

### Identity Alterations in *Amateur*

Hal Hartley's film *Amateur* offers one view into the underlying factors that control identity. For some people, the thrill of being in someone else's shoes is good enough to empower them to act in ways that they normally would not. One such person in *Amateur* is Isabelle. Isabelle has spent the majority of her life living in a convent as a nun when she suddenly realizes that she is a nymphomaniac and begins to write pornographic short stories. Throughout the movie, various scenes show her struggle to grasp her new identity and try to make people understand that she is indeed a nympho and can write pornographic stories.

Isabelle's identity confusion is shown in the scene in which she tries to sell a story to an editor of pornographic short stories. The editor tells her that the story is too poetic and not graphic enough. This is in contradiction of what Isabelle has believed all of her life. When Isabelle was younger and tried to write poetry, it was too prose-like and she could not make anything good come of it. At this point, Isabelle is confused as to who she really is. Her poetry is bad and her short stories are too poetical. To enhance Isabelle's identity isolation, Hartley has her sit on a couch by herself as the porn editor explains that her short stories are not graphic enough and too poetic. The shot continues to pan back and forth between herself and the editor. Isabelle and the pornography editor are never shown in together in the same shot. This is suggestive that their two identities

Hartley also uses background scenery to convey Isabelle's identity confusion. While Isabelle sits primly at the edge of the couch behind a Romantic picture of the Virgin Mary, the pornography editor sits in a relaxed position at his barren desk. In the background there is a framed picture of the magazine that he edits. The difference in background pictures is Hartley's

attempt to show Isabelle's purity and ill qualifications to write pornography for the editor, and to enhance the smuttiness of the pornography editor.

The differences in realms are further shown when the camera suddenly shows the editor sitting on the arm of the couch near the position that Isabelle previously occupied. Instead of having Isabelle sit beside the editor, she is placed at the opposite end of the couch. Isabelle remains seated in her prim, nun-like position while the editor lounges on the edge of the couch. The opposite sitting position is similar to their extreme differences in identity. The fact that Isabelle remains in one seating position throughout the scene shows her lack of comfort in the porn editor's office. Isabelle's body language in the scene mirrors her inability to fully be comfortable with the identity she is attempting to take on.

Isabelle once again tries very aggressively to accept her new identity during the drill scene. Just when Kurt is about to torture Sofia, Isabelle emerges with the drill in hand. The camera stays on Isabelle for a second longer than it should, showing how she is caressing the drill in her grip. The only word out of Kurt's mouth is, "wow." Isabelle then proceeds to move around Kurt with the drill in a threatening manner. The camera drapes around the movements of Isabelle and Kurt as he tries to escape. There are no sharp angles. This is suggestive that the empowering motions of Isabelle with the drill are helter skelter. The feelings of aggression and empowerment are temporary. The draping angles suggest flow, but not direction. The lack of direction is indicative of Isabelle's lack of comfort and understanding of her new identity.

In fact, Isabelle's actions with the drill and the camera movements are similar to a child taking its first steps: the motions are tottering, erratic, and clumsy. Although like a child taking its first steps Isabelle can assume the motions and attitude, it is not her comfort zone, or who she

really is. The aggressive, sexually wanton image that Isabelle once again tries to convey emerges awkward and out of character.

Throughout *Amateur*, Isabelle presents herself as the polar opposite of the identity she has been the majority of her life. It is through Hartley's use of camera angles and background imagery in various scenes that the audience realizes that the new identity Isabelle assumes does not fit her nature. Isabelle's inability to realize her new identity fits Hartley's vision that there is no way around basic human nature.

#### References

Amateur. Dir. Hal Hartley. Sony Picture Classics, 1994