Villains, victims, and virgins: Asexuality in the films of Alfred Hitchcock

Erick Burdock
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/16323
Villains, victims, and virgins: Asexuality in the films of Alfred Hitchcock

by

Erick Burdock

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Program of Study Committee:
Justin Remes, Major Professor
Matthew Sivils
Geoff Sauer
David Zimmerman

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2018

Copyright © Erick Burdock, 2018. All rights reserved.
DEDICATION

To my mother
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>MARKED WOMAN: THE CLINICAL CASE OF <em>MARNIE</em></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A DANDY MASQUERADE: HOLLYWOOD CENSORSHIP IN <em>ROPE</em></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>WHORIFYING SECRETS AND NARRATIVE PURGATORY IN <em>PSYCHO</em></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>BIBLIOGRAPHY</strong></td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>APPENDIX A: FILMS DISCUSSED IN THIS THESIS</strong></td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL FILMS RELEVANT TO AN ANALYSIS OF ASEXUALITY</strong></td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The cinema of Hollywood is a cinema of exclusion, reduction, and denial, a cinema of repression. Consequently we should not only consider what is shown, but also that which is not shown. There is always something behind that which is being represented which is not represented. And it is exactly that that is most interesting to consider.

—Martin Arnold

This epigraph, from an interview with avant-garde filmmaker Martin Arnold, could allude to any number of profound absences in classic Hollywood cinema, an era where just about anything that was not explicitly white, heterosexual, and unequivocally proper struggled to materialize on the silver screen. Queer characters, among other minorities, hid behind a lugubrious veneer that manufactured and subsequently reinforced harmful stereotypes, some that still persist today. In this thesis, I seek to investigate a largely overlooked and ignored facet of queer identity—asexuality—and its representation in the films of the venerable Alfred Hitchcock. Arnold’s statement seems specially suited for this subject, since representations of asexuality can result by masking homosexuality and is often illustrated as an identity based on absence, lack, and repression. Despite its designation as the “invisible” orientation, asexuality nevertheless pervades Western culture, and has so for many, many years.¹ Popular literary figures such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s character Sherlock Holmes, Bob

---

Manana and John L. Goldwater’s Jughead (from the *Archie* comics), and even Alfred Hitchcock’s *Marnie* help establish precedents for asexual characters.

In this thesis, I use the definition provided by The Asexual Visibility & Education Network (AVEN), which describes an asexual as “someone who does not experience sexual attraction.” This rather simple definition defies countless assumptions and attitudes about asexuality that are analyzed and referenced in the proceeding chapters. Many films from this time period promote the notion that asexual figures lack a fundamental component to the human experience. These figures are often pathologized and portrayed as unnatural villains or sexually frigid women who cannot reconcile their differences from the established norm, which culminates in their disaffected alienation despite any attempts at assimilation. AVEN also clarifies that, while asexual people lack the ability to feel sexual attraction, they may still feel other kinds of attraction and arousal. Often confused for or portrayed as celibacy or Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (coincidentally, a predominately female ailment), media portrayals tend to regard asexuality as an identity made up of negatives and absences, articulated as a condition caused by repressed trauma, female sexual frigidity, or queer anguish. Therefore, while asexuality and celibacy are not synonymous, their portrayals in cinema suggest otherwise. Benjamin Kahan puts this argument to bed, writing that while “celibacy exceeds the boundaries of the hetero/homo binary, requiring a rethinking of sexual categories and the concept of sex as such ... asexuality ...”

---

baffles, dodges, and unthreads the hegemony of hetero- and homosexuality.” While both celibacy and asexuality push back against the constraints of heteronormativity, Kahan argues that the latter stands to truly challenge preconceived conceptions of what constitutes a traditional relationship, sexual or otherwise. These comparisons between celibacy and asexuality make a queerly asexual analysis difficult, since the characters and films with this theme generally provide multivalent possibilities, meaning that explicit asexuality is almost never intentional, but instead a byproduct of censorship, homophobia, misogyny, or psychopathology. For example, the eponymous “frigid blonde” in Hitchcock’s Marnie (1964) adamantly expresses her aversion to physical intimacy and male authority, but Hitchcock implies that this aversion stems from a traumatic childhood experience. Her husband attempts to “cure” her frigidity by raping her and, while scholars have discussed the unequivocal sexist and queer themes implicit in this film, the asexual possibility remains profoundly absent from the published literature.

A consequence of this newly visible sexuality, its connection to celibacy, and a definition based on negatives and absences means that finding unambiguous representations of asexuality is not only difficult, but unlikely. As a result, our analysis relies on the examination of what Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper coin as asexual “resonances,” writing:

we are attuned less to self-identified asexual figures than to asexual “resonances”—or traces, touches, instances—allowing us to search for asexuality in unexpected places. Such a queer broadening of what can “count” as asexuality, especially historically speaking, creates space for unorthodox and unpredictable understandings and manifestations of asexuality. Through a queerly asexual

reading strategy and an attention to the touches, instances, moments, and resonances, we begin to assemble an asexual archive that can accommodate the ephemeral and elusive fragments of asexuality that our methods uncover.\textsuperscript{4}

One of the overarching objectives of this thesis is to contribute academic discourse and analysis on literary works that compile potential asexual artifacts for a multivalent archive. Moreover, Przybylo and Cooper discuss the inherent challenges of creating such a “queerly asexual” archive.\textsuperscript{5} Such an examination invites inquiries into very fundamental, but hard-hitting issues that challenge hegemonic masculinity, sexual essentialism, gender performativity, and queer theory. Przybylo and Cooper introduce this undertaking by arguing that, currently, asexuality is generally discussed in medical communities that work to prove and then examine its existence. As a result, psychologists such as Anthony Bogaert only refer to “true asexuality,” which is defined by its total adherence to celibacy, with the former defined as “not a choice” and the latter “as choice.” Przybylo and Cooper write that such an approach “does not account for the complex ways in which sexual identity, practice, and experience are never strictly ‘not a choice’ but rather made possible by specific sociocultural discursive environments,” and this rigidity prevents any possibility of producing a queerly asexual archive.\textsuperscript{6} The archiving that Przybylo and Cooper desire requires careful consideration and pliable interpretations. For instance, author George Bernard Shaw—or even his character Vivie Warren from his play, \textit{Mrs. Warren’s Profession} (1902)—could


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 301.
potentially be categorized as asexual but, while it would be difficult to deem them as such, we still stand to learn something from examining these themes. Elizabeth Hanson also notes that there are an abundance of reasons for abstaining from sex, and while the silences of past eras provide their own kind of commentary, it also restricts factual, definitional certainty; in some cases, scholars can only make educated guesses, which becomes increasingly complicated when applying modern ideologies of concepts like asexuality onto contexts without access to that term in the same way. However, the philosophical permutations surrounding figures like Shaw and Vivie and their potential lack of sexual attraction allows the inquisitive examiner to complicate the sexual binary initially proposed by psychiatrists Alfred Kinsey and Wardell Pomeroy. An asexual resonance—a possibility, a trace, a certain shade of character—makes Shaw a figure through which we may examine this theme. Similarly, Przybylo and Cooper discuss “art nun” Agnes Martin in their article to show how fluid interpretations of asexuality can yield particular insights, and also how these figures become sexualized and eroticized in spite of their asexual dispositions, to the effect of “closet[ing] asexuality within queer contexts.”

Hanson also warns against the “evidentiary problems and dangers of anachronism that reading for asexual identity would present,” and while I agree that potential concerns arise when applying a modern ideology to older artifacts, this issue


pervades historicist queer theory in general, not only asexuality.9 Reverse discourse is popularly used in queer studies to make previously inaccessible works open to further scrutiny and scholarship, and given asexuality's inherent queerness, it becomes yet another lens through which we can derive meaning. Nathan Smith writes that “queerness allows us to uncover queer meanings in cinema or literature that have otherwise been ignored because of the history of Hollywood denying positive or realistic depictions of homosexuality in cinema.”10 Also indicated by Smith, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Tendencies (1993), she argues that queerness transcends hetero-, homo-, and bisexual identities, thus encouraging an “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances.”11 Asexuality, as it so happens, fits into this description of “queer.” Hanson’s supposition suggests that asexuality has only recently become an identifiable characteristic of human experience, but the way in which we understand homosexuality today also differs from its representations in the past. Just because we did not have the vocabulary to describe these different identities does not mean that they did not exist, in various forms, throughout history. Przybylo and Cooper


argue that wherever there is queerness, asexuality dwells as well. It may not be immediately apparent or discernible but, like Rebecca’s phantasmic presence in *Rebecca* (1940) or David Kentley’s concealed corpse in *Rope* (1948), just because we cannot see these figures does not mean they are not there—or that we cannot learn something from their presence.

In this thesis, I have chosen to analyze Alfred Hitchcock’s films because of their acclaim, infamy, and the sheer amount of queer scholarship that already exists about them. His films have been regarded as a collection of the most brilliant—and polarizing—creations in cinematic history, and although attitudes differ on how hateful Hitchcock was toward his queer characters, these cultural artifacts act as apt subjects to undertake a queerly asexual analysis. Curious and curioser, even Hitchcock himself harbors an asexual resonance. When discussing *Marnie*’s screenplay with *Psycho*’s (1960) screenwriter, Joseph Stefano, Hitchcock admitted that he was celibate, despite his reputed attraction—or fixation—with women and sexuality. I have found no corroborating or additional information on this topic in my research, and its appearance is purely anecdotal in Tony Moral’s book. In addition, this claim also disputes actress Tippi Hedren’s allegation that Hitchcock sexually assaulted her during the filming of

---

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Master of Suspense deserves consideration for a queerly asexual archiving. Again, while celibacy does not denote asexuality, the lack of visibility for this sexual identity means that gray areas abound around these resonances. Furthermore, the movies Hitchcock made provide compelling evidence that he understood the nuance of queer sexuality, as we shall soon see.

In the first chapter, I analyze Hitchcock’s most straightforward representation of asexuality. In Marnie, the eponymous character undergoes sexual blackmail, rape, and amateur psychotherapy in a misguided attempt to cure her aversion to physical intimacy. I initially identify Marnie’s sexualization and how sexuality looms throughout the film like a voracious, voyeuristic specter. Her presumed virginity, and its eventual loss, becomes a narrative ploy that propels the film towards its melodramatic climax. This chapter primarily focuses on the ambivalent character Mark and his various methods to “fix” Marnie. These methods derive from destructive stereotypes and psychological “solutions” for queer sexuality, which run the gamut from heterosexual sex to aversion therapy. I discover that, while this film is appropriate for the asexual archiving that Przybylo and Cooper desire, it also reinforces the argument that Hanson makes about the necessity for heteronormative desire in facilitating a traditional narrative structure. We employ Hanson’s logic to discover Marnie’s sexual secret, which no one—not even Mark—could ever hope to uncover but, in doing so, emphasize the filmic pattern of queer characters, even asexuals, being described and portrayed as purely sexual creatures.

---

The second chapter dissects the ambivalent *Rope*, which exploits the dandy persona popularized by the flamboyant Oscar Wilde as a means to critique sexual essentialism and compulsive masculinity. I begin by examining the dandy persona’s inception and its eventual transformation around the turn of the 20th century; this perversion transformed the persona into a façade that symbolized queer secrets, and Russo argues that Hollywood exploited the dandy as a visual signifier for homosexuality. As articulations of queer characters became increasingly muted, the dandy also became essentially asexual. This notion sees its most coherent expression in Brandon, who inhabits the dispositions of the dandy while opposing both his hetero- and homosexual counterparts. Hitchcock and Hollywood censorship impose an impotence on Brandon that unlocks asexual resonances once hidden; these resonances emphasize Phillip’s homosexuality, as well as themes that range from gender performativity to virility to amorality. As a result, queer characters end up policing themselves and one another, and the film ends in a reciprocal, duplicitous silence that condemns a bigoted society more so than the movie’s murderers.

Finally, the third chapter focuses on *Psycho* (1960) and a trope that pits a hypersexualized character against a desexualized character, which simultaneously condones and condemns the values each character epitomizes. I identify and analyze what I dub the *sexual polarization hypothesis*, using Sarah Sinwell’s argument about American cinema’s tendency to pathologize asexuality by accentuating its otherness. Lila and Marion Crane act as Hitchcock’s most actualized examples of sexual polarization. However, a thoughtful comparison reveals Lila’s complete lack of

characterization in stark contrast to her sister’s. Dependent completely on Marion for narrative conflict and emotional depth, scholars tend to disregard Lila as a result. Nevertheless, her depiction as a queer character is remarkably positive, even if it still perpetuates the notion that sexuality is the preeminent feature of human identity.

This thesis concludes by looking towards the future and how an asexual analysis can cultivate its own particular wisdoms, ones that complicate our understanding of human sexuality. Only in the last few years have the humanities appropriated asexuality and begun the tireless task of applying its ideologies to queer theory. This thesis acts as one of these initial analyses and, therefore, the research runs the gamut from queer theory to the Hollywood Production Code to Alfred Hitchcock to corrective rape to Freudian psychoanalysis to gender performativity. The corresponding list of literary scholars includes such influential authors as Lee Edelman, Richard Allen, Tania Modleski, Robin Wood, and Alexander Doty. I build upon their invaluable insights by examining the conspicuous void of asexual representation in film, using Alfred Hitchcock—arguably the most iconic director of all time—and his filmography as a corpus with which to help create a canon of asexual literature, one that pulls back that veneer and exposes what was there all along.
CHAPTER 2

MARKED WOMAN: THE CLINICAL CASE OF MARNIE

“I’ve never been very keen on women who hang their sex round their neck like baubles. I think it should be discovered.”

— Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964) opens with a handbag. Tucked under her left arm, a woman clutches “a fat purse, a labial pouch in Provocation Yellow” close to her (see fig. 1). We hear the occasional click-clack of high heels meeting concrete, and as the woman walks away from the camera, we discover a deserted train station. She is dressed in a severe, dark dress suit that matches her similarly severe brunette wig. The woman continues walking until she seems small compared to the structures surrounding her. She sets down her suitcase and stops, waiting. This initial scene encapsulates the entirety of *Marnie’s* plot in a thirty-second vignette. Hitchcock’s voyeuristic camerawork makes it quite clear that Marnie has a secret—a sexual secret—that viewers want to uncover; they wish to know what she conceals in that canary yellow handbag. Correspondingly, before the audience knows her name, Marnie becomes a character defined completely by her sexuality, and this scene determines Marnie’s fate long before the film’s conclusion, a fate she has no power to influence. She can only stand and wait.

1. This epigraph as well as the titles for this chapter are attributed to Hitchcock, but their original sources are unknown or unclear.

Film scholar Vito Russo’s flawed but foundational text on queer representation in American cinema, *The Celluloid Closet* (1987), only ever alludes to asexual characters as neutered homosexuals. He describes these asexuals as a trope devised to appease and entertain the masses while providing them with a clear visual distinction between “normal” heterosexuals and homosexuals; audiences could enjoy the campy gayness of these harmless, sissified characters without offending their own values. These “sissy” male characters dominated American cinema until they were deemed subversive in the 1940s, but they were always male. At no point does Russo discuss a similar sterilization of queer females. Male asexuality in the Hitchcock film canon will be explored in a subsequent chapter, but it is worth noting that Russo and other film scholars often assume that women are unwilling to consummate a relationship because they are either repressed or empowered; they use their sexuality as a means to an end. The asexual

---

resonances harbored by these females, however, furnish distinctive and divergent insights, ones that help contextualize depictions of gender and sexuality in 1960s Hollywood. I argue that the film *Marnie*—and especially the eponymous character—conceal asexual resonances that create another lens through which we can understand Hitchcock’s oeuvre and hegemonic heteronormativity’s tendency to pathologize queer characters. In order to support this argument, we will first summarize the film, then use previous scholarship to identify its inherent asexual aspects, and, finally, focus on Marnie’s rape and subsequent commitment by the equivocal Mark.

“Suspense is like a woman. The more left to the imagination, the more the excitement.”

Adapted from Winston Graham’s novel of the same name, *Marnie* stalks the morally ambivalent protagonist, played by Tippi Hedren, who disguises herself and seduces employers before robbing them. She gets more than she bargained for with her next mark, the debonair but down-to-earth Mark Rutland, played by Sean Connery. Unlike her previous victims, when Mark discovers her deception, he blackmails Marnie into marrying him. Mark is also in for a surprise of his own when on their honeymoon cruise Marnie reveals her revulsion for sex. Despite his promise to respect Marnie’s aversion to intimacy, Mark rapes her and Marnie subsequently attempts to drown

4. Incidentally, Amber Witsenburg published an article this last year titled “You Freud, Me Jane? The Representation of Trauma and Sexuality in Hitchcock’s *Marnie*” that also dissects the asexual components within *Marnie*. Her argument fixates on the psychoanalytical framework that makes an asexual conceptualization possible, so while my own argument shares similarities with Witsenburg’s, the moments where they diverge, differ, or offer further explication provide compelling commentary. In addition, the probability that two different authors on different sides of the world find themselves discussing the same film and subject means that asexuality is now, more than ever, a topic that requires thoughtful critique.
herself. Mark manages to revive Marnie, but when they return home he continues his campaign of amateur psychoanalysis. In a second attempt at suicide, Marnie runs her horse into a brick fence, but survives. Her horse, however, is critically wounded and, as an act of mercy, Marnie shoots him. Visibly distraught, Marnie flees the mansion and attempts to rob Mark again. Mark finds her and, despite goading her into taking the money, Marnie discovers she is physically incapable of doing so, and becomes even more distant and unreachable. In the final moments of the film, Mark takes a traumatized Marnie back to her mother and demands that she divulge what happened to her daughter that precipitated her psychosis. Bernice Edgar, played by Louise Latham, reveals that she was a prostitute. One night during a thunderstorm, a client attempted to comfort a scared Marnie. Bernice mistook his behavior as sinister and attacked him. Believing the man was attacking her mother, Marnie intervened, grabbing a fireplace poker and killing him. Bernice’s shocking disclosure, far from comforting Marnie, causes her to become more catatonic. She and Mark leave, and Marnie remarks that she would rather stay with Mark than go to jail. The bereft newlyweds drive away to the creepy chanting of neighborhood girls singing about the troubled lady with the alligator purse, an image that opens the film.

We can identify Marnie as an appropriate artifact through which we can compile an asexual archive by closely examining the eponymous character. Not only does she physically express revulsion whenever touched by a man, but she also explicitly states: “I can't stand it! I'll die! If you touch me again I'll die! ... I cannot bear to be handled!” When Mark doubts her conviction, because she has appeared affectionate before, Marnie tells him that she “thought she could stand it if [she] had to” and that she has
always felt this way. He continues to repudiate her confession, to which she replies that when a woman does not wish to have sex with a man, “bingo, you’re a candidate for the funny farm.” These exchanges alone prime Marnie for a queer reading with an asexual spin, since Marnie clearly regards sex in a nonheteronormative manner. In addition, Ela Przybylo presents a popular trope in literature that pathologizes queer desire, or lack thereof, and Hitchcock uses this trope to “explain” Marnie’s sex aversion. Whether or not Marnie was “born” asexual or became that way as a result of her psychosexual trauma only matters insofar as the latter suggests the possibility of a “cure,” the same way in which other queer characters in films either died or “returned” to heterosexual society. Such examples include Rosa Klebb in From Russia with Love (1963) and the not-so-subtle Pussy Galore in Goldfinger (1964), films wherein “cartoon dykes are alternatively killed and cured in the grand tradition of heterosexual solutions.” Incidentally, Sean Connery appeared in both of these films as well, and in that same year, Robert Rossen directed Lilith (1964), a film in which Warren Beatty “sets straight” Lilith’s supposed lesbian psychosis through heterosexual sex. Clearly, the 1960s was a period in which Western society questioned heteronormative sexuality, but these films indicate that censors and mainstream attitudes overpowered serious inquisitions. Marnie acts as yet another character in this tradition who fights back against the sexual status quo, only to lose a fight she had no chance to win.


7. Ibid., 157.
The film’s narrative hinges on Marnie’s virginity, which remains a constant focus and fixation for Mark as well as the audience, and both parties anticipate her eventual deflowering in order to discover what she hides in the proverbial purse. As Michele Piso posits, “at the center of Marnie is the virginal hymen, ‘tainted with vice,’ … ‘yet sacred, between desire and fulfillment.’”

8. The threat of sexuality stalks Marnie throughout the film, looming in every scene with bated breath. Mark becomes a physical manifestation of this ever-present sexual threat that penetrates Marnie. Hitchcock himself reiterates this notion in his notorious interview with François Truffaut, in which he describes Mark as harboring a fetish for felons. He says that Mark lusts for Marnie because of, not in spite of, her lawless transgressions, but this fetishism becomes blurred in translation from book to film: if Hitchcock were to show Mark’s explicit perversion, he would have “to put it bluntly, … have Sean Connery catching the girl robbing the safe and show that he felt like jumping at her and raping her on the spot.”

9. We will return to Mark and the equivocal rape later in this chapter, but this quote demonstrates the depth of Marnie’s oppression; even her creator discusses her as an object of sexual gratification.

We can assert with almost complete certainty that Hitchcock—or even Graham—did not intend for the character of Marnie to be asexual in the way we understand asexuality today. Her pathology and past trauma indicate that her inability to consummate a relationship with a partner stems from Freudian theories about


internalized repression. Nevertheless, asexual resonances still abound, and—in Marnie’s particular case—they deserve thoughtful consideration. Modleski responds to the issue of authorial intention by suggesting that we can “implicitly challenge and decenter directorial authority by considering Hitchcock’s work as the expression of cultural attitudes and practices existing to some extent outside the artist’s control.”

Correspondingly, we can appreciate the ways that attitudes and scholarship surrounding Hitchcock’s films have transformed over time, inviting diverse forms of discourse that can be dissected and re-articulated. Affecting an asexual reading allows for a glimpse into the society that spawned Marnie, a society that we already know has attempted to erase and demonize queer identities and relationships in film, instead reinforcing essentialist normativity, with mixed results. Much of my main argument focuses on the way in which these “cultural attitudes and practices” influenced the film’s creation and its queerly asexual interpretation. Whether or not Hitchcock intended Marnie to be asexual or to reinforce compulsive heterosexuality, these themes appear in the film regardless, and we can apply queer theory to analyze them. In order to make Marnie an archivable artifact for asexuality, this chapter will investigate the following issues within the film: Hitchcock’s changes when adapting the original novel into film,


pathologization of queer-identified characters, corrective rape as a cure for queerness, and how “heteronarratives” problematize an asexual analysis.

Robert Samuels contends that Marnie’s fear of the color red—particularly when paired with white—symbolizes her “own feminine fluids,” both through menstruation and the myth of breaking the hymen, presumably through sexual intercourse. This fear could stem from any number of concerns, including lesbianism, but Marnie’s portrayal proves that she fears and loathes the prospect of sex entirely, not just with men.

Correspondingly, an asexual resonance can be attributed to this fear. Samuels alludes to this asexual possibility in his book about Hitchcock, writing:

_We do not know in the film if Marnie is a heterosexual woman who hates men, or if is she [sic] a lesbian that prefers women, or if she identifies with being a man who loves women, or a bisexual who desires everyone or no one [emphasis added]. The multiplicity of her possible sexual desires is matched by the endless varieties of Hitchcock’s own subjective positions._

Clearly, Marnie is a character that has fascinated scholars and filmgoers since her film’s release, and her enigmatic portrayal accounts for countless interpretations. I will argue, however, that asexuality both complements and complicates previous investigations.

Nathan Smith reviews the queer facets of “Hitchcock’s [arguably] last great work,” in a recent publication about the film, entitled “The Blonde Who Knew Too Much: Revisiting _Marnie_.” Smith argues that “by revising films like _Marnie_, and re-prioritising


their chain of meanings, we can try to uncover hidden queer meanings otherwise overlooked or concealed in previous interpretations.” Until now, the vast majority of academic involvement in the sexual politics of Marnie frames the character’s revulsion of sex by pathologizing it; in other words, once Marnie discovers the trauma that resulted in her condition, she can begin to repair her relationships by normalizing her behavior. This claim mirrors popular psychological stereotypes of the 1960s, but especially the notion that queer deviancy—including sex-repulsion or asexuality—results from past traumatization. Initially, the uninquisitive viewer might well assume that, at the end of the film, Marnie can now happily return to the Rutland mansion and become the perfect wife Rebecca only pretended to be. This notion vaguely resembles the ending of the film adaptation of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1958), in which Maggie and Brick go upstairs to make a baby after confronting Brick’s psychological hang-ups. Yet Marnie’s ending—in popular Hitchcock fashion—subverts such a vapid assumption.

This assumption withers when filtered by asexual resonances and eventually dies. We continue our examination by looking at the revisions Hitchcock made to the original novel. Hitchcock is well known for reconstituting and revising the source material for his films so that, in some cases, they only vaguely resemble the original


17. Michael Billington, “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Tennessee William’s Southern Discomfort,” The Guardian, September 30, 2012, accessed March 25, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/sep/30/cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof. Incidentally, the original script of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is provocatively queer, as it suggests that Brick had a homosexual relationship with his friend, Skipper. Tennessee Williams reportedly disliked the film revisions so much that, at a queue for the film, he warned filmgoers: "This movie will set the industry back 50 years. Go home!"
stories.\textsuperscript{18} For instance, Hitchcock alters just about everything in his adaptation of Daphne du Maurier’s short story, \textit{The Birds} (1952), leaving only the setting and those pesky, antagonistic birds. The revisions he made to \textit{Marnie} in particular emphasize the asexual possibility within the film, unintentional or not, which help us situate this artifact in a queer archive. For instance, besides Mark, Hitchcock removed all of the principal and secondary male characters; Mark inherits various aspects of these characters, which include his lustful cousin, Terry, and the psychiatrist, Roman. Strutt remains as an exception, but his involvement in the story never extends beyond plot development. While, on the one hand, it makes sense to simplify plot points and characters in order to translate a novel into film, these revisions also create caricatures of masculinity and femininity. Hitchcock critiqued these themes throughout the years, with such examples including the unnamed woman wearing a man’s suit from \textit{Suspicion} (1941) and Janet from \textit{Rope} (1948). I believe Hitchcock intentionally portrayed Mark as he did for this same reason, since the exclusion of these characters emphasizes him as the sole manifestation of masculinity and heteropatriarchy within \textit{Marnie}’s world. In addition, Hitchcock added the character of Lil Mainwaring (played by Diane Baker), Mark’s sister-in-law, who not only contrasts Marnie but also offers her a compelling sexual alternative.

Almost every line of Lil’s dialogue drips with queer innuendo. She sexualizes situations in direct contrast to Marnie’s frigidity throughout the film. When she first meets Marnie, Lil remarks to Mark “who’s the dish?” and every subsequent scene in which these women appear telegraphs an ambiguous yet oddly tender treatment of

lesbian desire. For instance, in the scene after Lil awakens Marnie from her nightmare, she reminds Mark that it is his responsibility to warm his wife up, the implication being that Lil would volunteer otherwise. She also offers assistance to Marnie after Forio fatally injures himself, but Marnie categorically rejects Lil and all of her well-meaning advances, implicitly reinforcing Marnie’s asexuality. In addition, while neither inherently villainous nor virtuous—as many of Hitchcock’s morally ambivalent characters are—an audience can infer that Lil acts as both competition and foil for Mark’s conquest of Marnie. Unfortunately, despite Hitchcock’s “marvelous and touching picture of female sexuality” in the guise of Lil, she has no happy ending, no ending at all, in fact, and the prospect of Marnie choosing Lil seems silly, even insipid, from an asexual perspective.19 Similar to Midge’s infatuation with Scotty in *Vertigo* (1958), Lil stands about as much of a chance of winning Marnie as Midge stands to win Scottie, and both of these characters subsequently disappear from their respective films once Hitchcock no longer needs them to run narrative interference. Were she given more attention, Lil may be another queer character to analyze and appreciate, but as it stands, she does little more than contrast Marnie, at least for a queerly asexual reading. Nevertheless, Hitchcock’s revisions further alienate Marnie from other females and thereby strengthens Mark’s hold over her. Marnie begins the film alienated from society and ends it the same way.

In her article “Aliens and Asexuality: Media Representation, Queerness, and Asexual Visibility,” Sarah Sinwell argues that asexuality’s representation in modern media works to “(re)create the cultural constructions of normative sexuality by mapping asexuality onto non-normative bodies and identities” and, while Marnie’s

conventional, physical attractiveness defies this claim, Sinwell also contends that “mental disability (and pathology) are written onto the asexual and sexualized bodies as a means of constructing their (ab)normalities, thus reinforcing many of the same stereotypical associations of the asexual body with an othered, unfit, pathological body.” She defends her argument by analyzing the character Brian from the film adaptation of *Mysterious Skin* (2004), in which a traumatic event in his past acts as a means of “explaining his asexuality.” Marnie’s own situation some forty years earlier mirrors this same trope and shows how media still struggles to portray asexuality “outside of this traumatic and pathological context.” The distinction between hypoactive sexual desire disorder and asexuality accounts for a conceivable defense of these portrayals, but this othering of queer sexualities that Sinwell refers to also pinpoints a marked desire to normalize heterosexuality at the expense of queer identities.

For instance, Sinwell discusses an asexual trope that pairs an asexual character with a hypersexual character. She showcases the differences between Neil and Brian in *Mysterious Skin* to defend this claim, since both characters react differently following the same sexual trauma from their childhoods; Neil becomes a male prostitute with distinct fetishes while Brian distances himself from any sexual or romantic situations. Marnie and her mother, Bernice, also reflect this asexual trope, since Marnie’s frigidity contrasts her mother’s promiscuity. Incidentally, we see this trope playing out in *Mrs. Warren’s


21. Ibid., 170.
*Profession* (1902), too, where the mother and daughter depict shifting societal attitudes. However, as Sinwell proposes, we can also understand these portrayals through a queerly asexual lens, wherein the absence or excess of sexual desire is predominantly negative, destructive, and always in need of a cure. While these asexual characters seldom die because of their deviancy, as their homosexual siblings have, they tend to either reform their ways and become absorbed back into mainstream society or face alienation. As abhorrent as it sounds, the practice of rape and/or heterosexual sex to cure “sexual inversion” has been used in the past, and Mark’s rape of Marnie is one such example of Hollywood’s dangerously destructive and disturbing obsession with compulsive heteronormativity.

"The ideal husband understands every word his wife doesn’t say."

Even today, scholars still seem divided on Mark, who embodies both wholesome and loathsome character traits; he is easily one of the most divisive and morally ambivalent characters in the entire Hitchcock canon. Modleski illuminates this contentious and occasionally odd discourse when she describes film scholar Robert Kapsis’ derision for a feminist interpretation of the rape scene, since it ignores the apparent “ambiguity” in Mark’s treatment of Marnie. The primary dissension centers around Mark’s rape of Marnie and whether or not he “actually” rapes her. Piso reflects on this disparity by pointing out the absurdity of Andrew Sarris’ analysis, which “described Mark Rutland as both a rapist and a patient husband.” In addition,


Witsenburg’s 2017 article takes for granted that everyone agrees about the infamous rape scene. This issue, however, extends beyond the film’s narrative and provides a harrowing critique of the society that spawned *Marnie*, one that presumably persists even today. On the whole, whether or not Mark “meant” to rape Marnie matters little to a discussion of a queerly asexual possibility, since she is raped by him regardless, but it does reveal the authority with which compulsive heteronormativity influences cinema. Preeminent Hitchcock scholars such as Pomerance and Wood provide meaningful but potentially dangerous defenses for the rape in *Marnie*. An analysis of their insights might provide resistance to their logic. However, my intention is not to argue these scholars in any way condone rape; instead, this paper seeks to further expand Hitchcockian discourse in the pursuit of additional perspicacity.

The fact that Mark rapes his newlywed wife makes this rape more, not less, loathsome, particularly for an audience who remembers that she was blackmailed into the union and repeatedly stated that she could not abide the touch of any man. In Pomerance’s description of the event, he appears to defend Hitchcock by asserting that the actual word “rape” was not used when Hitchcock spoke with Jay Presson Allen, the second screenwriter whom he hired. Nevertheless, the first screenwriter, Evan Hunter, was fired for expressing enormous concern about writing the “alleged” rape scene. Hunter also warned Hitchcock that such a scene would “alienate” Mark and make it impossible for audiences to empathize or identify with him.\(^\text{24}\) In addition, correspondences from Moral’s book proves that Hunter in fact used the word “rape”

---

when he prevailed upon Hitchcock to remove said rape. There is no doubt Hitchcock explicitly intended for Mark to rape Marnie. While the the issue of intention might be more indicative of Hitchcock and Winston Graham than Mark, *Mark irrefutably rapes Marnie.* Joe McElhaney decries “All right, then, he will be kind. She will be polite. And he swears on his honour that he will not—A pregnant vacuum as she gazes at her Knight.” Witty wordplay aside, Mark does promise to leave Marnie be, only to break that promise days later. Mark himself even identifies as a “sexual blackmailer,” and while his tone suggests levity, the implications could not be more profound.

We now move to perhaps the most troubling aspect of Pomerance’s argument, where he questions Marnie’s exclamation of “no!” after Mark says that he “very much wants to go to bed.” He writes that “she [Marnie] has said [no] before, proclaims as a motto, notwithstanding the current of experience. This women *in extremis,* whose every statement has been a lie, who has lived a life of masquerade: is she suddenly to be taken at face value when she has negated, of all things, sex?” To Pomerance’s credit, Marnie has been markedly distrustful and deceptive throughout the film, but his analysis suggests Marnie “was asking for it” despite expressing her desire to be left untouched and given her visceral reactions before, during, and after the rape. Marnie’s suicide attempt the following morning, Wood argues, was merely staged and a plea for help


28. Ibid., 34-35.
rather than a legitimate attempt to end her life. I contend, instead, that Marnie’s feelings of helplessness and hopelessness in the face of Mark’s patriarchal power compel Marnie to kill herself. Later, when she sees the fox cornered and killed during the hunt, she is reminded of her own bleak future, gilded cage notwithstanding, and attempts suicide once again.

Piso’s argument supports this claim, and one of the principal points I hope to make here is that, whether or not Mark meant to rape Marnie, his assumptions that he knows how to fix her—and that her frigidity stems from pathology—creates a negative critique of the society which spawned these assumptions. Ultimately, Mark’s male entitlement and sexual proselytizing harms Marnie; he only helps her so that he can mould Marnie into his image of a “normal woman.” Mark does not accept Marnie for who she is, regardless of her possible asexuality. Piso writes:

Mark’s unquestioned view of himself as owner and as a man of property leads to the heinous rape. So accustomed is he to owning, so synonymous is his sexuality with social power, that he assumes he can possess Marnie too, violate her, break her down, and then build her back up (in his image, his language, in the image of the “normal” female) in much the same way that he rebuilt the Rutland business. In the most literal and terrible way, Marnie is Mark’s.

Pomerance reinforces this notion that Marnie’s rape could not be prevented, when he writes that Marnie “invented her own fate.” For a queerly asexual reading, this claim reiterates a cliché in Hollywood cinema; any character who engages in nonheteronormative activities—especially homosexual, but also countless others,


including asexual—must pay for their sins through death, ruin, or conformity. We see this same scenario playing out with Brandon and Philip in *Rope*, who both face annihilation after murdering their friend, another queer character who conceivably conforms by dating the insipid socialite Janet.

This paper villifies Mark in the hopes of showing how the heterocentric mindset problematizes queer identity to such a degree that it can appear to condone rape. Proving without any doubt that Mark rapes his wife allows the asexual resonances in these moments to be studied more closely. Corrective rape, a relatively new term, refers to the sexual assault of a queer person in order to “cure” them, and has become a serious issue in South Africa and the lesbian community at large. Megan Morrissey describes corrective rape “as a tool to discipline nonnormative sexuality ... a hate crime.” While this actual term did not exist back in the 1960s, psychology of the time thought that homosexuality could be cured through reparative therapy. Witsenburg corroborates this claim, writing that Mark attempts “to trigger Marnie’s ‘repressed’ heterosexuality by forcing her to have sex,” and later attempts amateur psychoanalysis as a result of books he reads, such as “Sexual Aberrations of the Criminal Female.” Furthermore, in Martin Kantor’s book *Why a Gay Person Can't be Made Un-Gay: The Truth about Reparative Therapies* (2015), he discusses the same stereotypes about queer cures that Marnie faces, and notes how homosexuals were once considered

---


33. Amber Witsenburg, “’You Freud, Me Jane? The Representation of Trauma and Sexuality in Hitchcock’s *Marnie*” *Digressions* 2.2 (2017) 5.
psychotic and in need of psychological treatment. These therapies included shock
treatments, cocaine and strychnine injections while watching homosexual acts,
hormone injection, chemical and physical castration, lobotomy, and—ironically—
heterosexual intercourse. Russo writes about filmic depictions of this issue, saying
“people really believed that a good lay cured homosexuals,” and, in Marnie’s case, we
can interpret Mark’s rape as a fix for her frigidity, the same as his farcical free-
association game later on. However, Marnie does not suffer from repressed
homosexual desires, but the absence of sexual desire altogether; her perversion stems
from a lack that is irrefutably queer and, correspondingly, requires divergent
consideration. The notion that her past trauma completely caused her psychosis also
calls into question psychotherapy stereotypes of the time, which believed that the
realization of these past traumas could put someone on the road to recovery. Kantor
discusses this belief, saying:

By wresting memories of early trauma out of repression and revealing the
trauma to the patient then determining (and taking measures to reverse) its
exact effects, psychoanalysts could presumably deal with/reverse the impact of
the trauma and so its sequelae precisely responsible for a boy becoming gay/a
girl becoming a lesbian. (How the mysterious leap between developing
intellectual insight and changing sexual orientation actually occurred was never,
and still has not, been fully explained.)

We see these same concepts in Marnie, whose eponymous character we can superficially
pronounce “fixed” at the end of the film. Kantor continues by revealing the futility and


naïvete that such a proclamation requires, since these traumas often “take permanent hold ... cannot be easily ‘unseen’ no matter how hard one tries to put the trauma out of ones mind.”\textsuperscript{37} With this knowledge, we can finally understand the film through a queerly asexual lens: Mark attempts to cure Marnie of something she fundamentally cannot be cured of. In fact, asexuality lies at the heart of her character, and—in the end—Mark’s compulsive need (i.e. society’s need) to normalize sexuality is what defeats Marnie.

As in other endings from Hitchcock’s films, the ending in \textit{Marnie} is bittersweet. The final scene leaves the audience wondering why they do not feel better about a conclusion that, superficially, has all the necessary components for a feel-good Hollywood finale, à la \textit{Breakfast at Tiffany’s} (1961), \textit{Cat on a Hot Tin Roof} (1958), and just about every Doris Day film ever made. With all conceivable obstacles removed, the procreation may commence; specifically, Marnie’s realization places her on the path to a complete recovery, and—thus cured—she can return to Mark’s mansion and begin making babies. In reality, while Marnie finally confronts the trauma that has plagued her since childhood, the revelation is not a miracle cure.\textsuperscript{38} In fact, she appears just as dark, desolate, and disturbed as when Mark raped her. The final moments of \textit{Marnie} rely on Freudian psychology and melodrama to sanction the “heteronarrative,” a word that Elizabeth Hanna Hanson uses to describe the necessity for desire in propelling any plot towards its climax and resolution. Hanson argues that asexual narratives cannot function in a traditional narrative structure because they negate the innate necessity for


heteronarrative storytelling. Namely, Hanson implies that the desire to procreate lies at the heart of almost every story ever told. She writes:

The asexual possibility ... introduces the threat that the secret is that there is no secret, that there is nothing to be found out, that the story may well lead nowhere. What asexuals hide is the fact that they have nothing to hide; their sexual secret is that they have no sexual secret. The asexual closet, then, is empty, is not even a closet—although to position asexuality as a sexual secret, as the content of a secret, as a depth concealed by a surface, is to give the asexual nothing the shape of a something. The search for secrets, of course, is what narrative is all about.39

Through this lens, we return where we began: Marnie’s purse at the beginning of the film—supposedly stuffed with sexual secrets, her “sexual abberations”—is profoundly empty. Ergo, Marnie’s crime is that she has committed no crime. This final clue reiterates what Samuels describes as Marnie’s “absorption into the male-controlled heterosexual order ... but this process can only be realized through the threat of punishment and containment.”40 Tried and convicted on circumstantial evidence, Marnie faces life with a man who tracked her, caught her, and—by God—is going to keep her.

---


CHAPTER 3

A DANDY MASQUERADE: HOLLYWOOD CENSORSHIP AND ROPE

First... silence, accompanied by curved lines on the television screen. Then... drums crescendo into the quirky, droll ditty “Funeral March of the Marionette,” and the blocky text “Alfred Hitchcock Presents” appears. A rotund silhouette enters the frame to fill those curved lines. So begins every episode of Hitchcock’s crime anthology series, where Hitchcock’s delightfully odd monologues open and close each episode and where characters encounter black humor, irony, and frequently death. This series cemented Hitchcock as a cultural American icon, a household name that drew associations with the dandy persona. This persona was popularized half a century earlier by the prolific author Oscar Wilde, and—as we shall discuss—was defined as an aesthete who appreciated art and perfection above all else, even sex and marriage, and who also repudiated normality. Through Wilde’s influence, the dandy also became a secret signifier for homosexuality in literature. Even if Hitchcock never confessed any association with these dandy dispositions, his films and star persona paint him as this figure nonetheless, in particular because of his notorious manipulation of Hollywood censors, which resulted in unmistakably queer texts. These censors, combined with the dandy persona, conceive a unique area of analysis for asexuality. I argue that the Master of Suspense himself, with Hollywood censorship as an accomplice, acted as accessories for dandified characters—specifically Brandon from Rope (1948)—which produced asexual resonances that question and criticize traditional heteronormativity and sexual essentialism, while also distancing queer characters from one another.
Asexuality’s relatively recent foray into queer discourse may spark assumptions that its critical discussion in American cinema has yet to occur. However, Vito Russo’s seminal text, *The Celluloid Closet* (1987), introduced asexual discourse to queer film studies more than thirty years ago. This brief introduction seems somewhat unintentional, as we will discuss in due course, but it nevertheless offers unique insight into queer censorship during the Golden Age of Hollywood. Russo describes effeminate men in American films of the late 1920s and 30s as models through which viewers could visualize the homosexual “other,” and thus separate him and those like him from the heterosexual “normal.” He also writes that when censorship laws began to prohibit and outlaw homosexual content of any kind, “the sissy remained asexual while serving as a substitute for homosexuality.”¹ These depictions tended to equate intellectualism, effeminacy, and male weakness with “deviant sexuality.”² Generally considered comedic contrivances, these characters were laughed off as inconsequential. However, despite Russo’s suggestion that these characters are essentially sterilized and therefore bereft of subversive significance, these censored, sissy depictions still manage to pervert the mainstream order. Furthermore, these effeminate portrayals dominated early film up until the late 1930s, disappearing—or concealed—almost entirely the following decade. Homosexually-coded characters became more difficult to differentiate from the heterosexual norm during and following World War II, and this difficulty survived through the Red Scare of the ‘50s, finally perishing when the Production Code ended in the 60s. The need to placate censors has created a pocket of films from the 1930s


² Ibid., 30-31.
through the 1960s that exposes otherwise obscured insights into Western society. To begin this examination, we first need to contextualize our argument by discussing the “problem” with male asexuality in Western cinema, then transfer into the dandy persona’s origins and transformation. We then provide details regarding prohibition in 1950s Hollywood before finally analyzing *Rope* for its asexual resonances that result from the preceding observations.

**Hide and (Don’t) Go Seek: Male Asexuality**

Russo derides the simplification of homosexual characters in American films by asserting that “[l]esbians and gay men are ... classified as purely sexual creatures, people defined solely by their sexual urges.” I agree with this claim insofar as asexuality in cinema also focuses exclusively on a character’s sexual proclivities. We see this tendency in *Marnie* (1964), where an asexually-coded character is raped by her husband in a misguided attempt to cure her frigidity. Russo himself laments the hypersexualization of queer characters but makes no comment on the ways in which asexual characterizations during this time period affected an audience’s understanding of sexuality. Male asexual resonances, for instance, conceal themselves with a manic compulsiveness that makes them more difficult to locate and decipher than female resonances. I imagine that there are numerous reasons for this dichotomy, most of which derive from societal stereotypes about men that enforce their sexual virility and excess desire, lack of emotion, and power over others, particularly women. Gay men threaten this stereotype because they defy the social mores that govern conventional values, implicitly employing effeminate behaviors that a misogynistic society sees as

abhorrent. Asexual men also threaten this stereotype because their lack of desire can be interpreted as impotence and weakness, and—as Ela Przybylo indicates—creates a safe space within a “sexusociety” that dominates and dictates normalized behavior. She describes sexusociety as a “sexual world” that “for asexuals [is] very much akin to what patriarchy is for feminists and heteronormativity for LGBTQ populations, in the sense that it constitutes the oppressive force against which some sort of organizing and rebellion must take place.” In a society that compulsively categorizes queer people by what they do in the bedroom, asexuality—to an extent—becomes a means with which one can combat this mindset, since it focuses on what people do not do in the bedroom. However, this rebellion can only stretch so far, since asexuality at present is only discussed linguistically in terms that describe its difference from the heterosexual norm. This issue further aggravates the binary rationalizations that permeate Western sexualities and gender stereotypes: straight/gay, sexual/asexual, male/female. These rationalizations limit and categorize individuals in a way that unfairly compares their difference or “lack” to the straight/sexual/male norm. Nevertheless, we may begin dismantling this mindset by looking at the dandy and asexually resonant characters from Hitchcock’s oeuvre to see these notions in action.

To start with, Russo’s description of asexual sissies is inconsistent with our understanding of the terminology today. He argues that “effeminate men could intimate


6. Ibid., 452.
homosexuality while remaining essentially asexual and without threatening the status quo.” Instead, the word desexualization provides a more accurate characterization of the 1930s sissy character. If asexuality is the inability to experience sexual attraction, then desexualization purposely deprives or divests the character of their sexuality. Anthony Bogaert addresses this issue by discussing the religious figure of the Virgin Mary in Christianity, who conceived a child while remaining chaste. In this example, the ideology surrounding Mary divorces her from any conception of sexuality, thus desexualizing her and therefore making her a difficult character to analyze for asexual resonances. However, Sinwell argues that Brian from Gregg Araki’s 2004 Mysterious Skin (2004) is a nerdy, socially awkward character whose asexual resonances physically separate him from the established norm. She continues, writing that modern asexual characters are generally defined by desexualized attributes, creating a clear visual distinction by depicting asexuals as having “non-normative bodies and identities”.

The vast majority of asexually-coded characters in film history occur because of censorship’s attempt to conceal queer desire. Subsequently, a shift between the past and present persists wherein asexuality was once used to neuter homosexuals and erase their queerness, while today asexual characters are visually coded to separate them from heteronormativity as well as pathologizing their presumed sexual aversion. The


desexualization of these characters still deserves deliberation because of the flexibility that Przybylo and Cooper argue is necessary for a discussion of asexuality; were we to only focus on explicit filmic depictions, we would have little to analyze, as would most queer scholars scrutinizing the Golden Age of Hollywood.\textsuperscript{10} This paper will not expound upon these issues but raises them as a potential subject for further inquiry. Moreover, the ways in which the Production Code—and its subsequent demise—have influenced this shift seem significant. In order to appreciate that significance, we must first describe the mask that directors appropriated in order to cultivate their queer subtexts.

\textbf{(Not) Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Contextualizing the Dandy}

Richard Allen describes the Greek roots of aestheticism and dandyism, which idealized “male beauty without sexual content.”\textsuperscript{11} Male beauty derived from artistic appreciation rather than the sexual aggrandizement that inundates modern media. Walter Pater reiterates this notion, writing that “[t]he beauty of the Greek statues was a sexless beauty: the statues of the gods had the least traces of sex. Here there is a moral sexlessness, a kind of ineffectual wholeness of nature, yet with a true beauty and significance of its own.”\textsuperscript{12} Within these observations, we can assess and identify the potential asexual resonances of aestheticism, which separates sexual pleasure from the human body and its artistic expression. This “moral sexlessness” emphasizes a purity or


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} Richard Allen, \textit{Hitchcock's Romantic Irony} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 119.}

innocence not unlike that of a child, a purity that Wilde warps in the late nineteenth century with his notorious but brilliant novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The novel follows Basil Hallward, a painter and aesthete obsessed with the handsome, hedonistic dandy, Dorian Gray. Behind Dorian’s dazzling visage festers a sickening secret, and his physical beauty belies his grotesque behavior.

Lauded as the progenitor of the modern dandy, which itself derived from the Greek aesthete, Thomas Elsaesser describes the Wildean dandy as “a man dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste... free of all human commitments that conflict with taste: *passion*, [emphasis added] moralities, ambitions, politics or occupations. And he despises everything vulgar, common, associated with commerce and a mass public.”13 This description makes apparent the villainous qualities inherent in the dandy, since his ideals, in general, oppose or reject those of the mainstream. For Wilde, the exploitation of aestheticism as a signifier for sexual perversion illustrates the subversiveness of artifice. For Hitchcock, the dandy persona’s amoral compass and clever, sardonic sense of humor afforded him a useful tool that could undermine and critique Western society’s values while concealing itself from censors. For an asexual analysis, the emphasis on freedom from passion seems especially significant, since it suggests that dandies operate outside the influence of sexual desire, to the extent that they may even condemn this trait. In addition, the notion that dandies follow their own established set of values, which negate or reject any form of sex, imbibe them with a sexlessness that can be interpreted as asexually significant.

Furthermore, Allen argues that Wilde “dramatizes the relationship between dandyism, aestheticism, and decadence in a manner that makes explicit the relationship between aestheticism and sexual ‘depravity’ or ‘perversity.’”\(^{14}\) In other words, the same as how Dorian hides his horrific truth within a portrait that portrays his monstrousness, the carefully constructed manners of the aesthete in American cinema masked the horror of his homosexuality. There was a shift from the dandy figure symbolizing sexlessness and sarcasm to a repressed or concealed queerness. Allen also writes that “Hitchcock’s villains are often either sharp dressers or aristocratic aesthetes, often made ‘sinister’ by stereotypically homosexual traits or hints of sexual perversion.”\(^{15}\) Scholars have already noted the sadistic allure that Hitchcock’s queer characters radiate in their respective films, and this allure transforms the apparent villains into identifying figures through which Hitchcock can create subversive narratives without openly “breaking the rules.” The aesthete or dandy persona is a mask, so to speak, which hides author intention. Additionally, Allen defends Hitchcock’s rejection of the problematic binary rationalization we have already discussed, arguing that his films are “neither moral nor immoral” and instead divvy the “amoral point of view of the romantic-ironist or aesthete.”\(^{16}\) That is to say, Hitchcock makes movies that cynically critique Western society by exploiting an asexually significant trope. For example, in *Dial M for Murder* (1954), Hitchcock portrays Tony as beguiling enough for viewers to feel ambivalent about the attempted murder of his wife. On the one hand, viewers root for Margot when


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., XIII.
she turns the tables on her assailant; on the other hand, however, viewers also want Tony to succeed in committing the perfect crime. Hitchcock ultimately does not endorse either side, despite Tony’s capture in the climax, which leaves the viewer with a “bittersweet” response that rewards those who look a little deeper. Nevertheless, the film employs dandy traits by denouncing the modern institution of marriage while romanticizing murder and blackmail; incidentally, Margot’s lukewarm romance also pales when compared to the chemistry between Tony and Charles.

So, Hitchcock employs this asexually-resonant, amoral aesthete—a word that seems to have become somewhat synonymous with dandy—as a means to explore non-normative behaviors and queer identities. Past scholarship by authors such as Lee Edelman and D.A. Miller paints Hitchcock as homophobic and hateful towards his queer characters (and women), but more recent articles by Robin Wood and David Greven frame these potentially discriminatory moments as a critique of the society in which his queer characters suffer. We can appreciate this interpretation because, while queer characters such as Mrs. Danvers (Rebecca, 1940), Leonard (North by Northwest, 1959), and Uncle Charlie (Shadow of a Doubt, 1943) meet with violent ends, their legacy endures longer than their protagonist counterparts. For instance, Mrs. Danvers commits suicide—a stereotypical plot point for queer characters—but in doing so also destroys the patriarchal, heterosexist prison that she and her presumed lover, Rebecca, suffered under, thereby traumatizing and preventing the heterosexual Max and the second Mrs. De Winter from ever leading a normal, happy life. Queer audiences may even endorse Mrs. Danvers’s attempted coercion of Max’s second wife to kill herself, since,

symbolically, queerness wins out against the heteronormativity. Ironically, Judith Anderson, who so brilliantly plays the macabre Mrs. Danvers, insists that she was not aware of the queer undertones in *Rebecca.* True or not, her reply indicates the authority with which censors ruled over Hollywood films during the 1940s and their resistance to queer themes, implicit or otherwise. This example also shows how censorship's attempt to conceal these queer themes can actually make them more potent, or—at the least—cannot erase them completely, thereby leaving behind traces of asexual resonances; Rebecca's queer tyranny over Max and the second Mrs. De Winter is intensified because of its ineffability, similar to how monsters in horror movies are that much more terrifying when they hide their physical form from the audience. This same line of reasoning applies to *Rope,* in which the dandy trope hides the horror of homosexuality while incidentally advocating for asexuality and amoral subversion.

**You'll Believe it When You (Don't) See It: Hollywood Censorship and Artifice**

Film scholar D.A. Miller in his article “Anal Rope” describes the limitations that censorship enforced on queer expression in film. Referring specifically to *Rope,* he writes that the “famously hard-ass Production Code … strictly forbade the display and even denomination of homosexuality; but also, more diffusely, by the cultural surround of legal, social, psychic, and aesthetic practices (the last including those of spectatorship) that tolerate homosexuality only on condition that it be kept out of

As the cliché goes, queer characters were kept out of sight and out of mind, cowering behind a Rock Hudson-esque masculinity that defeated queer tyranny. For instance, the virile Roger Thornhill, played by the beguiling Cary Grant, kills Leonard and presumably reinstates heterosexual order by saving Eve in *North by Northwest*. This claim is further cemented by Hitchcock’s visual innuendo of the train entering the tunnel at the end of the film, symbolizing coitus. As a queer character, Leonard’s lack of screen time relegates him to the rank of secondary or tertiary character with little backstory or dramatic need. Martin Landau’s suggestion that the character’s love for his employer motivates him provides Leonard with more depth than a typical lackey. His queerness, like other characters of the time period, leaves little to distinguish him from everyone else; indeed, his close—but not intimate—relationship with Phillip Vandamn and meticulous attire alone indicate any subversion. These scraps of queer identity make up the majority of gay characters from that time period. Consequently, on the surface, these characters seem squeaky clean. As Miller relates of Rupert from *Rope* and his hypocritical blame, those who themselves have queer traits can see resonances where others cannot: “a-man-standing-too-close-to-another” may appear innocuous to everyone except those who understand the codes and subtexts. Thus, characters such as Uncle Charlie, Bruno, and Brandon can deceive censors and the general viewer by

---


appearing normal, if nonetheless peculiar, while condemning the very values that their sterilized depictions epitomize.

Despite this apparent difficulty in identifying queer characters from the 1940s through the 1960s, they continued to crop up in various films, traditionally “asexualized” and visually indecipherable from everyone else. These queer characters eulogized tropes of the dandy sissy that dominated 1930s cinema, and Hitchcock employed this dandy persona throughout his film career. Increasingly frustrated by Hollywood interference—as evidenced by the acrimonious relationship between Hitchcock and his original American producer, David O. Selznick—he established an ill-fated production company and afterwards demanded complete creative control. The iconic shower scene from *Psycho* (1960) acts as the most blatant example of Hitchcock manipulating censors into allowing potentially inappropriate content into his films, but it was certainly not his first foray into subversive territory. The fascinating, but odd, case of *Rope* showcases Hitchcock at his most cynical and subversive.

I argue that the Production Code’s tyrannical insistence that homosexuality be literally erased and eradicated from the silver screen has generated asexual resonances that would otherwise not exist. Consequently, directors such as Hitchcock have created characters that, because of—rather than in spite of—these strict censor laws are more subversive in their supposedly squeaky-clean visage. This notion can be seen most profoundly in the dandified characters of Brandon in *Rope*, Bruno in *Strangers on a Train* (1951), and Charles in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). As Elsaesser indicates, these characters reveal an aspect of humanity through the dandy persona, specifically through contrivance:
Hitchcock’s films—splitting our gaze and dividing our attention, transferring our identity and switching our allegiance—teach us the subllest and most beguiling form of treason: recognizing in the other a part of ourselves. Putting our ordinary selves under erasure, the dandy in Hitchcock makes us rediscover the morality of artifice.21

The issue of artifice becomes particularly prevalent, again, because of Hollywood censors, who also attempted to mask reality by altering and erasing aspects of a film that promoted or even addressed queerness and sexual deviancy. Such were the fears of censors that characters could not even claim to be virgins, since such a claim implied the opposite.22 This same rationalizing underpins Rope, wherein Brandon and Rupert cannot even deny that they sleep together because it suggests they do.23 Artifice and concealment are components to the dandy persona and indicate a predisposition for asexual resonances that, when transmogrified into the censored homosexual of Hollywood cinema, complicates traditional binary assumptions generally attributed to analyses of sexuality.

Elsaesser provides a compelling argument that pronounces even Hitchcock himself a dandy. Described as a “dandyism of sobriety,” his fastidious suits, sardonic sense of humor, penchant for perfectionism, and even the “statuesqueness of his massive body”—popularized by the opening sequence of his television series, “Alfred Hitchcock Presents”—combine to create a character built on artifice and aesthetic


sensibility, similar to those that litter his films. This celebrity persona, however, conceals the real Hitchcock in the same way that Marilyn Monroe contrasted the stereotypes caused by the roles she played in movies. It comes as little surprise that Hitchcock would imbue his characters with traits he himself shares, especially those films that appear so personal, such as Marnie, Vertigo (1958), and Rope. Consequently, all of these films boast profound queer and asexual themes. We have already discussed in the introduction that Hitchcock is an apt figure for asexual analysis, but his fascination with artifice also preludes queer connotation. This examination of artifice, or one thing signifying another, became a Hitchcockian trope popularized by his MacGuffin narrative ploy. In a number of his films, Hitchcock distracts the audience in order to defy expectation and subvert the status quo. For instance, Marion Crane’s romance, theft, and getaway in Psycho propels the film forward until her subsequent murder by the disturbed Norman Bates, who invades the spotlight after disposing of Marion, i.e. the MacGuffin. We can identify this same ploy in Rope, where David’s murder, the party, and threat of discovery distract the viewer from Hitchcock’s unflattering commentary regarding American prejudices about sex.

**Less Is (Not) More: Hitchcock’s Rope**

Rope follows the allegedly homosexual couple, Philip and Brandon (played by Farley Granger and John Dall respectively), through an atypical dinner party at their apartment. The film opens with the two men strangling a schoolmate to demonstrate their superiority and then concealing his corpse in a chest, upon which they later serve their dinner. They reminisce about the experience in a pseudo-post-coital reverie before

the guests arrive, all of whom Brandon has chosen for sadistic amusement. Brandon devised the entire event, however, for his former schoolteacher, Rupert (played by James Stewart), who denies culpability when he discovers the classmate’s corpse. Brandon begs Rupert to understand, even appreciate, the symbolism behind the murder, but Rupert calls the cops, and the three men conclude the film in a stifling, mutually complicit silence.

Along with the Production Code, the consequences of casting the actors for *Rope* cast the film in an asexual light. Hitchcock initially intended for Montgomery Clift and Cary Grant to play Brandon and Rupert respectively, but the homosexual overtones prompted them to withdraw from consideration. The original script made no bones about the physical relationship between the students and their teacher, and prospective actors worried that playing these parts would blemish their reputation.25 As discussed previously, strict censorship stipulations demanded any queer content be categorically eradicated from the adaptation. Wood corroborates this claim, arguing that “homosexuality had to be coded, and discreetly, and coding, even when indiscreet, is notoriously likely to produce ambiguities and uncertainties.”26 Hitchcock’s replacements, John Dall and James Stewart, unintentional or otherwise, assist in this queer erasure. Stewart in particular lacked the macabre mindset necessary to portray Rupert as a beguiling villain. The screenwriter, Arthur Laurents, warned Hitchcock that casting Stewart “destroyed a motive and a relationship unintentionally,” since Stewart’s


immaculate public image, as well as his frustration with Hitchcock’s filming methods, shifted Rupert from foppish accomplice to hardheaded gumshoe. Laurents continued, writing that “Jimmy Stewart was Jimmy Stewart. Which meant not a whiff of sex of any kind.” The case of Rupert’s sexuality endorses an asexual reading that will enrich our analysis, because Stewart’s veneer of all-American everyman hides a remarkable opportunity for insight. We will return to this claim. Brandon, too, makes complicit the film’s queer censorship: as a closeted homosexual frightened for his reputation, Dall played his part without any “whiff” of love, desire, or affection for Phillip. His reluctance bestows additional asexual meaning upon Brandon, who becomes an antagonist to his partner, Phillip. Farley Granger, on the other hand, took the advice of his then-lover, Laurents, and accentuated the queer aspects of his character. The resulting discord between actors, characters, intentions, and erasures—combined with associations with the dandy persona—make Rope an appropriate artifact for analysis. And it all begins with Brandon.

Brandon is not the character a viewer might initially expect to empathize and identify with in Rope; after all, he murders a friend in a pseudo-Nietzschean attempt to showcase his superiority, indulges in sadistic rabble-rousing with the partygoers, and displays his innate weakness whenever he opens his mouth, in the form of a pronounced stutter. Wood nonetheless found himself enraptured by the sardonic aesthete, writing that Brandon’s “arrogance and assurance cease to be alienating and


28. Ibid., 71 and 73.
become perversely touching.” This arrogance stems from the dandy persona, and Brandon’s fascist leanings, careful manners, perfectionism, and “warped sense of humor” paint him as a dandy, whom Elsaesser describes as:

[P]reoccupied, above all, with style. A dandy makes a cult of clothes and manners. A dandy has an infinite capacity to astound and surprise. A dandy is given to a form of wit which seems to his contemporaries mere cynicism. A dandy must be negative: neither believing in the world of men—virility [emphasis added], sports—nor in the world of women—the early, the life-giving, the intuitive, the nature and flowing. A dandy prefers fantasy and beauty over maturity and responsibility, he pursues perfection to the point of perversity.

While Coffin is actually describing Hitchcock in this passage, these sentiments also apply to Brandon, who negates a number of sexed stereotypes and fears in post-World War II America. A typical American audience identifies Brandon as the principal villain from the outset, despite his incapacities. His fascination with perfection, particularly for art’s sake, canonizes Brandon as a dandy. He tells Phillip: “You know I never did anything unless I did it perfectly. I’ve always wished for more artistic talent. Well, murder can be an art too. The power to kill can be just as satisfying as the power to create.” The most evocative example of Brandon’s dandyism occurs when he asks Mrs. Wilson to set the buffet on the chest concealing David’s corpse. This deliciously demented moment highlights both his bitter cynicism and pungent appreciation for symbolism, since David’s death hearkens back to Brandon’s favorite childhood story.


“The Mistletoe Bough” (1822). In that story, a new bride suffocates when she is accidentally locked in a chest while playing hide-and-seek.

Brandon’s assertion that murder has artistic merit queers him, since he seeks the ability to take life, not create it. His crass commentary on the superiority of a few men over all others, accompanied by his cruel treatment of Janet when he glibly invites her boyfriend and former lover to the same party, also demonstrate the acerbic ethos of the dandy, whose queer tyranny assures his eventual demise. In classic Hollywood cinema, homosexuals are articulated as unnatural and envious monsters who secretly hate themselves and those like them, and this sad but substantially accepted stereotype from the mid-twentieth century appeared in films such as *Rope*, where Brandon and Phillip hate one another precisely because of society’s abhorrence of them and their sexual activities.31 This self-hatred purportedly prompts Brandon and Phillip to murder David in the first place; as a result, the only way these two men can show their love for one another on the silver screen is through David’s death.32 For an analysis of repressed homosexuality, all of this discourse checks out, but a few substantial changes manifest if Brandon is identified as asexual, not homosexual.

Wood describes the movie’s murder scene as symbolic of homosexual sex, namely male masturbation resulting from the inherent shame and resentment that prevent Brandon and Phillip from consummating, in the traditional penetrative sense. He also indicates that this scene shows “a kind of socially imposed impotence” that implicates both society in general and in Brandon in particular, who struggles with the


32. Ibid., 353.
wine cork, but finally defers to Phillip to open the bottle.\(^{33}\) This impotence, on one level, results from the censorship and erasure that Hollywood imposed. For instance, Will Hays, well-known overseer of the authoritative Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), decreed that film “must have that sacred thing, the mind of a child, that clean and virgin thing, that unmarked slate.”\(^{34}\) For Brandon, this symbolic impotence becomes a recurrent theme that firmly reveals itself at the beginning and the end of the film, first with the cork and later, when Rupert grabs the gun from Brandon’s hands and fires it, a clear phallic display of masculinity and heterosexual order winning the battle against queerness, both on a large and small scale. Brandon finds himself incapable of completing or displaying these signifiers for orgasm, and both times sublimes his impotence through other queer characters. To push this point further, Brandon murders David with a rope which—while perhaps trite—resembles a flaccid penis in the same way that his pistol, in the climax, resembles an erect penis. In a time when sexuality was typically defined as one or the other, Brandon stands apart from both the heteronormative and homosexual. Rendered asexual by Hollywood, Hitchcock, and Dall, his queer identity is defined by a lack or absence, rather than a preferred object of desire. Brandon’s representation in *Rope* can account for several asexual possibilities, but the most defensible characterizes Brandon as someone either asexual or repressed by society to the point that he cannot consummate his desire for Phillip. He may be romantically attracted to men, but the pressure of sexual


essentialism forces him to seek out a physical relationship; incapable of consummating, murder becomes his alternative outlet for the physical gratification he otherwise cannot experience. Consequently, Brandon’s asexuality becomes socially imposed.

This trope of asexual-coded characters achieving sexual arousal as the result of violence and murder is not without precedent, and even appears today in films such as Chan-wook Park’s *Stoker* (2013). Truffaut says that Hitchcock often made sex synonymous with murder by de-romanticizing the love scenes and filming them like murders.35 For example, in *Dial M for Murder*, Swann’s attempted murder of Margot appears as though the two are passionately embracing. These cynical reversals reinforce edicts of the dandy persona, and the murder of David represents a retaliation against compulsive heterosexuality as well as sexual essentialism, the belief that all humans desire to copulate through penetrative sex.

Miller’s provocative article, “Anal Rope,” written in response to the AIDS crisis, intensifies this insight. He describes Hitchcock’s filming method—the illusion of one continuous shot—as homophobic, since it denies the viewer their voyeuristic and masochistic desire to see the act of gay sex, despite zooming in and focusing on men’s backsides to hide the actual cuts. To clarify, Miller writes that “from behind, the body would no doubt show or signify the penetrated, penetrable anus—or would do so if once again a cut did not phonically intervene.”36 He also suggests that David’s concealed corpse at the climax, when revealed to Rupert, implicates both David and Rupert as


presumed homosexuals. This argument insinuates that *Rope* is entirely about showcasing gay sex without actually showing the act. An asexual analysis reveals, as also in the case of *Marnie*, the depths of America’s ironic fascination with sex even as they conceal it. Furthermore, all of this proselytizing reveals one of the aforementioned reasons behind the elusiveness of male asexuality: virility. Miller writes that castration anxiety festers in the heart of *Rope*, not homosexuality. The effeminate traits attributed to homosexuals destabilize masculinity because one partner assumes the passive role traditional for females, and this passiveness emasculates David while threatening Phillip and Rupert. Brandon, rather than representing effeminate tyranny, portrays castration anxiety through presumed impotence and weakness.

This distinction pits Phillip against Brandon, which reinforces the loathing the couple have for one another; not only must they contend with a heterosexist society that actively erases them from existence, but from prescriptive sexual essentialism as well. As discussed earlier, by Russo’s assertion that queer characters become defined by their sexual behaviors, Brandon offers a divergent, if not fully realized, alternative. I argue that, through an asexual lens, Phillip becomes the hypersexualized, homosexual “other” that offsets Brandon, made apparent by Hitchcock’s insistence on Phillip’s homosexuality and virility throughout, first, with the cork, but also later, when Brandon begins to share an odd anecdote about strangling chickens. Brandon says that “he saw Rupert choke two chickens at once,” and—as Miller indicates—“choking the chicken” is an old-fashioned euphemism for male masturbation.³⁷ Phillip denies any such claim.

³⁷ Incidentally, Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* was published the same year that *Rope* was released. Both deal with the presence and prevalence of homosexuality in American society.
Despite Brandon’s insistence that he strangled two or three chickens at the same time. On the surface, Phillip’s exasperation stems from his strangulation of David at the film’s onset, whom he kills while the impotent Brandon watches. Yet, through this symbolic lens, the issue of the chickens heightens Phillip’s hypersexuality and complicates matters when Rupert reminds him that he also saw Phillip’s “handwork,” calling him a “good chicken strangler.” With this understanding, we can assume that Phillip engages in homosexual sex (of the apparent non-penetrative variety) with a variety of men, and one of these alleged men may be his professor, Rupert Cadell.

Previous scholarship has argued that Rupert represents the unassailable heteronormative authority that ultimately overpowers queerness. This notion perhaps persists because the character’s presumed homosexuality was almost completely erased from the final product, but it does not account for his status as a confirmed bachelor, another signifier of queerness in older films. His flirtations with Mrs. Wilson speak more about her, since she extrapolates innocent flirtation into something more serious. Phillip and Brandon even mock the romance, thereby confirming Mrs. Wilson as the old maid persona—quite literally—while queering Rupert, who Miller writes is, “if not a gay bachelor, remains a confirmed one, and unlike Guy’s [from Strangers on a Train], his heterosexuality amounts to nothing but a nonhomosexuality.” Again, we witness another identity based on lack, in addition to a barrier erected between queer characters. Miller’s argument even suggests the


possibility that Rupert himself has asexual possibilities. Through this reading, queerness oppresses itself by policing itself through mutual contempt, and Hollywood’s appropriation of queer symbols such as the dandy make these symbols complicit in oppression and repression while also assisting in queer erasure. Rupert excoriates Brandon and Phillip’s ideology, saying: “You’ve strangled a fellow human being who could live and love as you never could. And never will again.” Rupert’s condemnation reveals the authority with which systematic homophobia antagonizes queer identities, but his insinuation also makes no sense. Miller evaluates this statement, alleging that “if Brandon and Phillip could never live and love like David, it can hardly follow that they will never live and love like him again.” However, if we assume that the first of Rupert’s judgements is directed towards Brandon (“never could”) and the second towards Phillip (“never will”), then we can begin to understand the desolate world in which these characters toil. The shared silence in the film’s final moments memorializes the rift between these three tortured men; in the foreground, Rupert turns away from the audience, resting his hand on David’s coffin in a disturbingly self-reflective manner. In the background, we see Brandon—ever the dandy—indulging in a glass of decadent champagne, distanced from those by something he cannot see, say, or feel.

Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) opens with a nymphomaniac playing bridge in a psychiatric ward. A male orderly beckons to this woman, the buxom Miss Carmichael, and she follows with a seductive smile rouged on her face. As they stroll through the facility, she coos sweet nothings into his ear, cradling his arm and playfully scratching his hand when he rejects her advances. The orderly dumps Carmichael off in the office of Dr. Peterson, a bespectacled woman smoking a cigarette and poring over papers at a large, oak desk. Visually, these women vary vastly from one another. While Carmichael’s long hair drapes her bare neck and shoulders, Peterson ties hers up in an orderly bun. Carmichael wears a billowy, low-cut top in direct contrast to Peterson’s blocky, unwelcoming coat. They twitter back and forth about the frivolity of Freudian psychoanalysis before Carmichael admits she hates men, saying “if one of them so much as touches me, I want to sink my teeth into his hand and bite it off,” a remark that ironically defies her earlier behavior. She resents Peterson’s taciturn reaction and retaliates by throwing a book and calling her “Miss Frozen Puss.” Exit the incensed Miss Carmichael, who is whisked away by orderlies—never to be seen again—and enter the condescending Dr. Fleurot, who reprimands his colleague for her utter “lack of human emotion and experience,” a flaw he regards as fundamentally “fatal for a woman.” Dr. Peterson rebuffs Fleurot’s flirtations and his creepy compassion, replying that her feelings “in no way resemble” his own. He departs as well, equally incensed and dumbfounded by the rejection.
This prologue embodies a trope that appears in an astounding amount of Hitchcock’s films. In this scene, a hypersexualized character (Miss Carmichael) is pitted against a desexualized character (Dr. Peterson) in a manner that links them together because of, rather than in spite of, their stark dissimilarities. We have explored this phenomenon in other chapters, with Marnie countering her prostitute mother and Brandon countering virile Philip, but this trope extends beyond these few characters and films. Employing a queerly asexual analysis, these moments yield meaningful opportunities to expand our understanding of Hitchcock, human sexuality, and established normality. I argue that many characters from the Hitchcock canon—but particularly Lila Crane from Psycho (1960)—are desexualized characters purposely depicted to oppose their hypersexualized counterparts. These depictions impose a narrative purgatory that highlights the desexualized figure’s dependency on their hypersexual counterpart for characterization and conflict, and this trope also highlights the long-held belief that sexuality is the preeminent component of human identity. Effectively, this trope enforces a filmic stereotype that characters divorced from sexuality are undeveloped mechanizations and mere plot devices.

When discussing this hyper- and desexualization theme, I will refer to it as sexual polarization. When I use this term, it means two characters are pushed into opposite sexual poles, frequently to highlight queerness’s deviation from the norm. This hypothesis imposes boundaries that, on the surface, police sexuality, yet Hitchcock’s trademark amorality allows for his characters to seemingly endorse conventional Western values while truly condemning them; the dichotomy between hyper- and desexualized characters is but one of many ways in which Hitchcock indulges in queer
rebellion. Sinwell describes this sexual dichotomy through its depiction in contemporary media, writing that “the interrelationships between asexuality and hypersexuality are seen as two sexual extremes; promiscuity is seen in opposition to asexuality. Yet, both promiscuity and asexuality are constructed in terms of pathology and in opposition to the ‘normal.’”¹ For instance, Marnie—while conventionally attractive—suffers from pathological trauma that stems from her childhood, thereby distancing her from Mark and normative society. The dandified, impotent Brandon in Rope (1948) also defies established sexual values that regulate sexual relationships, queer or not, which separates him from his heterosexual and homosexual peers. I argue that these asexually prominent characters are made into identifying figures in Hitchcock’s films, which complicates the viewer’s response to them; he or she cannot necessarily condone or condemn these characters. Moreover, the movie we analyze in this chapter demonstrates Hitchcock’s ability to create ambivalent artifacts that, even today, resonate with new audiences and interpretations.

Before we begin, we must acknowledge that the hyper- or desexualization of these characters results from the ways in which the director has crafted them and the scholar interpreted them, and therefore are potentially unfair—or divergent—approximations of that character. As Price indicates about film analysis, “several meanings can exist side-by-side, even supposedly contradictory meanings”.² In a


somewhat paradoxical fashion, we must employ the flexibility that Przybylo and Cooper profess is necessary for an asexual analysis, but also rely on coded stereotypes and antithetical analyses in order to fashion an argument. For instance, Wood acknowledges this concern about queer analyses and their unfortunate reliance on “heterosexist mythology” for consistent examination, which assumes that certain codes (a lingering stare, celibacy, the color lavender) reify particular traits as queer, despite little evidence to substantiate such a claim or a reluctance to perpetuate these traits as stereotypes.3 This concern also affects an asexual examination, where a character unwilling to consummate a relationship does not necessarily mean that character is asexual. Likewise, a character thrown into an array of sexual scenarios does not make them a nymphomaniac or promiscuous. Therefore, while this chapter focuses on asexually-resonant attributes in Hitchcock’s films, it especially seeks to apply Sinwell’s argument about hyper- and desexual tropes to classic cinema; that is to say, while one can argue that Lila is asexual, she could also be analyzed as a lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, et cetera. We care less for the explicit identification of queer figures as asexual than for the insight we derive from a queerly asexual analysis.

The topic of this chapter is not without precedent. Theodore Price provides a thoroughly compelling analysis of Hitchcock in his book, Hitchcock and Homosexuality: His 50-Year Obsession with Jack the Ripper and the Superbitch Prostitute—A Psychoanalytic View (1992), which approaches but never quite intersects with my own argument, especially in his chapter regarding Rebecca (1940). Whereas I label the sexualization in these films as sexual polarization, Price labels them as the “Whore/
Virgin” theme, which uses Freudian psychology to depict misogynistic attitudes about female sexual “purity:” namely, a woman is either chaste and good or promiscuous and evil, and a husband’s latent murderous tendencies emerge when he uncovers his wife’s promiscuous past.4 Furthermore, Gillian Hanson frames these polarizing depictions of women in classic Hollywood cinema as the give and take of a “permissive society” responding to an emerging sexual revolution, one in which women purport to have more agency.5 Linda Williams instead argues that “desire and sexual pleasure as positive values in themselves have no legitimate, acknowledged place in the era of the Code, though they certainly sneak in and around the edges,” meaning that most depictions of sexuality in pre-1960s Hollywood existed to endorse ideological agendas.6 Williams expresses the sexual content in these films as “exquisitely ambiguous,” a term I find particularly appropriate for a queerly asexual analysis as well, given the flexibility required for such an examination. All of these scholars, while discussing slightly different aspects of a much larger subject, allude to what Williams paints as the relationship between "revelation and concealment.”7 Specifically, the presence and portrayal of sexuality, or lack thereof, can create vastly different yet nonetheless compelling tableaus of the culture from which they derived.


7. Ibid., 6-7.
That being said, I had great difficulty finding more than scraps of scholarship on hyper- and desexuality in mid-American cinema. What little there is, provided above and throughout, generally frames the topic in terms of censorship and sexual liberation. I suspect this absence stems from a preference to examine the more salacious subjects in film while disregarding or misinterpreting their counterparts; that is to say, while the provocative Marion receives substantially more attention, Lila is utterly ignored by scholars (or labeled a lesbian). Vito Russo offers a queer explanation, contending that queer characters become absorbed and regarded as purely sexual creatures by their audience, while heterosexual characters are provided more depth and complexity. This claim, while disregarding a number of Hitchcock’s most iconic characters, nevertheless holds up for an asexual analysis as well. This chapter relies on Alexander Doty’s delightfully disaffected book, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (2000), in which the author queers universally beloved classic films, including *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1953), and even *Psycho*. In particular, his chapter on *Psycho* raises the issue of asexuality and desexualization a fair few times. First, he pinpoints the unique, queer ambivalence Hitchcock bestowed on Norman Bates, who is infantilized much like Joan Fontaine’s character in *Rebecca* (1940). However, his voyeuristic desire, as evidenced by the prominent peephole he conceals behind a portrait, grants him a sexual fluidity that, while fascinating, does not push our analysis further. For this reason, we will focus instead on Marion and Lila, who—despite being sisters—few

---


scholars seem to compare and analyze as doubles. Doty himself fixates on how Marion and Norman contrast one another while only casually remarking on how Lila assumes her sister’s role in the film following her murder. I believe that the disparity between these sisters shows most explicitly a recurrent theme in both Hitchcock’s canon—and perhaps Hollywood films at large—that pits hyper- and desexualized characters against one another to establish sexual normality in the midst of “queer apocalypse.”

“Psycho” Sis: Lila Crane

_Psycho_ starts in a hotel room, where the ravishing Marion reclines in her underwear, the implication being that she and Sam had sex moments before the camera started rolling. The angle accentuates her breasts, which slightly obscure her face and, centered in the frame and paired with a white bra, become the focal point (see fig. 2). While casual sex in and of itself does not signify hypersexualization, the time period in which the film was made makes this scene all the more salacious. Moreover, this is the viewer’s initial introduction to Marion, who becomes sexualized before the audience knows her name, similar to Marnie’s predicament two years later. Of course, we also have the infamous shower scene, in which Norman—and the audience—watch with bated breath as Marion bathes. Norman murders her moments later and, for an asexual analysis, Hitchcock’s hypersexualization of this character, augmented by her explicit ties to heterosexuality, makes her emblematic of heteronormativity. This normativity has its limits, however, because Marion’s purportedly promiscuous behavior and criminal activity prevent her from assuming that airbrushed June Cleaver role; instead, she is a

---

10. Generally, scholars discuss doubles in relation to Marion/Norman and Lila/Mrs. Bates.

troubled woman who the audience assumes would have righted her wrongs, if not for her untimely demise. Norman and Lila, comparatively, lack this same sympathy, presumably because of their queer connotations.
Hitchcock bombards Marion with sexual iconography that, when divorced from the actual character or provided sufficient context, condemns the director more than her. Marion’s departure from the film also marks the departure of explicit sexuality. In its wake stands Lila, who neither Hitchcock nor his viewers ever eyeball in the same voyeuristic manner. In perhaps Hitchcock’s most notorious use of the Macguffin, the lovely Marion Crane, played by Janet Leigh, perishes thirty minutes into the movie. With her death, the standard romance plot line—part and parcel of so many Hollywood mysteries—is also eradicated. Doty describes this definite shift in perspective caused by Marion’s demise, writing that “the queer couple presides over the death of both female (hetero)sexuality and the possibility of establishing a central diegetic heterosexual couple who could return the film to straight, patriarchal, cultural and narrative spaces.”\footnote{12 Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 173-74.} In essence, Marion is an avatar through which Hitchcock can explore less conventional characters; her death unlocks a Pandora’s box of queer prospects.

The audience then follows Lila Crane, Marion’s shrewd sister who contrasts her sibling in a fair few ways. The differences between these characters makes apparent the friction between hyper- and desexualized characters in the Hitchcock canon. In addition, this difference, for once, imparts the queer counterpart with remarkably positive connotations, ones that do not require the viewer to side with the villain. In order to frame Marion and Lila as these hyper- and desexualized symbols, however, we have to employ heterosexist stereotypes. We only see what amounts to roughly twenty-four hours from each sister’s life and presume to know who they are from this limited exposure. Nonetheless, I doubt many will deny that Hitchcock and his audience
sexualize Marion in the majority of the scenes she appears. We see her undressed and
either reclining or hovering near a bed no less than three times in the span of thirty
minutes. In proper dandy fashion, her unexpected death destabilizes the heterosexual
narrative Hitchcock has woven, obliterating audience expectation and allowing Lila to
enter the limelight, a woman clearly unsuited for the classic Hollywood, Leading Lady
role. Likewise, I am compelled to defend Lila from her previous scholarship, which
tends to disregard or underestimate her in favor of the more lascivious characters. The
Ethel Mertz to Marion’s Lucy Ricardo, the implication in these analyses suggests that
characters like Lila deserve less consideration because they serve as mere cogs to keep
the narrative moving along. While Lila and other desexualized characters definitely
suffer from a lack of development often entrusted to their hypersexual counterparts,
they still yield their own particular insights. In fact, this deficiency of concerted
deliberation might also indicate a preference in queer scholarship that limits fruitful
discovery.

When we first meet Lila, she is not reclining on a bed in post-coital revery.
Instead, she exits a vehicle, dressed in a blocky outfit that hides—or refuses to
accentuate—her feminine form. Like a hardheaded gumshoe, she marches into Sam’s
shop and transforms into the kinetic force which propels the film toward its apocalyptic
resolution. Doty discusses Lila’s unconventional depiction in Psycho, drawing attention
to the ways in which Marion and Lila contrast one another. He writes that Lila “is
positioned as outside the ‘dangerous’ and fetishized straight female sexuality of Marion
... [She] can take on a major, and a positive, role in a queer reading of Psycho.”\(^{13}\)

downright deplorable depictions of queer characters in film, we can derive some satisfaction from Hitchcock’s and Miles’s representation of Lila. However, Doty’s primary argument ironically fosters one of the fallacies that he fights back against, one that overlooks asexuality and its representation when articulated through heteronormativity. In most circumstances, we would not expect to find any considerable discussion of inherent asexuality in a queer analysis, but Doty’s speculation regarding Norman’s asexuality on the very first page of this chapter makes one wonder why Lila, whose sexuality is inarguably more ambiguous and absent than Norman’s, is unequivocally labeled a lesbian.

While Doty indicates and dispels the asexual possibility in Norman, he also denies Lila that same consideration. His assumption that Lila must either be gay or straight presents yet another binary assumption, one which restricts Lila from receiving the consideration Doty himself admits she lacks, thus intensifying the sexual polarization in the film. He indicates that Lila’s lesbianism stems from “negatives and absences” and describes her as “‘not feminine,’ ‘sexuality denied,’ ‘prim,’ ‘[heterosexual] reluctance,’ ‘severely restricted’ sexually.”14 My perception of Lila leads me to regard her as a strong female character, while Doty’s description implies an inherent weakness resulting from her queerness. Doty also notes the visual distinction that primes Lila for a queer reading, since her homely outfits and outspokenness make her more of an authority figure than her male cohorts. While I may not describe her clothing as particularly masculine and homely, I do believe that Lila dresses herself to deny the male gaze. She defies narrative expectation not only when she refuses Sam’s romantic

advances but also when she solves her sister's murder and confronts the literal skeleton in Norman Bates's closet. In an argument focused on hyper- and desexualized characters, Doty's claim suggests that heterosexual women are more sexualized in cinema; correspondingly, lesbians hide behind a veneer of celibacy, repression, and reticence. We also witness this provocative claim in *Rebecca*, but it is worth noting here that, despite the inherent heterosexuality of Marion and queerness of Norman and Lila, it is the hypersexualized, straight character that meets a horrific end.

In addition, while I agree that “stepping outside of ... pejorative and heterocentric positions” encourages a more fruitful queer analysis, the audience is given no definitive evidence of Lila's lesbian desires, or even sexual desires at all.¹⁵ The distinction between the Crane sisters ensures a discussion of multivalent queer prospects, but to assume that an absence or lack bespeaks lesbianism seems shortsighted, or at least debatable when analyzing Hitchcock's films. For example, Mrs. Danvers's depiction in *Rebecca* 20 years previous contains very transparent signifiers for lesbianism. Accordingly, while Lila's lack of sexual or romantic desires may result from censorship's intervention, I believe the relative absence of heterosexist stereotypes indicates an alternative interpretation. Hitchcock's polarization of the Crane sisters accounts for more than a heterosexual versus homosexual conflict. Doty falls into an either/or binary that he himself laments, writing that employing queer theory "offered a way to discuss nonheteronormative gender and sexuality, and their interrelationship, in a way that avoided the 'yes s/he is—no s/he isn’t' binaries that can pit gay men

against lesbians and straight feminists.”¹⁶ He assumes that Lila’s lack of sexual interest in Sam, or in reclaiming and rejecting the romantic role bestowed upon her sister, primes her as a “dyke.” Like Brandon in Rope, nothing can stand for something, but that something is not always or only homosexuality. Doty also notes Hitchcock and scenarist Joseph Stefano’s decision to remove “all indications of the budding romance,” as well as Lila’s reluctance to acquiesce to performative gender roles.¹⁷ Klinger reinforces this claim, asserting that ”Lila is depicted as prim, a severely restricted counterpart to Marion in terms of sexual iconography.”¹⁸ In effect, Marion is associated with sexual excess and her sister with absence, although this absence results from Lila’s lack of characterization rather than specific “tells.”

The polarization between the Crane sisters becomes most apparent when we investigate how each sister interacts with the notorious symbol for sexual activity, the bed. We have already discussed Marion’s introduction and the frequent scenes where she appears on or nearby beds while in some state of undress, but Lila’s contact with the bed, or lack thereof, intensifies the sexual polarization of these respective characters and their connection to asexuality. When Lila investigates the Bates manor, she discovers a bed with a single imprint; the imprint, left by the late Mrs. Bates, has been interpreted as the requisite lonely existence of lesbians and other queer characters on the silver screen. Lila then looks straight into the camera, as though she can see beyond


¹⁷. Ibid., 174.

the gaudy Victorian chambers and to the audience watching her during a disturbingly self-reflective moment (see fig. 3). This vignette could very well be admonishing depictions of queer characters in Hollywood cinema or perhaps perpetuating the stereotype that these characters are antisocial psychopaths who either end up dead, a murderer, or both. I argue, rather, the evidence Doty provides suggests that Lila is a desexualized, asexually-resonant figure, made especially apparent by this scene. I cannot imagine a more literal, visceral depiction of asexuality than an empty bed marred by an imprint—a profound absence—left behind by a single body. Unlike the viewer’s voyeuristic appraisal of Marion, Lila stares back at her audience in accusatory defiance.

While Doty supplies numerous sources to substantiate Lila’s homosexuality, we receive no such indication that she harbors lesbian desires for any of the female characters. Granted, Lila’s only prospects include her sister and a well-preserved corpse,
but the negation of female characters—except, perhaps, for Norman’s crossdressing—provides further testimony for an asexual possibility. Following Marion’s death, every character in Psycho is denied any romantic or sexual relationships. In fact, they are also denied any narrative conflict or characterization apart from Marion’s murder and the resulting investigation. We know that has Lila has no special or romantic feelings toward Sam, which makes their masquerade at the motel all the more performative. Furthermore, Doty discusses how Psycho’s ending appears apocalyptic. I offer a divergent analysis, one in which the desexualization of Lila and resulting narrative spells something closer to a static, narrative “purgatory.”

Klinger writes that “the reformulation of the couple in the second part, Lila and Sam, is in totally asexual, nonromantic terms,” which Doty uses to argue that Lila cannot escape the “queer apocalypse” that subsumes the entire film after Marion dies, similar to how the swamp greedily swallows Marion, her vehicle, and 40,000 dollars whole.19 While Doty employs this term in a rather lackadaisical manner, I think it possesses serious promise for our analysis, since it suggests that queerness is inherently destructive. Lila, the “brash, heroic dyke” stands in the wake of this revelation regarding her sister’s death, speechless and defenseless against the straight men who dissect the murder with cavalier alacrity.20 We cannot deny the nihilistic impulses inherent in Psycho, and its ending in particular, but the hyper- and desexualization theme, while perhaps not empowering for Lila, presents an additional area for analysis. This area


convolutes the narrative by imposing some sort of asexual or desexualized stasis—a purgatory, if you will—that neither moves the plot forward nor offers any definitive resolution. In Lee Edelman’s scorching polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and Death Drive* (2004), he describes the death drive that queer characters exhibit in traditional narratives, which opposes what he calls “reproductive futurism.” To simplify his argument, Edelman claims that heterosexual desire in film articulates itself through life and procreation while homosexuality through death and destruction. In a very visual example of this notion, Leonard in *North by Northwest* (1959) literally attempts to stomp out the heterosexual couple, and thereby the social values they symbolize, when he steps on Roger’s hand on top of Mount Rushmore.22 Leonard pays for his queer rebellion with his life, and the final shot of the film reinstates heterosexual order through the visual pun of the train entering the tunnel; Mrs. Danvers, Philip, Brandon, Bruno, and Uncle Charlie meet similar ends in their respective films, but the purgatory imposed by sexual polarization is most apparent in *Psycho*.

The film’s narrative diverges into an apocalyptic hellscape when Hitchcock allows his queer characters some agency. Asexually-resonant characters, while indisputably queer, languish in a constant stasis between life and death as well as good and evil, caused by binary representations of heteronormative and queer narrative states; in essence, these characters are thoroughly neutral.23 Based on its current articulation as a negative, lack, and absence, asexuality is equally incapable of affirming


22. Ibid., 87.

or denouncing the status quo or endorsing the ideology Williams insists is necessarily in classic Hollywood cinema. Hanson broaches this topic, writing that “The asexual possibility may be in tension with narrative closure, but it is not a productive tension. It is not a misdirection or an excess of narrative movement, but the cessation of movement ... structured by non-desire and non-event, asexual stasis has nothing to resolve.” With Lila juxtaposed against both heterosexual Marion and queer Norman, she literally and figuratively assumes a static, powerless, role between them, particularly when removed from the primary narrative. Her sister’s mystery solved, Hitchcock withholds any indication relating to Lila’s future. In fact, Lila’s characterization leaves the audience with very little a beyond a dogged determination to help her sister and indifference to the male gaze. She is a waif, made especially apparent by the sexual polarization that highlights Marion’s excess and Lila’s lack thereof.

Yet again, Hitchcock’s cynical, dandy dispositions subvert expectation time and again through queer negatives and absences. In films with this trope, two figures are intrinsically linked, connected by a traumatic experience, especially death. More often than not, the hypersexualized character knows or remembers something invaluable that the desexualized character cannot or does not, but desperately seeks. For instance, Neil recalls the sexual abuse he and Brian faced at the whims of their baseball coach in *Mysterious Skin* (2004), Marnie’s mother conceals her prostitution and daughter's childhood accident, Rebecca obscures her sexual excesses and acrimonious marriage with Max, and Marion’s disappearance spurns Lila to investigate her sister’s deepest

secrets. When the hypersexualized character imparts their counterpart character with this secret knowledge, frequently sexual, the revelation leaves them horrified and “whorified,” meaning that this new knowledge causes them to lose their “virginal” purity. This discovery, rather than consoling Lila or the desexualized others, neuters their motivation and conflict, thus revealing their inherent two-dimensionality, their stasis in between life and death, and the ways in which they are left undone. To that end, a queerly asexual analysis shows how every primary and secondary character in Psycho has some sort of sexual secret, except for Lila, who spends the entire film uncovering the secrets of others.

Thus uncovered, we witness firsthand how Hitchcock removes the spotlight from Lila; her duties fulfilled, she becomes part of the tertiary cast, nothing more than a reaction shot to play off of the arrogant psychiatrist’s oddly thorough diagnosis. We can conclude that the sexual polarization hypothesis shows the sheer scope of queer possibility, with Marion and Lila each representing remarkably diverse facets. Given Marion’s death, Norman’s depravity, and Lila’s desexualization, I still believe that Lila represents reasonably positive portrayal of queerness undefined by desire. However, this portrayal has its constraints, since desexualization and lack of character development tend to go hand in hand. Projecting beyond this film, sexual polarization offers a strategy to see how, in spite of the constant flux of films that inundate our culture, some things remain in constant stasis. While asexual resonances conceivably combat heteronormative values, its iteration in this trope is at the least reductive and, at the most, absent of any meaning whatsoever.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

My ears hear what others cannot hear; small faraway things people cannot
normally see are visible to me. These senses are the fruits of a lifetime of longing,
longing to be rescued, to be completed. Just as the skirt needs the wind to billow,
I’m not formed by things that are of myself alone... Just as a flower does not
choose its color, we are not responsible for what we have come to be. Only once
you realize this do you become free...

—India Stoker

Chan-wook Park’s *Stoker* (2013) begins and ends with the death of an old,
prototypical sheriff and the preceding quotation. India Stoker, an undeniably
questionable protagonist, smiles over his gasping, trembling body. She then pulls out a
rifle, aims it, and fires. The film concludes with the sheriff’s blood spraying the weeds
and wildflowers that abut a scenic highway. Described as a reimagining of Alfred
Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Stoker* follows India Stoker, a misanthropic
debutante who can only achieve sexual arousal by playing classical music and
committing violent murder.¹ She first murders a man who attempts to rape her; then the
queer, beguiling Uncle Charlie; and finally the sheriff, whom she kills simply for sadistic
pleasure. India symbolizes the trope that substitutes queer attraction and sex for death,
but her characterization also abounds with asexual resonances. Nevertheless, she acts
as the moral compass for the film, and this distinction imbues her with an agency and
platform fanatically withheld from her filmic ancestors, so to speak. A queer reading of

the accompanying quotation also advocates for an unapologetic, even inspiring, defense
of queer sexuality. With characters like India, we are witnessing firsthand the sluggish,
gradual shift in queer depictions that Russo so desperately longed for; however, as he
laments, this change will come “only when it becomes financially profitable, and reality
will never be profitable until society overcomes its fear and hatred of difference and
begins to see that we’re all in this together.”

In spite of these obstacles, through an analysis of these filmic artifacts and their predecessors, we can see how characters like
Marnie, while perhaps still subjugated, are increasingly wresting power from their
overseers.

Queer history is a lot like dust; no matter how many times someone wipes away
all the evidence, it just re-accumulates, again and again. That dust eventually settles for
good, remaining long after those who tried to remove it. In this thesis, we have
examined representations of asexuality in the films of Alfred Hitchcock, finding that
asexual resonances abound where queer themes are most prominent and prevalent. In
*Marnie* (1964), the sex-repulsed protagonist undergoes humiliating and horrifying
treatment by her husband and sexual blackmailer, who pathologizes her repulsion and
attempts to cure her through corrective rape and Freudian psychoanalysis. She is not
cured, however, and her story ends much like Brandon’s from *Rope* (1948). Similarly
incapable of reciprocating his partner’s passion, but equally inept at identifying or
expressing his frustrations in a way that would frame queer characters in a positive
light, Brandon ends the film separated from his straight and gay cohorts. Lila from
*Psycho,* while underdeveloped and lacking narrative conflict, epitomizes the sexual

1987), 322.
polarization trope that appears in all of these films and throughout cinematic history. Fortunately, she also epitomizes a reasonably positive portrayal of queer characters from the Production Code era, although her lack of characterization might account for this discrepancy. This brief exploration of Hitchcock’s renowned collection has shown that many of his films can be enriched by a queerly asexual analysis. Furthermore, the topic of asexuality could potentially cultivate additional discussions of human sexuality and its representation in cinema.

These discussions may include Gerard Loughlin’s argument about inherent asexuality in films with religious and Christian themes, which valorize chastity and disavow passion. He interrogates these instances, writing: “Why is asexuality deemed such an important aspect of heavenly life that the denial of sexuality in this life must be thought ‘superior’ to its practice? Is the denial of sexuality any closer to the asexuality of heaven, than is the embrace of sexuality in this life?” These questions indicate an area for queer inquiry where films with religious themes manufacture their own particular asexual resonances. Przybylo and Cooper also remark on asexuality’s “shadow feminism,” a very promising prospect because, in both of the films I discuss featuring asexual, female protagonist, feminist analyses also abound. In addition, continuing an investigation of sexual polarization—particularly in more recent films—and how these schisms can convolute or affect a traditional “heteronarrative,” may provide a fascinating timeline for asexual representation in cinema. These same issues may


appear in written literature as well, which could proliferate the investigations we begin in this thesis. Finally, horror films have always been hotbeds for queer analysis, and I believe that the asexual possibility makes its own ghoulish appearance in numerous movies mired in the macabre.

Again, this thesis and any resulting scholarship is not focused on identity politics or labelling a specific character as asexual; instead, a study of asexuality sheds additional light on queer representation, especially since gay characters are often articulated as asexual in older artifacts. Through tireless sleuthing and unfiltered curiosity, we can discover who did—or did not—do it, with whom, and why or why not. Asexuality defies the universal notion that we all physically desire someone else, regardless of the gender of that someone else. Coincidentally, our idea of what constitutes sexuality becomes increasingly visible as we learn to accept, or respect, human diversity, which allows for new perspectives and encourages further examination of human sexuality in any and all conceivable ways; I believe that asexuality stands to offer insights to anyone, not just the minority. The hope is that, with this thesis, I have provided prominence and representation for a budding facet of human expression that show how sexual identity is no longer defined within the limitations of a bedroom, and what we have been ceaselessly taught and told is now nothing more than the philistine ashes of the incurious.

Arnold, Martin and Scott Macdonald. “Sp... Sp... Spaces of Inscription: An Interview with Martin Arnold.” In *Film Quarterly 48*, no. 1 (1994).


APPENDIX A: FILMS DISCUSSED IN THIS THESIS

*Spellbound.* Dr. Alfred Hitchcock. United States, 1945.
APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL FILMS RELEVANT TO AN ANALYSIS OF ASEXUALITY

_Frankenstein._ Dr. James Whale. United States, 1931.
_Rebecca._ Dr. Alfred Hitchcock. United States, 1940.
_Shadow of a Doubt._ Dr. Alfred Hitchcock. United States, 1943.
_Strangers on a Train._ Dr. Alfred Hitchcock. United States, 1951.
_The Innocents._ Dr. Jack Clayton. United Kingdom, 1961.
_Empire._ Dr. Andy Warhol. United States, 1965.
_A Clockwork Orange._ Dr. Stanley Kubrick. United Kingdom, 1971.
_The Man Who Fell to Earth._ Dr. Nicolas Roeg. United Kingdom and United States, 1976.
_Alien._ Dr. Ridley Scott. United Kingdom and United States, 1979.
_The Hunger._ Dr. Tony Scott. United Kingdom and United States, 1983.
_A Room with a View._ Dr. James Ivory. United Kingdom, 1985.
_Aliens._ Dr. James Cameron. United States, 1986.
_Deenerated._ Dr. Martin Arnold. Austria, 2002.
_Inception._ Dr. Christopher Nolan. United States, 2010.
_Her._ Dr. Spike Jonze. United States, 2013.
_Stoker._ Dr. Chan-wook Park. United Kingdom and United States, 2013.
_It Follows._ Dr. David Robert Mitchell. United States, 2014.
_Mad Max: Fury Road._ Dr. George Miller. United States, 2015.