# **How does cultural context affect our understanding of cinematic context in relation to voyeurism in Hitchcock Movies?**

Over the past decades, the film industry has rapidly grown. The art of film covers various issues in the society ranging from political, religious and economic matters (Denzin, 1995). Over the years, the growth of the film industry has captured the attention of many cultures across the world. However, one must note that many factors affect how people understand and interpret the context of cinematic texts or the movies as presented by the authors. The factors dictate the relationship between the text and the context of the movie as Denzin (1995) highlights. There is a close relationship between the text and the context which influences how people understand cinematic texts. The relationship between movies and culture is a complicated issue. Cinema as art is deeply rooted in the cultural, political and economic context of its setting. Culture has a strong influence on how people perceive and understand movies (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 1997). Depending on the culture, some actions in a movie can be considered indecent while others can be considered decent. Cinema itself is a representation of various cultures with an aim to pass or communicate specific messages to the audience. Therefore, the paper herein looks at the how cultural, political and economic backgrounds affects one’s understanding of cinematic texts. Also, the paper looks at voyeurism in Hitchcock movies such as the Rear Window.

Movies influence culture while cultures also influence movies (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 1997). Movies have a strong influence on the cultures that consume them on various ways. Also, the production of the movies themselves is as a result of the activities taking place in the society. The activities inspire the creation of the movies as well as their distribution in the film market (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 1997).

Movies are not only inspired by the society and the culture, but they also act as custodians of the cultural practices of a society (Caldwell, 2008). Movies also influence certain behaviors in the societies that consume them. For example, most popular cultures in the United States and the United Kingdom are mainly influence by the film industry. Films may also be used to represent particular issues in the society such as gender discrimination, education, and poverty. The latter shows that understanding the context in which a movie is created is an important step in understanding the movie itself. Therefore, one with a proper understanding of culture and traditions of the society in which a movie is set is likely to understand it faster than one who is not familiar with the culture.

There are varied definitions of the term voyeurism, and they all depend on the context of use. However, despite the different definitions of voyeurism, the term has a common meaning of spying on someone or something (Deutelbaum and Poague, 2009). Spying, in this case, refers to the activity of looking or checking on someone without their knowledge. Therefore, cinematic voyeurism refers to the act of peering and spying on the activities of other people and their private moments (Deutelbaum and Poague, 2009). The persons being looked at in this case do not know that they are being watched and hence the voyeur takes his time trying to interpret his actions. Apart from just the act of spying, the most common definition of voyeurism is the act of gaining sexual pleasure by looking at or watching other people engaging in sexual activity (Deutelbaum and Poague, 2009). The latter gives a specific meaning of the term voyeurism which is extensively covered in Hitchcock’s works. Voyeurism has in many cases been a subject of discussion in the cinema industry. Some scholars even argue that the act of watching a movie itself is an act of voyeurism since the audience derives pleasure by looking at the private activities of other people. The following text gives a glimpse into the biography and career of Hitchcock.

Alfred Hitchcock is one of America’s greatest film directors having produced tens of movies (Taylor, 2013). Alfred Joseph Hitchcock grew up in Essex, England and he was the son of the late William Hitchcock and Emma Jane. Hitchcock’s parents were both half Irish and Half English, and he had two siblings (Taylor, 2013). Hitchcock grew up as a member of the Catholic Church and attended a school run by Jesuits. Hitchcock’s interest in movies started when he was working as an estimator for the Henley Company. During this time, Hitchcock frequently visited cinemas and reading US trade journals which inspired him to be a movie director (Taylor, 2013). Hitchcock later joined the film industry in 1920 where he started as an artist drawing the sets. His first success in directing a movie was in 1923 when he succeeded in directing the movie Number 13 from start to finish. His career in the film industry grew fast, and he became one of the best producers in the United States gaining a nickname “Master of Suspense” (Eisenberg and Blank, 2013). However, Hitchcock died in 1980 due to renal failure.

## **Effects Cultural Context on the Understanding of Cinematic Context about Voyeurism**

As already defined in the previous sections of this paper, voyeurism refers to an act of spying on other people’s private affairs or moments. Voyeurism is a major subject in the cinema industry as some of the artists use it a style of writing their texts and movies. For example, Alfred Hitchcock is one of the main artists who talked about voyeurism in their works. Francis Ford Coppola also covered voyeurism in his work The Conversation (Blazer, 2006). Hitchcock’s Rear Window is also considered as one of his works where he extensively used and covered voyeurism.

In the movie the Rear Window, the main character, Jeffrey is seen to be driving pleasure by looking at his neighborhood. In the text, the story evolves from what the main protagonist sees. In this case, vision is used as the primary sense to engage in voyeurism (Blazer, 2006). Hitchcock shares the visual experience of Jeffrey with his audience in the entire text showing his voyeuristic behavior. However, in most societies, spying or peeping is regarded as unethical behavior. The latter can be seen when Jeffery and his family members become wary of the ethical issues of peeping but later realize that it has helped them realize many things about their neighborhood. It is through the voyeuristic behavior of Jeffrey that they can find out about the murder of Mr. Thorwald. The society views voyeurism as an unhealthy desire that should not be tolerated as it contradicts the ethical norms. However, Hitchcock in his movies, especially the Rear Window, tries to contradict this school of thought. He uses his main character to show some of the benefits of voyeurism and also forces the audience into the act of voyeurism to prove his point of view. Therefore, in Hitchcock’s works, voyeurism is treated as not much unhealthy but as a natural behavior that any individual can have (Denzin, 1995). However, the point of view that regards voyeurism as a natural behavior may affect the reception and distribution of the movies in areas where voyeurism is considered as a criminal offense. In some societies, the act of spying is considered as a criminal offense and can only be carried out by licensed individuals. Therefore, such jurisdictions can consider movies that promote the act such as the Rear Window unsuitable for its citizens as it promotes a criminal act.

Hitchcock presents the act of voyeurism using various approaches in of his movies. For example, he uses the vision as the primary medium of spying while in other works, he uses sound as the primary way of expressing the act of voyeurism. Where he uses sound as the medium of voyeurism, the characters listen to what other people are saying without their knowledge.

Hitchcock’s point may be true depending on how one looks at the issue of voyeurism. Voyeurism can be considered as human nature since humans are born curious (Mulvey, 1989). Humans in their natural habitats often want to know what is going on around them and voyeurism is one of the ways he uses to collect information about his environment. People naturally look at things they are not supposed to look at out of curiosity. Also, people love listening to things they are not supposed to listen to as defined within their cultural contexts. The urge to know why one is not supposed to look at or listen to a particular thing is what drives people to commit the act of voyeurism. As members of the society, people tend to know as much as they can about everything happening within the society even if it does not concern them. As a result, the society that condemns voyeurism as an unethical behavior is itself made of voyeurs. For instance, people go to the cinemas to watch actions and drama which are actions of other people. Some people also view pornographic content to drive pleasure which they cannot gain in their lives. Hitchcock tries to prove this point through his characters. For example, in the Rear Window, he presents Jeff as a voyeur when he looks at the dramas of his neighbor (Mulvey, 1989). He then brings the fact that every member of the society is a voyeur and one should not be condemned for being a voyeur.

An analysis into most of Hitchcock’s works shows the acts of voyeurism in many forms ranging from the simple spying to the complicated identification between the voyeur and his audiences as can be seen in Psycho and Rear Window. Hitchcock maintains that all humans are voyeurs when he tells Truffaut that nine out of ten people will stand and look at a woman or a man dressing or puttering in their rooms and not is likely to turn and walk away minding his or her business (Deutelbaum and Poague, 2009). He also mentions that despite the society considering voyeurism as an evil behavior, all its members are voyeurs. It is this point of view that inspires most of his works from Psycho to Rear Window. For example, Norman Bates acts as a voyeur Psycho, and he does not feel guilty about it proving Hitchcock’s point that every individual is a voyeur.

The works of Hitchcock gives a clear indication of how certain aspects of the society can affect the creation production, distribution, and preservation of cinematic texts. For instance, the society can influence the creation of a cinematic text in many ways which include the choice of characters, the choice of scenes as well as the story itself. The latter can be illustrated by Hitchcock’s choice to cover the issue of voyeurism in the society in most of his works (Eisenberg and Blank, 2013). Reading or watching most of the Hitchcock’s works show that he intended to convince the audience that voyeurism is a natural thing that every individual can have. He intended to show the audience the error in the cultural view of voyeurism as a vice in the society. Therefore, one can realize that the views of the society on various issues may have a great influence on the creation of cinematic texts.

Voyeurism has taken over the contemporary society, and the society is now regarded as a surveillance society. Citing the internet especially the social media where one can get all the information about an individual without their knowledge. The cameras installed in every public space also spy on every move that people make hence making the society itself made of voyeurs. The latter proves Hitchcock’s point that the society is made of all voyeurs. The current cinematic works also portray voyeurism at high levels that it is difficult to differentiate between what is considered as private and what is considered as public. The current cinematic works have made what the society considered obscene as fascinating. However, one can still see the effect of the perception of the society on the consumption of such material. The exposures of some acts that are considered obscene according to the cultural norms of certain groups of people have led to the burn of such films in different countries across the world. For example, one of the largest film industries, Hollywood has faced a lot of difficulties in letting its products penetrate the Chinese market due to the cultural and the political differences between the United States and China. Therefore, a cinematic work set in the United States may be difficult for a Chinese student to understand and interpret its context due to the differences in culture and political contexts of the two countries.

Cinematic texts are products of the society, and therefore, all factors that affect the society are likely to affect the texts. Most cinematic works are based on the cultural, political, economic and historical issues affecting a particular society. Therefore, one’s understanding of the context of the text mainly relies on the knowledge of the cultural, political and economic context under which the story is built. Voyeurism is one of the cultural aspects that influence how people perceive movies and how they consume its content. Despite voyeurism regarded as a vice in most societies, Hitchcock through his works proves that it is a natural behavior that any normal person can have. From his works and points of view, one can conclude that the society is made of all voyeurs and voyeurism is not a vice as long as it does not interfere with the rights of other members of the community.

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