

Hitchcock and Hume Revisited: Fear, Confusion and *Stage Fright*

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This essay is a return to the scene of a crime. In my recent book on Hitchcock (Orr 2005, 26-52) I made an outrageously general argument for the affinity between Hitch's narratives and David Hume's reasoning about human nature. For something so speculative, you expect cracks to appear pretty soon. But my impulse since the book's appearance has not been to feel I exaggerated – which I'm sure I did – but to sense that I did not go far enough. There was more to be said about this oblique, long distance liaison down the centuries and I now feel it best said through a film which I had not discussed at all, partly because I shared the general feeling that this was not one of Hitch's most auspicious films. The acting was uneven, the tone whimsical, the plot often cluttered and it suffered, or so I thought, from that general uncertainty of touch that sometimes characterised Hitchcock's return to England. But then again his short wartime film *Bon Voyage* (1944) has been underestimated, as were in different ways *Under Capricorn* (1949), the remade *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) and later *Frenzy* (1972). As Michael Walker has pointed out (1999: 199-202), *Stage Fright* (1950) has a structural complexity, a narrative coherence and a textual density missing from his 1930s films like *Young And Innocent* (1937). In other words, it brings back to London in 1950 the innovating aspects of Hitchcock's Hollywood aesthetic of the 1940s.

Acting-wise the failings of Michael Wilding and Jane Wyman, who were clearly not Grant and Bergman, and of Richard Todd, who was clearly not Joseph Cotton, diminish on a second viewing when nuances of plot and motive deepen, the stage becomes more clearly

an organic metaphor for the drama of the film, and the power of symbolic objects gathers strength. This is also a film where Hitchcock, with his familiar dose of sly and calculated humour, had pushed his structural theme of lost identities in new and unexpected ways. He branches out and develops a bold move, often dismissed as sleight-of-hand or gimmicky plot-twist - the deceitful flashback. On the face of it, the narrative starts out as yet another fugitive 'wrong man' film, following in the footsteps of *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Young And Innocent* and *Saboteur* (1942). Jonathan Cooper (Todd) a man on the run falsely accused of murder is determined to prove his innocence by enlisting the aid of close friend Eve, a student actress (Wyman). Only very late on do we discover that Cooper has been lying to her and that he is a killer after all. But let's start at the beginning. As his car speeds away through a bomb scarred East End with St Paul's Cathedral in the background, he tells Eve he is suspected of killing the husband of singer Charlotte Inward (Marlene Dietrich), his much older lover, when in fact Charlotte is the real culprit. He graphically narrates this 'injustice' by telling Eve of his discovery of the crime through the so-called 'lying flashback' that starts the film. Yet the term is a misnomer. The flashback has no voice-over as in film noir and aspects of Cooper's account contain elements of truth. The flashback is a vivid, dramatic visualisation of a mixed memory that mingles truth and falsehood, and just as its visual power of conviction conquers Eve, it also conquers us. And to back it up, most viewers would know that Hitchcock 'does' wrong man movies anyway and this appears to be another one in the series.

Now let us turn at an acute angle to David Hume. In Hume's account of reliable memory in *A Treatise of Human Nature* the senses always depend on the force and vivacity of the evidence recalled and the mind applies its reasoning to them: event-recall outweighs, therefore, the power of imagination or fancy, which invents things that did not happen at all. Yet, epistemologically speaking, the comparison is a relative one, a matter of probability that applies most of the time but not all. Hume admits that just as memories can deteriorate so much they can be taken for imaginative fancies, so the opposite can also be true:

an idea of the imagination may acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment. This is noted in the case of liars; who by the frequent repetition of their lies come at last to believe and remember them as realities. (2000, 60-1)

Hume's observation points us to the enigma of the Hitchcock flashback: there is a transfer whereby elements of fancy take over from elements of memory and in the urgency and eloquence of his account, Cooper momentarily believes in his own propaganda. But since cinema is a medium with an audience there is also a double layering. Cooper is lying not only to Eve but also to us; and Hitchcock's methods of filming the flashback are such so that he gives Cooper's narrative 'fancy' extra visual force and vivacity, and intermingles the big lie with other incidents which in retrospect we can see as having been true. Let us look at how this works.

The film opens with a theatre safety curtain rising to reveal a high-angle shot of St Paul's surrounded by pitted bomb sites. A distant sports car speeds along a deserted stretch of road in the camera's direction. Cut to ground level and then to a close studio shot of Todd and Wyman in the car. Cooper outlines the scenario of his flight that begins in his flat one evening: immediately as Hitchcock cuts to Cooper's flashback, his voice-over stops. He is visited by Charlotte in a white bloodstained dress, telling of her husband's 'accidental' killing and asking him to go back and fetch a blue dress from her flat that she can wear in its place. (It is this account of her account of the murder that later proves to be false.) He goes to her apartment. He sees the prone body of the dead man and the fireplace poker nearby that is cued as the murder weapon, gets the blue dress from a cupboard, messes up the husband's desk in the study and smashes a glass pane on the garden door to suggest forced entry. On his way out, he is disturbed by Charlotte's maid Nellie (Kay Walsh) who has just seen the dead body and now sees him dash down the stairs. He returns, gives Charlotte her dress and she leaves by mutual agreement for her nightly performance at the theatre. 'You're an actress,' he tells her, 'you're playing a part.' Soon after, he phones Eve's mother to find out that Eve is rehearsing at RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art), then hears the police call at the front door. He dashes out and escapes in his car to RADA pursued by the law, where he joins Eve's stage rehearsal uninvited, whispers his plight in her ear (his own bit of playacting) and escapes with her out of the stage door. We cut back to the car in the present where Eve now promises to drive him straight to her father's coastal cottage and give him refuge.

The flashback lasts all of thirteen minutes. It includes not only Cooper's account of Charlotte's visit, but Charlotte's account of the murder, and also a brief flashback within the flashback to Charlotte's apartment where Cooper remembers Nellie watching him, and then imagines her tracing his number in the phone directory to call the police. It ends

with the scene at the RADA rehearsal stage to his being pursued by detectives, which Eve herself can verify. Much of the second part of the flashback is true: Nellie does see him leave after discovering the dead body; he does have Charlotte's bloodstained dress. We can presume moreover there was a faked forced entry and the murder weapon was the poker. What we finally discover, though, is that the roles of Cooper and Charlotte are reversed. He is the murderer and she his accomplice, not vice versa. Despite her veiled confession to Eve at the end, the actual degree of her complicity is never established. We never find out exactly what Charlotte's role in the murder was and it could be much more than she 'confesses'. In other words there is no detailed flashback on her part, *Rashomon*-style, to counterbalance our vivid entry into the film. Hitchcock is almost challenging us to imagine the truth of the matter visually in the same way, with the same impact that he has shown its falsification. If Hume says the memory has greater power and vivacity than the imaginative fancy, then Hitchcock is demonstrating (with some arrogance) that the cinematic image of false flashback has more Humean force and vivacity than his spectator's attempt to imagine the truth of the matter. In a similar way, perhaps, Michael Haneke in his recent film *Hidden (Caché, 2005)* is challenging his audience to come up with a solution to the origin of the surveillance tapes that are posted through the letter box of his besieged Parisian couple. From what angle are they taken? Who took them? Why? What is the relation between the son of Georges Laurent (Daniel Auteuil) and the son of the middle-aged Algerian he knew briefly in childhood as an adopted stepbrother on his family farm? The tapes are vivid enough, recordings of recognisable places that can be (and are) authenticated. Do our powers of detection to go beyond them have the same powers of force and vivacity as they do to establish a sense of mystery in the first place?

Style-wise Hitch's flashback pulls out all the stops to convince us. He films long flowing takes, travelling two-shots of Charlotte and Cooper as they ascend the stairs and walk across the room. The mix of crane and crab dolly shots is balanced by Cooper's entry into Charlotte's apartment. A dazzling crane shot follows him through the front door and glides up past fly-away scenery as he ascends the stair and walks along the balcony. Once inside the apartment the camera follows his journey of "discovery" – the body on the floor, the poker nearby, the blue dress in the cupboard and his movement through to the study where he fakes forced entry from the garden. In *mise-en-scène* one sequence mirrors the other and the impact is dramatic. Much of what follows, until the final sequence in the theatre, is stylistically simple by comparison. The melodrama of the flashback more than

matches the cinema of everyday life. Yet there is a subtle continuity. Cooper's criminal dissimulation sets in motion a whole series of ambiguous charades. He himself acts out the role of the 'wrong man'. Charlotte plays the role of the grieving widow (though more concerned to have proper cleavage in her black mourning dress than anything else), while Eve and her father (Alastair Sim) plot to expose Charlotte through shady and dubious impersonation. Eve, the apprentice actress, at first pretends to Nellie to be a nosy journalist and then pays her hard cash so that she can impersonate her cousin, Doris, and become her stand-in as Charlotte's cockney dresser. Her father devises his own shock tactic. Winning a white-dress doll in a shooting gallery, he stains the dress with blood from his hand and bribes a young scout to show it to the performing Charlotte as she sings Edith Piaf's '*Ma vie en rose*', rendering her speechless (and inducing stage fright). Earlier Eve has tracked Inspector 'Ordinary' Smith (Michael Wilding) into a pub to keep up with police thinking, but Smith pretends at first not to be a policeman, and appears more concerned with a casual pick-up of a pretty girl over a beer and a sandwich than his murder investigation. Inviting Smith to her home the next day she tells her mother the inspector is a musician and asks him to play on the piano. All dissimulate (except the gullible mother) but, unlike Cooper, none tell the Big Lie. Yet we can see them dissimulating, a vice from which, as the 'wrong man', Cooper alone appears to be free.

Philosophically speaking the Hitch flashback becomes the exception that proves Hume's rule. Memory is a key to perceptual identity because it provides a frame for consistency and repetition in the evidence of the senses. The convincing lie builds upon this frame, implicitly acknowledging that this is how our minds work, and so provides false consistency and repetition. For Hume daily perception is a discontinuous affair that relies on the consistencies of memory and habit to fill in all the gaps, to give us in our daily encounters a negotiating frame for probabilities. So it is that we are also fallible, for often we succumb to tall tales that are told with perfect consistency and utter conviction.

Here Hitchcock ups the ante, style-wise, by the force and vivacity of the flashback itself. Filmically it is the most powerful section of the narrative and the one to which we are the least resistant: much of the rest of the film until the very end could be seen as anticlimax - or gentle comedy. Yet narrative continuity is provided by the transfer of deception, using that trope of dramatic exchange so favoured by Hitch in all his films. At the start we don't know that Cooper is passing himself off as innocent - that is, as what he is not. Yet after his escape everyone at some point is seen passing themselves off as someone

else, as if the nub of criminal deception that is the exception to the rule had filtered back into the collective consciousness of all the dramatis personae in diluted form. Yet it is also because, as Hume surmised, our sense of identity is loose that in our culture dissimulation allows us a through line to firm it up – but only as someone or something else. The charade, the game, the impersonation demand an invented consistency to be credible. Eve's 'passing' as Nellie's cousin, Doris, can only work if Smith, who knows her as Eve, doesn't spot her as Doris and if Charlotte, who knows her as Doris, does not spot her as Eve. In actual fact she is spotted by Charlotte's manager, Freddie, in the audience when Charlotte is rendered speechless by the bloodstained doll. Charlotte as an old pro barely holds her nerve. Yet when the apprentice Eve is exposed by Freddie in front of Smith, it is *she* who is dumbstruck in a superb piece of reverse-angle aesthetics, the amateur in the audience who experiences 'stage fright' when she has finally been rumbled.

The charade or impersonation can be seen as a culturally self-conscious artefact that appeals to us because it symbolises what, in Hume's terms, is a mental process of which most of the time we are unaware: we need the illusion of unity in our perceiving that our senses and our reason cannot give us. Hume writes:

However one instant we may consider the related succession (of objects) as variable or interrupted, we are sure the next to ascribe to it a perfect identity, and regard it as invariable and uninterrupted. Our propensity to this mistake is so great...that we fall into it before we are aware: and tho' we incessantly correct ourselves by reflection, and return to a more accurate method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy, or take off this bias from the imagination. Our last resource is to yield to it, and boldly assert that that these different related objects are in effect the same, however interrupted and variable. In order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together... (2000, 166)

Hume's model is not strictly trans-active in the social sense. It is a generic model for the individuated perception of objects and of other beings. But it can be made so. He saw his paradigm as open and transferable to all domains of human discourse. If we make it socially trans-active in film narration, as Hitchcock does, and form it around fictional characters, then it extends the Humean frame. The *Stage Fright* charade, we can then see, is mutually beneficial to a point: for the Self, it manufactures unified being; and for the Other, it manufactures unified perceiving. But if the charade is rumbled then things collapse, for it is based on false foundations in the first place. Daughter and father dissimulate in order to prove an accused man truthful and innocent, and end up showing him to be deceitful and

guilty. The only consistent persona in the film is Charlotte, star of the musical stage, who isn't really Charlotte at all but Dietrich playing herself – as Hitchcock encouraged her to do. In other words, Charlotte is so one-dimensional that she is a consistent character only because she has no character: she is merely an extension of the star persona of the famous actress playing her part and regarding her character as another star vehicle for her brilliant career. This self-referencing folds over into the visual design: Charlotte's stage set is in part simulacrum of her apartment; the divan on which she reclines to sing onstage (as only Dietrich could) 'The Laziest Girl in Town', echoes the divan in her living room (which doubles as crime scene) on which she had also reclined to receive police investigators (and may also have been reclining to witness her husband's murder).

Hume observed that 'the mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations'. (2000, 165) This is very much the experience of the spectator observing the dramatic gambits of *Stage Fright* – they themselves are a form of living theatre in which everyone is role-playing and often confused by the consequences of their own mimicry. The confusion this creates exaggerates a normal dimension of perceptual confusion, in Hume's terms integral to the quandary of identity that is caused by the perceptual discontinuities of everyday life, and which we try to overcome by relying on false constants like soul, self or substance to reassure ourselves of our own solidity. Here Hitchcock starts from this premise of confusion and discontinuity to forge a vital link between role-playing and fear. Their synonyms - stage and fright – in the conjoined condition Hitchcock's title form a metaphor that is very real. In this film, unlike his other fugitive pictures, Hitchcock does not want us to see fear as something purely involuntary, a reaction to events beyond the control of his characters. On the contrary, Eve's charade is an exception to his usual rule, a deliberate tempting of fate. As played by Wyman, Eve is not one of Hitchcock's heroines caught in near-tragic circumstances largely beyond her control like the personae of Joan Fontaine, Ingrid Bergman, or Grace Kelly in *Dial M for Murder* (1954). Instead, she is a willing player in the game that links play-acting to fear, which is both literally and metaphorically a form of 'stage fright'. She seeks out the condition the title evokes and finds it in Hitch's final stroke of irony not *on* the stage, but *beneath* it in the props room, coming face to face with Cooper in the tight entrapped space of the seat in a 'stagecoach' prop and discovering him to be the killer.

But why do it? Why does Eve play such a tortuous game? The official motive is to 'save' Jonathan. But at times it seems a pretext for other things, as Hitchcock explores the ambivalence of motive over time, switching course and direction. Hume puts it somewhat differently but perhaps the effect is the same. He argues that the mind avoids despair by continually seeking

after foreign objects, which may produce a lively sensation, and agitate the spirits. On the appearance of such an object it awakes as it were from a dream: The blood flows with a new tide: The heart is elevated... (2000, 228)

In *Eve* we find furthermore a moderated or bourgeois addiction to risk: the risk of being caught out through impersonation, and yet the hope not to be caught out, whose repetition becomes a source of whimsical humour. Yet the comic tone of the film also comes from the fact that her family and acting friends, as well her admiring police inspector, all provide a safety cushion. She is not stuck alone at night in room number one of the Bates Motel. Because her charade takes place in familiar settings – her father's cottage, the family home, her acting academy - this seems a film where Hitchcock is at his most conservative. Eve is not wrenched out of familiar surroundings – Jonathan Cooper is an old friend she trusts - and her predicament is distinctly Humean in the safest sense. Donald Livingstone summarises Hume thus:

Because of (our) prejudice on behalf of the familiar, boredom may set in or a custom outlive its utility. And so novelty is valued as a welcome relief, but only as an enrichment of the deeper and wider background of the familiar. (1998, 6)

We sense that Hitchcock is pushing novelty here to its furthest point *before* the point of no return - as with the small town in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), where teenage Charlie falls in love with the dandyish novelty of the visiting Uncle Charlie and finds it tough to suspect he can be a serial killer of rich widows. Meanwhile, her father and his friends are happy to discuss the notorious murders of the day without realising that they have a real murderer in their midst.

Yet there are mixed motives, too, and the ambivalence that Hitchcock loves. Halfway through the film, Eve falls in love with 'Ordinary' Smith, the detective who fancies her. As her father tells her, she is 'changing horses in midstream'. In fact, the very momentum of the charade has pushed her away from the 'wrong man' for whom she fights, and into the arms of his accuser. Her father's metaphor is apposite because romance is connected, as in most Hitch's films, to mechanical motion. Here he reverses our expectations of speed

acceleration. In many car chase movies cars accelerate to a dramatic climax. But *Stage Fright* inverts this expectation in its three-phased entropy. The heady rush of flight (and the lying flashback) takes place as Cooper's car speeds out of London. This rush of motion seduces Eve into the lie of the flashback, but this is all too fast and sudden for romance. Halfway through the film, in the taxi ride to the garden fete with Smith, a more leisurely cruise in the back seat inclines Eve to the thrall of romance, the perfect pace for canoodling. Near the end of the film, sitting next to Cooper in the seats of the coach prop under the stage, movement is down to zero. The coach does not move: they do not move. Feeling is frozen. Hitchcock shoots in close-up with a spot on each of their faces, a framed rectangle of light from the forehead down to the tip of the nose. Cooper confesses. All desire has vanished, to be replaced by fear.

Hitchcock specialises in the conquest of a trauma in several of his endings – in *Spellbound* (1945), in *Vertigo* (1958), in *Marnie* (1964) *Stage Fright* is no exception. Of course, this is trauma in a minor key. At the moment of truth, Eve does not seize up and play the putative victim. She conquers her fear by talking her way out of things smoothly and calmly, persuading the homicidal Cooper in her last act of tactical deceit that the entrance leading into the orchestra pit is a secret way of escape. He takes the bait and finds himself exposed as the police close in. Yet fear itself is the key to Eve's ambivalence, the source of anxiety and trepidation but also of the adrenalin rush that takes her out of the futility of boredom. It may indeed be the *core* of her ambivalence, the passion at the end of a long road of discovery.

Before we deconstruct fear in the Hitchcock canon, let turn back to Hume. Hume is relevant to Hitchcock precisely because in the whole history of Western thought he is one of the very few philosophers of the passions. Indeed, his great ambition in the *Treatise* (great indeed for a twenty-five year old) to lay the foundation for a 'science of human nature' precedes later conceptual divisions between the natural and the social sciences, between mental and moral philosophy, between philosophy and psychology, and between thought and emotion. Hitchcock, as a twentieth century artist and not a philosopher, is someone who has always created visual and narrative scenarios that nonetheless probe with great imaginative power the complex relations of thinking and feeling, acting and reacting that characterise the human condition.

If fear is one of the major emotions in the Hitchcock canon, it is also one of the most fascinating, philosophically. It also features as a key term in Part 3 of the second book of the *Treatise*, where Hume discusses the nature of the direct passions.

As a direct passion in Hume's lexicon, fear is one response that arises from the perceived presence of evil just as its natural antithesis, hope, arises from the perceived presence of good. Technically speaking, fear as a passion - like hope, grief or joy - is a secondary impression of a reflection on the primary impression of objects in the sense-world. In more blunt terminology, it is usually a response to the prospect of pain just as hope is a response to the prospect of pleasure. However, anticipating Freud, Hume points out the ambivalence of this kind of response, which for him fuses passion and reason, emotion and perception, philosophy and psychology (in the sense that we know those terms today). Hope and fear are not antithetical opposites but inter-mingled responses to the relative uncertainties of good and evil, the relative likelihood of pleasure and pain. When something appears mostly good (or pleasurable) then hope is the likely response, but when it appears mostly bad (or painful) then fear takes its place. But there is usually a mixing of some kind. It is not only a question here of identifying the general existence of good or evil: one must also pinpoint its form, its specific nature in the first instance of impression. If we hear of a friend's death without knowing the reasons, it creates consternation. This grief may then be stilled by learning the death was the result of an illness or an accident, but may increase if it proves to have been caused by negligence or worse, murder.

This fluctuation Hume describes as generating a 'passion [that] cannot settle' a 'tremulous and unsteady motion' in which grief and joy are mingled. At the start of the film, Eve is alarmed to hear of the murder of Charlotte's husband, but relieved to be convinced that Cooper is not the killer. Equally, at the end of the film, she is aggrieved to hear Cooper's eventual confession of guilt, and trapped in the coach beneath the stage, is terrified by his musing threat to kill her as a motiveless act in order to cop a plea of insanity and so avoid the gallows. But she is quietly overjoyed when he takes the bait and agrees to exit through the door into the orchestra pit, which she then locks behind her. The sense of threat that generates fear is also an adrenalin rush that makes her seek to overcome it. You could say she has rehearsed for this moment with her impersonations. Now that she is put on the line she is poised, calm and word perfect. She has conquered fear – and stage fright.

The importance of fear as a Humean passion in *Stage Fright* is that by using a two stage model of rehearsal and enactment, Hitchcock deconstructs the normal paradigm of fear as Hume evokes it and as he illustrates it in most of his films. Eve's impersonation charade is a trial run that plays on the fear of getting rumbled – and is thus subject to ridicule and approbation. It plays on the deep uncertainty that Hume points to as the trigger. For him, fear arises from very uncertainty in the formation of the passions. '...Surpriz is apt to change into fear,' he writes, 'and everything that is unexpected affrights us.' (2000, 285) Yet the conquest of the surprise of fear segues into that other great direct passion, curiosity. The surprise that generates fear creates a 'commotion in the mind' and this produces:

A curiosity or inquisitiveness, which being very violent, from the strong and sudden impulse of the object, becomes uneasy, and resembles in its fluctuations and uncertainty, the sensation of fear or the mix'd passions of grief and joy. This image of fear naturally converts in the thing itself, and gives us a real apprehension of evil... (Hume 2000, 285)

For most of Hitchcock's besieged heroines fear is a slow-burning passion that builds up gradually, but here it is an instalment in two parts. Eve rehearses it through impersonation where little except ridicule and chastisement is at stake, but then has to play it for real when her life is suddenly threatened. Like all of Hitch's other heroines, Eve's fear is inseparable from that other narrative driving force of direct passion, curiosity: finding out about Charlotte occupies the first half of the film; finding out about Jonathan occupies its finale. The *Stage Fright* series or triad of Fear–Uncertainty–Curiosity is the Humean triad in most Hitchcock films and is of course carried forward in Hitchcock's legacy to film at large. One of its most perfect post-Hitch renditions is in Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986). The 'fear' surrounding the severed ear leads to an anxious uncertainty that is converted by the investigating couple into a structured curiosity, which in turn provokes further situations of fear and uncertainty.

To conclude, the other special gloss that *Stage Fright* adds to deconstruction is the 'old friend' tag that Eve gives Jonathan at the start of the film. Hitchcock upends here his own convention of strangeness, used so effectively in *The 39 Steps*, *Suspicion* (1941), *Spellbound*, *Notorious* (1946), *North by North West* (1959) and *Psycho*. Certainly, he had already used the lure of familiarity in *Shadow of a Doubt*, where he also charts the passage from the familiar to the strange. But there we knew *much* more than his gullible young heroine right from the beginning. In *Stage Fright*, by contrast, we share the deceiving

flashback with her, and if Hitchcock errs on the side of familiarity in his dissection of English bourgeois eccentricity, the ending is a necessary corrective. For Freudian addicts of the uncanny Hitchcock resonates with intimations of the familiar within the strange. But here, mildly wicked and mischievous, he dissects the strangeness of the familiar – the evil within that we least suspect.

References

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