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Hitchcock, Hume, and the Matrix of Modern Cinema

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When biographer Donald Spoto published *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* in 1983, critic Richard Grenier started his front-page article in the *New York Times Book Review* with George Orwell's observation that in order to be influential, a writer must be read by people under twenty-five. Hitchcock ultimately fails this test, Grenier claimed, because ever since the rebellious 1960s, film enthusiasts tend to be freewheeling 'paraanarchists' with little patience for the 'mechanical…dangers' and 'cozy…paranoia' (Grenier 1983, 32) of Hitch's rigorously designed movies. These moviegoers hold 'the conviction that man is naturally good', the critic continued, 'and…is corrupted only by such artificial institutions as the state' (ibid., 1). Ipso facto, young people regularly detect evil in the hearts of politicians and other authority figures, but are loath to recognize any trace of it in themselves. The malevolence that flourishes and festers among ordinary, average people in Hitchcock's world--a world where even a cozy place like Santa Rosa, California, can 'go crazy every now and then,' as Detective Jack Graham memorably puts it in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)—thus becomes for Grenier's baby-boomers a construction as outmoded and irrelevant as, say, the *Weltanschauung* of Henry Kissinger, whose favorite movie is the 1960 shocker *Psycho* (ibid.).

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It's hardly surprising that moviegoers persuaded of humankind's 'natural goodness' would regard Hitchcock's skeptical view of human nature not as a plausible existential-psychological position but as a gratuitous moral slander. Could anyone but a misanthropist dream up Uncle Charlie of *Shadow of a Doubt*, who's the most popular guy in town *and* a serial killer who holds the town in withering contempt? Or the winning L.B. 'Jeff' Jefferies of *Rear Window* (1954), who's a decent, caring man *and* a peeping tom with a camera? And imagine how these 'naturally good' moviegoers must feel when they find themselves swept away by a Hitchcock film, impulsively rooting for Bruno Anthony's groping hand to seize the fateful cigarette lighter in *Strangers on a Train* (1951) or for Marion Crane's incriminating car to reach the bottom of the swamp in *Psycho*. In scenes like these, Hitchcock doesn't just allege a naturally-*not*-good side of human nature, he pretty well proves the case, using audience responses as Exhibit A in his presentation. And despite the protestations of ideological pundits, his works remain a living force in world cinema. My university students respond with more enthusiasm to films like *Blackmail* (1929) and *Psycho* and *Rear Window* and *North by Northwest* (1959) than to the great majority of 'old movies' by other directors. Hitchcock thrillers maintain good sales on DVD and still exert a healthy influence on auteurs around the world. Allegiance to the Master of Suspense is clearly alive and well among spectators, filmmakers, and an ever-growing array of scholars—those of us who, in Grenier's words, `have captured teaching posts at universities, from which position they attempt to stem the anarchist tide' (ibid., 32). One of those scholars is John Orr, whose outstanding *Hitchcock and Twentieth-Century Cinema* opens new doors in Hitchcock criticism while mounting a powerful argument for the director's ongoing centrality in cinematic discourse.

In his opening chapter, Orr lays out his film-historical and film-critical agendas, which naturally overlap throughout the book; in the second chapter he sketches his film-philosophical agenda, which informs and enriches his analyses, sometimes explicitly and sometimes not. As its title hints, *Hitchcock and Twentieth-Century Cinema* presents the protean Master of Suspense as a "matrix-figure" (8) of modern film, playing a hugely influential role in cinema's evolution from the silent era to the present day. Although he doesn't say exactly what a matrix-figure is, Orr takes the term from an admirable source: the French critics and filmmakers Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, who in their 1957 book *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films* use it to describe the L.B. Jefferies character played by James Stewart in *Rear Window*, a 'photographer with prying eyes…whose gaze dominates the enclosed space…where the spectacle of murder unfolds' (ibid.). Orr loves this metaphor but feels it doesn't go far enough. In his view, Hitchcock's skill at 'orchestrating

the space and spectacle of his vision' places the 'short, portly' director—a mirror image of Stewart's lean, tall figure—at the center of 'not only…his own cinema but of cinema as such', channeling the best legacies of the past into new achievements that helped to shape film's present and future. 'So much shock', Orr writes in eloquent tribute, 'so much suspense, so much montage, so much mystery, so much watching, so much doubling, so much disaster, so much redemption: it all goes back to him'. The link between Hitch and his fellow filmmakers thus emerges as 'a form of fate that ties in through echo and repetition down the years' (ibid.), binding the Master of Suspense to the destiny of cinema itself.

Orr's ability to wax poetic in passages like this doesn't mean he skimps on historical details or sensitive interpretations of individual films. He is careful to enumerate the preexisting fundamentals of cinema that Hitch gratefully harvested at numerous stages of his career, especially during the aesthetically formative 1920s period when he was a cinephile in English film clubs and theatres, a tyro in the British film industry, and a hugely impressed young visitor to Germany's mighty UFA studio. It was in those years that he absorbed the expressionism of Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau, the surrealism of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, and the montage innovations of Lev Kuleshov and S.M. Eisenstein, to name only the most important. Hitchcock valued these as individual techniques and, more important, as elements of a stylistic *Gestalt* that he soon began conceptualizing and inflecting in personal and distinctive ways. The unique blend of style, content, and worldview that spawned the adjective 'Hitchcockian' was inspirational in turn to an enormously wide range of latter-day filmmakers, from the French New Wave directors of the 1960s to currently active Asian filmmakers like Wong Kar-Wai and Takashi Miike, whose 1999 thriller *Audition* weaves elements of *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* into a jolting new take on the elusive nature of reality and appearance. Orr sees much to celebrate in Hitchcock's near-ubiquitous presence, but he is not uncritical about it, finding cinematic perils in the 'immense overload' (6) of Hitchcockian influence. This is a vital point, since a very slippery slope descends from homage and pastiche to imitation and repetition; the latter two are symptomatic of what Orr calls 'an illusion of progress that masks a compulsion to repeat…an easy addiction in which "inspiration" is too easily an excuse for lacking vision' (ibid.). Orr's preferred mode of Hitchcockian fellow-traveling is the 'translation of vision' practiced by filmmakers like Alain Resnais and Roman Polanski, who 'absorb [Hitchcock] into the world of their *own* vision', building 'parallel worlds' (7) from starting points boldly independent of his.

Along with the matrix-figure, the key to Hitchcock most effectively used by Orr is the notion of *exchange*, which Rohmer and Chabrol identified in the 1950s and divided into four basic varieties: moral exchange, or the transfer of guilt; psychological exchange, via suspicion; dramatic exchange, as in blackmail; and concrete exchange, manifested in to-and-fro movements (Rohmer and Chabrol 1957, ix). Orr complicates this scheme in two ways: first, by observing that in Hitchcock any exchange of a given kind generally includes some aspects of the other three kinds; second, by explaining how Hitchcock uses his polyvalent transfers as 'a register of shifting power-relations' whereby his protagonists make moves for and against one another in ceaselessly evolving, frequently fatal games. These insights facilitate many productive readings throughout the book: the exchange in *Shadow of a Doubt* that transfers young Charlie from one gaze to another and from trust into suspicion; the origin of *Notorious* (1946) in a transfer of guilt from an executed Nazi father to his troubled antifascist daughter; and the transactions through interrogation in *The Paradine Case* (1947), to name only three. In later parts of the book, where Orr traces Hitchcockian thematics in diverse films by other directors, we find David Lynch forging 'a dynamics of exchange based on guilt, sexuality and memory' (153) and film noir fleshing out 'the fatal triangle of fall guy, *femme fatale* and victim by adding on financial *exchange* to its conspiracy of passion' (155, Orr's emphasis). We also discover an 'exchange signifying the sacrifice that perverse miracle entails' in Chabrol's ferocious *La Rupture* (*The Breakup*, 1970), one of several films that Orr discusses in terms of 'perverse miracle' plot twists that deftly transform time-tested narrative formulas. Conversely, we find an *absence* of exchange objects in Rohmer's moral tale *My Night at Maud's* (*Ma nuit chez Maud*, 1969), wherein life itself is 'the immediate source of [a] perverse miracle' that allows the naïve hero to proceed into the future without the 'forgetting and suppression of a painful past' (151) sought after by his traumatised counterpart in the memory-haunted *Vertigo*.

In an effort to move beyond the Roman Catholic perspective embraced by Rohmer and Chabrol in their Hitchcock book—appropriately, since Hitchcock was himself a Catholic, if a more-or-less lapsed one--Orr simultaneously affirms and vaults over their metaphysic by drawing on René Girard's idea that the Passion of the Christ represented a 'symbolic exchange' that replaced blood sacrifice with self sacrifice, producing a sense of irredeemable guilt among believers dismayed by humanity's collective culpability for Jesus's crucifixion (Girard 1979, 39-67). Hitchcock intuitively works out this scenario in secular terms, locating the source of guilt not in the divine goodness represented by Jesus's bitter sacrifice, but rather in 'the evil of mankind that we are also powerless to prevent' (40). In this way Hitchcock renders the transfer of guilt empirical and also

universal, since it is embodied, 'in an epoch that is uneasily half-secular and half-religious', by a 'sacrificial unconscious' (ibid.) that makes even Hitchcock's falsely accused 'wrong man' characters feel an irrational guilt which they can neither understand nor exorcise.

These concerns carry us from the film-critical elements of *Hitchcock and Twentieth-Century Cinema* to its directly philosophical interests. Orr cheerfully acknowledges that, given the director's Catholic upbringing and Jesuit education, it's unlikely he ever had David Hume on his reading list. He then declares that it doesn't matter one way or the other, since important ideas often 'transmit themselves down the centuries' by way of an 'accretion of thinking and feeling [that] percolates through the culture and cannot be nailed by chapter and verse alone' (26). Going on to acknowledge with equal cheerfulness that 'the concept of experience [is] deemed naïve in the fading arena of the "postmodern" at its most kitsch', Orr promptly recuperates the concept by tracing a good deal of Hitchcock's intellectual power to eighteenth-century discourses that stress 'the primacy of experience as the fragile basis of understanding' (ibid.). Hitchcock's cinematic vision, that is to say, builds upon 'the loose empire of the senses Hume had begun to construct in his vision of human nature' (best elucidated in *A Treatise of Human Nature*) two centuries earlier—a 'flawed, imperfect edifice' that stresses 'the power and logic of the senses, the vagaries of trial and error, the power of the passions over reason, [and] induction over deduction', and sees in human nature (another concept often deemed naïve nowadays) the 'force-field of belief as ever holding sway over the complexities of knowledge' (26-27).

In the vast and ever-growing bookshelf of Hitchcock scholarship, I can think of no formulation that captures the meaning and spirit of Hitchcock's art more precisely and concisely than this. Hume's philosophy sees life as a jumble of existential fragments that people strive to resolve by means of guesswork, inference, sensory impressions, and the use of past experiences as bases for future expectations; with remarkable congruence, Hitchcock's narratives likewise centre on quests to solve puzzles arising from 'the vexed relations between sense-experience and knowledge'. Hitchcock films are 'fables about fictional characters whose fate is bound up with perceiving a world in flux, and of translating acts of perception into forms of knowledge', all of which is in turn bound up with 'the spectator's pleasurable act of perceiving [the characters'] perceiving' (27). Hence the fascinating gaps that yawn between character perception and viewer perception in films like *Frenzy* (1972), where we know who the necktie strangler is long before the people in the picture do, and *Rear Window*, where matrix-figure Jeff mimics our stasis in the audience until Thorwald hurls him into motion at the climax. Some of Orr's most illuminating comments relate to the roles of custom and habit in Hume's epistemology

and in Hitchcock's films, where the conservatism of the well-crafted story becomes a narratological launching pad for explorations of 'our deep fear of perceptual collapse' (29). Here as elsewhere in the book, Orr makes discriminating use of details from Hitchcock's biography, noting that cinema's intrepid explorer was "an addict of custom' in his personal life. He also adduces Gilles Deleuze's point (in *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*) that for Hume communication inevitably takes place by way of 'external relations and…the mediation of objects (32); this further links Hume with the 'drama of transaction' so essential to Hitchcock's narratives, and enables Orr to find, for example, a 'Humean reflection' (80) in Hitchcock's remark that in an ideal movie chase, 'the tempo and complexity…will be an accurate reflection of the intensity of the relationships between the characters' (quoted in Brady 1950, 45). Orr also brings Hume into play with other filmmakers--observing, for example, that Hume is to Hitchcock as Henri Bergson is to Alain Resnais—and finds creative uses for additional philosophers (Blaise Pascal, Jean-Paul Sartre, Marcel Camus) as well. Along the way he takes issue with an entire 'generation of critics …who have misread Laura Mulvey' (85), explores connections among Hitchcock and the authors John Buchan, Daphne du Maurier, Joseph Conrad, and Graham Greene, and analyzes felicities of acting in numerous Hitchcock films. And more.

It is a truism that no book is perfect, and after praising so much in Orr's book, I have some criticisms to add. One is that while *Hitchcock and Twentieth-Century Cinema* is unquestionably an auteurist study, allowing Hitchcock the credit (and occasionally the blame) for just about everything in just about every film, Orr doesn't theorize his position on auteurism or even set forth a rationale for the particular ways in which he exercises it; a brief account of this would have been welcome. Another is that Orr's emphasis of Hume as a gateway to Hitchcock's thought is more exclusive than it has to be, needlessly curbing the book's philosophical scope. To suggest just one avenue that occurred to me while reading his main chapter on Hitchcock and Hume, the valuable insight that Hitchcock's characters 'are what they are because they are what they become in the duration of his plots' (41) might be profitably pursued in the terms of numerous modern philosophers, such as William James, who observed that the 'fundamental fact about our experience is that it is a process of change….[O]wing to the fact that all experience is a process, no point of view can ever be *the* last one' (James 1911, 89-90, emphasis in original). Similarly, the edgy philosophical flash of Slavoj Žižek came to mind in relation to Orr's statement that fiction 'is an elegant construction….But within its framework chaos ensues' (41). (In addition to his Hitchcock-related books, Žižek does fascinating readings of Hitchcock, Lynch, and others in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, the 2006 documentary directed by

Sophie Fiennes, which he wrote and stars in.) Every reader will have such associations while reading *Hitchcock and Twentieth-Century Cinema*, and I suppose the point of this complaint is that I wish the book were longer.

A few specific points also deserve mention. Orr shouldn't take for granted that in *The Wrong Man* (1956) the man eventually caught by the police is the protagonist's 'criminal double, the real hold-up man about to embark on another escapade' (47); who's to say that another wrong man isn't being arrested, given the enormous chasm between realities and appearances in this film? Looking for movies that rival F.W. Murnau's exquisite *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) in creating a camera-ready metropolis from scratch, Orr says that only two pictures, both by Federico Fellini, come 'close to matching it' (72); but I think Jacques Tati's magnificent *Play Time* (1967) is the best possible contender. In his otherwise splendid analysis of Hitchcock's influence on François Truffaut's films, Orr leaves out *The Bride Wore Black* (*La Mariée était en noire*, 1968), which Truffaut told me was his most Hitchcockian—and *excessively* Hitchcockian—picture. Orr's contention that *Psycho* preemptively inverts 'the formula of [Hitchcock's] Freudian critics'(79) is provocative but unclearly stated. It's interesting to suggest that the Madeleine/Judy character in *Vertigo* inspired the Renée/Alice character in *Lost Highway* (1997), but it's far-fetched to hypothesise that David Lynch chose the name Renée in homage to Hitchcock's film, where Madeleine/Judy was Madeleine/Renée in the source novel and the first draft of the script, but not in any draft after screenwriter Samuel Taylor joined the project. On the level of book-review housekeeping, Orr and the comma have an uneasy relationship; he can't seem to decide whether to call characters by their fictional names or the names of the performers who play them; and he joins the long list of writers who misspell L.B. Jefferies's admittedly tricky last name.

These are minor glitches in what is mostly a bold, insightful, and wonderfully creative book. Orr makes it clear on page after page that Hitchcock was a moral-ethical thinker—indeed, a moral-ethical philosopher—whose perceptions and insights were no less dazzling because they came from the mind of a popular moviemaker instead of an aesthetician or academic. 'Hume was a philosopher by profession,' Orr writes, 'Hitchcock by default' (26). Although sheer cinematic talent was the source of his almost preternatural skill at making us nail-biting witnesses of fates that are 'not ours but well could be' (ibid.), resources in a far deeper stratum of his mind gave birth to the engrossing riches of his endlessly intricate, profoundly thoughtful art. He was a philosopher of the twentieth century, and one suspects he was a thinker for the ages as well. Orr makes the case with an elegance and eloquence that live consistently up to their subject.

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