five is supplied by

Scottie, who doubts his own sanity as his obsession with Madeleine grows; in what I call the

"doubt-twist-affirmation" pattern, Scottie finally learns the truth about Madeleine. In the final

scene, Scottie discovers the plot and defeats the evil and his acrophobia, completing the

Monomyth.

Cinematography and music also identify this film as a Hitchcockian Thriller. Using his

camera, Hitchcock directs the audience as well as his actors. The most iconic shot from the film

is still used today, and is often referred to as the "vertigo-shot" as well as the more technical

name, "dolly-zoom shot." Other memorable shots from the film include extreme close-ups of

Scottie's face accompanied by jarring music and intense lighting, which helps convey Scottie's

mental struggle to the audience.

Another example showing the Hitchcock Monomyth is *Psycho*. Perhaps the best-known

Hitchcock film, *Psycho* challenges the Monomyth while ultimately affirming it. The problem

arises after the first forty-five minutes of the film when the protagonist, Marion Crane, is killed.

After she is first introduced, Marion steals $40,000 from her job at a bank to start a new life.

The audience assumes that the remainder of the film will be about her dealing with the

consequences of her actions: will she give the money back, get caught by the police, or get away

with it? This first part of the film is complete with a protagonist, a dangerous situation, a

MacGuffin, and suspense. However, the doubt and plot twist that the Monomyth calls for is

fulfilled in an entirely different way than the audience expects; just after Marion decides to

return the money, she is killed in the infamous shower scene. At this point in the narrative, the

Monomyth restarts. The first forty-five minutes becomes the introduction to the "real movie"

that follows, complete with a new protagonist, danger, MacGuffin, suspense, twist, and

conclusion. Scholar Stephen Husarik also suggests that the film can be interpreted to have two plots, but he argues that there is one continuous protagonist: Norman Bates ("Transformation of 'The Psycho Theme'"). Husarik suggests that the scriptwriter sympathized with Marion more than Bates, and therefore wrote a script that framed her as the protagonist. This interpretation still follows the Hitchcock Monomyth with minimal variation.

In the "second" plot of *Psycho,* Lila Crane becomes the new protagonist, with help from Sam Loomis, Marion's boyfriend, and detective Milton Arbogast. The disappearance of her sister becomes both the crossroads in Lila's life and the dangerous situation as she snoops around the Bates Motel. The MacGuffin appears in the form of a payphone call from the detective Arbogast to Lila, in which he explains that he will call her back after a talk with the elusive Mrs. Bates. Just as the lead is going cold, Arbogast is killed, and new suspicion is cast on Mrs. Bates: another "doubt-twist-affirmation" pattern. The film ends with a detective explaining Norman's psychosis, and a final scene of Marion's car being pulled from the swamp. This provides closure for the audience and characters, completing the Monomyth.

In *Psycho,* Hitchcock is able to achieve a gritty realism that connects with an audience in a new way. In an article about Hitchcock and his films, Mark Jancovich says that Hitchcock used the film crew from his TV series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents,* to achieve the raw look starkly different from his previous big-budget films ("The English Master"). In one of the last scenes in the film, Norman sits in the police station while a voice over of his thoughts reveals the depth of his insanity. Again, extreme close-ups and strange camera angles are used to convey mental struggle.

But *Psycho* would have been incomplete as a Hitchcockian thriller without Bernard Herrmann's iconic score. According to Husarik, Herrmann's paycheck was doubled for *Psycho* because Hitchcock felt that "33% of the effect of *Psycho* was due to the music" (146). The addition of this memorable score is the final factor needed to fit *Psycho* into the Hitchcockian Thriller sub-genre.

Rear Window is another classic Hitchcock film that can be analyzed with the Hitchcock Monomyth. Our protagonist, L.B. "Jeff" Jefferies, is homebound due to an injury he experienced while taking photographs of a car race. In addition to the injury, relationship problems between Jeff and his beautiful, affluent girlfriend Lisa supply the sense of uncertainty that the Hitchcock Monomyth demands. After Jeff develops the habit of spying on his neighbors, he witnesses what he comes to believe was a murder, the evil force in the Hitchcock Monomyth. In this film, there are several MacGuffins; the ring, the flowerbed, and the murder itself all fulfill the Monomyth. The biggest dose of suspense comes after Lisa takes it upon herself to enter the apartment of Mr. Thorwald, the suspected murderer while Jeff watches. The self-doubt comes early in the film, when both Lisa and Jeff are temporarily fooled by Thorwald's alibi. In the end, Thorwald is brought to justice, and although Jeff is still injured, he and Lisa are happy and hopeful. In all ways, *Rear Window* satisfies the Hitchcock Monomyth.

During the scenes in which Jeff spies on his neighbors, the audience is often shown close-ups of his face to show whatever emotion he feels: horror, lust, pity, etc. By showing us how Jeff feels, Hitchcock is suggesting what we should feel; using his camera, Hitchcock is able to direct both his film and the audience. This connection between the protagonist and audience is essential to any Hitchcockian thriller.

Today, the monomyth and sub-genre Hitchcock developed are still closely followed by many popular thriller movies. For example, *Flight Plan, A Perfect Murder, The Happening,* and *Disturbia* are all films that fit into the Hitchcockian thriller sub-genre, showing that this suspenseful type of movie is still popular with audiences today.

The film *Shutter Island,* directed by Martin Scorsese, is an excellent example of a successful contemporary film that can be distinguished as a Hitchcockian Thriller. In addition to utilizing the Hitchcock Monomyth almost in its entirety, this movie uses cinematographic elements and a film score that help distinguish the movies in this sub-genre. The film begins with Teddy Daniels who is haunted by a fear of water, post-traumatic stress from WWII, and the death of his wife. Daniels is obviously struggling with some serious problems and is at an important point in his life where he must change or continue to suffer. The opening scene shows Daniels on a boat approaching a mental asylum where a patient has gone missing, a situation full of danger as the Monomyth calls for. The MacGuffin takes the form of both the question "Who is 67?" and the missing patient, Rachel Solondo. Here the film deviates slightly from the Monomyth: instead of the audience knowing something that the protagonist does not, Daniels finds out there may be a conspiracy early on in the film. This dramatic irony is normally the key source of suspense for Hitchcock. Instead, the suspense comes from this question that the audience asks itself: "When will the doctors at the asylum realize that Teddy Daniels knows about the conspiracy?" Although the suspense is still there, the change in source shows the progression of the Hitchcock Monomyth. As the Monomyth demands, Daniels' suspicions are doubted, at first by his partner and then himself. The "doubt-twist-affirmation" pattern occurs when he stumbles upon the real Rachel Solondo, a nurse who escaped from the corrupt asylum who reveals the conspiracy. In the final step of the Monomyth, the film takes an interesting

direction. The antagonistic force, the evil experimentation and conspiracy, turn out to be a

fabrication of Daniels' imagination. Dr. Cawley, the head of the institute, was helping Daniels

play out his fantasy world in hopes that it would bring him back to reality.

Depending on how the final scenes are interpreted, this film either follows or contradicts

the Hitchcock Monomyth. One interpretation is that Teddy Daniels' psychosis was the

antagonistic force; he conquered it in the end, and decided to be lobotomized because he could

not live with the horrors of his past. Another interpretation is that there is no antagonist and that

Daniels slipped back into psychosis at the end of the film. In either case, this film takes the

typical Hitchcock Monomyth and changes it to fit a modern audience. These slight deviations

show how the Hitchcock Monomyth has progressed to satisfy new audiences, who need new plot

twists to keep this Monomyth fresh.

In addition to the plot, director Scorsese's cinematography and soundtrack further root

Shutter Island as a Hitchcockian Thriller. Starting in the first scene, close-ups of Daniels are

utilized to show his emotions and mental struggles, emulating similar shots in *Vertigo, Psycho*,

and other films by Hitchcock. The film soundtrack is actually a compilation of previously

composed works, including a few pieces that evoke the same foreboding feeling created by

Hermann Bernard in many of Hitchcock's films (Scorsese). With all of these elements, *Shutter

Island* illustrates that the same "recipe" that Hitchcock followed can captivate audiences today.

After honing his directing skills, Alfred Hitchcock created a perfect "recipe" that many of

his most iconic films followed: the Hitchcock Monomyth. Today, this monomyth helps to define

a unique sub-genre of movie, the Hitchcockian Thriller. This sub-genre of film created by

Hitchcock is still popular today, as is evidenced by the success of contemporary films like

Disturbia and *Shutter Island.* In addition to having many similarities, *Shutter Island* also varies from some parts of the Hitchcock Monomyth, showing the evolution of genres as time progresses. Even in the relatively short time between Hitchcock's and Scorsese's directing careers, film genres have noticeably changed, for better or worse. With so many new films that fit into a growing number of genres and sub-genres, it is important to know how to distinguish them. For the casual filmgoer, the basic knowledge of genres is enough to get by; but all film enthusiasts should know the origins of their favorite genres.

This paper constitutes only my thinking and my ideas. Where I have used any other materials, I have clearly identified and attributed them.

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