

media, and the time slippages that occur between them. For example, the rupture instigated by the commercial break is as important as Hitchcock meeting his double from a different time period.

Cinema is about an unfolding reel in time—at its most basal, it is a medium that makes use of time in an abstract way in order to construct a narrative. Storytelling will always be an interpretation of time.

Adapted from: Peranson, M., "If You Meet Your Double, You Should Kill Him: Johan Grimonprez on Double Take", in *Cinema Scope*, no. 38 (Spring 2009), 14–18.

"Casting Around": Hitchcock's Absence

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But in his Absence he still Commands the Scene

In January 2001, just after his death had been announced, I noticed, on the back of the Dutch film magazine *Skrien's* Christmas number, a photo by Johan van der Keuken, renowned Amsterdam documentarist. It showed a bend in a single-lane tarmac road, cut into rocks like a wedge, on a fairly steep incline. A holiday snap, taken in southern Spain, where an ailing van der Keuken had fled to escape the inclement weather at home. What arrested my eye was the caption he gave it: "The spirit of Hitchcock has just passed and disappeared around the corner. But in his absence he still commands the scene."¹ It struck me as a surprisingly resonant, if unexpected juxtaposition, turning a banal shot into a moment of mysterious menace, reminiscent of no less than three Cary Grant "dangerous driving" scenes: in *Suspicion* (1941), *To Catch a Thief* (1955) and *North by Northwest* (1959). Perhaps after all an apt homage to the master of montage

1 The photo is online at <http://esvcoo1069.wico23u.server-web.com/5/elsaesser.html>

and innuendo, from another master of montage and innuendo, however far apart the two filmmakers were in every other respect. I gave it no further thought, more preoccupied with the loss of a director whom his own country had never given his due. Over the years, however, as I noticed how inescapable and indispensable references to Hitchcock had become in my field, and not only in academic film studies, but for artists, curators, photographers, filmmakers, biographers, and critics, I began to wonder why “in his absence, he still commands the scene”. Indeed: why twenty-five years after his death, his absence has become such a presence.

A brief reminder of just how ubiquitous, but also how elusive he is: type “Alfred Hitchcock” into Amazon.com “books” and you have more than 7,000 hits. Even subtracting the scores of ghosted Ellery Queen mystery paperbacks that appear under his name, there are well over 600 books in print that deal with his films, his life, his women, his stars, his collaborators and associates. Look under DVDs, and all his films (as well as many of the TV shows) are available in digitally remastered re-issues, bundled collections, special editions and boxed sets.² If this is the thick ground-cover of his fame, academia and the art world provide the taller trees. Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol’s study from 1957, Robin Wood’s *Hitchcock’s Films* from 1965, Truffaut’s interview book *Le Cinema selon Hitchcock* from 1966 (English translation, 1967) and Jean Douchet’s *Alfred Hitchcock* (1967) set the stage. But instead of four books in ten years, the average since the 1980s has been more than tenfold that number for each decade. The 1980s and 1990s also saw artists bring Hitchcock to the gallery: Judith Barry (1980), Victor Burgin (1984), Cindy Sherman (1986), Stan Douglas (1989), Christian Marclay (1990), Douglas Gordon (1993), David Reed (1994), Pierre Huyghe (1995), Tony

2 “Hitchcock is already everywhere in American culture—in video stores and on cable TV, in film courses and in a stream of critical studies and biographies that shows no sign of letting up, in remakes and re-workings and allusions that mine the oeuvre as a kind of folklore.” See O’Brien, G., “Hitchcock: The Hidden Power”, in *New York Review of Books*, vol. 48, no. 18 (15 November 2001).

Oursler (1996), Cindy Bernard (1997), Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller (1999).³

Filmmakers, almost too numerous to count, have rendered homage to Hitchcock’s films: foremost, Brian de Palma who, starting with *Obsession* (1976), *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Blow-Out* (1981), has virtually devoted his career to *Vertigo* remakes. David Mamet’s *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997), Robert Zemeckis’s *What Lies Beneath* (2000), Steven Spielberg’s *Munich* (2005; the phone bomb scene) have all been praised for their “Hitchcockian moments”, while every film version of Patricia Highsmith’s Ripley novels, from *Plein Soleil* (1960) to *The American Friend* (1977) and from *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999) to *Ripley’s Game* (2002) has had to pass the Hitchcock (*Strangers on a Train*) litmus test. Roman Polanski might well be considered the most gifted among Hitchcock disciples: much of his oeuvre is a careful, as well as witty response to the challenge that Hitchcock presents: *Repulsion* (1965) his *Marnie* (1964), *Frantic* (1988) his *North by Northwest*, *The Tenant* (1976) his *Psycho* (1960) and *Bitter Moon* (1992) his *Vertigo* (1958). Gus Van Sant famously restaged *Psycho* shot-for-shot in 1998,⁴ and most recently, the Shanghai filmmaker Ye Lou has been introduced to western audiences as “Hitchcock with a Chinese Face”.⁵

To each his or her own: academics have praised Hitchcock for defending family values⁶ but also for sadistically intertwining love, lust and death.⁷ He has been compared to Shakespeare and

3 Most of these artists were brought together in the group show *Notorious: Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art*, a 1999 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford.

4 Santas, C., “The Remake of *Psycho* (Gus Van Sant, 1998): Creativity or Cinematic Blasphemy?”, in *Senses of Cinema* (Great Director series, no date); Žižek, S., “Is there a proper way to remake a Hitchcock film?”, *Lacanian Ink*. Accessed Autumn 2007: www.lacan.com/hitch.html

5 Silbergeld, J., *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face: Cinematic Doubles, Oedipal Triangles, and China’s Moral Voice* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

6 Brill, L., *The Hitchcock Romance: Love and Irony in Hitchcock’s Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

7 Love, lust and death are the words used for the Scottie-Madeleine relation in *Vertigo*, or to typify the attraction-repulsion between Mark and Marnie in *Marnie*. See Holland, N.N., “Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*: One Viewer’s Viewing”, in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis, Boston (USA)*, ed. F. Pereira (Lisbon: ISPA, 1996) or Moral, T.L., *Hitchcock and the Making of Marnie* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).



Alfred Hitchcock in *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, #57: *The Gentleman Caller*, broadcast on 10 April 1964 (*Double Take*, 2009)

Alfred Hitchcock:

The reason for my lack of enthusiasm for this Alfred Hitchcock lookalike contest will be apparent when I tell you that I entered and was eliminated in the first round.

Mozart, and "outed" as an eternal Catholic schoolboy racked with guilt. Writers have identified a misogynist Hitchcock and a feminist Hitchcock,⁸ an Oedipal Hitchcock,⁹ a homophobic Hitchcock and a "queer" Hitchcock.¹⁰ There is the Cold-War anti-communist Hitchcock of *Topaz* (1969) and *Torn Curtain* (1966), and the "hot-war" anti-fascist Hitchcock not only of *Saboteur* (1942), *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) and *Notorious* (1946),¹¹ but also present in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). He has made fun of psychoanalysis in *Rear Window* (1954) and *Psycho*, but he is Jacques Lacan's best interpreter.¹² There is a Gothic-Romantic, a Victorian,¹³ an Edwardian Hitchcock, with his imagination steeped in E.A. Poe and French decadence,¹⁴ and a modernist Hitchcock,¹⁵ influenced in turn by Weimar Expressionism,¹⁶ French Surrealism and Russian montage constructivism. And, of course, there is the post-modern Hitchcock, already deconstructing his own presuppositions in *Vertigo* or *Family Plot* (1976).¹⁷ The "British Hitchcock"

- 8 Lee, S.H., "Alfred Hitchcock: Misogynist or Feminist?", in *Post Script*, vol. 10, no. 3 (Summer 1991), 38–48.
- 9 Kelly, D., "Oedipus at Los Angeles: Hitch and the Tragic Muse", in *Senses of Cinema*, no. 24 (January–February 2003).
- 10 Modleski, T., *The Women who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988). Price, T., *Hitchcock and Homosexuality: his 50-year Obsession with Jack the Ripper and the Superbitch Prostitute: A Psychoanalytic View* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1992). Corber, R.J., *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). Robinson, M.J., *The Poetics of Camp in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock* in *Rocky Mountain Review*, vol. 51, no. 1 (Spring 2000).
- 11 Simone, S.P., *Hitchcock As Activist: Politics and the War Films* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985).
- 12 Samuels, R., *Hitchcock's bi-textuality: Lacan, Feminisms, and Queer Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
- 13 Cohen, P.M., *Alfred Hitchcock: The Legacy of Victorianism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995).
- 14 Perry, D.R., "Bibliography of Scholarship Linking Alfred Hitchcock and Edgar Allan Poe", in *Hitchcock Annual 2000–2001*, ed. S. Gottlieb (New London: Hitchcock Annual Corporation, 2001), 163–73.
- 15 Hutchings, P.J., "Modernity: a film by Alfred Hitchcock", in *Senses of Cinema*, no. 6 (May 2000).
- 16 Gottlieb, S., "Early Hitchcock: The German Influence", in *Hitchcock Annual 1999–2000*, ed. C. Brookhouse (New London: Hitchcock Annual Corporation, 2000), 100–30.
- 17 Allen, R., "Hitchcock, or the pleasures of meta-skepticism", in *October*, no. 89 (Summer 1999), 69–86.

has been given new cultural contours and local history roots, to balance the general preference for his American period.¹⁸ And in recent years, we have had Hitchcock the Philosopher:¹⁹ but which philosopher? There is a Schopenhauerian Hitchcock,²⁰ a Heideggerian Hitchcock and a Derridean Hitchcock, several Deleuzian Hitchcocks, a stab at a Nietzschean Hitchcock (*Rope*, of course) and most recently, a Wittgensteinian Hitchcock.

How can a man—and his work—be so many apparently contradictory things to so many different people? What is it that draws them—and us—to Hitchcock and makes him return, time and again, as so many doubles of his own improbable self? Proliferating even as they voice their protest, each one implicitly claims the kind of authenticity, which must strip the others of their usurped pretensions. Slavoj Žižek, himself not someone to pass up an opportunity to bring Hitchcock into the debate, irrespective of the subject, once suggested a plausible if possibly tautologous answer: his claim is that Hitchcock has since his death in 1980 increasingly functioned not as an object of study or analysis, but as a mirror to film studies, in its shifting contemporary obsessions and insecurities. Commenting, by self-referentially double-backing on his own contributions to the unabatedly thriving Hitchcock industry, he diagnoses the logic behind the various hermeneutic moves and changes in reputation and predilection I have just enumerated, as the effects of transference (a major theme, of course, in Hitchcock's work, itself magisterially dissected in the very first book of the cycle, the Rohmer/Chabrol study). This transference has made of Hitchcock himself a monstrous figure, at once too close and too far, a (maternal) super-ego "blur" as much as a super-male Godlike "subject supposed to know".²¹

According to this logic, Hitchcock occupies the place not so much of the film-auteur analysed, as of the (psycho-)analyst,

18 Barr, C., *English Hitchcock* (Moffat: Cameron & Hollis, 1999).

19 Yanal, R.J., *Hitchcock as philosopher* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2005).

20 Mogg, K., *The Alfred Hitchcock Story* (London: Titan Books, 1999) most persistently (and quite persuasively) argues for Hitchcock as a disciple of Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*.

analysing: listening impassively to the interpretative talking (auto-)cure, his famous silhouette over the years getting to look more and more like those giant faces of the Egyptian goddess in the British Museum in *Blackmail* (1929), the Statue of Liberty (in *Saboteur*) and the Mount Rushmore Presidents (in *North by Northwest*). "Hitchcock" is always already there: in place and in control, when the interpreting critic arrives with yet another definitive or diabolically ingenious reading. The various stages of Hitchcock's reception from the late 1950s to the 1990s and beyond, thus do not even chart the inner dynamic of film studies, as scholars refine, redefine or overturn the reigning critical paradigms. What drives the Hitchcock hermeneutic (wind-)mills would be an impulse altogether more philosophically serious; namely the desire to overcome, across transference and mirror doubling (and thus doomed to fail), the deadlocks of ontological groundlessness: from "pure cinema" to "pure deconstruction", as it were, —and beyond.²²

What is plausible in this thesis is that Hitchcock, once canonized as the towering figure of his art—no different indeed from Shakespeare, Mozart, Jane Austen or James Joyce—feeds an academic industry that, once set up and institutionally secure, largely sustains itself without further input from the "real world" other than reflecting the changing intellectual fashions of the respective disciplines. The author and the work become a sort of "black box" into which everything can be put and from which anything can be pulled.²³ What is close to a tautology, however, is that in

21 "Hitchcock as the theoretical phenomenon that we have witnessed in recent decades—the endless flow of books, articles, university courses, conference panels—is a postmodern phenomenon *par excellence*. It relies on the extraordinary transference his work sets in motion: [his] elevation into a God-like demiurge [...] is simply the transference relationship where Hitchcock functions as the 'subject supposed to know'." See "Introduction: Alfred Hitchcock, or, the Form and Its Historical Mediation", in *Everything You always Wanted to Know About Lacan: (But were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. S. Žižek (London/New York: Verso, 1992), 10.

22 For Hitchcock, Derrida and deconstruction, see Morris, S., *The Hanging Figure: On Suspense and the Films of Alfred Hitchcock* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002).

23 See also, Belton, J., "Can Hitchcock Be Saved from Hitchcock Studies?", in *Cineaste*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Autumn 2003), 16–21.

thus turning the fascination and “return” back to the writers and academics, it creates a closed loop. But why such a loop should form in the first place, around this particular figure and director, rather than another, and why the magic seems to work not just for academics, but extends well beyond to popular audiences, artists, novelists, the general public, is less plausibly explained, because it is already presupposed.

From a Work to a World

If we grant that Hitchcock, that constant reference point, now almost synonymous with the cinema itself, has become indispensable in the wider field of art, culture and the popular imagination, then something must have happened, both to his work and to the cinema, which he personifies and embodies. To recapitulate: from being a gifted craftsman behind the camera, technically skilled and ambitious, with a morbid imagination covered up by a mordant wit (the view of the British establishment well into the 1960s) and of being a superb showman with a rare talent for second-guessing popular taste and an uncanny gift for self-promotion (the Hollywood view, almost up to his death in 1980),²⁴ Hitchcock, some time between the 1970s and 2000, also became one of the great artists of the twentieth century, not just without peers in his own profession, but on a par with Picasso, Duchamp, Proust and Kafka.²⁵ Like Kafka, his name has become an adjective, and like

24 Kapsis, R.E., *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

25 “Salvador Dalí was unique with his representation of dripping clocks. Picasso was unique with his two-eyed profiles, and Van Gogh was known for his swirling brush strokes in *Starry Night*. And there’s a reason why people stare intently at these art works in the galleries rather than the vinyl placemats and canvas diaper bags resembling them in the museum gift shops. Although replicas can be just as appealing to the eye, without the innovation the masterpiece demanded in its conception, a replica can never compare to its original. That’s why I still, to this day, have not seen the 1990s remake of *Psycho*, and that’s why I’d like to throw rotten tomatoes at every *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* movie poster I see.” See Sauers, E., “Hitch-what-ian?”, in *Indiana Daily Student* (16 June 2005).

Picasso, everyone knows not only what his work looks like, but what it “feels” like, whether they have studied it or not. These artists define more than an age, an art form or a sensibility; they are a way of seeing the world and even of being in the world.

Hitchcock’s consecration became complete and official in 2001, when first in Montreal and then at the Centre Pompidou in Paris *Hitchcock et l’Art: Coïncidences Fatales* opened to wide acclaim and largely rave reviews. Curated by Dominique Paini and Guy Cogeval, the exhibition was a fetishist’s paradise: accompanied by the strains of Bernard Herrmann’s music, the visitor entered via a large room where “pinpoint spotlights stabbed out of the darkness at twenty-one small display cases mounted on a grid of twenty-one black columns. Each glass case bore a single cherished object arranged on a bed of red satin: the gleaming scissors from *Dial M for Murder* (1954), the bread knife from *Blackmail*, the key from *Notorious*, the cigarette lighter from *Strangers on a Train* (1951), the black brassiere from *Psycho*.”²⁶

This distillation (and dilation) of the films to the telling detail, to the tactile object, the dizzying erotic power emanating from these strangely familiar and murderously innocent objects, like deadly insects or poisonous snakes under glass, also seemed to be endorsed by the citation from Jean-Luc Godard, hung over the entrance portal as majestically and incontrovertibly as the words inscribed in Dante’s Hell:

People forget why Joan Fontaine was leaning over the cliff [...], why Janet Leigh stops at the Bates Motel, and why Teresa Wright remains in love with Uncle Charlie. They forget what Henry Fonda was not altogether guilty of, and why exactly the American government employed the services of Ingrid Bergman. But they remember a car in the desert. They remember a glass of milk, the vanes of a windmill, a hairbrush. They remember a wine rack, a pair of glasses, a fragment of

26 Lubin, D.M., “Hitchcock and art: Fatal coincidences”, in *Artforum International* (November 2001).

music, a set of keys. Because through them and with them, Alfred Hitchcock succeeded where Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and Hitler failed: in taking control of the universe. Perhaps ten thousand people have not forgotten Cézanne's apples, but a billion spectators will recall the cigarette lighter in *Strangers on a Train*, and if Alfred Hitchcock has been the only *poète maudit* to achieve success, it is because he was the greatest creator of forms of the twentieth century and that it is forms which tell us, finally, what there is at the bottom of things; and what is art except that by which forms become style.²⁷

The passage (originally from *Histoire(s) du cinéma*) is justly famous, full of the extravagant hyperbole of the youthful Godard, but now intoned with the growl and rumble of late Godard, blackened by the ashes of the Holocaust, which he sees himself as having survived, but which has cost the cinema its soul. Godard makes the all-important move from Hitchcock the kinky fetishist to Hitchcock the canny world-conqueror. Without the hyperbole and the apocalypse, one can say that the "Hitchcock" posthumously anointed at the Pompidou²⁸ is now no longer an artist among other artists, with a body of work and an inimitable stylistic signature, however unique this is for a British commercial filmmaker working within the Hollywood studio-system, but that he is a "world": complete, self-sufficient, not just immediately recognizable in and by its details, but consistent through and through: in short, holding the promise or the premonition that his cinema and thus *the cinema* can be/has become an ontology, an inventory of what is and can exist.

At any rate, it seems a battle is on, about the reality status of each: the world of Hitchcock/Hollywood and the world of history/memory, and it is not always certain which will win. Perhaps this very battle is what we need to witness, because it is

27 Godard, J.-L., *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1998). Quoted also in G. O'Brien, "Hitchcock: The Hidden Power".

28 Vest, J.M., *Hitchcock and France: the forging of an auteur* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).

as much an ontological one as it is perceptual. Ontological: the power of the cinema to define our reality, or as Jean-Luc Nancy once put it: coming to terms with the possibility that "the lie of the image is the truth of our world". And perceptual: the philosophical stakes of mimesis, representation and simulation.²⁹ I come back to Johan van der Keuken. It is not only that "in his absence he still commands the scene". The scene only exists, because it reminds van der Keuken of Hitchcock. Has it come to the point where we notice something only because it repeats a scene from a movie? In *Sans Soleil*, Chris Marker, on a visit to San Francisco, can only see the Golden Gate Bridge as an artefact from Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, a gesture repeated by Cindy Bernard, when she took her photograph *Ask the Dust: Vertigo* (1958/1990) from the exact spot (now railed off), where Scottie fished Madeleine out of the water and carried her back to his car. For his television programme *The Pervert's Guide to the Cinema*, Slavoj Žižek went to Bodega Bay, took a boat, and played Melanie, in order to deliver once more the cage with the love birds and to re-experience the first attack of the gulls,³⁰ a scene from *The Birds* that had already served Raymond Bellour for one of the most dense and delirious pieces of close textual reading.³¹ It became a sort of primal scene of psychoanalytic film theory, next to the crop-

29 In David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas*, there is a scene where one of the main protagonists, Luisa Rey, reports an interview she did with Hitchcock, in which she "put it to the great man, the key to fictitious terror is partition or containment: so long as the Bates Motel is sealed off from our world, we want to peer in, like at a scorpion enclosure." Cited in Byatt, A.S., "Overlapping Lives", in *The Guardian* (6 March 2004).

30 From Johan Grimonprez's interview-statement: "What actually fascinated me in this new work, is how much our understanding of reality today is filtered through Hollywood imagery. For instance, when Hitchcock scholar Slavoj Žižek compared the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center to a real-life version of *The Birds*, he called it the ultimate Hitchcockian threat that suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He referred specifically to the scene when Melanie, played by Tippi Hedren, approaches the Bodega Bay pier in a small boat, and a single seagull, first perceived as an indistinguishable dark blot, unexpectedly swoops down and gashes her forehead. It is strikingly similar to the plane hitting the second World Trade Center tower. In this sense 9/11 brought fiction back to haunt us as reality."

31 Bellour, R., "Les Oiseaux: Analyse d'une Séquence", in *L'Analyse du Film* (Paris: Albatros, 1979). First published in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 216 (1969), 24–38.

dusting episode from *North by Northwest*, the Indiana prairie stop that many a Hitchcock fan (including myself) has tried to locate, and which Cindy Bernard, again, claims to have found in her *Ask the Dust: North by Northwest* (1959/1990). Is Hitchcock's "world" metonymically present, because these are the "primal scenes" of an ontological switch, establishing a new "order of things" an archive of first-cause references, of which the phenomenal world is merely the reflection and residue? Has his "world"—and by extension, the world of (Hollywood) movies—become our Platonic Heaven, making its memory thus the "hell" (of obsessions, fixations, murderous designs, palpitating terrors and feverish longings) which our "returns" try to turn into a "home", and to whose impossibly flawed endeavour our repetition compulsions bear witness? In other words, is one of the reasons we now have (Hitchcock) "installations" in our museums, due to the fact that these are the "worlds" we need to, want to, but finally cannot install ourselves in?³²

The Paradoxes of Mimesis from Parrhasios to Hitchcock

From a two-dimensional picture on the screen, Hitchcock's world invites one to think it three dimensional—to gratify an almost bodily urge to enter into it, to penetrate it, furnish it, surround oneself with it, irrespective of, or precisely because of one's awareness of the dangers, even courting them: besides repeating Norman Bates's gesture, it is the Scottie syndrome—taking *Vertigo* as the most accomplished version of the Hitchcockian *mal à voir*, the swooning sickness—that sucks the viewer into his films, and of which *Psycho* would be the more hysterical spasm. It may explain why some artists have tried to "inhabit"

32 "The collapse between what is real and what is fake is very much part of the exploration throughout *Looking for Alfred*, in particular with reference to lookalike culture. Film stars become fake imitations of their celebrity projections and in turn lookalikes, while adopting the attitudes of their cherished idol, become a more real version of what they try to look like." Interview with Johan Grimontprez.

this universe by dilating it: Douglas Gordon's installation-projection *24-hour Psycho*, by taking up a complete day, is wall to wall Hitchcock: not in space but in time. If such a move sounds drastic, the paradox it points to is nonetheless unavoidable: as Hitchcock never tired to point out, his films are all about artifice, not lifelike realism,³³ so how can they exert such a strong mimetic pull? In other words, if after Hitchcock, Life Imitates the Movies, how did we get there, and especially how did Hitchcock get us there?

One obvious way that Hitchcock lures us in, Caligari-like conjuror and showman that he also was, is with his cameos, the walk-on parts which should now perhaps be described as "walk-in" parts: not just in the sense that often enough, Hitchcock literally "walks into" his own films, giving us, for a split-second, the double-take impression of seeing in 3D. He also beckons us in, nowhere more so than in those cameos, where a quick look over the shoulder (most ag/trans/gressively in *Marnie*),³⁴ invites us to follow him along the corridors of his character's secret,³⁵ but initiating also a gesture of display, like a shopkeeper showing off his wares, or a gamekeeper presenting the habitats of exquisitely exotic, enigmatic or merely eccentric creatures. Hitchcock's films, at certain moments, become walk-in zoos, taking us on a safari of familiar, if far from open-range obsessions. At other times, scenes generate a pull of immersion, where one is led on, not by the master-magician himself, but by his female assistant, the blonde heroine. She is the one who ventures into ominously silent attics, tries and rattles locked doors, or takes us down some dark pas-

33 "Film is not a slice of life, its a piece of cake" (Hitchcock). But see also Cohen, T., *Anti-mimesis From Plato to Hitchcock* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

34 This scene, too, has been exhaustively analysed by Raymond Bellour. See Bellour, R., "Hitchcock the Enunciator", in *Camera Obscura*, no. 2 (Autumn 1977), 66–87.

35 "One crucial and recurring moment in the work is of Hitchcock meeting himself. The point where he turns his head and glances back refers to *Stage Fright* (1949) and *Marnie*. I've mirrored these with the Hitchcock cameo from *Foreign Correspondent*, where he passes someone on the street. This glancing back appears also recurrently in the casting sessions as we asked each impersonator to do this to camera." Interview with Johan Grimontprez.



sage way, no: down the cellar stairs in Norman Bates's house: an Alice, either falling into a Wonderland of screeching birds, or as in *Psycho*, of an equally screeching (if we're still listening), as well as grinning, mummy's skull.³⁶

The "walk-in" effect, as well as the beckoning gesture, invariably calls to mind the most famous of all stories of mimetic representation as a bodily effect, the story of the two Greek painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasios, as related by Pliny. Zeuxis once painted some grapes that were so realistic that birds swooped on the canvas and pecked at them. But then, his rival Parrhasios asked Zeuxis to his studio, keen to demonstrate a similar feat. Zeuxis, in front of the work, demanded Parrhasios to draw back the curtain, which hung across the canvas, in order to be able to judge for himself the skills of his colleague. But the curtain *was* the painting. Acknowledging that Parrhasios was the better of the two, Zeuxis said, "I took in the birds, but you took me in."

Besides the swooping birds, there is another point to this story that relates to Hitchcock. For whereas the lifelike grapes give us versions of photorealism, and refer to an effect achieved "out there", in the world of objects, producing, in other words, a "fake", the curtain veiling the "painting" achieves an effect "in here", in the beholder's mind, and thus produces a "truth": not about the world, but about this mind, its imagination, its desire and/or (self-)deception, which may be too painful to confront, putting the viewer in a state of denial, or into the loop of (compulsive) repetition. In other words, Zeuxis and Parrhasios are two kinds of "realists", whose strategies are, however, different and almost diametrically opposed, in the sense that the second is the meta-commentary on the first. It is not that Parrhasios is merely a "baroque" trompe-l'œil realist against the "classically" representational Zeuxis. What matters is the interaction

36 "He was in some sense our Lewis Carroll, populating his Wonderland with looking-glass inversions of the same world we inhabit: a world of spies and murderers, lovers and tennis players, actresses and jewel thieves. They exist, apparently, to make fascinating patterns in which the spectator, like the director before him, can become lost." See G. O'Brien, "Hitchcock: The Hidden Power".

or interchange between the two, where Zeuxis' "demand to see" mistakes Parrhasios' curtain as interposing itself between him and whatever he hopes to see represented. Zeuxis' category mistake *is* Parrhasios' painting, or put differently, whereas Zeuxis paints *grapes*, Parrhasios paints (the) *desire* (for grapes). Similarly, whereas some directors have filmed Marlene, Marilyn, or Madonna, Hitchcock has filmed the *desire*—for Madeleine, Melanie or Marnie.³⁷

This doubling of mimesis by its own impossible desire for possession (and often fatal entanglement in the paradoxes of representation) points to another way of accounting for the mimetic pull in Hitchcock: the unexpected realism he engineers at the scale of detail (again, detail!) when the overall picture makes no sense at all: say, the miniscule lady's razor on Cary Grant's enormous jowl in the railway station washroom of *North by Northwest*. Accurate in itself, but misaligned in its proportions or settings, this is, of course, what makes an object hyperreal and a scene oneiric: such moments are the tipping points of mimesis, the ones practised and perfected by the Surrealists. These switches, or parallax perceptions, are reinvented by Hitchcock in another idiom, and extended, one might argue, to include the plot. The endless fussing over minutiae, the obsession with getting the settings "right" (which is to say, getting them from the

37 Žižek, who in a comment on the "veiled Muslim women" debate in several European countries also refers to the Zeuxis/Parrhasios competition, draws an even bolder conclusion: "And this brings us back to the function of veil in Islam: what if the true scandal this veil endeavours to obfuscate is not the feminine body hidden by it, but the *inexistence* of the feminine? What if, consequently, the ultimate function of the veil is precisely to sustain the illusion that there is something, the substantial Thing, behind the veil? If, following Nietzsche's equation of truth and woman, we transpose the feminine veil into the veil, which conceals the ultimate Truth, the true stakes of the Muslim veil become even clearer. Woman is a threat because she stands for the 'undecidability' of truth, for a succession of veils beneath which there is no ultimate hidden core; by veiling her, we create the illusion that there is, beneath the veil, the feminine Truth—the horrible truth of lie and deception, of course. Therein resides the concealed scandal of Islam: only a woman, the very embodiment of the indiscernability of truth and lie, can guarantee Truth. For this reason, she has to remain veiled." See Žižek, S., "A Glance into the Archives of Islam" (2006). Accessed Autumn 2007: www.lacan.com/zizarchives.htm

register of verisimilitude into that of the absurdly improbable, by the tiniest of shifts in incident, like Marnie's shoe falling out of her coat-pocket, as she tiptoes past the—deaf—charwoman, away from Mark Rutland's safe), speak of the determination with which Hitchcock is said to have used up and was accused of abusing so many able Hollywood screenwriters. The point was to arrive at a screenplay whose move and countermove are invariably slung across an abyss, if we follow the self-cancelling logic of the MacGuffin. The solid strands of plotting that anchor character and motivation in the "real world", yet leave so much unsaid and unspecified as to force the viewer to surmise most of it in his mind, serve to weave as dense a curtain as possible across the "nothing there", or rather across the chuckling repartee that concludes the story of the famous device's origin: "(Then) this is not a MacGuffin."³⁸

Now you see it, now you don't: Magritte's Pipe and the Double, negative

The MacGuffin thus conceived suggests a revision to the idea of the mimetic pull, providing first an ontological gap that could suck one into a black hole, while also complicating it by the reappearance of the Double, materialization of this gap, and its always already implicit negative: the non-identity of this world with its own felt presence. And besides, "Then, this is not..." is, of course, itself the double of: "Ceci n'est pas..." It repeats perhaps the most famous gesture of indexical negation, the line written by René Magritte into his advertisement (or school primer) drawing of a pipe, with the word/image combination creating an endlessly reversible rebus puzzle, or "switch" (the painting is called: "the treachery of images"). If we follow Foucault's commentary on "Ceci n'est pas une pipe": at stake is the distinction

38 In the famous exchange between the two travellers, which Hitchcock tells Truffaut by way of explaining the origins of the MacGuffin, the final lines are: "But: there *are* no lions in the Highlands!?" — "Then, *this* is not a MacGuffin".

between resemblance and similitude in visual representation. When implying that an image *resembles* reality, one assumes the ontological superiority of the latter. This is indeed what Magritte forestalls with the negative, rather than merely saying something as obvious as that you cannot smoke a painted pipe. With *similitude*, there is no originary referent, however much we might fantasize one: according to Foucault, things and images are “more or less ‘like’ each other without either of them able to claim the privileged status of model.” But Magritte not only breaks with resemblance, while apparently sticking to its representational rules. He also flouts another principle of classical painting: that the space of representation (the picture) and the space of writing or linguistic reference (the title) be separate and hierarchically subordinated to each other. What Magritte achieves by placing the words “inside” (but why not “on top of” or merely “in”?) the painting and phrasing them in the negative is to create an oscillation or a hesitation, a kind of “thrilling” of our perceptual norms and habitual expectations. These norms imply that perceiving, recognizing and comprehending a two-dimensional image as a depiction of space requires an act of associative seeing, whereby optical and tactile, as well as linguistic and cognitive registers all work together, to confirm and synthesize the different sensory input. By separating the senses from each other, and putting them under the sign of negation, Magritte makes us aware of the “division of labour” among their respective registers, while also bringing into play all kinds of traps for the mind and the eye that lurk in the folds of visual representation. The subtle, but excessive self-evidence of bourgeois order in Magritte—the tailored suits, the bowler hats, the umbrellas and other accessories or accoutrements of a regulated life—are thus so many pointers to the mode of representation which his pictures at once instantiate and forever destroy. Many of Magritte’s most typical effects are thus referenced to the basic issue of perspectival painting (but also cinema): how to depict a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. What he puts in crisis, for instance, are the signifiers of spatial depth, such as figure-ground relationships, perceptual cues with respect to light source and shadow-



Double Take, 2009

ing, the scale and positioning of objects within a perspectival image-space, or the direction of the characters' looks in relation to each other: meant to meet in mutual confirmation and yet destined forever to miss their (ap)point(ment)s of intersection, and instead vanishing into horizonless voids.

Obviously, it would be hard to substantiate a one-to-one correlation between Magritte's techniques and Hitchcock's plotting or framing, but the "this is not..." formula gives a clue to their kinship, suggesting that a separation of the sensory registers and the production of cognitive dissonances may well be a factor in the kinds of uncanny each is able to achieve in his respective medium. If we do indeed take selective input from our perceptual field and create our own cognitive coherence—matching what we see with what we hear and with other perceptual cues, letting the brain take the strain of making it fit—then the slight misalignments Hitchcock habitually produces in his own solid worlds of middle-class mores, are what brings about the peculiar mobilization of the body, pulling us into the picture as a kind of supplement, at once necessary and in excess: which is itself a definition of the monstrative and the negative that come together in the indexical gesture asserting that "this is not..."

This is not Alfred Hitchcock

The phantom double stepping into this breach—necessary when he is not there and excessive when he appears—is the lookalike, apparently healing the rift, but in fact, also deepening it. Everything said so far: about the too many Hitchcocks of academia, about the Sphinx-like posture he occupies in the Oedipal scenarios of his critics, about his fatal attraction to artists and other world-makers, about Parrhasios' painted veil and the mimetic pull one feels before his films, finally points to nothing else: that Hitchcock is most himself when he can point to or index himself and say "this is not Alfred Hitchcock", as he so often did, when stepping "out of" the cinema and, for instance, "into" television.

"Looking for... (the 'real') Alfred" is thus a productively futile exercise in more senses than one. First of all, because Hitchcock's (diegetic) presence in his films, through the walk-in cameo parts, at once in-side, out-side and be-side his creations, disavows his God-like control and thereby reasserts it the more incontrovertibly, with the ontological knot being tied by what Bellour has called "Hitchcock the enunciator",³⁹ but which I am now suggesting has also to do with "Hitchcock the indicator": the invariably implied gesture of pointing. Not (only) voyeurism or scopophilia is his trademark, but the metaphoric index finger, along which our spectatorial vision is led, as it were, by the nose, towards those divergent-dissonant vanishing points that make up the "treachery of images". They remind us all too palpably of our awkwardly real bodies, in what has been called Hitchcock's effects of "motor mimicry",⁴⁰ or they propel us into his universe as if by gusts of wind, carrying us along, like dry leaves, before a downpour.

Productively futile also, because this "looking for" has to be a "casting around", rehearsing and repeating the founding gesture of the necessary excess, and following therein the (paratactic) logic of similitude rather than the (hierarchical) order of resemblance in representation, the latter's truth supposedly sustained and guaranteed "from outside". The lookalikes are thus of the order of "similitude" rather than "resemblance", for it is this order of similitude which ensures that the world of Hitchcock can appear more real than the real world, while being so self-confidently artificial: the "piece of cake" rather than "the slice of life", as Hitchcock notoriously put it. If the lookalikes acknowledge the (minimal) gap of all representational regimes, their serial similitude (as in Magritte) ensures the mise-en-abyme of (filmic) representation in two-dimensional space. By casting for the part,

³⁹ Cf. n. 30.

⁴⁰ For "motor mimicry" in Hitchcock, see Noll-Brinckmann, C., "Somatische Empathie bei Hitchcock: Eine Skizze", in *Der Körper im Bild: Schauspielern – Darstellen – Erscheinen*, ed. H.B. Heller et al. (Marburg: Schüren Verlag 1999), 111–21.

as it were, they preserve that moment of hesitation and oscillation on which is founded but also flounders our fascination for “the Hitchcock moment”: neither Aristotelian identification, nor Brechtian distanciation can here negotiate the dialectic of appearance and reality, and instead, it is the possibility of a double, *our* double, that haunts each of these (p)lunges, making them at once unreal and too real. From this apparition, this spectralization of ourselves, in the act of seeing, the lookalike rescues or protects us, as the fake-double, being a sort of ontological scapegoat, in the guise of a fetish. How fortunate, therefore, that they do in fact exist, these Hitchcock lookalikes, and in so many preposterous, improbable or near perfect embodiments! They prove that the “right man” has to be the “wrong man” (and vice versa), in order to sustain the parallax vision, or “partition” that marks the space where (not only) Hitchcock has just turned a corner: a whole hauntology of realism and reference, in its absence, is destined to still command the scene.

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Hitchcock is Not Himself Today...

An interview with Johan Grimmonprez by
Chris Darke

2007

Chris Darke: *We’re talking only a short distance away from The Gainsborough, the first film studio Hitchcock ever worked in. Having been on the trail of Hitchcock for almost four years with this project, you must have the feeling that his shadow is everywhere you go.*

Johan Grimmonprez: This reminds me of the MacGuffin anecdote: I’ve read three, four, maybe five versions of this story where Hitchcock tells an almost but not quite identical account about two guys who meet on a train. One asks the other: “What’s that thing you’re carrying in the luggage rack?” “That’s a MacGuffin” comes the answer. The first guy follows, “What’s a MacGuffin?” The second replies that “It’s a device to trap lions in the Scottish Highlands”, at which point the first retorts: “But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands.” Nonchalantly, the reply comes as “Well, then that’s no MacGuffin!” In our search for the perfect Hitchcock, perhaps he has himself become our own MacGuffin, our illusion pushing the search forward. In the end it’s like those Russian dolls, one hiding within another and within another and within another, until finally you realize that there is nothing hiding beneath at all.