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Hitchcock

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Overcoming Boundaries: Lines in Hitchcock’s Films

In the latter part of Alfred Hitchcock’s career, specifically during the creation of *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, and *Psycho*, he used different line movements during the opening titles of each film. In *Vertigo*, the audience sees multiple swirling patterns that then circle towards us, changing colors and rotating. *North by Northwest* presents its audience with a grid, where the lines constrict the area into smaller spaces. The credits in *Psycho* are a pattern of straight lines that move across the screen, cutting into the words as well as the space. With each film, there is a continuation of this theme; the presence of the lines weave themselves through the film, allowing the audience to better understand what Hitchcock means to do with the film as well as observe any interruptions in the theme he presents. *Vertigo*, the first of his films that truly establishes lines into the film’s context, perfectly mirrors the opening sequence; the colors, rotation, and direction of the lines create an uneasy feeling that stays true until the end of the film. *North by Northwest* also contains this same idea: the grid resembles the path each character follows. But rather than maintain this set of lines as in *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest* works to stray away from the restrictive lines of the grid. *Psycho* throws its audience off balance by ridding of its straight lines presented to us in the opening credits. Rather than seeing the straight lines reoccur throughout the film, the image of a circle slowly pushes away the lines, as well as the order, as the film progresses.}

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Hitchcock experimented with each film, he at first accepts these opening lines and then later rejects them; Vertigo maintains the swirling lines throughout and North by Northwest creates new grids as its characters change their lifestyle. It is not until Hitchcock presents Psycho that the audience witnesses a breakdown of the orderly lines in its opening sequence.

An intense observation of Vertigo's opening credit sequence is vital to understanding how Hitchcock makes the remainder of the film mirror the opening. At first, the film zooms in on certain parts of a woman’s face; Hitchcock films half of her lip, then her full lip, he pans up her face to her nose and then to her right eye. From this eye, the audience sees that the color changes to red and then the title “Vertigo” appears from that eye. Then the series of lines begin. A swirling, galaxy-like purple design rotates to the left. The color then changes to blue, and then a purple constellation pulses to the left. After this, a new blue design appears and turns to the right; significantly, it is the only design to do so in this sequence. After, green lines rotate left, then a blue design, one most resembling a body, moves towards the audience and does not spiral. From inside the spiral comes a green object that again rotates left, turns to yellow, and then shoots back into the red eye. From the eye the words "directed by Alfred Hitchcock" appear.

The audience has just witnessed an assortment colors, and has just spent a few minutes watching seemingly pointless objects rotate towards him or herself. What can the audience take from this opening sequence? First, there is a definite sense of confusion, and even a “vertigo”-type feeling of nausea. But also, there is a sense of something, or someone, falling into an abyss. The extreme colors are bright
amongst the black nothingness—and present a sort of sudden life and death as the colors rotate and then disappear. These feelings remain present throughout the film as Scottie remains suspended over a great abyss, trying to conquer his vertigo as well as grab a hold of the scheme of which he is forced to be a part.

Directly after the opening credits, we are forced into a fast-paced rooftop chase. Scottie is suddenly dangling from the roof of a building, and makes the mistake of looking down at the ground. Modleski remarks on the film technique Hitchcock uses here to make the ground seem even farther away from Scottie: it is “the famous ‘vertigo shot,’ the track-out/ zoom-forward that so viscerally conveys Scottie’s feeling of ambivalence whenever he confronts the depths” (Modleski, 100). This is the first instance where Scottie is affected by his vertigo, and it does not help him when he watches a man falls off the roof to the depths below. In the first cut, we see the man falling behind Scottie, who glances to the ground. The second cut is of the man falling, and rotating, to the left, exactly as the objects do in the credit sequence. The third shot is of Scottie looking, watching the fall. The fourth shot is of the man on the ground, from Scottie’s point of view. What these series of shots establish, and also directly relate to the opening sequence, is that, as Charles Barr puts it, “throughout the film, [Scottie is] metaphorically suspended over a great abyss” (Barr, 32). The opening credits directly mirror that which occurs in this scene: the light of one man falling, circling to the left, is thus swallowed by an abyss, exactly like the swirling colors do as they disappear out of the screen to blackness.

When Scottie first sees Madeleine, at Ernie’s, once again there is a direct parallel to the bright colored lines in the opening sequence. There is a scan from
Scottie, as he looks over his shoulder at the room, The camera follows where he is looking, panning across the red room, and focusing on a woman in a green dress. The camera then slowly moves its way in towards her, zooming in on her green shape. This scene is almost identical to the opening credits, where the camera zooms in on a green object. Not only is her dress green, her car is green as well—which also acts as a set of lines that the camera, and Scottie, follows; the camera zooms in on the green movement. Both Barr and Modleski agree upon the trance the audience falls into as Scottie follows her in his car. Barr states that “the scene flows hypnotically” (Barr, 42), while Modleski more interestingly notes: “she leads him in a downward spiral” (Modleski, 93). The car chases are thus identical to the beginning: trancelike and spiraling.

In the sequence of Madeleine’s death, the audience sees a repetition in movement, in rotation, and in the “vertigo shot”. As Scottie tries to catch Madeleine running up the stairs, it is no shock that the direction he moves in is counter-clockwise; the rotation he makes is to the left. Scottie looks down again and reminisces on the feeling of terror of falling down into an abyss. In this first sequence, the audience does not see Madeleine fall (and cannot see the direction she turns as she falls, or the ploy she is involved in). All that we can see is her final position on the ground. Her posture is that of a turning spiral, almost identical to the shapes in the opening credits. Only later, when Judy reminisces, are we able to see just how she fell: and strangely it is to the right. Although at first this seems to break with the constant left spiral, there is one exception. In the opening credits,
there is one, and only one, shape that moves to the right. This death of the real Madeleine is therefore the only shape in the film to turn this way.

During Scottie’s dream sequence, the audience sees even more situations where the film mirrors its opening sequence, this time, presenting itself in Scottie’s subconscious. At first, the lights flash blue, then normal, then purple, and then repeat in this way. Flowers appear and then shift into cartoon-like manifestations of the flowers, much like the shapes in the opening credits. The flowers fly around a blackness and meld into Scottie walking. As the colors flash red, exactly like the opening sequence, he comes upon a graveyard and falls straight down into one of the graves. As he falls, there is no spinning body; only Scottie’s head is seen falling down a cartoon-like tunnel. The face seems to be coming closer to the audience, most like the opening sequence, where objects move closer to the camera. It is after this that Scottie is then falling onto the roof. At first he is a black figure, rotating to the left, but then the colors switch to an all white background. The changing background stresses the uncertainty of where he is, proving to be yet another example of an abyss. Modleski notes on this scene: “There is a cartoon-like image of Scottie’s silhouette falling first toward the red tiles of the mission roof and then into a blinding white light, an image of nothingness, of infinitude” (Modleski, 96). These reoccurring falling objects, as well as their bright colors, and the abyss-like holes, constantly remind the audience of these same actions that took place in the opening credits of the film.

The opening credits of North by Northwest set the tone for the remainder of the film, beginning with the corporate green background of the “Metro Goldyn

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Mayer” screen and ending with the lines of the work building. The lines that make up the corporate building are brought into the credits in a slanting fashion, which come down diagonally from the top right corner of the screen. The grid it creates then acts to hold, as well as contain, the names of the actors; “Cary Grant” is spelled between its lines, and so on. After its actors are listed, the lines blend into the lines of the rigid glass corporate building, and suddenly the glass reflects the cars driving along the road. Like a projection of a film, the corporate grid reflects the cars, the people, the names of the actors, as well as the world around it. The grid along this corporate building therefore reflects literally as well as figuratively, the human condition. The grid symbolizes how society has already created each of our own paths as well as our own fates (Millington). Just as the cars and taxis drive along the grid reflected in the windows in the first few scenes, the frame remains throughout the film, and the audience watches as Thornhill struggles to rid of his own grid.

The next scenes follow the bustling people coming and going on the streets of the city. However, since the audience has just been presented with a series of lines and a sense of inescapable paths, we cannot help but feel that each person’s movement, however driven it may be, has been constructed and predetermined for them. The people move like automatons on a grid. The people bustle, trying to jam into their correct place: out of buildings, into to the subway, on the crosswalk, and down the stairs. The paths taken have “reduced identity to the occupation of a niche within the maze” (Millington, 136). It is with this sense of placement in society that the audience looks at the remainder of the film.
The grid makes its physical manifestations constantly throughout the film: on the paneled walls, the tables, the windows, and so on. As the film moves from the Oak room and then to the Townsend home, both spaces are paneled in the same grid like design. The grid shows that there is no escape from Thornhill’s destiny; it has already been predetermined. Thornhill’s first space he occupies without panels on the walls is in the library of the Townsend mansion, where he has been kidnapped. The room is oval, and the camera films the three men, circling each other, testing each other below. The high camera angle belittles them and shows that, in fact, they have no control. Millington observes this high view is a representation of the CIA’s control over Thornhill’s future: “the possession of the high angle is linked to the exercise of power” (Millington, 137). Even when Thornhill tries to escape, drunkenly driving the car, and is arrested, yet again he is taken to a wooden paneled room (a court room). Thornhill is unable to escape from the paneled walls of the grid presented in the opening credits. Like a pawn in the CIA’s chess game, he is unable to make his own moves.

We are then transported to a room without a panel design on its walls—to a meeting room for the CIA. There is a grid design on the table, and papers lay upon it, papers that no doubt shape the lives of other people. Interestingly, this is put here, showing that the grid is literally created by their own hands. After refusing to aid Thornhill, the professor stands up and walks to the window, yet another grid, which looks out onto the Capitol Building. The fate of people and even the government is thus in the hands of this agency, who mercilessly create the world’s grid (the only other grid in the room is that of a globe—signifying their worldwide power).
Pomerance observes: “Roger represents not only a roué’s personality but the dominant economic class, the force behind the economic logic of daily life in consumer capitalism. Though he is charming, to be sure, he is immensely powerful, but national security is more powerful still” (Pomerance, 32). The audience knows that for Thornhill to escape from his unfortunate grid, he must come in contact with the CIA.

Thornhill does not realize the necessity of escaping his grid until he finds himself faced with death, an airplane trying to run him over in an open field. After his revelation, the grid drastically removes itself from the film, as if Thornhill finally chooses to take control of his fate. In the next room Thornhill finds himself in, Eve’s hotel room, there are no grids on the walls. There is only the remnant of the line pattern on the pillows and the windows. And by the time Thornhill reaches the Shaw and Oppenheim Galleries, there is no grid. The professor comes to claim him, signifying Thornhill’s success in grabbing the attention of the CIA and his official escape from the grid, from his path set upon him at the very opening credits. The forest where Eve and Thornhill reunite is thus perfect: it is roomless, and also gridless; from this point on, the two create their own destiny, their own new frame to live upon. The opening credits establish a supposedly inescapable grid; the audience watches as the characters escape from their predetermined path and create their own.

While the previous two films establish main thematic movements as well as grids for the remainder of the film, Psycho’s opening credit sequence is not followed through, but rather—broken down. Psycho begins with the “Paramount” logo,
interestedly split and diced; the film then moves onto a myriad of text, these diced as well. The white empty screen is immediately broken by a series of black lines, and these cut in from the left and the right. Next, the word “Psycho” is shown, which immediately splits as well and moves back and forth, wiggling in sharp motions. Names such as “Vera Miles” and “Anthony Perkins” cut in sharply and then split apart. The lines provide order in a jarring manner. However, the lines also work to expose what is underneath, supplying both knowledge as well as order. At one point Janet Leigh’s name is hidden by the lines and is not shown until the lines orderly move away and expose the words beneath it. Most importantly, there is no circle in the opening sequence (besides, of course, curves in the letters of people’s names); there is nothing that interrupts the straight lines.

The next scene begins in Arizona, where the name, date, and place is orderly stated; nothing has interrupted the order in this scene. The camera swoops across perfectly arranged buildings, zooms into a rectangular window and peeks into a room, filled with more orderly furniture. Yet, the orderly lines are immediately threatened: although the bedpost has straight lines, Melanie’s head, a circular shape, breaks the completion of the full headboard. And although the couple stands in front of the windows, where the blinds give a horizontal balanced background, once again, their heads break the perfect lines. The audience immediately is conscious of the impossibility of a perfectly balanced world. And if that was not enough to satisfy—the circular fan in the corner of the screen ominously hovers above the couple, reminding us all of the incapability in maintaining order.
It is from this point that the observer begins to see not only the straight lines, but the circles that threaten the lines. As Marion steals the money and runs off with it, Wood expresses “with her we lose all power of rational control, and discover how easily a ‘normal’ person can lapse into a condition usually associated with neurosis” (Wood, 145). This is true: as an audience, we are amazed that someone, presumably like us, can steal money and do it so quickly. We watch to see how she escapes, but even more so, what this does to her mind and her conscious. It is clear that whatever signs of order established in the opening credits are slowly but surely being pushed aside; like a “slowly spreading stain” (Toles, 159), more and more of these circular themes interrupt the order Marion had once seen.

Looking extremely close at the infamous shower scene, one may observe how the circular pattern finally wins victory over the ordered lines. When Marion enters the shower, we note the systematic tiles on the walls as well as the systematic movements of the water hitting Marion. It is only the showerhead, circular at the top left screen, which proves to be any sort of circular threat to the ordered lines. However, there is a point of view shot right at the showerhead, a tip from Hitchcock that there is something ominous about the scene; something unusual is about to occur. Norman enters the room, and after a few shots, we see the chaotic “O” of Marion’s mouth when she screams. After a series of cuts as Norman stabs Marion repeatedly, Hitchcock films Marion’s hand sliding down the tiles, grasping for not only an edge, but presumably, the order of the world she had known before. Again, she reaches for order, this time it is the shower curtain, and fails; she falls onto the floor of the bathroom. Hitchcock films a shot of the drain sucking in the bloody
water: the realm of disorder has won. Wood observes how we as an audience see
“the round hole of the drain leading to an apparently bottomless darkness, the
potentialities for horror that lie in the depths of us all” (Wood, 149) and are
frightened by it. Williams notes that the drain is an “abyss” (Williams, 171). Even
further unsettling, as the water drains into the darkness, Hitchcock then cuts to a
close-up of Marion’s eye, and pans back, tilting his camera to the left, mimicking the
path of the draining water. In doing so, the circling out from the drain to the eye is
as if chaos is permeating from every hole.

The circles do not stop there; they merely continue to push out the remaining
orderly lines. During the course of the film, Hitchcock films a few shots of the Bates’
house from below, by the Motel. Each time the shot occurs, more and more of the
Bates Motel is pushed aside (along with the lines of the siding of the Bates Motel).
While more and more of the house, of the chaotic hole, is shown, less and less of the
systematic hotel makes it into the shot. The circles present begin escalating: the eye
of Norman watching Marion undress, then the toilet, the drain in the bathtub and in
the sink, and also with the pail and the sinking car (Toles). Hitchcock adds more and
more of these circular objects into the film as it progresses, showing the audience a
visual manifestation as we delve deeper and deeper into the psyche of Norman, and
ourselves as well.

Finally, the detective, Sam, and Marion’s sister enter the chaos in attempts to
find the answer, which undoubtedly is a kind of order in itself. The detective enters
the house and tries to hold onto the known: he holds the orderly staircase, takes
comfort in the straight lines of the doors as well as the curtains on the doors. When

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he fails, Marion's sister advances into the house; Hitchcock emphasizes the sister's entry to the house as she grabs the circular doorknob. It is as if she is entering the door to madness. When she reaches the basement, although there are straight brick walls, there is a hanging circular light bulb, illuminating the interruption of order—Norman's dead mother sitting on a chair. Immediately, we are horrified by her empty eye sockets, which are sickening circles in themselves. The mind cannot rid of that chaotic disturbing image and Hitchcock uses this shot again, when he superimposes a shot of the dead mother over Norman's face; a certain sign that whatever order was established in the beginning of the film is now gone and taken by madness.

Hitchcock's progression through these three films in his use of lines shows the ability a director has in creating a system and then either continuing with it or ridding of it completely. *Vertigo* is a perfect example of how its opening sequence, its lines, colors, and movements, was created to directly mirror what occurs in the remainder of the film. In Hitchcock's next film, *North by Northwest*, he challenges the possibility for its characters to change the theme of the opening sequence; can its characters defy the grid set upon them? By using a grid, the idea is a much more literal one; as Thornhill hopes to escape from his fate, Hitchcock also tests how much the film can stray from its opening titles. Thornhill, as well as Hitchcock, does not escape the grid necessarily, but is at least able to create a new one. *Psycho* is Hitchcock's final film to utilize lines in a dominant way, and he works to completely break down the opening. The circle, an object not present in the opening credits, destroys the entire orderly system. The films *Vertigo, North by Northwest*, and

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Overall, this is a very good paper. It has taken an interesting approach to the three films, and follows through by tracing the repeated lines, grids, and circles of the pattern through the various films. It provides ample evidence to back up its claims about the continuities and changes within Hitchcock’s own oeuvre. And ultimately I am convinced by its analysis of the way these formal patterns play out over the course of the movies. And, to top it off, it is very well written, so it is a pleasure to read.

That said, there are two issues facing this paper as written. The first is the assumption on the paper’s part of a clear trajectory in AH’s thinking; that AH is deliberately creating and then breaking down a visual pattern through these films. I suspect that the paper is correct about this, but alas it is something that we will never be able fully to prove, since AH was notoriously elusive on the subject of his process. He would tell his audience things, but it was never clear if he was serious, or if he could be trusted. An easier way to make the argument would be to claim that 1) the movies do this and 2) this may represent a deliberate strategy on AH’s part. It may sound like rhetorical hairsplitting (because let’s be honest, it is). But it is a way of masking the fact that we can’t ever be totally sure of his intention.

The second challenge facing the paper is its dependence on the secondary materials we read in class. The paper does an excellent job of citing Modleski, Wood, Barr, and so on; however, the result is that it reads as if many of the ideas presented
in the paper “belong” to other sources than yourself. Some of this is inevitable when we choose to write on topics that have been heavily considered by others.

Regardless, the paper does an admirable job of bringing these varied details together into a coherent argument. But for future reference you should keep in mind that you want to be developing your own ideas as much as working off of the ideas of others.

    Overall, very good work.

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Works Cited


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