

The persecution of women in the films blackmail and frenzy through the use of SOU...

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



The issue of female persecution throughout many of Hitchcock's films has been fiercely contested, none more so than the controversial issue of assault and the attempted rape of a woman. Views that Hitchcock represents the archetypal misogynist are supported, Modelski suggesting that his films invite " his audience to indulge their most sadistic fantasies against the female" (18). Through both the manipulation of sound and the use of language, none more so than in *Blackmail* and *Frenzy*, the idea of rape and violence does effectively silence and subdue not only the women in the films, but the also the women watching them (18). It can be said that Hitchcock had in some regard, the upmost contempt and disregard for the female character and its expression throughout the majority of his films, showing both a lack of " incontrovertible evidence" (101) and a lack of restraint in his depiction of a highly problematic and violent incident, the rape and the " attempted" (almost subsequent) murder of a woman. Regardless of how violently depicted the aforementioned incident was, it is the female's inevitable exclusion through sound and language that leads to her inevitable downfall, displaying both films' attempts " to appropriate femininity and to destroy it", alluding to Modelski's curious comparison of " sympathy and misogyny" (110). It is this very comparison therefore that is the key to understanding why exactly the figure of the woman is so victimized. Despite the severity of the discrimination, and how it is depicted in either film, there appears to be an underlying sympathy due to the lack of communication the female has within " the man's world" due to the individual's exclusion from sound, as Yacowar states in his analysis of *Blackmail*, stating that " It works as a brilliant examination of the limits and problems of human

communication" (103). It is the purpose of this essay therefore to demonstrate that there is a profound influence in the use of sound and language in relation to the discrimination of women. By showing that the manipulation of sound and language in regards to the films' narrative structure is responsible for this apparent persecution, a clearer understanding should be gained as to why the figure of the female is observed in this form. In *Blackmail*, the discrimination of women appears to be the main focus throughout the majority of the film, clearly establishing a male dominated, misogynistic world from the beginning. The opening establishes and embodies the world of the justice system, "the man's world", accompanied by its seriousness, organisation and harshness in its outlook on reality, the depiction of a typical arrest, identification and trial of a convicted criminal. However, this "world", according to Wood is threatened, stating that it is somewhat disrupted by the protagonist's "frivolousness, selfishness, and triviality" (272). It becomes clear that the female protagonist, Alice, appears to be provocative and impatient, despondent at the prospect that she has been kept waiting at the expense of the British legal system, although she is more than happy to share a joke with the nearest detective in order to incite some form of reaction from her lover, Frank, a fellow detective. Stating that she expects "the entire machinery of Scotland Yard to be held up to please" her only aggravates an already awkward situation, emphasising her unwillingness to conform to the rules and regulations, expecting the law to accommodate her every necessity. Furthermore, irrespective of Alice's standpoint on the British legal system, it is her annoyance in being kept waiting a matter of minutes

that provides the ensuing events to take place and can be argued that she is responsible for the situation she puts herself into, causing a disagreement between herself and Frank to leave with another man, the artist and her "assaulter". Although the very nature of the Alice's agenda is to be questioned straight away, somewhat naïve and clueless with regards to the "man's world" and to human experience, she is unaware of the threat that she constantly subjected to, the representation of male desire and sexual practice through the element of sound and her own sexuality. This sexuality is illustrated by the envisagement of the "female" by the male. Her attempt at drawing a woman's head on the canvas is met with mixed reaction, causing the artist to take control of the situation, guiding her hand to complete the picture by drawing a nude female body, clearly showing an unconscious observation of his intentions. The artist's choice of song for instance, typifies the situation Alice finds herself in. The song, "Miss Up-to-Date", has lyrics that are essential to the moral matters within the film itself. The choice of song appears to display, at first glance, an amorous male's attempt in seducing the female protagonist. The lyrics, however, also introduce the fact that, like the nude painting is a caricature of the "female", according to Weis, "the song projects an image of how the artist envisions the girl, an interpretation of behaviour that the girl does not wish to accept" (54). By way of consenting to man's view of the "female", there is a sense that "the girl's extreme reaction to the artist's reaction to the artist's advances is prompted by her unacceptable image of herself that he has revealed to her" (54). This can also be said for the language in the film. It is the lack of communication or expression of language that is used to conceal

the " apparent" truth, aptly illustrated by her delayed confession at the conclusion of the movie, implicating the audience as well as herself and her lover Frank. In addition to the very centred misogynistic world which surrounds her, it is her inability to speak which causes her to be excluded, a personal admission of guilt that cannot be confessed. However, it is the male " word" against the female " word" that creates a tension, a tension that seems to favour what is considered to be an " act of violent love" (Spoto 19) rather than an " attempted" rape, Tracy's admittance " It's my word against hers" only underlining the lack of control Alice has within the " man's world". Although the intolerance of the female is clear through the language that is used, it is sound that provides the most understandable form of discrimination. It is therefore important to consider how the introduction of sound to the film industry has unconsciously created an outlet for filmmakers and the like to express their own personal views, whether they appear to be misogynistic and discriminatory towards women. The very nature of cinema at the time, complete with its restriction by political and ethical censorship, paves the way for the exploitation of the female through the unconscious use of sound and language rather than the shocking effects of the visual. By the manipulation of sound, Hitchcock is able to integrate previous elements of plot and narrative through the culmination of her experiences since she " allegedly" murdered her attacker, particularly during the infamous " knife" scene. Her hesitation and unwillingness to accept what she has done, her subsequent retreat and the time she spends aimlessly wandering the streets all coalesce in some shape or form within the sequence. Through the manipulation of sound and the almost apparent eradication of speech from

the perspective of the female protagonist, a sense of nervous anxiety and unconscious accusation is created. The rhythmic presentation, pitch and loudness of the word "knife", creates a sense of anxiety that, without the inclusion of sound, would have been totally undiscovered and no doubt, would not have been as effective (if at all possible) in the silent film genre, with its melodramatic, over-emotive style. However, according to Modelski, "critics of content themselves with celebrating the cleverness of such manipulations of sound without discussing its narrative function" (21), it being used to display the nervous anxiety that the female protagonist possesses. Regardless of this, the critics focus upon the cinematic genius that the director himself possesses, stating the way in which Hitchcock "masterfully controls this element by turning the cinematic screws" (133). What must be taken into consideration is the fact that *Blackmail* is the first British sound film that "foregrounds the problems of woman's speaking" (21). One must realise that this preparation regarding specific detail to the manipulation of sound allows Hitchcock to create through "subjected sound", a sense of belated hearing and distortion especially in terms of one of the film's male characters, Frank, especially at the scene whereby the sound is introduced, Frank's meeting with Alice at Scotland Yard. As indicated by Weis, "any sympathetic identification between the audience and Frank is minimal because the action is not seen from his perspective; he is as deep in the frame as the other two characters, and no subjective cutting is used" (45), indicating that Hitchcock's use of restricted hearing is key in terms of its narrative function, providing a platform from which he can control the audience's own identification with the character himself, hearing

as much as he does throughout the majority of the film, " Hitchcock makes us notice it by intentionally annoying us with it" (Weis 45). This elaborates upon the ease in which the " individual" can be manipulated through sound and not just the apparent, constant exclusion of the female herself. However, it must be stressed that the director, although accused to be persistently misogynistic and discriminatory toward women, does appear to create a sense of sympathy for the female. *Blackmail* does prove to offer " an exemplary instance of Hitchcock's misogyny, his need to convict and punish women for their sexuality, the film, like so many of his other works, actually allows for a critique of the structure it exploits and for a sympathetic view of the heroine trapped within that structure" (Modelski 25). It is the constant reduction of women to objects within the company of men, the heroine trapped " between a figure of the law and the lawlessness" (Modelski 28), that creates this sympathy. In her isolation, she is unable to ensure the only thing that can relieve her from her enclosed structure, " human communication", a commodity that within the " man's world", the figure of the female does not have. In order to relate the discrimination of the female to Hitchcock's own misogyny, an extreme example has to be taken in order to decide whether or not sound and language are purely responsible for the female's downfall. In looking at *Frenzy*, an extreme example of the attempted rape and discrimination of a woman, it is important to realise how exactly it differs to *Blackmail*, a film of a less severe depiction. By doing this, a clearer understanding of how the female is discriminated with " Hitchcockian" film will be maintained. In *Frenzy*, it is clear to see a different depiction of the persecution of women, a much more focused, violent

representation and the horrifying sense of reality that accompanies it. Due to the "incontrovertible evidence" (Modelski 101) that *Frenzy* undoubtedly shows, it must be emphasised that the violence that it portrays does not detract from the main focus, the discrimination of the female by what she represents. Despite this, it is its almost chilling and somewhat clinical use of language rather than its use of sound that gives *Frenzy* its harsh outlook. The representation of sexual violence has been, for the most part, fiercely contested and criticised, alluding to the plethora of Hitchcock's films that he has made previously, depicting through careful editing and creative manipulation, the very nature of the subject matter. According to Spoto in *The Dark Side Of Genesis*, with regards to the portrayal of sexual violence and the form of rape and murder, "Hitchcock insisted on all the ugly explicitness of this picture, and for all its cinematic inventiveness, it retains one of the most repellent examples of a detailed murder in the history of film" (545). In order to understand the exact severity and "repellent" nature of its depiction of sexual violence, it is important to consider the rape scene in detail, what exactly make it "repellent" and uneasy to watch as the viewer. The introduction of the scene sees the character of Rusk approaching a matrimonial agency, in search of "love", or as the inspector states, "a masochist", a woman who shall be dominated and effectively submit to his "peculiarities". His primary interest becomes clear and his intention to assault Brenda is known. Despite this, her reaction disappoints him, "All right, I won't struggle", his reply all the more sinister, "some women like to struggle", displaying his experience in sexual violence and highlighting, as stated by Modelski that "[woman's] capitulation to male desires and

expectations is never complete" (114). In close up, a sense of anguish can be clearly seen on the woman's face, her utterance of a psalm to detract her attention from what is happening. Through the prolonged close up of her naked breast, as well as her last act of humility by struggling to re-cover it with her bra whilst reciting her psalm, it undoubtedly emphasises the sheer grotesqueness of the situation. It is her words however which grotesquely clash with Rusk's own admittance of pleasure, the camera constantly cutting back and forth to Rusk's face, repeating the word "Lovely" to express the perverse pleasure he is receiving from his actions, until he eventually succumbs to his own impotence. By placing full responsibility on the woman, he effectively "blames" her, shouting "you bitch" before subsequently strangling her for her "failings" to arouse him, a sentiment that does support Spoto's claims regarding its "repellent" nature. However, it can be said that the inclusion of extremely graphic and "repellent" depictions of sexual violence was caused by the loosening of censorship around the time the film was made, and can also be related to some of the other films Hitchcock is famous for, Psycho and Vertigo to name a few, infamous for their inclusion of sexual violence, albeit less graphic but still effective. Bearing this mind, Weis suggests that this sexual violence can be said to be "a cultural response to women's demands for sexual and social liberation, demands that were, after all, at their height in 1972 when Frenzy was made" (111). In spite of this, it is the very nature of the woman's sexuality that is primarily responsible for her discrimination. Seemingly from the outset, the figure of the female is purely discriminated due the sexuality that she possesses, Rusk's constant "lusting" and craving to satisfy his "peculiarities" only highlighting the image

of women being displayed as sexual objects. It is through Rusk's own occupation, as a fruit vendor, which he continuously references, using language, the idea of copulation with food, another "object". His statement to Brenda before her subsequent rape only emphasises his position, "there's a saying in the fruit business, we put it on the fruit: don't squeeze the goods until they're yours. I would never, never do that". Apart from the obvious contradiction in regards to his own statement later in the scene, he proceeds to eat the apple she has bought, whether this is a metaphorical suggestion of his consummation of her or his allusion that what is "hers" is also "his". It is through the comparison of food with death that another issue is raised, the idea that the female is a form of filth and pollution, the inspector's uncanny comparison between the inedible food his wife places before him and the body of Babs, another victim. Modelski highlights the key association between women and pollution and their expression through language in several forms; none more so than the corpse as an extreme form of pollution, drawing us into "an immediate experience of the man's grotesque encounter with death" (108). It can be said that the female corpse does regain a measure of revenge by way of contaminating Rusk, and being responsible for his inevitable downfall. However, this fails to alter the perception of women, only accentuating the fact that a woman only possesses some form of power when she is dead, again illustrated through the inspector. It is his comparison, as aforementioned, that can be compared to the process of rape or assault as alluded to in the previous rape scene. It is Rusk's own inability to satisfy his sexual desire and his consequent murder of Brenda that appears to invoke a contrast, whereby food is likened to a

deceased corpse and the wife herself retaliates for his lack of sexual inclination. (109). What must be understood is that *Frenzy* does not endorse all the apparent, graphic violence that it displays. It is clear that women within the film gain sympathy for their problems regarding patriarchy. It is the idea of "cannibalism" that Modelski elaborates upon, stating its effect as a means to uncover the profound ambivalence the director holds for femininity as well as an eloquent understanding of women's struggle against patriarchy, "the individual at the cannibalistic stage wants to destroy the [woman] by devouring it, but [Hitchcock] also wishes to preserve it and assimilate it" (112). What must also be considered is the fact that the figure of the female is never truly destroyed, and that through the female there are elements that enable the female to be resistant to her apparent destruction or assimilation. (112). As it has been interpreted, it is clear that Hitchcock was "obsessed with exploring the psyches of tormented and victimized women" (Modelski 27), using a manipulation of sound and language to illustrate the female's undoubted lack of communication and human expression within the male-dominated, misogynistic "man's world". It is this lack of communication that is responsible for the numerous references of sexual discrimination and violence, in particular, the attempted rape of a woman, resultant due to "a particularly lucid expose of the predicaments and contradictions of women's existence under patriarchy" (Modelski 27). It is clearly apparent in both *Blackmail* and *Frenzy* that the director has the control to elaborate upon his own misogynistic outlook, displaying the exclusion of the female through an eradication of their speech and the manipulation of what surrounds them. By doing this, the director is able to

control how the figure of the female is persecuted and criticised throughout the majority of his films. Through the control of the female's exclusion through sound and language, the manipulation of it leads to her inevitable downfall, providing an opportunity for the appropriation of femininity and its destruction. By way of focusing on its appropriation, it can be said that sympathy is created in relation to its misogyny. It is through the sexual violence this misogyny creates that the male representation of the woman is based, its exploration through the unconscious sexuality of the female, thus creating a sympathy irrespective of the graphic nature in which the horrific incident is shown, illustrating an uneasiness that all protagonists are influenced by. Although the uneasiness of relationships at the conclusion of Hitchcock's films is a common theme, it is the deformation of sound and language by Hitchcock that creates the suspense and anxiety that his films are infamous for, allowing the female to become the centre of the discrimination, meaning that its only solution is the pursuit of "human communication", an ideal that through careful analysis of both films, seems impossible for the female to ascertain.

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Word Count: 3653