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The Lady in the Van and the challenge of Psycho: On the political uses of psychoanalytic imagery in film

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The Lady in the Van and the Challenge to Psycho; On the political uses of psychoanalytic imagery in film

Abstract

This paper explores the strikingly similar use of psychoanalytic imagery in the films *Psycho* and *The Lady in the Van*. The paper argues that the latter film is a deconstruction of the former's political aims. Where *Psycho* uses psychoanalytic imagery to warn of the danger that strong female autonomy poses to normal psychic development, *The Lady in the Van* uses the same tropes to expose the mendaciousness of such thinking. The paper concludes by demonstrating how *Psycho* represents a counter challenge to the political pretensions of *The Lady in the Van*. Bennett's film is on the face of it a critique of middle class attitudes to homelessness. However, this paper demonstrates that by offering a psychological explanation for Miss Shepherd's alterity, *The Lady in the Van* mimics the psychiatrists detailed diagnosis of Norman Bates's perversion at the end of *Psycho*. This is argued to be problematic because the repeated explanation of the alterity of the strong voice of the mother reduces the uniqueness of the character to a symptom rather than an expression of autonomy. Ultimately the paper makes a case for the cultural significance of these films for exploring the political use of psychoanalysis to promote different social ends.

There are many curious, subtle, yet also striking similarities between the seemingly disparate films *Psycho* (1960) and *The Lady in the Van* (2015). Even though the two films, released fifty-five years apart, are quite different in terms of genre and style, the more recent film borrows many images and tropes from the earlier film that invite comparison. This paper will explore the potential of *The Lady in the Van* for exposing and critiquing the ideological gestures of *Psycho*. What will emerge is a rich critique of the way that psychoanalytic imagery can be used to promote oppressive and persecuting notions of 'normal psychological development' that privilege conservative conceptions of heterosexual male dominance.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Nicholas Hytner's film adaptation of Alan Bennett's memoir and play, *The Lady in the Van*, while prima facie appearing to be incomparable, share a variety of similar features. Firstly, both films' action takes place around a space of

accommodation beside a three level house. Furthermore the accommodation is used by a female fugitive. In *Psycho* Norman Bates' three-level house sits perched above the motel. In *The Lady in the Van*, the action takes place around Alan Bennett's three-level house in Camden Town where his driveway operates as a place of refuge for the homeless Miss Shepherd.

Secondly, both films begin as a story about a female character on the run from the law before completely shifting to focus to concentrate on a male character's psychological problems. Thirdly, in both films the male lead character is dealing with issues to do the mortality of their mother. Also the mother figure in both films watches over the sexual behaviour of the male lead. Fourthly, both Norman Bates and Alan Bennett are presented as divided selves. Norman Bates takes on the personality of his dead mother, and Bennett is presented as two selves who talk to each other, the writer-who-lives and the writer-who-writes. (Actually, there is a third Alan Bennett, the real Bennett who appears in a Hitchcock-esque cameo at the end of the film). In both films the split personalities are resolved in the final moments. In *Psycho*, Bates and his mother become inseparable as Bates appropriates her persona entirely. In the more positive resolution of *The Lady in the Van*, Bennett is shown as no longer divided as if he has worked through his problems. What is important about this difference is that both Bates's descent into psychosis, and Bennett's ascent to authenticity are a result of their respective relationships to strong autonomous women. *The Lady in the Van* mimics the psychological framework whilst simultaneously inverting the invited reading of that imagery. To demonstrate the deconstructive potential of *The Lady in the Van* it is important to first establish the connection between the psychoanalytic framework of both films. Once this has been established the significant cultural relevancy of that deconstruction can emerge. The most useful way of linking the two films is through analysing the psychoanalytic imagery of the three-level house in each film.

In *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Slavoj Žižek claims that the three levels of Norman Bates' house are analogous to the three level mind of Freudian Psychoanalysis – the same can be said of *The Lady in the Van*. Žižek describes the middle level of the house, the main living area, as Bates' ego. For Freud, the ego is the coherent organization of mental processes and these processes are what give rise to consciousness (Freud 443). The upper level represents his superego. The superego is the result of the Oedipus complex, where the infant internalises simultaneous feelings of love and anger towards the father figure, who is a source of love and also an obstruction to the enjoyment of the mother figure. The result of this ambivalence is the internalisation of a sense of guilt. The unconscious drives of the id are from then on presented to the ego through the superego.

The superego presents a series of demands for ideal behaviour. Thus, in *Psycho*, the mother's voice berates Norman from the top level for not meeting the high standards of his ego ideal. Finally, the basement level represents the id, "the reservoir of these illicit drives" (Žižek). Freud understands the id to be the home of the unconscious. It is unwilled and constantly communicates to the ego its desire for pleasure. Žižek claims that the key point regarding the arrangement of the levels of Bates' house is that there is a deep connection between the superego and the id. For Žižek, there is nothing ethical about the commands of the superego. In fact, as Žižek contends, the superego places ever more exacting demands of us and laughs if they aren't achieved. Žižek argues, "There is always some aspect of an obscene madman in the agency of the superego."

This paper will later explore the political meaning that Hitchcock propounds through the depiction of psychological development. At this point in the argument it is important to show how *The Lady in the Van* uses the same imagery as *Psycho*. *The Lady in the Van* mimics the depiction of psychological life in *Psycho*, and, through the subtle narrative differences that emerge from the same psychological framework, the more recent film dissolves the strong

political meaning of *Psycho*. Thus, it is important to set up how the psychoanalytic framework is on display in *The Lady in the Van*.

The demanding call of the superego in *The Lady in the Van* is evident on both Miss Shepherd and Bennett. At the beginning of the film, an imageless audio sequence of a car accident is followed by a shot of Miss Shepherd on the run from the police. For the rest of her life, Miss Shepherd falsely believes that she has caused a young motorcyclist's death, and she feels guilty about that. Symbolically, this guilt is represented through the retired police officer who, like an apparition, irregularly appears at her van in the dead of night and corruptly extorts money from her by suggesting he will turn her in (even though he has knowledge of her innocence). The officer's appearances are the symbolic call of the superego and resemble the insults hurled at Bates by his mother.

Miss Shepherd's superego has an oedipal origin as there are two authority figures that loom large over her pre-van life. Firstly, there is the male figure of her piano teacher, the virtuoso Alfred Cortot. Secondly, there is the female authority figure of the Mother Superior from her convent life. At first Miss Shepherd loves both her mother (the church) and her father (music). However, as she develops she finds that the two are seemingly incompatible, as one takes her away from the other. This is analogous to Freud's descriptions of the infantile ego coming to see the father as an obstruction to enjoyment of the mother (Freud 455). It is through Miss Shepherd's attempts to love God more than music that she experiences feelings of ambivalence towards music - it is at once is a source of joy and sin. Miss Shepherd internalises this relationship to the father figure and the resulting neurosis has her guilt take on the inflection of an intense and negative reaction to hearing music. That is, the superego is formed through this relationship and the result need not be an ethical sense of guilt, just one informed by how the internalisation of that reaction to the father resolves itself. Freud describes the super-ego as the self-judgement that the ego falls short of its ideal (Freud

453). Miss Shepherd's loud and physical praying at night in her van is evidence of an ego prostrating itself before an overactive superego that loudly proclaims her inability to satisfy the conditions of her ego ideal. In a striking gesture towards *Psycho*, Miss Shepherd's van has shower curtains separating the inside space of atonement from the outside.

There are more symbolic representations of the superego in *The Lady in the Van*. After Miss Shepherd moves into Bennett's driveway she symbolically becomes Bennett's superego. When Miss Shepherd parked her van on the street she was the superego of the street's residents. She reminded them of their privilege and curtly refused their offers of charitable atonement. In Bennett's driveway, Miss Shepherd takes on a more personal relationship to Bennett, acting as his superego, making unrealistic demands of his behaviour, and, like Bates's mother, cantankerously yelling in judgement at Bennett's sexual encounters - she stands as a loud and judgemental sentinel, watching over his sexual behaviour.

The levels of Bennett's house are also interesting metaphors for Bennett's psyche. It is easier to understand each level as symbols for the religious metaphysical locations, heaven, hell and purgatory. Heaven, the top floor, is the cleanest. Bennett pleads with Miss Shepherd to not use the bathroom on that level because of its cleanliness. Also on this floor is the bedroom, a monastic cell with a single bed and very little else decorating the room. Interestingly, this bedroom is not where Bennett has sexual encounters. There is one moment where Bennett attempts to seduce a male actor and is promptly and politely rejected. The rejection comes at a time when he is keeping his homosexuality secret. His sexuality does not match the ideal of 'proper' sexuality that is allowed in this top floor room of the ego ideal. Rather than this becoming a moment for an interruption of violence, as it would in *Psycho*, it all remains quite civil. For Bennett, the failure to live up to the exacting demands of the ego ideal does not result in perversion; rather this interesting and subtle subversion of the

meaning of the encounter between the ego and superego demonstrates the narrow ideological nature of the depiction of psychological development in *Psycho*.

Effectively, the political meanings of *Psycho* are exposed and dissolved by the depiction of a civil encounter that challenges socially accepted behaviour. Bennett challenges his ego ideal by questioning the prioritising of a certain view of sexuality. That the encounter is unsuccessful and that Bennett's future trysts occur in his basement does not indicate the success of the image of the celibate ego ideal; instead the act of challenging what can occur in the top floor that results in a civil and polite rejection represents a deconstruction of the dominant ego ideal insofar as an ambiguity has been added to the image that reveals the ideological meaning of the original as well as the potential for other meanings to emerge. The fixed meaning of the ideal ego is dissolved through this challenge. To borrow a term from the criticism of Jacques Derrida, the questioning of normality is a *pharmakon* in the film. It poisons the dominant reading of normal psychological development whilst also offering a cure from the oppressiveness of that reading.

The film has many references to Saints. For example, in their first encounter Miss Shepherd asks Bennett if he is Saint John. Bennett's neighbours also repeatedly describe him as a Saint for allowing Miss Shepherd to park in his driveway. The Saint is the ego ideal; that is, the ideal of behaviour that one should be like, but must fail to live up to. Bennett has one courageous outburst in the film when he hears the ex-police officer threatening Miss Shepherd. From the window of his monastic cell Bennett scares the officer away. It is from this height that Bennett acts without motive, or sense of English timidity and repression. This level thus functions similarly to the superego, insofar as it presents to Bennett a behaviour ideal. Again a subtle difference from the depiction in *Psycho* challenges the meaning of 'normal psychological development' offered in *Psycho*. Here is an instance of the voice of

the super ego (the top level) operating as an ethical agent. The superego here demands of Bennett just action to help a vulnerable person.

The second floor is purgatory, and it also the floor where Bennett is divided into two selves. This is where writer-who-writes labours, like a transcribing monk, whilst the writer-who-lives paces the halls regretting his inability to live a meaningful life. This is the level of uncertainty, and social reality. Bennett does his business here, engages with neighbours, leaves the house, and escorts away his partners from his midnight trysts. There is a degree of inauthenticity and self-deception operating in this ground floor level. The ethical heights of the monastic cell are covered over by decorations, and personas. Bennett's neighbours gossip in his kitchen at this level while he fetches a bottle of wine. His neighbours gossip about Bennett's "dirty secret" (his obvious but unspoken homosexuality). Bennett allows himself to show emotion on this level, and to hide it as well. Thus this level represents a purgatory-like waiting where the ego is stuck between the calls for pleasure satisfaction from the basement and the calls for Saintliness from upstairs, and from the van outside. The van literally blocks the house's entrance to the world and Bennett's corresponding social interactions are inflected with the van's presence.

The basement level of the house is hidden from us. The writer-who-writes does not enter this level, he remains in purgatory as an aspect of the ego. Here, in the id, is the home of sexual desire. The camera does not reveal this level. Its presence is hinted at when Bennett asks Miss Shepherd to use the toilet downstairs as she is spoiling the upstairs toilet; and again, after the death of Miss Shepherd and the removal of the van, Bennett's new live-in partner announces that he will be waiting downstairs. Since, for most of the film Bennett keeps his sexuality secret, this open recognition of his sexuality can be said to represent a subversion of the oppressive depiction of normal psychological development presented in *Psycho*.

All of this demonstrates a cultural significance to the psychoanalytic theory at the heart of these films. The way that *The Lady in the Van* can use the same tropes as *Psycho* to subvert the dominant reading of normal psychological development has far reaching consequences for resisting oppressive imagery. This is especially significant when considering the sexist depiction of the strong autonomous woman in *Psycho* and the contrasting, yet mimicking depiction of the noble strong autonomous Miss Shepherd in *The Lady in the Van*.

Robert Genter has presented a thorough account of the specific historical contexts of various psychoanalytic themes that inform *Psycho*. He demonstrates that the climate into which *Psycho* emerged was receptive to the idea that political deviance and sexual deviance were linked (Genter 138-139). Such ideas culminated in Theodor Adorno, Daniel J. Levinson, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, and Nevitt Sanford's *The Authoritarian Personality*. This book argues that individuals who possess a deficiency in their egos, through poor mothering that stifles the development of the traditional Freudian model of good psychological development through the Oedipus complex, become, through that deficiency, submissive, untrusting, and open to radicalisation (228). Genter's claim is that Norman Bates' character is intentionally analogous to the 1960's conception of the psychopath. Murray Pomerance claims that Bates begins as the standard of American boyhood, and it is through the smothering relationship with his mother that the ideal of boyhood is perverted (239). For Genter, "Bates became the exemplar of the political and sexual deviant depicted by the psychoanalytic community" (Genter 148). That Miss Shepherd, in *The Lady in the Van*, confuses Bennett's homosexuality for communism is an interesting point considering the film's similarities with *Psycho*. This confusion fits the conflation of political and sexual deviancy common in MacCarthyist era discourse. However, in *The Lady in the Van*, the confusion is treated, as it should be, as a moment for comedy.

The Lady in the Van is not suggesting that homosexuality is a problematic deviancy, indeed its ending depicts Bennett being publicly open about his sexuality, and psychologically healthy as a result. However, as noted earlier, the social critique of *The Lady in the Van* is the critique of class identity in 1970's Britain. The residents of Camden Town are white, well-to-do, and overly conscious of their separation from the poverty of Miss Shepherd. In fact their distance from Miss Shepherd is mirrored by their distance from the sexuality of Bennett – both poverty and sexual deviance are somewhat incomprehensible to them. For example, in an awkward scene the neighbours have attempted to match Bennett with a woman – this is despite the fact that they gossip about him hiding a “dirty secret”. Thus they know of homosexuality, but see it more as a deviancy to be corrected than a natural way of being. Through this use of comedy the film critiques the ideological assumption that harbouring sexual desires for someone of the same sex, or, believing that communism is a better alternative to neoliberal democracy, are forms of psychopathic deviancy requiring incarceration. *The Lady in the Van* thus enacts another inversion, this time by demonstrating the moral bankruptcy of the white middle class, (who in *Psycho* are the model for moral normalcy).

Genter describes Norman Bates as suffering from an Orestes complex. Initially described by Fredric Wertham, the Orestes complex suggests that the defining drive of man is towards matricide rather than patricide. Wertham's is fearful that along with a rise in female autonomy, there is a corresponding collapse of the household. Thus, Wertham saw matricidal drives as evidence of a desire to reign in the destructive power of women that thwarts expressions of masculinity (Beaty 29). Genter draws our attention to the work of Edmund Bergler and his notion of the “giantess of the nursery” (152).

Rather than as a source of pure pleasure, for Bergler, the mother is also a threat to the megalomania of the infant, imposing sleep schedules, feeding times and other outside

determinants on to the consciousness of the child who believes itself to be omnipotent. If a strong masculine figure does not diminish the fearful power of the mother the result is abnormal psychological development where either the child internalises feelings of sadism towards the mother, or masochism, actually enjoying the torment from the mother. Bergler, like Wertham, and in line with the general fears of MacCarthyist North America, argues that the decline of masculinity and the concurrent rise of feminine autonomy left individuals still fearful of the maternal image (Genter 153). Genter describes Bergler's psychoanalytic theory as the most relevant framework for *Psycho* (153). This fits with Raymond Bellour's observation that in Hitchcock's films only men are able to be psychopaths; and that it is through engagement with emasculating women that men develop psychosis (Bellour 321).

Interestingly this is also the relevant framework for *The Lady in the Van*, despite that film's attempts at criticising the society which harboured such irrational and sexist fears. Bennett seems to fear allowing his mother into his life, as if she still is the giantess of the nursery. He tells her that she wouldn't like the stairs, which, considering the analysis of the three level house above, is suggestive of Bennett not wanting to show his mother his true psychological state. Yet Bennett is no Bates, and, if following Bergler's model this is perhaps due to the presence of a strong father figure in Bennett's early life. The film suggests this is the case in a poignant scene where Bennett is walking his mother to a taxi which she does not want to enter as she longs for the company of her son. The mother looks at Bennett and announces that she deeply misses Bennett's father. The insinuation is that his presence in the household held the mother together. Thus it could be said that Bennett was able to avoid falling into psychopathy because of the presence of his father in his early life. However, a better reading of *The Lady in the Van* is that the film represents a strong criticism of the sexism and pessimism of Bergler and *Psycho*.

Genter describes *Psycho* as a statement by Hitchcock that the resulting state of affairs from the collapse of male authority will destroy normal family relations (156). *The Lady in the Van* inverts the fear of feminine autonomy that Bergler and others display, even as the film uses the same psychoanalytic framework to depict the relationship with the mother. The inversion occurs through the celebration of Miss Shepherd's autonomy. For example, Bennett is aware that it is her will which secures the space in driveway. Also, in one of the final sequences, the ghost of Miss Shepherd is speaking to both Bennett's announcing that her fifteen year presence in the driveway represents having the last laugh. Thus Bennett overcomes his matricidal tendencies without needing to identify with a strong father figure and the result is a moving portrait of care, not the collapse of such sentiment. Bennett enables feminine autonomy by allowing Miss Shepherd to live in his driveway, and through her autonomy he comes to terms with his own issues.

As mother figure, Miss Shepherd represents a critique of such psychoanalytic theory that relies on a specific sequence of events to take place in a specific order for normal psychological development – such as the Oedipus or Orestes complex. Our first glimpse of Miss Shepherd and Alan Bennett in their arrangement has Miss Shepherd descending the staircase from the top floor bathroom with the sound of a flushing toilet. Bennett asks her not use that bathroom as it is clean, to which she replies that the basement bathroom is too foul for her sensibilities. To put this scene in the terms of the tripartite model described above, not only is Miss Shepherd reluctant to explore Bennett's id, she literally defecates in his superego. Any talk of normal psychological development from this point on is doomed to murkiness. Miss Shepherd is incontinent and her faeces appears at regular intervals in Bennett's top floor bathroom and driveway.

Miss Shepherd's incontinence and Bennett's constant cleaning of her faecal waste from his floor and driveway is further critique of the notion that increased female autonomy is to

blame for society's woes. Despite her biological vandalism of Bennett's house and driveway, Bennett remains in charge of his narrative. His recognition of Miss Shepherd's strength at the end of the film does not diminish his authorial voice, nor does the unveiling of a plaque in her honour take away from the act that Bennett is the star of his own story. The writer-who-writes does not tame Miss Shepherd as the strong father figure should in Bergler's account. If anything Miss Shepherd hones her criticisms of Bennett instead of being subdued by his masculinity. At the end of the film Bennett the writer happily provides Miss Shepherd a dramatic ascension into heaven with God welcoming her with outstretched arms. Clearly Miss Shepherd and her autonomy have not made the world worse.

Furthermore, the bathroom washing scene from *Psycho* is similar to Bennett's washing of his bathroom after Miss Shepherd has spoiled it. In both films there is a mother figure spoiling the bathroom's cleanliness and the son accounts for the mess. In *Psycho*, this motif lends itself to the Orestes complex and the entailing critique of feminine autonomy; however this is not the case in *The Lady in the Van*. Alan Bennett's cleaning of his top floor bathroom represents his own attempts to maintain his sublimation. He cleans, grudgingly, as an expression of care. The social criticism of *The Lady in the Van* forces an encounter between the homeless and the middle class. Bennett expresses in the film his worry that audiences will feel that there is too much excrement in the film. He then retorts, that "care is all about shit." Bennett is cleaning up the mother's mess out of a sense of duty, just as psychiatrist at the end of *Psycho* proclaims. However, Bennett is not cleaning up his mother's crime; instead he is symbolically dealing with his guilt at the privilege of his situation – he wishes her filth would just disappear. Bennett is thus guilty of the same hypocritical middle class attitude to homelessness that pervades his street. He cleans in order to maintain his otherness. That is, Miss Shepherd's poverty cuts through the illusion of the saintly monastic cell and stains it with the reality of poverty. There is from Bennett's neighbours, attempts at charity which fail

to address the fundamental difference between the poverty stricken and upper middle class. The occasional hot drink or slice of cake does not address the level of difference from poverty that Miss Shepherd's excrement reveals.

The bathroom scene of *The Lady in the Van* can be further illuminated by examining the piercing, statue-like gaze of Miss Shepherd. Žižek, in *The Perverts Guide to Cinema*, describes the use of toilets in Hitchcock's films as revealing a threshold between the ego ideal and the id.

We say the eye is the window of the soul. But what if there is no soul behind the eye? What if the eye is a crack through which we can perceive just the abyss of a netherworld? When we look through these cracks, we see the dark, other side, where hidden forces run the show... In our most elementary experience, when we flush the toilet, excrements simply disappear out of our reality into another space, which we phenomenologically perceive as a kind of a netherworld, another reality, a chaotic, primordial reality. And the ultimate horror, of course, is if the flushing doesn't work, if objects return, if remainders, excremental remainders, return from that dimension... Hitchcock is all the time playing with this threshold. (Žižek)

In *Psycho*, Sam and Lila find proof that Marion was in the Bates Motel when they discover a piece of paper floating in the toilet that had failed to flush away. The unflushed toilet defied even Norman Bates' meticulous cleaning. Similarly, in *The Lady in the Van*, the dark reality of poverty defies the cleaning efforts of Bennett who admits that he would rather that it all just went away (like the flushing of a toilet). Such a reading of the bathroom scene casts a different angle on the happy ending of *The Lady in the Van*.

Seeing as how it is more than possible to read *The Lady in the Van* as presenting a subtle deconstruction of the oppressive political use of psychoanalytic imagery in *Psycho*, it is interesting to note that *Psycho* can be seen as exposing the political pretensions of *The Lady in the Van*. *The Lady in the Van* clearly attempts to make a statement about middle class attitudes to poverty and homelessness. However, the ethical critique of contemporary attitudes to homelessness is ineffective and this is demonstrated through the similarities that the ending of the film has with the ending of *Psycho*.

Genter analyses the way that the ending of *Psycho* has different meanings for different contexts. He points out that for the beat generation Norman Bates became a counter culture figure, as for them the psychopath represented the only valid form of dissent in a world of psychological control (157). This interpretation opens up an interesting comparison with the ending of *The Lady in the Van*. It is not a stretch to suggest that one of the appeals of Miss Shepherd's character is in her counter culture status. She is sharply juxtaposed to British middle class sensibility and the positioning brings out what is worst in the latter (repressed desire, timidity, hypocrisy...). The film is strongest when Miss Shepherd is enigmatic. She has strange and scary visitors to her van, she mysteriously visits a stranger in a seaside town, she has an unknown past involving study abroad and time in a nunnery, and, most importantly, despite her obvious problematic situation she exudes a towering sense of dignity. However, similarly to *Psycho*, where the psychiatrist provides a complete analysis of Bates and his backstory, *The Lady in the Van* reveals Miss Shepherd's life in a way which removes her alterity.

Bennett, by revealing the back story of Miss Shepherd, takes ownership of her character. When Miss Shepherd eventually receives institutional care, her back story, which she has so closely guarded, is unravelled. In other words, Miss Shepherd's character, once subsumed by the psychiatric world, is diagnosed and explained through a series of revelations, and

consequently, her autonomy disappears as the unique features of her character are reduced to a symptom. These revelations represent Bennett's appropriation of Miss Shepherd. Bennett even has Miss Shepherd return after her death, now happy and conversational, to candidly speak of her desires for her memorial – recalling the voice of Bates' mother pondering on how she would be remembered. She has also reconciled in heaven with the young man whose motorcycle crashed into her, thus removing her guilt. In a most extravagant scene the clouds even part for her and God calls her up to heaven, arms outstretched in an embrace. All of this is appears quite lovely if it didn't resemble the diagnosis of the therapist from *Psycho* so closely.

In *Psycho* the psychiatrist claims that Bates goes to great lengths to keep alive the idea that his mother is still alive. He appropriates her and speaks for her. In the final monologue the mother's voice proclaims her innocence – how could she do anything more than sit and stare considering she is in reality no more than a stuffed mummy? Similarly, in *The Lady in the Van*, Bennett possesses Miss Shepherd's entire character speaking for her in a manner in which she would never have spoken if alive – writer-who-lives makes this explicit on numerous occasions claiming “she never said that”. What has happened is that the homeless other, what has most disgusted his sensibilities, has been appropriated by him. The audience can be entertained by her eccentricity and need not see the dark underside of poverty anymore. Instead of really coming to understand the plight of the other, Bennett appropriates the other into his art. She is no longer homeless, incontinent, smelly or cantankerous; thus the ascension is on Bennett's terms and not her own.

The similarity between the psychiatrist's report in *Psycho* and the ending of *The Lady in the Van* do much to subvert the intended social criticism of the latter film. The audience are left feeling placated with Bennett's charity, when in reality all class difference remains as embedded as before and the struggle of the mentally ill and poverty stricken stay as

problematic and impenetrable for middle class sensibility. When as enigma Miss Shepherd cuts through conceptions of social acceptability while remaining markedly human. Her otherness is in her ability to shock through the absence of manners and incontinence. The importance of the enigma is expressed by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas's ethical project, if it can be summarised, might be said to be an attempt to treat the other as other. Any explanation of the other that produces an understanding of the other is an act of appropriation. Levinas attempts to describe a philosophy of darkness in which the Other is never fully possessed (Levinas 203-216). Alan Bennett's discovery of the reasons for Miss Shepherd's behaviour, in the Levinasian sense bring the Otherness of Miss Shepherd into a light where her Otherness is lost. Thus the explanation of the character can be said to be an unethical depiction. In more practical terms, the explanation of Miss Shepherd transforms her actual situation into a narrative which can be understood by the middle class.

When it does no more than depict Miss Shepherd's stoic integrity, *The Lady in the Van* imparts a noble quality to her otherness which does far more to excite ethical reactions from the audience than do the author's appropriative gestures at the end which only supply a false empathy. This strong noble character rejects some of the more sexist psychoanalytic assumptions about the detrimental impact that strong women have on society. The film loses this moral compass when Bennett treats Miss Shepherd as his own artistic creation. In one last comparison to *Psycho*, *The Lady in the Van* ends with the dedication of a plaque to Miss Shepherd. This scene has a Hitchcock-esque cameo from Alan Bennett. The film reveals itself at this point as filmic fiction, as the crew are shown filming Alex Jennings (as Alan Bennett) dedicating the plaque to Miss Shepherd. This scene is analogous to the final moments of *Psycho* where a pensive Norman Bates speaks to himself as his mother. The mother in this scene is interested in what people will think of her – "they will say, why she would never harm a fly". She is, in a sense, Norman's creation, and this scene is setting up a

legacy. The plaque, in *The Lady in the Van* is a similar attempt by the son to determine how the mother is remembered. She is now a permanent feature of Bennett's house. The audience are left feeling that her poverty and homelessness were permitted objects of voyeurism, because what is really on display is an example of eccentric behaviour. Once explained, our empathy for her early life's torment diminishes the impact of her incontinence; it has an explanation and can thus be a part of the middle-class world. Through this Miss Shepherd loses the dignity that she worked so hard to embody through the careful cultivation of enigma. When as an enigma, Miss Shepherd receives care; as an explained case she becomes exploited by the writer.

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