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ORDER VS. CHAOS:

THE FILMS OF ALFRED HITCHCOCK

In his films, Alfred Hitchcock creates a picture of a world that is enormously unsettling. In this world, chaos can strike at any moment. People are powerless to prevent or avoid it. The presence of chaos needs no explanation--it is simply part of this unfriendly universe. Hitchcock provides no comforting philosophy to explain away horrific events. There is no benevolent God protecting his people. Events happen at random. Human beings are not necessarily rewarded for their willpower or virtue. Efforts aimed at stopping chaos and establishing order are mostly ineffectual. In the cases where an individual does resolve the chaos of the moment, the resolution is most often only temporary. The audience is left with unsettled, uneasy feelings at the end of these films. There is no guarantee that chaos will not strike again, tomorrow.

In this paper I will examine the different forms of chaos portrayed in Hitchcock's films, as well as some of the technical devices he employs to effectively imbue the audience with a vivid sense of the chaotic situations he portrays. I will also discuss elements in Hitchcock's personal life for possible links that explain his lifelong fear of chaos, his obsession with order, and the result of these preoccupations in his work and his life.

One type of chaos Hitchcock employs is where a perfectly "normal" person, living a normal life, is pulled into the middle of some kind of intrigue, due entirely to being in the "wrong

place at the wrong time." The person has done nothing to provoke this involvement, and is ill-equipped, initially at least, to handle the situation. Some of Hitchcock's quintessential films follow this idea, most notably "North by Northwest." In this film, Cary Grant plays Roger Thornhill, a character who is is hijacked during a business lunch. He is mistakenly identified as a government spy by Phillip Vandamm, the film's villain. From this point on, Thornhill's world spins out of control. In his efforts to sets things right and establish order, things go from bad to worse. He gets framed for a murder and becomes a nationally recognized fugitive. All he can do throughout the rest of the film is try to save his neck. He is a pawn, at the mercy of unfriendly powers which are greater than he is.

Even government authorities, the supposed order-keepers in a chaotic world, offer little help. When they discover that Thornhill has been mistaken for the imaginary spy they have created, they do not intevene to save him. It is not in their interest, and so they let him continue to endanger himself. When he seeks refuge from them, they turn him out on the street, where they know he is vulnerable. Thornhill has to actually escape the police, in order to resolve the chaos. Only at the end of the film does law enforcement step in and truly help him, during the shootout on Mount Rushmore. This callous, endangering attitude is also directed toward the heroine, Eve Kendall. The government uses her, without regard to her safety, to get information about Vandamm. By the end of the film, law enforcement has been strongly indicted as being self-serving, worthy of cynicism and distrust.

Betrayal by a trusted loved one is another recurring form of chaos delineated by Hitchcock. This is the dominant theme of "Shadow of a Doubt." In this film, we see the chaos that is unleashed when someone who enjoys our most intimate affections turns out to be an

embodiment of evil. There is an order, based on trust, inherent in the idea of family and intimate relationships. In this film, the villain is no intruder or stranger, but one who is in the "inner circle" of the family. This close proximity leads to enormous chaos, exponentially greater than if the evil were at a physical or emotional distance. The characters are in a weakened state here: their guard is down, making them vulnerable to the perfidy of the deceiver.

In the beginning of the film, we see that young Charlie is devoted to her uncle Charlie, with whom she has telepathic communication. This telepathy is a force of nature, not necessarily of the benevolent kind. She has little control over it. It binds her to her uncle, a connection that turns out to be nearly fatal. Uncle Charlie's visit is seen by the family as a wonderful gift, when in reality he is only hiding from the law. The family opens their arms to him, blissfully ignorant of the danger in which they are putting themselves. As young Charlie comes to see uncle Charlie's true nature, her world becomes chaotic in two ways. First, her psyche is shaken with the knowledge that she cannot trust her own perceptions. The idyllic order that has previously existed for her has been shattered forever. Second, her physical well being is put into peril. She ends up in hand-to-hand combat, fighting for her life, against this person she once adored. That her world has been shattered is apparent on her face in the last moments of the film, made all the more ironic by the adoring words of the preacher at the funeral, touting her uncle's virtues.

In "Vertigo," Hitchcock takes the idea of mental distress even farther, exploring the chaos that results from the loss of one's mind. Jimmy Stewart plays Scottie, a man who has acute acrophobia, producing the condition of vertigo. At the beginning of the film, we see him dangling from a rooftop. When a law enforcement officer tries to help him, the man slips and falls to his death, as Scottie watches, helpless. Scottie is powerless to prevent the accident, and

helpless over the condition of vertigo that results.

We soon learn of the seriousness of Scottie's condition. We see him in Midge's living room, testing his willpower over his affliction. He takes a stepstool from the kitchen, and demonstrates how he plans to conquer the illness. He stands on the first step, no problem. Second step, no problem. With the third step, however, he faints into Midge's arms, paralyzed, totally helpless.

This chaotic mental condition makes him vulnerable to the treachery of the outside world. This comes in the form of an assignment from an old "friend," who asks him to spy on his wife Madeleine. As we later learn, Scottie has been chosen expressly because of the weakness his condition produces in him. Scottie is sucked into this devastating charade, which leaves him in a state of inner chaos far worse than when he started. Subsequently, he spends months in a mental hospital, a helpless child. His condition is pathetic. Midge, in her visit, tries to sooth him by telling him "mother's here." His victimization, first by the accident and then by Elster and Judy, has left him paralyzed.

Scottie's eventual mental healing comes through chance, not from his own willpower or virtue. After leaving the sanitarium, still deeply wounded psychologically, he runs into Judy on the street. He becomes obsessed with trying to turn her into Madeleine. We see him slipping back into a dangerous mental state. He is awakened from this illusory state, again, by chance. Judy makes the mistake of wearing Madelaine's necklace. He recognizes it, and is able to start piecing together the mystery. For the first time in the film, he starts to take charge of the situation.

But in this chaotic world, even regaining one's sanity does not eradicate chaos. Scottie

drives Judy to the mission, and forces her to ascend the tower, as he extracts the truth from her. In doing this he conquers his vertigo. But his success is short lived. As they get to the top, his feelings of righteous anger are confused by the passion he still feels for her. He has healed his illness, but is torn by his ambivalent feelings. Suddenly, a dark form from the shadows of the bell tower approaches. Judy, in a deranged state of mind, screams and falls to her death. Scottie is powerless to save her. He stands on the roof of the mission, looking down at her, miserable. His chaos has changed form. He has resolved his vertigo, but he must now deal with the trauma of knowing that he was used and deceived by the person he loved most, a woman for whom he still burns with passion, but who is now dead, precluding the possibility of resolving the relationship in an emotionally satisfying manner. It is likely that this new chaos will be equally as painful and chaotic as his previous dilemma.

Hitchcock portrays the act of falling in love as a form of chaos, similar to losing one's mind. In most of Hitchcock's movies, the love portrayed is close to obsession, with the object of the obsession being a person of striking physical beauty. This kind of love is something like a trance: paralysis caused by the magnetism of another person. This is not the kind of love that comes from long term caring and mutual respect. This love is dangerous, taking control away from the character, leading to chaos.

In "Notorious," Alicia falls for Devlin, a handsome government agent. The instability of their relationship is portrayed in the dinner scene. She has cooked a chicken for him, and has make preparations for a romantic supper. It goes very smoothly at first. When she receives the phone call, however, asking her to fulfill a dangerous and morally ambiguous government assignment, their dialogue reflects the obsessive nature of the relationship. Devlin feels strongly

against her accepting the assignment, but hides his feelings. The more she pushes him to stop her from accepting the assignment, the more entrenched he becomes in his denial of his caring for her. As a result, she makes the dangerous and impetuous decision to accept the assignment, throwing her life into chaos and endangerment. She sees it as the only way of making herself worthy of Devlin's love and affection.

This theme is also developed in "Suspicion." Lina has fallen in love with the handsome but unpredictable Johnnie. When he starts behaving in chaotic ways, especially in regard to the handling of money, the order in her mind disintegrates. The love she bears him and the attraction she has for him make it impossible for her to think objectively. She is torn between her affections and the evidences of his wrongdoing. As the story progresses, she suspects that he has caused the death of a close friend, in order to profit financially. By the end of the film, she is convinced that he is trying to kill her. We have seen him through her eyes throughout the film, and his character has grown more and more sinister. In the final scene, she sees that her perceptions have been an illusion, the product of an obsessive, fearful mind. The ending is ambiguous, perhaps intentionally, for the audience. Lina seems to be completely convinced that Johnnie is being honest with her, but we have seen things in him that we cannot dismiss so easily. We have only seen him through her chaotic point of view, where illusory romantic attraction has been mixed with bizarre and criminal evidence, and we are left with no idea about who he really is.

In "The Birds," Hitchcock keeps the idea of inner, psychological chaos, but adds the spectre of horrific natural disaster. He goes farther in this film than in any other, in portraying the order--chaos theme. In earlier films, we have seen individuals thrown into chaotic situations, which endanger them personally. In "The Birds," the chaos is global. The entire world is affected

here. Human being are being devasted and destroyed by an unfriendly, angry, vengeful universe. The most unsettling part of it is that no explanation is given for this outpouring of mass destruction. It simply happens, unprovoked. Nothing to prevent it or mitigate it. No deeper meaning assigned to it.

The film's dramatic structure adds to its disturbing content. In David Sterritt's analysis, he points out that the film is a radical departure from the narrative form.[1] It has no resolution. It simply ends, with the characters still in great peril and confusion. He cites this narrative construction as giving the film much of its power to disorient and disturb.

In the story, Melanie has gone to Bodega Bay to visit Mitch. From the beginning of her arrival, the chaos starts to unfold. Her presence is upsetting to Annie, Mitch's ex-girlfriend, and also to Mitch's mother, who is terribly afraid of being abandoned by her son. Melanie is on a boat, travelling across the bay, when the first bird attacks. The event is dismissed as random, and quickly forgotten. The relationship between Mitch and Melanie begins to develop, with Melanie revealing the chaos that has existed in her own life. The second bird attack occurs at the children's party. In the aftermath, the deputy sheriff appears. He is quickly revealed as ineffectual in resolving the disorder. The attack scenes escalate in terror and power from this point on. In the scene where Lydia goes to the farmhouse, Hitchcock does a violent thing: he places the most fragile and fearful of the movie's characters in direct contact with this evil, alone and unprotected.

In this film, Hitchcock portrays the carelessness and unpreparedness of people in dealing with an enemy. In one scene, Melanie is waiting, outside the school, smoking a cigarette. She is

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[1]David Sterrit, The Films of Alfred Hitchcock, Boston: Carney, 1991, p.143.

entirely oblivious to the fact that the birds are lighting upon the jungle gym directly behind her. Her inattention allows for an army o birds to line up in formation. Had she been alert, she could have warned the schoolchildren earli r, and avoided at least part of the trauma which unfolds at the school. The scenes in the cafe al o show people's unpreparedness. They are divided and contentious, as if they all live within heir own separate worlds, lacking the cooperation and objectivity that would help them figh a common enemy. In the first cafe scene, the conversation among the characters is incoherent a d disconnected. In the second scene, a woman turns on Melanie, blaming her for this holocau st. Their level of chaos has increased by their inability to organize themselves and band togeth r.

Toward the end of the film, M elanie and Mitch and Mitch's family have barricaded themselves inside the family home. W e see the masculine, paternal energy Mitch has exerted to protect his family, fortifying the hous , striving to establish an order against the impending chaos. Initially, his efforts appear to have wo rked. The attack by the birds mysteriously evaporates. The characters, exhausted, fall asleep. Th n, Melanie hears a bird in the attic, and goes to check it out. The birds there nearly tear her apart, with an unrelenting ferocity. Hitchcock seems to be saying that the moment one considers herself out of danger is when she is actually the most vulnerable. Melanie's protector is in the room right below her, asleep, oblivious to her plight. Nothing is there to protect her when she most needs it.

The birds' stillness at the end of the movie is not a note of hope. The violent energy of the birds is almost palpable, both due to their sheer numbers and the eerie, nondescript sound they emit. We have a moment of remission, but not resolution. We do not know when the destruction is going to resume. The characters load into the car, to find help for Melanie. But in light of the

chaos that has preceded, their future holds only a dark uncertainty.

Hitchcock not only want his audience to see the chaotic state of his characters, he also wants us to feel it. In his interview with Truffaut, he likens watching a film to watching a speeding train.[2] If you see the train from a two-mile distance, you feel nothing, but if you stand close to the train as it's speeding through a station, it almost knocks you down. His intention is to "knock us down" with his films, making us feel every inch of the drama the characters experience.

Ironically, Hitchcock accomplishes his portrayals of these various forms of chaos by applying a great deal of order in the planning phase of his films. He is legendary for the amount of preparation he devoted before production. He bragged that the actual production of a film bored him. His scenes were all meticulously storyboarded, and the designs were followed obsessively. Rather than shoot scenes in the customary way (i.e. long shot, close-ups, medium shot) he shot only the footage he intended to use. This technique required that all of the cuts be planned beforehand. The postproduction editing process, therefore, was mere assembling. The creation process had already taken place.

Hitchcock used devices to make the audience feel what he intended them to feel. One trick was to create main characters who were "normal people," who might be our neighbors (just more physically attractive). His central characters exude an "everyman" quality. He often cast well-known, likeable actors in these roles, such as Jimmy Stewart, Ingrid Bergman, Cary Grant. As a result, the viewer puts himself in the precarious position with which the character is faced.

Hitchcock uses point of view shots to enhance identification with the character's internal

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[2]Francois Truffaut, Hitchcock, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985, p. 265.

chaos. An excellent example comes from "Suspicion," when Johnnie brings the glass of milk up the stairs to Lina's room. Hitchcock enhances the mystery surrounding the glass (whether or not it contains poison) by making it glow. As it turns out, he actually placed a light bulb inside of the glass to achieve this effect.[3] We see the glass through Lina's chaotic state of mind. This scene also uses noir-ish, sinister lighting. Johnnie's demeanor is sinister and attractive at the same time, reflecting Lina's conflicting emotions toward him. Likewise, at the end of the film, when the two are speeding along the winding road, the camera shows us the dangerous view of the steep cliffs from her point of view, illustrating her paranoia.

Another example is the restaurant scene in "Vertigo," where Scottie first sees Madeleine. Hitchcock employs mirrors in this scene to enhance the idea of illusion--illusion that is beginning to invade Scottie's mind. In a key scene later in the film, Hitchcock uses multiple devices to show the extent to which Scottie has fallen into a illusory state of mind. In this scene Scottie has put the final touch on Judy's transformation into Madeleine, asking her to put her hair up. As she emerges from the bathroom, she is surrounded by fog, and bathed in a green, goulish light. We see Scottie's face in close-up, a man completely obsessed. The camera swirls around the two lovers in their extended kiss. Hitchcock adds "deja vu" shots of the stable at the mission where Madeleine killed herself, and shows Scottie's confusion, not knowing where he is. Bernard Herrman's music accompanies this illusory scene, using violins in a haunting, otherworldly score. All of these elements combine to show Scottie as a man who has lost all sense of reality. He has entered a world of complete chaos.

There is much speculation over the source of Hitchcock's obsession with chaos. In his

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[3]Francois Truffaut, Hitchcock, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983, p. 143.

biography, The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock, Donald Spoto gives evidence from Hitchcock's upbring. He cites an incident from Hitchcock's childhood, when he was five or six years old[4]. His parents put him to bed and then went on an extended stroll. He awoke to find himself alone, "nothing but night all around me." Terrified, he got up and comforted himself with food. Spoto credits this incident as possibly "imparting a lifetime fear of being alone or in darkness" in Hitchcock, and also creating an association between food and comfort.

Hitchcock's father, William Hitchcock, was a man who insisted upon order and discipline. Hitchcock tells an account of how his father once locked him in jail, as a boy, to teach him a lesson. He uses this story to explain the theme in many of his movies, of unjust accusation and imprisonment. Spoto points out that although the story may not be entirely true, Hitchcock's telling of it portrays his feelings toward his father, and his fear of law enforcement figures.[5]

The east end of London, where Hitchcock was raised, was a roudy, boisterous place. Competitive athletics, such as cricket, lacrosse, and football, were highly popular, and were pasttimes in which most youths engaged. Hitchcock, however, participated in none of them. Perhaps the chaotic and unpredictable nature of sports terrified him. And it is likely that he was not attracted to the cooperative nature of team sports. Instead, he observed. He concentrated on things he could control, contenting himself with books and solitary games. His games consisted in studying maps and in the memorization of train timetables, where he astounded his family with his ability to recite the timetables for most of England's lines. His life was safe and

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[4]Donald Spoto, the Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock, Boston: Little, Brown, 1983, p.17.

[5]Ibid., p.17.

withdrawn, with his mother as his primary companion, perhaps because it was only in solitude that he could feel a sense of safety.

School also brought an element of chaos into the life of young Hitchcock. He was enrolled at St. Ignatius at age eleven, where corporal punishment was considered a healthy and good form of discipline. As an adult, Hitchcock would admit to have been "terrified...of the Jesuit fathers, of physical punishment, of alot of things."[6] The intense focus on literature and theater also seems to have been instrumental in the formation of Hitchcock's dramatic sensibilities.

The Roman Catholic school also had a lasting effect on Hitchcock's sense of God and spirituality. Personal guilt is a predominant theme in his movies. Particularly Catholic guilt, stemming from a belief that one is condemned for one's sins, and can only be redeemed by confession. Daniel Spoto describes the spiritual environment of St. Ignatius as follows: "...the insistence on a dread of sin, on moral probity, and on the preservation of each jot and title of the law...was designed to keep the ranks of Catholics strong and sturdy."

As Hitchcock moved into his teenage years, he developed a fascination with all things bizarre, violent, criminal. His pasttimes included going to the theater and to Old Bailey Court, where he watched murder trials, even taking notes on them. He also frequented the Black Museum at Scotland Yard, which contained the relics of famous crimes and criminals. He held a fascination with the tools used in murder and torture, and educated himself about them. He was also, not surprisingly, taken by the works of Edgar Allen Poe.

As an adult, Hitchcock was a series of contradictions, always in control professionally, but

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[6]Ibid., p. 28.

personally shy, avoiding interpersonal conflict at all costs. Doris Day recounts a conversation with him during production of "The Man Who Knew Too Much."[7] She had assumed that he was unhappy with her work, since he never spoke to her. When confronted by her, Hitchcock revealed that he didn't speak to her because of fear, "that he was more frightened--of life, of rejection, of relationships--than anyone. He told me he was afraid to walk across the Paramount lot to the commissary because he was so afraid of people."

It is curious that a person as solitary and shy as Hitchcock would seek a profession as intensively people-involved as film directing. A more chaotic, stressful profession is difficult to imagine. It seems natural that a fear-based person would seek a less social, more solitary occupation. It may have been an obsessive need for recognition, a need for artistic expression and an elevated sense of artistic superiority that would drive such a person to the top of this profession.

Hitchcock's salvation as a director came through careful, fastidious planning. This was his response to the chaotic nature of the film industry. Through planning, chaos could be contained, if not entirely avoided. He is legendary for planning out every detail of his films, even down to each cut. This served him in several ways. First, it gave coherence to his work. Every element in his films means something, and all the elements combine to achieve a unified result. His best films are masterpieces, and even his lesser works are far above average. The problems that plague many film directors, such as disjointed narratives, postproduction editing crises, and huge budget overruns, were essentially eliminated through Hitchcock's meticulous planning.

Secondly, Hitchcock's planning led to his retaining creative control over his films. In his

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[7]Ibid., p.17.

years working for Selznick, beginning with Rebecca, Hitchcock shot his films in an extremely economical fashion. As described earlier, Hitchcock only shot what he needed, "editing in the camera." This virtually assured his creative control over the film in postproduction. This frustrated and irritated Selznick, since it prevented him from making his own creative alterations.

Third, this approach aided Hitchcock in avoiding interpersonal squabbles, which terrified him. On the set he assumed a persona of great calm, ever unflappable, never losing his cool. He had planned out everything, and had command of every detail, so that there was little need for discussion or argument with others. This posture covered the shyness and terror he felt, and facilitated his control over others. Spoto compares the personas of Selznick and Hitchcock, writing that Selznick was "expansive, sometimes explosive, emotionally volatile,--but people knew where they were in the hierarchy of his affection and estimation. Hitchcock...was secretive and emotionally subdued, and he affected a reserved and serious manner, the better to keep his cast and crew alert for his moods and demands."[8] In other words, Hitchcock's personal style gave him great control and authority. The power he wielded was enormous, almost impenetrable.

Hitchcock's aversion to chaos and insistence on order carried over into his personal life as well. He seemed to follow the philosophy of Gustave Flaubert: to be extremely disciplined and orderly in approaching one's craft; to restrain one's emotional sensitivities in one's external life, however violent, while exploring the these sensibilities artistically.[9] Hitchcock's outward life was a model of middle-class values, marked by a rigid order. He married at an early age, and was

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[8]Ibid., p.225.

[9]Ibid., p.44.

faithful to his wife, at least in the physical sense, all his life. They lived in modest, unostentacious homes. He avoided physical exercise and any activity which risked physical injury. Hitchcock even joked that after he left the bathroom, no one would ever never know he had been there.

There may have been a price to pay, however, for this rigid insistence on order and avoidance of chaos. There is evidence that Hitchcock suffered acute internal turmoil and unhappiness during his life. His appearance could have been part of the cause. He was an obese, unattractive man, working in an industry that prized physical beauty above all else. This could have been a factor in his obsessive emotional affairs with his leading ladies. If he couldn't be physically attractive himself, he could possess or control someone who was. He would become obsessed with a leading lady, and attempt to "remake" her, to the extent of creating a new wardrobe, new hairstyle for her, even changing her name. In the most transparent and blatant of these affairs, with Tippi Hedren, he broke his usual decorum. He professed his love openly and offered himself to her in an embarrassing and adolescent way. The inevitable rejection by the frightened young actress appears to have wounded him deeply.

The toll taken by a lifetime of obsessive orderliness was manifest in Hitchcock's personal and professional decline during the latter part of his life. His films were less successful critically and commercially, such as Marnie, Topaz, and, Torn Curtain, as well as less ambitious. His wife's health began to deteriorate, as did his own. His weight was at an all time high. His paranoia grew. In a telephone conversation with Anthony Schaffer, he pleaded, "Tony, they're all betraying me! Everyone's leaving me! You've got to come and rescue me! I'm all alone!"[10] There are scores of such stories, from various sources, giving evidence of a life that was

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[10]Ibid., p. 575.

unraveling. He had built his life on professional accomplishment, not focusing on nurturing personal relationships and friendships. Now, in his old age, he was lonely and solitary, much as he had been as a boy.

The question could be raised, Was Hitchcock's obsession with order a virtue or a disease? The answer, most likely, is: both. In the realm of art, especially filmmaking, people who don't have a sense or order do not survive. Hitchcock's orderly, middle class lifestyle and meticulous workstyle seem to have provided the strength and stability that allowed him to create. Film history is crammed full of famous, expensive disasters-- all the result of lack of planning and foresight. The captains of those ships generally sank with them, many never recovering. Hitchcock, conversely, enjoyed professional longevity, turning out an astounding fifty-nine films, most of them commercially successful. He is remembered in film history as one of the great artists of the medium.

On the other hand, his obsession with control may have diminshed his level of personal happiness. It is possible that it led to an inability to form intimate relationships and friendships with others. It may have been the reason behind his painful, unfulfilled romantic longings, fearing the chaos that might result if he allowed himself to actually participate in them.

In summary, the theme of order versus chaos permeated the life of Alfred Hitchcock, both professionally and personally. He used this theme to portray the human struggle in a way that moved, excited and troubled his audiences. His technical artistry in creating emotion is legendary, tapping into the deepest fears of the human unconscious in a way that few directors have achieved. The battle that raged inside his head and his heart was played out in his work, a mirror of the inner life he tried so hard to conceal.

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Excellent essay. You handle a lot of facts with skill and make your point convincingly.