



Journal of the Film/Alfred Hitchcock Special Interest Group

The MacGuffin

Issue No. 24

February 1998

ISSN 1035-9001

\$US 5

EDITORIAL

(In view of the length of the 'Editorial' this time, readers may want to refer first to the section at the end that introduces the contents of this issue.)

IN 'CONTESTING TEARS: THE Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman' (1996), Stanley Cavell cites Freud on how the 'repudiation of femininity' must be the bedrock at which psychoanalytic activity ceases.¹ I assume that this refers to the case of a male patient, and that the 'femininity' to be 'repudiated' is debilitating somehow.² In any event, and importantly, Cavell has his own thoughts on such matters. For instance, drawing on Lacan this time (whom he acknowledges somewhat insouciantly), he suggests that the patient who resolves his Oedipal drama 'under the threat of castration, the threat of a third person', becomes free to know general human existence as animate and real - as opposed to inanimate and insubstantial.³

Such observations as these by Cavell spring from his extended use of psychoanalytic texts, including Freud's essay on "The Uncanny" (itself centred on the tale by E.T.A. Hoffmann called "The Sandman"), to elucidate a key moment in Max Ophüls's *Letter From An Unknown Woman* (1948), starring Louis Jourdan and Joan Fontaine. That key moment is the one when the man has just read the letter addressed to him by the woman, and has reacted in 'horror and exhaustion' to the images that result (which we see) by covering his eyes with his hands.⁴ Cavell feels that the man's gesture is 'ambiguous',⁵ because it implies that the man is torn 'between avoiding the horror of knowing the existence of others and avoiding the horror of not knowing it, between avoiding the threat of castration that makes the knowledge accessible and avoiding the threat of outcastness should that threat fail ...'.⁶ (That last phrase is vital, for it carries Freud's/Lacan's notion that without castration, no integration.)

I've cited Cavell for a reason. I want now to defend my essay on Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) that was printed in the last 'MacGuffin' - an essay which has drawn an 'uncanny' or perhaps just a 'stunned' silence - and how better to start than by showing that what I wrote 'overlaps' a new book by the esteemed Professor Cavell? (For my own estimation of Cavell, see elsewhere in this issue.) So recall, first, how I wrote of Jeff (James Stewart) in that film that his climactic confrontation with Thorwald (Raymond Burr) has itself an air of the 'uncanny' about it. Thorwald is clearly the 'castrating' father-figure. Hence I wrote: 'When Thorwald finally comes to Jeff's apartment, he indeed poses a threat to the eyes of the hero. As if fighting fire with fire, Jeff at that moment must shield his own eyes while trying to ward off his assailant by firing photographic flashbulbs at him.' Such a moment seems directly comparable to the one in *Letter From An Unknown Woman* as described by Cavell.

For consider. Two problems that have beset the wheelchair-confined Jeff throughout *Rear Window* are his enforced passiveness, equatable with 'femininity', and his ambiguous, enddistanced relations with his neighbours - who appear to him (and to us) as essentially just interesting puppets or automata. That is, until the film's two main climaxes. The first of these involves the death of a little dog (and remember that Hitchcock loved dogs), at which time the audience, but not Jeff, get to meet some of the neighbours in individual close-ups, pointedly *not* shot from Jeff's point-of-view. On the other hand, the second main climax involves precisely Jeff and his hands-on encounter with the neighbours' 'representative', Thorwald, who is also the film's 'bad' father-figure. (The film's 'good' father-figure, seen briefly onscreen, is Hitchcock.) Following Cavell, we may infer that after this encounter Jeff has successfully passed his 'castration' test, resulting for him in a second broken leg,⁷ and has become an 'integrated' member of his community, one of the neighbours in fact. No longer will he (and it's to be hoped, members of the audience) find his fellow-creatures merely insubstantial and puppet-like. I'm reminded of the end of Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), at which time James Stewart says outright, 'This world and the people in it have [hitherto] always been dark and incomprehensible to me ...'.

Most of the above was at least implicit in what I wrote last time. My article also made use of E. Jentsch's understanding of what constitutes the 'uncanny', i.e., a matter of whether a person in a story is indeed 'a human being or an

automaton', and I criticised Freud for not giving that understanding more weight. Cavell, too, takes Freud to task for this.⁸ But now note. What I also did last time was focus on a second aspect of male 'femininity' that operates in *Rear Window*, one concerning Hitchcock himself. I commented and gave reasons for how Hitchcock by the mid-1950s 'was now more laid back and his work showed a new openness to the "archetypal" which is so often a hallmark of creativity. The male mother emerged in him.'

That perspective puts us above the Oedipal drama in a place where the view is altogether broader, I think. My notion of Hitchcock's 'femininity' may well have come in part from earlier remarks of Cavell and William Rothman and then Leland Poague - see a note by me accompanying Professor Poague's article in this 'MacGuffin'. Now, to speak of Hitchcock's 'femininity' in this way isn't necessarily to say that he himself ever failed to resolve his Oedipal drama! It may only show in him a further and privileged stage of psychic development, a 'return of the displaced', if you will. On the other hand, what I wrote last time, that "'wholeness" isn't everything', still applies. Though I made the remark in a non-Freudian context, it could clearly mean that passing the Oedipal test isn't everything either. Especially for someone who has rightly been called a genius. I often remember a remark once made by one of the editors of 'Movie' (UK). How boring a lot of 'mature' films are, he said. I believe that he meant 'mature' in the sense of 'conformist'. Well, my article last time was concerned to show in Hitchcock a maturity of a different, less conventional kind. I'm speaking of someone who was now sufficiently 'detached', in various senses of that word, to be able to create in high spirits and with an eye for the sharpest and truest details. A paradox is how much this process involves a 'deep connectivity' or what the vitalist philosopher Henri Bergson called 'intuition'.⁹

I've just been corresponding by email with an American academic who is writing a book on Bergson's predecessor, Arthur Schopenhauer. Our discussion touched on how Schopenhauer himself put a primary emphasis on intuition and *then* on how the operation of 'reason' might come into play to create art, poetry, drama, music, philosophy, etc. Interestingly, it was this particular type of 'reason' that Schopenhauer regarded as 'feminine':

he maintained that reason was like a woman - it could only give after receiving, by which he meant that reason was only operational after receiving intuitive knowledge.

I don't see anything incompatible here with the view of Hitchcock I expressed last time (albeit that it's *Lisa* in *Rear Window* who is explicitly credited with having 'intuition'). On the contrary, I think it works well as a paradigm or trope of what actually happens in *Rear Window*. Moreover, it seems to me that Schopenhauer's basic philosophy (virtually contemporaneous with the stories of Hoffmann) is precisely about how we're all indeed *both* human beings *and* automata. We're all human beings, nominally at any rate, in the world we live in each day, the world of what Schopenhauer called 'Representation' (made up of mental images).¹⁰ On the other hand, there's a sense in which *none* of us is anything other than an automaton or a puppet viewed from the perspective of ultimate reality, what Schopenhauer called the world's 'Will' (or life-force).¹¹ Of course, the trick is to understand how these two aspects of the world are really one and conjoined. As Oliver Sacks puts it in 'Awakenings': 'To speak in terms of either [aspect] alone is to lay oneself open to a destructive duality, to the impossibility of constructing a meaningful world ...'.¹²

Bergson would surely have agreed with that. It also happens to be very close to Hitchcock's world-view, I think.

* * *

I honestly don't know how some of what I've just written may relate to the Oedipal drama; but then, some very wise people I've known have never read Freud, if you follow me. By the same token, there does seem a connection with what Cavell took from (or read into) the face-covering gesture of Louis Jourdan in *Letter From An Unknown Woman*, that it shows a man torn 'between avoiding the horror of knowing the existence of others and avoiding the horror of not knowing it ...'. As Schopenhauer understood, the world *is* a place of horror (something often mirrored in the fiction of his admirer, Joseph Conrad). The man - or everyman - in the Ophuls film may be seen as lacking the 'deep connectivity' that would have brought him into meaningful relations with the world. Accordingly, what Cavell calls 'the melodrama of the unknown woman' plays as a parable or trope of that sad truth - though you hardly need Cavell to explain it. Schopenhauer would do!

But let me be more precise for a moment about the two aspects of Schopenhauer's world-view and how it may indeed be Hitchcock's, too. In George Toles's essay on *Rear Window* that I quoted last time, he invokes Plato's famous parable of the cave (which Schopenhauer knew well). He suggests that many people live their lives in a sort of metaphorical darkness - 'and the only energy they ever have comes from egoism and dreams'.¹³ Such people, Toles believes, are seen behind each of the rear windows in Hitchcock's film, to which observation I would add that the benightedness of these

people is shared by most of us most of the time: we feel ourselves free but are simply unaware of the massiveness of the drives and pressures, constituting Will, that compel us to think and act the way we do.

Now, Schopenhauer saw art and philosophy as affording us at least occasional respite from these pressures and as allowing us at least brief glimpses of our true condition - even finally a sense of the noumenal (Will) behind the phenomenal (Representation). But he understood that virtually no-one, not even a person of genius, could live in a state of enlightenment or Nirvana for more than a small portion of the time. Mind you, some people might try to do so: I sense that the Decadent aesthete Walter Pater, advocate of 'art for art's sake' and a major influence on Oscar Wilde (more on him in a moment), was such a person. In effect, Pater's excessive passiveness, commented on by Camille Paglia in her great book, 'Sexual Personae',¹⁴ is a parody of true Nirvana.

Thus, in the benighted, and the 'Decadently' passive, respectively, are represented two opposed conditions that may result when 'a destructive duality' isn't mediated by the sort of knowledge Schopenhauer held out - and which I've suggested is embodied in Hitchcock's world-view. In my essay last time, I pointed to how Hitchcock in and beyond his film provides an 'Orphic' presence who acts as a re-uniter and healer, performing very much the active role of the artist that Schopenhauer advocated.

In this issue of 'The MacGuffin', Jason Rasmussen draws our attention to the detectable influence of Oscar Wilde on Hitchcock. Jason focusses on Wilde's novel 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' (1891) as the specific work of Wilde's that Hitchcock had read 'several times'. Well, it seems to me that 'Dorian Gray' provides an instance of a work by someone who was indeed conscious of how this world is both a place of Will (with all its horrors) and of Representation (appearance), and who succeeded brilliantly in embodying his duplex knowledge in a novel that is both visionary and dynamic, a novel of 'deep connectivity'.¹⁵

Here in passing is a personal anecdote. Many years ago, while I was still a student at university, I first read a passage in 'Dorian Gray' that has always seemed to me to embody the spirit of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Lord Henry says:

It is an odd thing, but everyone who disappears is said to be seen at San Francisco. It must be a delightful city, and possess all the attractions of the next world. (Chapter Nineteen)

On reading that, I wrote to Hitchcock and told him of my 'feeling'. A few weeks later there arrived in my letterbox a package addressed to me and marked 'Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions, Universal City, Los Angeles'. Inside was a copy of Truffaut's 'Hitchcock' (which had recently come out). Just that and nothing else.

* * *

Now a few thoughts further defending my article last time on *Rear Window*. I've adapted them from some email correspondence I had recently with Professor B. He apologised for having read my piece only 'very quickly', and so I started by saying how glad I was that he had been *able* to read the piece quickly! Touching on something we'd discussed before, I wrote:

There was much elbow-grease and spittle applied to polishing the piece into a 'readable' state, in [trying to remove] all vestiges of the academic tendency to passive voice, abstract nouns, and convoluted constructions, instead of active verbs, concrete, verifiable illustrations, and short, immediately-graspable sentences.

On another, related matter we'd previously discussed, I added:

Behind that lies my yogic, Schopenhauerian understanding: that percepts are closer than [mere] concepts to the only immediate and knowable 'reality' available to us; that over-use of conceptual thinking, without checking against perceived reality, is inviting of non-sense (for as Schopenhauer pointed out: it is possible to go on and on using concepts and never come down to earth, more's the pity!).

My own main criticism of my article is that, despite my best efforts, it was too dense. In a way, I blame Hitchcock for that! Only in the course of writing about *Rear Window* did I begin to fully grasp what an intricate mechanism Hitchcock and scriptwriter John Michael Hayes had created. Hitchcock's cameo-appearance in the film as a man winding a clock is deceptively modest. He should have portrayed himself as a Swiss-watch-maker!

Despite that, I still feel that my article did some good things:

1. Apart from what I'd call the 'gee whiz' content (comparisons of the film to Delibes's 'Coppelia', etc.), there are several sharp observations nestling in there - not unrelated naturally to Hitchcock's own sharp eye mentioned already. For example, I pointed out how *nobody* in the film seems to want to get too 'involved', as when Lisa (Grace Kelly) is heard to say about the Thorwalds, 'I don't care'. I would ask: is the fact of the matter adumbrated here greatly different from what Schopenhauer tells us, that we're all bound in subjectivity - and that sometimes we wilfully help the process along? Certainly Norman Bates in *Psycho*, made six years after *Rear Window*, has a point about the benighted human condition when *he* is heard to say, 'We're all in our private traps!'
2. I'm reasonably happy with the *structure* of my article. True, I allowed myself to make what is perhaps the key point in an almost throwaway passage about Aldous Huxley's 'The Gioconda Smile'; nonetheless I did establish to my own satisfaction that Hitchcock was familiar with both that particular story and its analogues (one of which was the Francis Iles novel 'Malice Aforethought', which Hitchcock had wanted to film and finally directed on American *radio* in 1946). Huxley's tale had been greatly talked about when it was first published in the 1920s, not least because the sensational murder case it was based on was still fresh in people's minds. I think that there's every reason to believe that it provided Hitchcock, at some deep level, with the inspiration for the (Mona) Lisa character in *Rear Window*, and very probably prepared him to make an even more elaborate use of feminine archetypes in *Vertigo*. (These are discussed in 'MacGuffin' 11.)
3. I think that my estimation of Hitchcock as someone of both 'negative capability' (empathy) and 'imperious mastery' (given to control) takes a *lot* of his measure!
4. Finally, I'd say that a major point of my article - and of much of my particular take these days on movies - is that you can stand further and further back from the art of someone like Hitchcock and see new levels of association. Ditto, for life itself! To me, that's something that film criticism is very good for. So thank you Stella in *Rear Window*, for reminding us that we *should* get outside our houses - and our customary ways of seeing - every once in a while, in order to look back in.

* * *

This issue of 'The MacGuffin' is something of a readers' issue. I thank each of our contributors wholeheartedly.

Leland Poague teaches at Iowa State University and is editor with Marshall Deutelbaum of 'A Hitchcock Reader' (1986). Professor Poague and I currently find ourselves in amicable contention with each other, and regular 'MacGuffin' readers will recall how this came about. Back in 'MacGuffin' 17, I wrote an article on *Vertigo* that was critical of Poague's own, long article on that film that had appeared in the 1994 'Hitchcock Annual'. Now Poague has responded to what I wrote, linking his response to an analysis by him of noted Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar's *High Heels* (1991) - a film that makes its own 'intertextual' references to *Vertigo*.

My latest comments about Poague's position are included in this issue. I've made them as frank, and as specific, as I can - and I've invited Professor Poague to write back if he should want to. Readers' comments will also be very welcome.

Stephen Donatelli teaches literature at Harvard University, and the title of his thoughtful and somewhat whimsical short essay on *North by Northwest* (1959) included below - "Hitchcock's Intense Inanity" - is taken from Shelley. (I can't resist observing that Shelley was another contemporary of Schopenhauer, and that the description in 'Prometheus Unbound' of the cosmos as 'the intense inane' reminds me strongly of Schopenhauer's own view of things!) Recently Mr Donatelli co-wrote with Robert Castle, who edits the excellent newsletter called 'Film Ex', an article on Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* that has been accepted by Film Comment'.

I've already had cause to mention Jason Rasmussen's article, "Hitchcock, Sexuality, and the Self", which is basically about Oscar Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' and Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Jason has carefully researched his topic, and writes most knowledgeably. He's currently employed by the University of Wisconsin Medical School though hoping soon to do graduate work in the field of English literature.

Lisle Foote is a recent graduate of the University of East Anglia Film Archive MA Program. Her thesis involved tracing the changing attitude of the American press to Hitchcock and his films, 1926-1939, i.e., up until when Hitchcock went to the US to live and work. Lisle's careful findings are reported in this 'MacGuffin' by means of two items: a special 'News' feature, summarising her work on Hitchcock, and a separate short article adapted from her thesis and called

"Hitchcock's early personality profiles in the US press". Lisle herself is now living in the US, doing clerical work at UCLA while looking for a job in a film library. She's married to David Mullen, who's a cinematographer.

Our 'Book Review' in this issue is in fact the promised review by Charles Silet of "The *Rebecca* Project" on CD-ROM. Charles Silet teaches at Iowa State University and is reviews editor for the 'Hitchcock Annual'.

Our 'Oz-report' is again contributed by Freda Freiberg, who lives in Melbourne, Australia. Freda is co-author with Annette Blonski and Barbara Creed of the important book, 'Don't Shoot Darling!: Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia' (1987).

I trust our readers will enjoy this rather special issue of 'The MacGuffin'.

To everyone, good viewing - Ken Mogg.

Notes

1. S. Cavell, 'Contesting Tears' (1996), p. 111.
2. Not to continue in rhetorical vein: Cavell in fact cites Freud in order to equate 'femininity' with 'passiveness' (Cavell, p. 112).
3. Cavell, p. 110.
4. Ibid, p. 81.
5. Ibid, p. 110.
6. Ibid, pp. 110-11.
7. The question arises: what might Jeff's *first* broken leg symbolise? I'm happy to equate it with humankind's natural state of mortality and 'impotence' into which each of us is born. (Compare Norman O. Brown, 'Life Against Death', Chapter III, as quoted in 'MacGuffin' 23, p. 20.) Hence Jeff's motor-racetrack accident forcibly reminds him of his basic 'weakness'. It wouldn't be the only time in a Hitchcock film when someone has had to be so reminded in order to embark on a new, more purposeful direction in life.
8. Cavell, p. 110.
9. In Bergson's 'Creative Evolution' (1907), he brilliantly associated the thought process with the form of that new phenomenon, the movie. This is definitely worth remembering, considering that Bergson's status as something of a cult-figure reached its apogee in the 1920s, when the young director Hitchcock was mixing in some avante-garde film circles. Another parallel to 'deep connectivity' is one I mentioned in 'MacGuffin' 21, p. 13. There, I noted how Paul Klee, who would become Hitchcock's favourite painter, in the 1920s proclaimed that the artist who penetrates to 'that secret place where primeval power nurtures all evolution' succeeds in embracing 'the life force itself', thereby arriving at 'that Romanticism which is one with the universe'. A similar thought informed André Breton's notion of surrealism.
10. I thank Harry Ausmus for suggesting to me that Schopenhauer's use of the German word 'Vorstellung' is probably best rendered as 'mental images' (rather than as 'idea' or 'representation').
11. The religious notion of individual 'souls' merely offers a parallel case to what I'm describing here, and for that reason may be omitted from the present discussion of 'human being' versus 'puppet'. Philosophically, the notion of 'soul' carries little weight; and in any case Descartes's literally dogmatic exclusion of animals from soul-status (while allowing it to all human beings) shows that, in this area, he was certainly *no* philosopher.
12. O. Sacks, 'Awakenings' (revised edition 1982), p. 219.
13. G.E. Toles, "Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* as Critical Allegory", 'boundary 2', 16, No. 2-3, Winter-Spring 1990, p. 241. Toles is in fact here quoting Iris Murdoch on Plato, a passage in which she proposes that the movie theatre *literalises* Plato's cave. A connection with what was said by some of the thinkers quoted in footnote 9 above may not be wholly coincidental - and perhaps Hitchcock's films, with their 'deep connectivity', are showing us the reasons why.
14. C. Paglia, 'Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence From Nefertiti To Emily Dickinson' (1991), p. 481.
15. It would not surprise me to learn that Wilde had been an influence at some level on Max Ophuls.

Coming attractions

Hitchcock's *Suspicion* - and its ending; Hitchcock's *Murder!*; Dan Auiler's "My Favourite Hitchcock Films". Plus 'Letters', 'News', book reviews, etc. Extra items always wanted.

LETTER

Nandor Bokor, University of Technology, Budapest, Hungary

I think your term 'motherly dimension' referring to *Rear Window* ['MacGuffin' 23] is quite wonderful. I remember when I was about 15 and I saw eight or nine Hitchcock films on Hungarian TV, that one of the qualities I felt most distinctly about them was that there was someone there bestowing wisdom and loving care on his audiences. I guess I felt the same quality that your article talks about.

Also, your description of Hitch's cameos as 'a palpable reminder to us that he's in control' (p. 21) seems very accurate to me, and reinforces what I had felt as a child while watching his films.

NEWS

(Readers are urged to send in reports and cuttings for this feature. Both general interest and Hitchcock-specific items are sought.)

Death of Peggy Robertson

Alfred Hitchcock's long-time script supervisor/assistant, Peggy Robertson, died on February 6th, aged 81. Peggy Robertson first worked with Hitchcock on *Under Capricorn* (1949), made in England, before re-joining him later in America on *Vertigo* (1958), remaining in his personal employ until he decided to close his office in 1979. Hitchcock died the following year.

The Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills contains a long interview with Peggy Robertson as part of its Oral History Program.

Now about *Psycho* ...

Two fascinating pieces of information about *Psycho* (1960) came to light on the <alt.movies.hitchcock> Usenet site a few months ago. One concerned how when 'Mrs Bates', brandishing a knife, heads towards Lila Crane in the fruit-cellar, just before Sam rushes in, the words 'I am Norma Bates' are clearly heard. This particular effect is taken straight from Robert Bloch's original novel (Chapter Fifteen). The line in the film isn't disguised, just strung out (interestingly, you don't see Mrs Bates's lips move), and it's given a fairly base-y rendering in contrast to the high pitch of the shrieking violins. So you don't consciously notice it, yet it lends its weird, unnatural effect all the same.

The other piece of information is that some prints of the film have an additional 'subliminal' shot of the grinning skull. All prints have a fleeting shot of the skull at the end, as we leave Norman in his cell and dissolve to the car exiting the swamp. But some prints have a similar effect much earlier, where Norman is down at the swamp, near the gnarled tree, and turns his head when he hears Sam calling his name. (One surmises that Hitchcock experimented with introducing the effect at this point as a possible way of preparing us to see 'Mrs Bates' in the fruit-cellar later on.) Stephen Rebello, author of 'Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of *Psycho*' (1990), is kicking himself for not remembering the effect when he wrote his book. He sent us this email: 'It is indeed there, and the strangest thing happened the other night. Whilst reading a Buchan thriller, I distinctly recalled seeing at a theater in Harvard Square, Boston, a re-release of *Psycho* in which [the] skull did in fact appear in the earlier scene. I remembered tossing it off at the time as due to my cramming too hard for finals.'

Hitchcock's reputation with the US press, 1926-39

'A sappy chorus girl picture, probably intended for the sappy sticks ...'. On that inauspicious note, 'Sime' in 'Daily Variety' began his review of Hitchcock's *The Pleasure Garden*; it was the first review of a Hitchcock film to appear in an American publication. Thoroughly negative, it didn't even mention the film's director. But that was in 1926. Nine years later things had changed. According to a 'Time' reviewer, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* provided 'one of the neatest melodramas of the year', and 'Alfred Hitchcock's direction' was the equal of a story 'told in sharp, abbreviated sequences gathering pace steadily toward their explosive climax'.

A turning-point in getting Hitchcock's name - and his films - known to American audiences was the release of *Blackmail* in 1929. His first sound film had received rapturous praise in several English newspapers, and this was something that even 'Life' magazine felt worthy of an article though the writer, Harry Evans, warned his readers that 'this picture does not merit all the fuss'. *Blackmail* had a two-week engagement at the Selwyn theatre in New York (as well as opening in Los Angeles and elsewhere), with a top ticket price of \$2 - far more upscale than the one-day engagement, 45-cent seats *The Pleasure Garden* had commanded at Loew's New York.

Facts such as these come from a recent master's thesis successfully submitted to the University of East Anglia's Film Archive program by Lisle Foote. According to Lisle, what initially hampered a British director from building a reputation in America was the low regard in which the British cinema was held there, both by reviewers and audiences. The same issue of 'Daily Variety' (3 November 1926) that called *The Pleasure Garden* 'sappy' had this to say about Graham Cutts's *The Prude's Fall* (re-titled *Dangerous Virtue* in the US), on which Hitchcock had been editor and titles-artist:

One of the striking examples of why British films are not acceptable to American audiences. Just a piece of junk and far from worthy, even as a place on a double-feature bill at Loew's New York. ... The New York audience hooted it from the screen in derision. ... This is one to lay off unless you want to show your audience how badly pictures can be made in England.

Until the US release of *Blackmail*, the only other Hitchcock picture to be exhibited in that country was *The Lodger* (strangely re-titled *The Case of Jonathan Drew*). Lisle Foote says that American critical reaction to Hitchcock's films fell into two periods. Up until *Waltzes From Vienna* (re-titled *Strauss' Great Waltz*), made in 1933 but not released in America until 1935, they 'received the same attention given to [films] of any other British director'. That is, American trade papers gave them short, factual reviews, and newspapers occasionally covered them - sometimes in a review based on a film's London opening. Then, with the release of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* in 1935, Hitchcock was hailed by the critics as Britain's greatest director.

Apart from the sheer entertainment value of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Lisle Foote suggests that there were other possible reasons for that film's success. First, Hitchcock had lately moved to a new studio, Gaumont-British, who were actively pursuing the American market and who were able to give the film a much wider release than the director's earlier films. Further, it's likely that the US success of the Charles Laughton picture, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (Alexander Korda, 1933), helped pave the way for other British films. And again, the casting in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* of Peter Lorre, in his first international role since the child-murderer in *M* (Fritz Lang, 1930), let the critics write about a known actor. They would seize a similar opportunity a year or so later when Hitchcock's *Secret Agent* also included Lorre in the cast.

In fact, US reviewers were always very actor-conscious. When Charles Laughton finally made a Hitchcock picture, *Jamaica Inn* (1939), the film itself was hardly a success. Fortunately for Hitchcock's reputation on the eve of his departure for Hollywood, several of the reviewers blamed Laughton! The 'Time' reviewer said that the picture was not an authentic Hitchcock 'but an authentic Charles Laughton. Scarcely a shot in the whole picture revealed the famed British director's old mastery of cunning camera, sly humour, shrewd suspense.' Nonetheless, as that quote shows, the reviewers now knew (or thought they knew) what a Hitchcock picture should be. The 'Hollywood Reporter' said that in *Jamaica Inn* 'Hitchcock pleases the audience with his usual wealth of good little directorial touches'. John Mosher's review in the 'New Yorker' astutely singled out for praise a particular touch: the dinner party such 'as only Hitchcock, with his Hogarthian soul, could compose'.

- Not the least of the factors behind reviewers' informed reports on Hitchcock and his films was the existence by now of the Hitchcock legend itself. Carefully supervised by Hitchcock, it had some factual basis. Quite often, Hitchcock would give interviews and his studio would issue promotional material. Elsewhere in this issue, we print Lisle Foote's description of Hitchcock's 'personality profiles' which the US press in its turn wrote up and helped to valorise.

Hitchcock's Intense Inanity

Article by Stephen Donatelli

WHEREVER TWO OR MORE people are gathered in Hitchcock's name, the device of the 'MacGuffin' is likely to come up. That's the peculiar personage, object or event upon which the whole story depends, even though neither the characters nor ourselves have the faintest idea about who or what he, she or it really is. Hitchcock himself pointed to the

tarmac scene in *North by Northwest* as being in the spirit of this curious device. It's there that Leo G. Carroll finally gets around to telling Cary Grant why the government invented a nonexistent agent and what it had hoped to gain by doing so. But the words he speaks are swallowed up by the din of nearby airplane engines. Ever the child of silent films, Hitchcock had come to discover that the 'facts' are sometimes cinematically moot. The probability that the facts might mean something or other, or nothing, or be forever elusive,¹ is good enough for him and his art.

You can take the charm of this discovery a step further, though, by wondering if the device of the 'empty fact' has a pertinence beyond its utility as a film-making technique. I mean, what if the MacGuffin were as much a vision of life as it is a great director's technical signature? What if, at the bottom of all our hitherings and thitherings, as Hitchcock seems to suggest, there really was only something rather stupid or not even worth knowing - a kind of cruel gibberish? *North by Northwest* sets that question before us again and again, but in small ways that easily escape notice as we tend to fixate on the more flamboyant images of the stiletto murder at the U.N. or the cropduster conflagration. It's worth inspecting a few of those smaller souvenirs, keeping in mind that *all* filmic 'effects', special or otherwise, will always exact a secret price from us. They do mean something, whether we or their practitioners want them to or not. Even meaninglessness can mean something, and once you begin hunting around in *North by Northwest*, the case builds against the MacGuffin as a totally innocent technical trick.

To bring this monumental hypothesis down to size, I sometimes like to think about the little statue which shatters on Mount Rushmore, as Eva Marie Saint and Cary Grant flee across the stony, carved faces. The broken figurine exposes a snippet of microfilm - state secrets, presumably; what they are is quite beside the point. (Future exegetes may find that that snippet of film is nothing but an outtake from the masterwork, *North by Northwest*, a film which, like its micro-cousin, isn't supposed to have a discernible meaning.) Throughout the course of this northwestward-ho epic, images like the statuette regularly appear. They don't contain anything legible, or else their content, once read, doesn't mean anything or is just blank.

This big zero at the centre of Hitchcock gets written up large on Roger Thornhill's monogrammed matchbook, a crucial prop in the film and a fitting emblem for Roger's superficial lifestyle. The 'O' in 'ROT' means, as Roger tells the inquiring Eve, 'nothing'. For an Englishman like Hitchcock, of course, 'rot' really is a kind of nothing, a something not worth bothering about, folderol, rubbish, nonsense. Roger's name, and by implication his existence, rotates upon an axis of (to paraphrase Shelley) intense inanity. Like a doughnut or a hollow cylinder, Hitchcock's centre of gravity is always located at a point in empty space.

The hint of something null at the core of things comes back to us in the little things, the properties. The late-appearing pistol, for example, is fired a total of three times in three separate scenes, each of those times with great dramatic impact. As Martin Landau's lizard-like character discovers, the pistol is loaded with blanks. So much fuss and bother over nothing! (Of course, when Martin gets plugged in the monument scene, the professor admonishes the rifle-wielding park policeman, 'Not fair, using real bullets'; in Hitchcock's artificial universe, life is not supposed to be worth losing or [by inference] living. You mustn't worry your head about it!)

As with the real bullet that wasted Martin, *North by Northwest*, despite its stubborn belief in the void at the heart of us all, occasionally can't help grazing somebody's flesh. People have this odd proclivity, you see, for getting in the way of Hitchcock's railroading, and while he may agree to show them at such inconvenient moments, he faces them only fleetingly, or even not at all. When confronted with Eve's betrayal, for example, James Mason registers an exceptional grimace which bespeaks his pain at finding out that what he had taken to be true and trustworthy is only an elaborate lie. Mason as Vandamm quickly recovers, though, and hatches a fine, impromptu plan for shoving Eve out the door of his private plane.

When it comes to seeing how costly it really is to discover that experience is a sham, Eva Marie Saint's performance is much more eloquent than that given by Mason's momentarily discommoded villain. In an incomparable cinematic passage, towards the end of the film, the character Eve discovers Thornhill's monogrammed matchbook in the ashtray at Vandamm's house. The camera sees her only from above and from behind. Her spontaneous recognition of the Thornhill monogramme gives her a slight but deeply expressive start. Eve's face is not visible. One may hazard that it doesn't need to be, since the principle of the MacGuffin dictates that it is not all that necessary for us to know a human face in the way that a director like Bergman has taught us to know one, namely, as the direct expression of a deeper self. The advent of individual identity is a little too slightly unbearable for Hitchcock, and not very well integrated into his agenda. Eva Marie Saint's expressiveness fills the screen in spite of the director's rigorous censure. It is a triumph of acting over the nominal limits set by the director.²

It's also important that, as a person whose inner life Hitchcock can't look at, that person should be a woman: her body is the human currency with which the film balances its political and erotic debts. In consenting to smoke out the spies, she has made a principled decision and has put her entire rational and physical self on the line in a way that far exceeds the puny and expedient investments made by every other character (all men). If Hitchcock had really wanted to give us a good look at the human meaning behind the revelation of deceit, if he had pursued the message encoded within his favourite filmic principle, *North by Northwest* would be about Eve, not about the aging and blustering beefcake, Roger. Moral depth, I suspect, is not to Hitchcock's taste, and we can only wonder what the monumental gains and losses would be if it were.

©1998, by Stephen Donatelli

Notes

1. Editor's footnote. For a recent 'deconstructive reading' of *North by Northwest*, arguing that the signifying presences its characters take for granted are all illusion, see Christopher D. Morris, "The Direction of *North by Northwest*", 'Cinema Journal' 36, No. 4, Summer 1997, pp. 43-56.
2. Editor's footnote. A similar point about the contribution made by Hitchcock's actors, beyond the limits of his control, is stated at the outset of a recent fine article by Deborah Thomas, "On Being Norman: Performance and Inner Life in Hitchcock's *Psycho*", in 'CineAction', No. 4, 1997, pp. 66-72. But it seems to me that Thomas's article effectively qualifies the point thus stated ...

OZ-REPORT

Hearts a-flutter in colonial New South Wales

THE BIG EVENT THIS summer in Australia was the opening of *Oscar and Lucinda*. For the Australian film industry, 1997 had been a year of modest, competent entertainments that re-cycled narratives from popular Hollywood genres - the road movie, the thriller, the musical, the dork family satire - but re-situated them in an Australian setting and peppered them with some laconic Australian humour. *Oscar and Lucinda* was lumbered with much greater expectations. To begin with, it had the backing of a big Hollywood studio, enjoyed a big budget, starred a big overseas star (Ralph Fiennes), and was directed by Gillian Armstrong, she of the Brilliant Career. Furthermore, it was an adaptation of a big novel by Peter Carey, an ambitious and sprawling epic, which won the 1988 Booker Prize in the year of the bicentenary of British colonization of Australia.

It was perhaps inevitable that the great expectations of this movie were not to be realized, for the novel is not suited to Hollywoodization. The film is largely faithful to the events of the novel, reproducing the episodic and fragmented narrative in the way it sketches the separate and briefly touching careers of British Oscar and Australian Lucinda and retaining the off-screen narrator, Oscar's great-grandson (whose voice is supplied by Geoffrey Rush, best known for his starring role in *Shine*) for continuity and comment. But the novel's project was an ambitious one; it was no less than a post-colonial re-writing of both the Victorian novel and Australian history in the light of late 20th-century attitudes. Carey renders absurd the grand narratives of the nineteenth century - the grand narratives of novelistic fiction, of progress, of imperial expansion, of heroism, of industrial capitalism, of missionary Christianity. But the Hollywood epic relies on the grand sweep of traditional narrative, and carries with it the expectations of the *Bildungsroman*: audiences expect fully fleshed out heroes and heroines who experience grand passions, who love and triumph or love and lose, but at least they learn from their experiences, they mature, acquire depth and understanding in the process.

Armstrong, superbly served by her photographers and costume and set designers, has re-created place and period in magnificent lush detail; she has also humanized and softened Carey's absurdly malfunctioning central characters - gaining an engagingly warm and gentle performance from Fiennes, whose previous performances have been notably wooden. The cinematography is truly epic - the landscape of rural Devon and outback New South Wales is rendered in great romantic vistas reminiscent of the epic landscapes of David Lean. The grand passion of the two lonely misfits, Oscar and Lucinda, is communicated credibly and tangibly in their shared passion for gambling, the scenes of which are alive with quasi-sexual excitement.

But the film misses out on the novel's acerbic social critique. In trying to be a movie epic, and yet remain faithful to the novel, the film must fail to achieve either aim, for the novel is an epic anti-epic. The magnificent cinematography, period recreation and star performances produce in the movie audience the desire for a passionate romance but the story (even with a crucial change to the ending, that allows Lucinda to retain her fortune and raise Oscar's son) frustrates their desire for all-out epic romance. Admirers of the novel, on the other hand, have bemoaned the film's recourse to the

picturesque, its realism and humanism, finding there a betrayal of Carey's supple, sophisticated, contemporary intelligence.

Nevertheless, in almost all respects, especially in the quality of its performances and in its *mise-en-scène*, *Oscar and Lucinda* is a better film than *The English Patient*, which was a popular and critical success. Perhaps great expectations too readily engender large disappointments.

©1998, by Freda Freiberg

Hitchcock's early personality profiles in the US press

Article by Lisle Foote

REVIEWS OF HIS FILMS were not the only coverage Hitchcock received in the American popular press. He was also the subject of personality profiles in general interest magazines. Articles about English directors were not common in such magazines in the 1920s and 1930s. But Hitchcock's mixture of box-office success and interesting eccentricities seem to have made him a worthy subject with editors.

What's most remarkable about these Hitchcock articles is their consistency, both between each other and with interviews that appeared throughout the director's career. Hitchcock biographer Donald Spoto wrote: 'By 1979 he had perfected a small supply of familiar anecdotes that satisfied the press - one or two about the painstaking methods he applied to preparing a film, one or two about the practical jokes he liked to play in the early days.'¹ However, in one respect Spoto was wrong: Hitchcock had worked out these anecdotes forty years earlier. Right from the start, every article included a standard Hitchcock biography, a summary of his working methods, and samples of what 'Life' called his 'innumerable peculiarities'² (including his alleged penchant for cruelty and practical jokes), as well as his interest in food, his resulting weight problem, and his diet attempts.

The biographical sections of the articles invariably mentioned Hitchcock's father's greengrocery business (the 'New Yorker' helpfully translated the family's little more than working-class status to 'solid middle class' - the equivalent of shop owners in the States)³ and young Alfred's Jesuit schooling (though no mention yet of how the Jesuits taught him suspense). Then would follow mention of Hitchcock's night-course work, his stints in the cable business and advertising, his move to the titles department at Paramount, London, and his eventual graduation to directing. The articles did not fail to point out how the variety of tasks he performed at the studio mirrored his complete command later on of all aspects of his craft. His wife rated a few sentences noting her continued work on his films. 'Life' even published a picture of the whole family, dogs included (Alma and Patricia in Hollywood native costume, Hitchcock still in a dark suit).⁴ The articles ignored his early British films: 'Life' called *Sabotage/The Woman Alone* (1936) 'an early Hitchcock thriller'.⁵ In a long anecdote about Hitchcock's trials in making *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), the film's name was never mentioned. Nevertheless, the anecdote is quite similar to the version Hitchcock gave Truffaut, with film-stock confiscated at the border, money running out, and a profligate actress.

Although the word hadn't been introduced yet, American journalists accepted Hitchcock's claims to be an auteur. Russell Maloney wrote in the 'New Yorker': 'A Hitchcock picture is, for better or worse, about 99.44% Hitchcock. [He] selects all his stories and is the leading figure in the adaptation, [the] writing of the dialogue, and [the] preparation of the shooting script'.⁶ The same article then mentions Hitchcock's shot-by-shot planning and the uneventful actual filming. Other articles included similar Hitchcock profiles, all crediting him with complete control. Reinforcing this aspect of the legend, 'Living Age' (a sort of highbrow 'Reader's Digest') reprinted an article Hitchcock himself had written for 'The Listener', London, with his thoughts on editing, the producer's role, film costs, and actors.⁷ None of the articles questioned Hitchcock's version of his input, or interviewed his collaborators for confirmation (of course, these stories were not intended as investigative journalism). Such work did not appear for several decades, in books like Spoto's 'The Dark Side of Genius' (1983) and television shows like the BBC's 'Omnibus' program called "Hitchcock, a two-part documentary profile" (1986). However, it's interesting to notice how much detail about the filmmaking process writers and editors of the time thought that the general public wanted to read. Then again, Hitchcock's working methods were often presented as yet another of his eccentricities.

Geoffrey Hellman in 'Life' informed his readers that Hitchcock 'cultivates his idiosyncrasies',⁸ and all the magazines were happy to list these. Among Hitchcock's harmless peculiarities noted by the press were his love of travel ('Life' claimed that he made spy pictures because spies also like to travel, and such pictures enabled Hitchcock to do so on an expense account basis);⁹ his ability to sleep through parties and the theatre (he 'has managed to sit through the best plays

of many a London season without seeing more than a fraction of them');¹⁰ his inability to handle money (according to the 'New Yorker', his accountant paid him an allowance of £10 per week, forcing Hitchcock to circumvent it 'like an improvident young wife');¹¹ and his 'amiable practice of letting off steam by smashing all available teacups'¹² (this seems to be an instance of how a story may grow in the telling, as formerly it was only Hitchcock's own cup that got smashed at the end of each tea time!). All of this made for an entertaining profile, matching the stereotype of the eccentric Englishman. But the writers also relished describing Hitchcock's darker idiosyncrasies.

Even in the late 1930s, Hitchcock's love of practical jokes and his reputation for cruelty received even more attention than his 'cute' oddities. 'Life' listed some practical jokes he'd played that were still being discussed in the 'Omnibus' program: the laxative-laced drink he gave to a property man who'd been handcuffed in the studio overnight; birthday presents of 400 smoked herring or large items of furniture delivered to friends with small flats.¹³ The beginnings of his reputation for being cruel to actors also appeared: the 'New Yorker' told of him shouting 'That's terrible! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?' to a 'dear old lady' actress.¹⁴ The same writer quoted him on actors: 'Break 'em down right at the start. It's much the best way.'¹⁵ The articles linked his cruel streak to the themes of his films (though not to the extent that Spoto did later): Hellman pointed to Mrs Danvers's sadistic side (in the forthcoming *Rebecca*), the dismembered blondes of *The Lodger* (1926), and the explosion that kills Stevie in *Sabotage/The Woman Alone* as 'precisely the sort of thing which brings roses to Mr Hitchcock's rather extensive cheeks and induces his most malevolently cherubic expression ... [he] is living proof that a man weighing more than 250 pounds need not be genial.'¹⁶ The disparity between his appearance and his films was remarked on by all.

But the writers didn't simply mention his weight and eating habits: they went into detail. 'Newsweek' said that 'his prowess as a trencherman remains a matter of international admiration.'¹⁷ The others described his love of steaks, ice-cream, and alcohol, as well as his astronomical restaurant bills ('Life' reported that he habitually spent \$25 for dinner).¹⁸ This invariably led to his precise current weight ('Newsweek' even added the bonus of Alma's weight)¹⁹ and his efforts to reduce. However, the last article of this period, published in November, 1939, tried to play down the matter of his over-eating. Against all the evidence, 'Life' stated that Hitchcock's 'reputation [for being a gourmand] is really unjustified'.²⁰ This was the only aspect of the director's biographical legend that a writer questioned at this time - and that was very possibly because Hitchcock requested it! Hitchcock was allowed to construct his legend in the United States, just as he had in the United Kingdom. He gave the journalists what they needed to write entertaining pieces. As Robert Kapsis has observed: 'part of Hitchcock's genius ... was his ability through much of his career to maintain a good working relationship with the media.'²¹

©1998, by Lisle Foote

Notes

1. D. Spoto, 'The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock' (New York, 1983), p. 6.
2. "Alfred Hitchcock: England's Best Director Starts Work in Hollywood", 'Life', 29 November 1939, p. 67.
3. R. Maloney, "Profiles: What Happens After That", 'New Yorker', 10 September 1938, p. 25.
4. G.T. Hellman, "Alfred Hitchcock: England's Best and Biggest Director Goes to Hollywood", 'Life', 19 June 1939, p. 34.
5. Ibid, p. 33.
6. Maloney, pp. 25-26.
7. A. Hitchcock, "A Director's Problem", 'Living Age', April 1938, pp. 172-74.
8. Hellman, p. 36.
9. Ibid, p. 34.
10. Ibid, p. 43.
11. Maloney, p. 28.
12. "*The Lady Vanishes* and a British Trencherman is Again Spotlighted", 'Newsweek', 17 October 1938, p. 29.
13. Hellman, p. 34.
14. Editor's note. I think I've seen this reported as an elaborate gag of Hitchcock's, with the 'dear old lady' a hired actress well-paid for her trouble.
15. Maloney, p. 26.
16. Hellman, pp. 33-34.
17. 'Newsweek', p. 29.
18. Hellman, p. 33.
19. 'Newsweek', p. 29.
20. 'Life', 29 November 1939, p. 67.
21. R.E. Kapsis, 'Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation' (Chicago, 1992), p. 24

Background to what follows: excerpts from a controversy ...

In order for our readers to better appreciate Leland Poague's article "Engendering (More) *Vertigo*" printed below, we first include short excerpts from the two articles it refers to. We also include a detailed plot synopsis of the film *High Heels* ... First, here are passages from Poague's original piece that appeared in the 1994 "Hitchcock Annual".

(a) From "Engendering *Vertigo*" by Leland Poague ...

'... Though [Tania] Modleski has lately accused [Stanley] Cavell of engaging "in conversations with himself," there have been precious few interlocutors for Cavell among the cadres of professional film scholars.

'There is good reason for scholars to avoid Cavell. His vision of the task of criticism is capacious and intricate; it rivals at every turn the standard "SLAB Theory" (SLAB = Saussure-Lacan-Althusser-Barthes) by means of which a whole generation of film professors has undertaken to characterize the ideological force of the cinematic apparatus. Though Cavell avows a specific loyalty to the transcendental romanticism of Emerson and Thoreau, it is his general claim that romanticism - as represented by such as Descartes and Kant and Rousseau and Nietzsche (in philosophy) and Shakespeare and Coleridge and Poe and Kleist (in literature) - fully anticipates the critique of culture undertaken more recently in the work of (in the names of) Marx and Freud, Lacan and Derrida. ...

'... Crucial for our purposes [here] are Cavell's "derivation" of "remarriage comedy" from its (mostly Shakespearean) sources in classical comedy and his subsequent derivation of "the melodrama of the unknown woman" from remarriage comedy, derivations which are describable (mythically) as a matter of conversation or interpretation or negation: "Let us think of the common inheritance of the members of a genre as a story, call it a myth. The members of a genre will be interpretations of it, or to use Thoreau's word for it, revisions of it, which will also make them interpretations of one another ('Pursuits of Happiness' 31). ...

'... My more immediate purpose, however, is to establish a context for describing *Vertigo*, like *Othello*, as "a failed comedy of remarriage" in which "the reunion is hideously parodied and becomes possible only a moment too late" (PH 142). ...

'My specification of *Vertigo*'s participation in the genre of remarriage comedy can (and must) be brief - precisely *because* the links are so systematic. I will return to the "Capra" intertext of *Vertigo* in discussing the latter film's relationship (via Stewart) to *It's a Wonderful Life*. Let me mark in passing two moments of *Vertigo*, however, which link it to *It Happened One Night*: 1) the scene in Scottie's apartment, after "Madeleine's" fall into San Francisco Bay (I take the impromptu clothesline with Madeleine's "things" slung over it, stockings included, as a direct allusion to the first "Wall of Jericho" scene of *It Happened*); and 2) Judy's declaration, as she and Scottie are preparing to dine at Ernie's, just before she puts on the necklace, that she is "hungry" (which takes up in short-hand form the equation of physical and spiritual appetites which Capra spreads so carefully through his version of the story). ...

'But there is another way to understand the film and Hitchcock's participation in it. Partly this involves his legendary cameo appearance. In *Vertigo*, Hitchcock is visible walking down a sidewalk outside Elster's shipyard, a large flashlight in his hand, just before Scottie enters the frame en route to Elster's office. Hitchcock thus marks *himself* as mortal, as seeking no exemption; we might say he is enlightened. Put another way, we are *all* "copies," *all* "counterfeits." Our existence does *not* depend upon complete independence or originality. ...'

(b) And here are excerpts from "Engendering the Truth about *Vertigo*: thoughts on an article by Leland Poague in the 1994 'Hitchcock Annual'" by Ken Mogg (the original article was printed in 'MacGuffin'17) ...

'I have read and re-read Professor Poague's 37-page article on *Vertigo*, and have come away dissatisfied! The article doesn't seem to me to be driven by insight into what Hitchcock was trying to do; instead, Poague has seen fit to interpret the film according to certain generic concepts borrowed from Stanley Cavell, William Rothman, et al. Now, I'm not saying that a film is never greater, or other, than the sum of its maker's intentions. But in this case what seems to have occurred is that Poague has been guilty of a common critical failing. He has allowed his theories and his subjective knowledge to box him in. Alleged similarities between *Vertigo* (1958) and some films of Frank Capra (on which Poague is an authority) receive a stilted *a priori* interpretation ...

'... In addition what follows represents an extension to the article on *Vertigo* and its sources that I wrote for 'MacGuffin' 11. There, I too drew a parallel: namely, between what I saw as a key aspect of *Vertigo*, its vitalism, and Arthur Schopenhauer's term "Will", or "life-force", which in fact has a long tradition, spanning West and East. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia", written in the 19th century, thrice quotes this revealing passage from "Lux Orientalis"/"Light of the East" by English theologian Joseph Glanvill (1636-80):

And the will ... dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will with its vigour? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doeth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.

'I'll explain. First, notice how Glanvill, anticipating Schopenhauer (1788-1860), contrasts the imperishable - but destructive - will with human mortality. In "Ligeia", the eponymous first wife of the story's narrator seems to return miraculously to life, as if embodying will itself. ...

'Leland Poague tells us that "little of substance is finally left unsaid in either *Vertigo* or ... *It's a Wonderful Life*. Citing Peter Brook's "The Melodramatic Imagination" (1976), Poague assigns to *Vertigo* a number of characteristics of melodrama ...

'... Typically, Poague *insists* on his interpretation. The reader is told that "apart from grasping [the notion 'that Hitchcock is the film's primary token of unknownness'] ... there is no way of comprehending the power and poignancy of the film's last shot". ...

'Now, I would concur with a reading that says an aspect of the last scene, at the level of plot, is Scottie's lack of "acknowledgment" of Judy, at least up until this moment. (Though perhaps not even now. Scottie's exclamation of "I made it" seems as revealing of basic self-centredness as Manny's "Do you realise what you've done to my wife?" at the end of *The Wrong Man*.) But such an attitude of Scottie's in the past also illustrates the Schopenhauerian/Kierkegaardian point that most of us fail to properly deal with the *particular* in life - occasioning in *Vertigo* Judy's lament that Scottie isn't treating her authentically. In turn, a reason for that is Scottie's "Faustian" ambitiousness ...

'... I think it's ludicrous of Poague to claim that a shot of Madeleine's garments on an impromptu clothesline in Scottie's apartment must represent "a direct allusion" to a scene in Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934); or that *Vertigo* is "aptly" to be compared to Preston Sturges's *The Lady Eve* (1941) simply because both are about the ups and downs of human existence and have things like dream-sequences (with an avuncular British villain) in common. Any experienced film teacher remembers plenty of occasions when a film shown to a class on Monday had seemed to possess "marvellous correspondences" to a quite unrelated film shown to a different class on Thursday - if you take my meaning. But I'd have thought it a *sine qua non* that such a teacher should quickly learn to distinguish the authentic connection from the fortuitous. I'm not sure that Poague has done that here. As for his claims that *Vertigo* alludes directly to the Capra films mentioned, those claims simply lack all proof. By contrast, when I sometimes tell people that a couple of scenes in *Mr and Mrs Smith* (the Mama Lucy's episodes) are adapted from ones in King Vidor's *The Citadel* (1938), filmed in England and starring Hitchcockian actor Robert Donat, the borrowing is both palpable and demonstrable. Also Hitchcock's great admiration for *Vidor's* films is on record ...

'Several times, Poague's approach to *Vertigo* is so "theoretical" that he fails to see or hear accurately what occurs. In the Muir Woods [Big Basin] scene, "a fantastically evanescent Madeleine" doesn't in fact accuse *Scottie* of "having taken ... no notice": she apostrophises "God". ("Here I was born and here I died. It was only a moment for you.") Judy-as-Madeleine-as-Carlotta is here playing at being "eternal" (or "eternally recurrent"), no doubt as Gavin Elster had instructed her to do - with the intention of trading on Scottie's sense of weakness, his "Faustian" longing for power and/or escape. ...

'... So I'll conclude thus. Given Cavell's transcendental-romantic sympathies (not least to the New England transcendentalists of the 19th century), and his particular indebtedness, recalling Schopenhauer's, to Kant, I sense that Poague's espousal of his (Cavell's) work isn't so far removed in spirit from my own of Schopenhauer's. Perhaps the present article has been no more than a trailer.'

(c) Lastly, here's a synopsis of *High Heels* (Spain, 1991) ...

Becky, a pop singer, has had almost as many husbands as gold discs. After her second husband, *Alberto*, had died unexpectedly, she had flown to Mexico with rising TV journalist *Manuel*, leaving behind in Spain her daughter from her

first marriage, *Rebecca*. Becky's new affair hadn't lasted, but she had stayed in Mexico for the sake of her career. Manuel had returned home. Meanwhile, Rebecca was raised by her father though never losing her obsession with her absent mother. Eventually she had married Manuel. Now she's a newsreader for the Spanish TV station where her husband is an executive director.

Not surprisingly perhaps, when Becky flies in to do a concert in Madrid, the reunion that follows is not without tension. Mother and daughter haven't seen each other in fifteen years. Becky is shocked to find whom Rebecca has married, and Manuel is shocked too - Rebecca hadn't told him that she was Becky's daughter! That evening, the three of them attend a performance by a drag artist called *Femme Letal*, whose name means 'lethal woman'. He specialises in miming Becky's old songs. Manuel is hostile to him, but Rebecca, who has always been a devoted admirer, goes backstage and secretly has sex with him.

Next morning, Manuel is found murdered, and the investigating *Judge Dominguez* learns that three women visited him that night: Becky, Rebecca, and *Isabel*, who is a co-worker with Rebecca at the TV station. All three plead their innocence, but later, while announcing the murder on the news, Rebecca breaks down and confesses to the crime. Though she is arrested and imprisoned, Dominguez doubts her guilt, especially after his own invalid mother's scrapbook of cuttings shows that Manuel was once Becky's lover. In jail, Rebecca sees a picture of a fellow inmate's boyfriend, *Hugo*, a drug dealer who bears a strong resemblance to *Femme Letal* and who is apparently killed after he turns out to be a police informer. Rebecca also realises that she is pregnant by *Femme Letal*.

Rebecca's arrest had coincided with Becky's concert, and Becky dedicates her first song to her daughter. As Dominguez proceeds with his investigations, a couple of further twists occur. The judge tells Rebecca that he is *Femme Letal*, one of a number of personas he has adopted to penetrate the underworld, and that he is in love with her. Also, Becky collapses on stage, and, rushed to hospital, discloses that she has a fatal illness. Mother and daughter are reconciled. Though Rebecca had indeed killed Manuel, Becky gladly covers for her. Their shared secret will go with her to the grave.

Engendering (More) *Vertigo*

Article by Leland Poague

[Editor's note. My response to Professor Poague immediately follows his article printed here.]

I BEGAN "ENGENDERING *VERTIGO*" by referring to the repetition that sounds throughout Hitchcock's film and throughout the discourse that has followed in the film's disturbing, melancholic wake.¹ Ken Mogg concludes "Engendering the Truth about *Vertigo*" - having 'read and re-read Professor Poague's 37-page article' - by evoking a critical homology or genealogy: as Poague to Cavell, so is Mogg to Schopenhauer, though the latter two, by essay's end, are pictured as having something like priority, as if the best I could do, in trailing Cavell, were to follow the wrong trail, or the wrong man.²

I take this evocation as a gesture of identification and apology, a way of atoning for the revenge-fantasy of the article proper wherein I stand accused not only of inaccurate descriptions of the film but of theoretical fixity or Faustian obsessiveness. It therefore comes as a happy surprise, in Mogg's last two sentences, when he allows that my 'espousal of his (Cavell's) work isn't so far removed in spirit from [his] own of Schopenhauer's'. In which case Mogg's 'article has been no more than a trailer' of my own - 'Perhaps' (p. 23). Of course, a cinematic trailer comes *before* the film it trails. Moreover, the film described in the trailer is often quite unlike the film one finally sees. So 'perhaps' I should not be surprised that the essay Mogg describes often seems far removed from the essay I (thought I) wrote. Whether more words can leap or bridge the distance remains, perforce, to be seen.

To the charge of theoretical fixity I plead guilty; it was exactly the point of my essay as published to question the extent to which *Vertigo* participates in Cavell's 'melodrama of the unknown woman' genre and, hence, negates (while yet evoking) various features of the Hollywood comedy of remarriage. In doing so, furthermore, I also invoked the larger body of scholarship regarding melodrama and the woman's film, chiefly Peter Brooks's 'The Melodramatic Imagination' (readers wishing to pursue the Brooks/Cavell connection should consult 'Contesting Tears', where Cavell contests, along Kantian lines, the Brooksian association of morality and the sacred.)³ What I find most uncanny about Mogg's insistence upon my insistence is that he evinces my 'inflexibility' chiefly by (repeated) reference to a passage where I am, rather in passing, agreeing with Bill Rothman's claim that Hitchcock is *Vertigo*'s primary token of 'unknownness'. 'Apart from grasping that fact', I say, 'there is no way of comprehending the power and poignancy of the film's last shot.' (p. 27).

Let me grant the emphatic tone of the passage. But note what I am really claiming: that to understand the film's last shot requires some understanding of Hitchcock's unknownness, some acknowledgment of his link with Judy, some way of taking her nameless fear as an echo of some quality attributable to the film more generally, hence to its 'maker' more generally. As a quasi-empirical claim, the assertion depends on simple parallelism: Judy leaves the space of the tower, as does the camera. And if, by orthodox auteurist warrant, the camera is equatable with the maker-director, then Hitchcock is equatable with Judy. (My subsequent claim that Judy and the camera both 'hover' is confirmed in the newly restored print by the fact that we do not hear Judy strike the roof tiles - where we most emphatically do hear Madeleine's crash-landing.) Of course, a person can discuss his or her understanding of *Vertigo* without discussing the last shot - but my explicit claim is more specific, almost tautological: that understanding the 'power and poignancy' of the last shot of the film requires taking it as the last shot of 'Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*' (as the credit reads). To be sure, 'Hitchcock' is no simple category, and my agreement with Rothman certainly implies that some account of Hitchcock's 'femininity' is necessary to any latter-day grasp of the movie. But I still find Mogg's fixation on this particular line of my 37-page essay a little (shall we say) dizzying - especially so when my 'insistence' on the Judy/Hitchcock link in the film's last shot is not exclusionary, does not necessarily deny other connotations and influences, of which Mogg adduces many.

Indeed, Mogg devotes most of his (12+ page) article to a series of empirical/historical claims about 'specific' influences on *Vertigo*, most of them urged as alternatives to my own intertextual reading of the film. I cannot do justice, in brief, to Mogg's pre-history of the film, which not only links Hitchcock to Poe to Schopenhauer (via Glanvill's anticipation of the latter) and Hitchcock to Poe to Simenon (via Narcejac and Boileau) but also manages, with help from Cavell, to draw in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (via Ibsen). And then there is a Spengler-Paglia-Goethe branch of *Vertigo*'s family tree to describe, which description finally allows Mogg to distinguish between a good ('open') Faustianism, where 'opposites are transcended' (p. 15), and a 'bad' Faustianism, which involves a willed (hence Schopenhauerian) assertion of a concept over a particular - as when Manny Balestrero blames his wife's despair on the (other) wrong man in *The Wrong Man*. This is, per Mogg, Scottie's crime: his 'single-visioned' insistence that Judy, say, become Madeleine, for which *Vertigo* itself stands as indictment and (hence) as cautionary remedy. And it is my crime as well, on Mogg's account, to the extent that my elaboration of the (Cavellian) intertext of *Vertigo* is equally willful, compassionless, self-obsessed.

Having pleaded guilty as (theoretically) charged, I am disinclined to contest Mogg's alternative account of *Vertigo*'s genesis and inheritance in detail. To the charges of inaccurate description and neglect of duty - the latter implicit in Mogg's regret that I neglected to engage his 'MacGuffin' 11 discussion of the film - I also plead guilty, sort of, though under mitigating circumstances (see below).

Mogg is right, that is, about my error in depicting Hitchcock, during his walk-on, as toting a flashlight. Mogg is wrong, however, in claiming that Judy is talking to God rather than to Scottie during the Muir Woods sequence. Of course, Judy is saying things she wants Scottie to hear, so that he will continue to read her as 'Madeleine', as possessed. In that sense, she speaks 'to' Scottie, though hers are 'mock' speech acts, are not 'for' Scottie. Madeleine, however, talks - if she 'talks' at all - not to Scottie, nor to God, but to the tree, or its cross section: 'Somewhere in here I was born, and there I died. It was only a moment for you; you took no notice.' I grant that 'you' can be plural. But when Scottie asks 'Madeleine' what she was thinking of, just before they stroll over to the cross section (Scottie leads her there as if to deny her very thought, by distraction), she replies: 'Of all the people who've been born and have died while the trees went on living.' Trees live, people die, and Judy has Madeleine declare herself already dead by reference to, by directly addressing and rebuking, the tree she takes as having ignored her demise. My linking this rebuke to Scottie - as being directed to him - assumes that Judy is playing on his sense of guilt, his vertigo, at having caused the death of his colleague in the film's first sequence, a reminder not to ignore it. God is *not* her (most immediate) interlocutor.

A far more interesting question attends upon Mogg's larger claim - urged openly at some moments, allowed to slide into the background at others - to know more clearly than I 'what Hitchcock was trying to do' (p. 14). By and large, Mogg presses that claim by reference to sources and analogs, to 'specific' influences that (apparently) exceed in pertinence and proximity the intertextual references sketched out in my Cavellian analysis of the film, though it involves, as well, the view that I use the melodrama-*Vertigo* link as a way of avoiding or slighting the history of patriarchal oppressiveness. (How Mogg's alertness to patriarchy is more sustained or historical than my own is hard to figure; as most of my references in the *Vertigo* sections of my paper were to feminist analyses of the film, I assumed that the issue was already sufficiently historicized, at least for my purposes.)

It is plain, however, that Mogg's argument is less historical than interpretive. That is, while he adduces some 'historical' facts - that Hitchcock read Poe, that Narcejac read (and wrote about) Simenon before co-authoring the novel upon which *Vertigo* was (very loosely) based - most of the evidence on view in Mogg's "Engendering the Truth" is a matter of 'parallels', of 'correspondences', of Jungian and Freudian 'scenarios'. Though Mogg declares that my assertion of a

Hitchcock/Capra parallel - via a similarity between Scottie's impromptu clothesline in *Vertigo* and the blanket-and-clothesline 'Wall of Jericho' in *It Happened One Night* - 'simply lacks all proof' (p. 19), his ostensibly contrasting claim that a scene in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* echoes one from King Vidor's *The Citadel* is subsequently confirmed by reference to the latter film's production venue (England), its cast ('Hitchcockian actor Robert Donat'), and Hitchcock's on-the-record admiration for Vidor (p. 20). I don't know if Hitchcock admired Capra, but it is hardly possible he was unfamiliar with Capra's films, especially not given the echoes of *It Happened One Night* in the hotel scene of *The 39 Steps*. Both *It Happened* and *Vertigo* were shot, for the most part, in Hollywood; and it's hard to imagine a more 'Capraesque' actor than Jimmy Stewart. Does the lack of 'admiration' of Hitchcock for Capra, then, settle this question, make it obvious that one of these parallels (Vidor/Hitchcock) is 'authentic', the other (Capra/Hitchcock) is 'fortuitous' (p. 19)? Obviously not. Put another way, where 'parallels' and 'correspondences' are at issue, the only appeal is to the interpretive pertinence of the similarities adduced.

Moreover, we are talking about similarity here, not identity. At some level, at least, Mogg wants to deny that 'marriage' or 'acknowledgment' - in the quasi-technical sense employed by Cavell and Rothman - is Hitchcock's deepest subject. Indeed, Mogg's more-or-less implicit claim that his pre-history of *Vertigo* is the real or 'historical' pre-history of *Vertigo* is itself an emphatically interpretive gesture, an assertion that the film is in some sense better, one's understanding of it truer (to something: to Hitchcock?), if it is read against the background he provides. Where I follow Rothman and Cavell in discussing Scottie's 'feminine' sense of himself, both embodied and denied in Madeleine/Judy, Mogg wants to say that the film (especially its last shot) enacts the Schopenhauerian scenario in which 'the world is an endless round of suffering', in which Scottie's distress is only troped by his obsession with Madeleine, such 'that Scottie is simply a discontented all-rounder' (p. 22) who fails, like most of us, 'to properly deal with the *particular* in life' (p. 19). And Mogg argues this contention, I contend, by means of what I must call, evoking Scottie's projection of himself onto Judy, 'over identification'.

He says, for example, that I adduce the case (which I called 'self-evident') that *The Lady Eve* and *Vertigo* 'are alike' in order to claim 'they're both "comedies of remarriage"' (p. 21). I never make the latter claim.⁴ I argue, rather, that *Vertigo* is an example of 'the melodrama of the unknown woman' genre described by Cavell, and I cite its evocations and negations of various clauses of the remarriage comedy scenario in support of that claim, though usually in a conditional voice, as in the following passage regarding the 'echoes of remarriage' in *Vertigo*: 'To the extent that we find the happiness pictured in remarriage comedy as honorable, as livable, to that extent we are bound to honor Judy and Scottie as having aspirations akin to our own' (p. 35). Where I urge similarity, hence a crucial difference, Mogg reads identity. Indeed, a primary tactic in Mogg's compare-and-contrast assessment of my interpretation is to adduce counter examples that are more appropriate, truer, that (here I interpret Mogg) correspond in greater detail, more authentically, to *Vertigo*. Thus, after allowing some link of Hitchcock to remarriage, he asks: 'But what of a play like Goethe's "Faust" ... [,] a story like Poe's "Ligeia", and a film like William Dieterle's *Portrait of Jennie* (1948) - all of which have correspondences in *Vertigo*? In at least one of those works, marriage is never an issue; in two of them, comedy is virtually absent. On the other hand, they *all* seem to me very much concerned with matters of Will and its permutations ...' (p. 19).

Though it is unlikely that a discussion of *Vertigo* is going to settle the question of whether Cavell or Schopenhauer provides the better picture of human existence or behaviors, it seems clear enough that a primary function of art works and art criticism is to keep the debate alive, to allow contention over matters of 'depth' - hence the endless desire for and denial of 'foundational' understandings. The tuition I am taking from Mogg's response to my analysis of *Vertigo* is less philosophical, more procedural. To say that X is *more* like Y than it is like Z does not entail that there is *no similarity* between X and Z, nor does it settle the question of the interpretive weight that such a similarity can or should bear. Such weightings are exactly the business of criticism and can only be disputed by counter weightings, by other readings and readers. Moreover, it is worth observing that the field of comparisons is far from stable; that is, it is less obvious than Mogg apparently believes that Goethe's *Faust* is a likelier or more apt intertextual companion of *Vertigo* than *The Lady Eve* or *Obsession* or *Taxi Driver*. Indeed, it is exactly *because* most latter-day viewers of *Vertigo* are likelier to see it through *Taxi Driver* than through Schopenhauer that the gesture of urging a different intertext has interpretive claim and force, *can* yield a different understanding of the previously understood. Interpretation is always a matter of 'aspect seeing', seeing the text through the interpretive lenses the world has variously given us, seeing the world through the texts we subsequently construct and urge on others. There is no end to it - short of death. (Is *that* where *Vertigo* ends?)

Where "Engendering *Vertigo*" began was a phone call inquiring whether I would write something, anything, about the connection of Alfred Hitchcock to Pedro Almodóvar for inclusion in a catalogue to accompany an Almodóvar retrospective scheduled for the 1993 Venice Biennale. I was teaching a class on melodrama, another on Cavell and Frank Capra; some of the thoughts deriving from that teaching circumstance seemed nearly ready to write up, though I knew very little about Almodóvar at the time, and had less than two months to work with, while doing all my other work. The

curator gave me the go-ahead to pursue the line of argument that became "Engendering *Vertigo*" - in the hope that I would bring Almodóvar into the essay. I eventually did, though in a 'coda' faxed off at the last minute. (These are the 'mitigating circumstances' I alluded to earlier, circumstances which made reading everything ever written about *Vertigo* quite impossible.) To the best of my knowledge the complete essay has never seen print; I've no idea what happened to the retrospective, or the catalog. Though Mogg is right to see me as following, in that sense 'trailing', Cavell - though I am grateful to Mogg for following my essay with his own, generously describing his as the 'trailer', hence mine implicitly as the 'feature' - there is a sense in which both our essays are trailers of the short subject that follows, in which the connection of Hitchcock to remarriage comedy to melodrama is further elaborated in an analysis of Almodóvar's *High Heels* (*Tacones Lejanos*, 1991), at the time his most recent film, which I take as a parodic remake of *Vertigo*.⁵

That Pedro Almodóvar is generally indebted to Alfred Hitchcock is powerfully confirmed by *High Heels*. An essay should be written on the relationship of *High Heels* to *Rebecca*, for example, and not only because the mother and daughter at the center of *High Heels* share versions of the same Hitchcockian name: Becky del Paramo (Marisa Paredes) and Rebecca Giner (Victoria Abril). The homoerotic subtext of Hitchcock's study of female possession and dispossession rises far closer to the textual surface in Almodóvar's fable of female inheritance. Like Hitchcock's never-seen Rebecca, pop-cum-torch singer Becky del Paramo is shadowed by a faithful female servant (Mrs. Danvers in Hitchcock, Marga in Almodóvar) and carries the secret of a life-threatening disease (Rebecca's secret is cancer, which she sardonically represents to Max as pregnancy, or so he reports to Joan Fontaine's character; Becky's heart is failing, a failure linked in various agonizing ways to her troubled history as Rebecca's mother). The Joan Fontaine character's desire to replace Rebecca in her husband's affections, which verges on a desire to *become* Rebecca, 'Mrs. De Winter', is variously troped in *High Heels* in the way Rebecca Giner marries Manuel (Feodore Atkine), her mother's former lover, for example; in the way Rebecca cheats on her husband with Femme Letal, a female impersonator who mimics her mother's pop-phase songs and style in his stage act. And there is always the fact that both films end with a literal transfer of guilt that has the effect of isolating central characters from the world they inhabit by virtue of an attendant secrecy. Though provoked by Rebecca, Max did deliver the blow that resulted in her death, a death which will doubtless be ruled (like Madeleine's in *Vertigo*) a suicide. Likewise, though she too is provoked, Almodóvar's Rebecca *did* fire the bullet that killed Manuel, yet Becky's last gesture before dying is to impress the murder weapon with her own fingerprints so the investigating judge can clear her daughter of the charge.

A similar essay should be written comparing *High Heels* and Hitchcock's *Marnie*. Various pieces of the Hitchcock film are displaced across the text of Almodóvar's. Bernice Edgar's letter-sweater - received in exchange for the sexual favor that resulted in Marnie - comes back in Almodóvar as the leather jacket (with a big block 'W' on the back) that Rebecca's friend Paula had given to her ex-boyfriend cum drug dealer cum police snitch, Hugo; the jacket becomes, or so it seems, the token of his death when Paula sees it in the possession of a female prisoner of the jail where Rebecca is incarcerated during the murder investigation. Marnie's distanced relationship with her mother is interpreted in the relationship of Becky and Rebecca; when Manuel tells Becky that Rebecca had reported her 'as good as dead' before Rebecca and he were married, I can't help hearing Marnie telling Mark (among other versions of her ancestry) that her father had deserted her and that her mother had been dead since Marnie was 18. Indeed, mother/daughter distance in both cases is troped via something like frigidity - Marnie can't stand to be touched; Rebecca, though loving her 'monstrous' husband, has had no sex for months until the night of Becky's return from Mexico when Rebecca and Femme Letal engage in a wild bout of sexual gymnastics in Letal's drag-club dressing room. And there is always the fact that, in each of these two films, it is the investigating male figure who falls in love with the woman of his study and proposes (demands) marriage -- Mark with Marnie, Judge Dominguez with (a now pregnant, by Femme Letal) Rebecca.

Perhaps Almodóvar's most telling refiguring of Hitchcock's *Marnie* comes in the sustained association of a traumatic childhood past with the color red. Hitchcock's practice on this account is the more spectacular, in that the many obtrusive 'red suffusion' sequences in *Marnie* are eventually motivated in the equally obtrusive fish-eye flashback to the child-version of Marnie killing Bruce Dern's sailor with a fireplace poker, spilling vibrant red blood across the background of his white t-shirt. It amounts (among other things) to a parable of sexual violation, of Bernice by the sailor, of Marnie by men generally. Primary colours, though red especially, are threaded throughout *High Heels* (often as high heels). In the film's opening sequence, for example, Rebecca waits in the airport for her mother's arrival from Mexico. She wears a white suit and carries a large red purse (another echo of Marnie, though Marnie's is yellow) and is surrounded by bright red airport seating, not to mention the red-winged aircraft in the background. From this we dissolve to the Isla Margarita where a red-and-white clad Becky, on vacation with her second husband and Rebecca, buys her daughter a pair of earrings to match her own. In response to losing one, Rebecca wanders off, becomes a 'lost daughter'; when Alberto and Becky find her, Rebecca's step-father traumatizes the little girl by pretending to sell her to locals for (literally) coconuts, as a potential sex-slave, one can't help but imagine, like Bernice Edgar. Soon thereafter,

while playing with her red-and-blue spin-top toy, the young Rebecca overhears Alberto and her mother squabbling over Becky's showbiz career (shades of the 1956 *The Man Who Knew Too Much!*). So little Rebecca proceeds to switch Alberto's pills, downers for uppers and vice versa, in order to set her mother free. It works, as Rebecca learns from watching a television news report of Alberto's asleep-at-the-wheel car-crash demise while she rests against a large red cushion. It matters more than a little that Becky finally returns to Madrid dressed top to toe in bright red, that *Femme Letal's* costume is also red-on-red during the first performance we see at the Villarosa, and that Manuel is clad in cherry-red pajamas when the stressed out Rebecca plugs him one month later.

The intertextual relationship of *High Heels* and *Vertigo* is equally as significant if somewhat more difficult to specify. That it *must* be specified, and under the sign of Almodóvar's family name, is signaled in the credit sequence of *High Heels*. Just before Pedro's directing credit comes on - featuring a silhouette profile of the director and his camera against a bright red background - Augustin's credit as executive producer comes up. It is a triptych, the centre panel of which is abstractly graphic, as of cubist blue planes receding to a centre point, like a passageway or colonnade, but the left-most panel is a tight close-up of a woman's eye, and the right-most panel is an image taken (as if) directly from the swirling computer graphic portion of *Vertigo's* credit sequence. Images that Hitchcock had condensed by superimposition - the eye, the vortex - Almodóvar has thus displaced, split up, made separate. But that separation also suggests linkage or similarity.

There is an obviously 'Spanish' quality to *Vertigo* that makes it an apposite intertext for *High Heels*. We might even think of Becky as a cabaret singer from somewhere to the south of San Francisco - which would make her the avatar of Carlotta Valdes. And here again we have an investigating officer, Judge Dominguez (Miguel Bosé), whose identity crisis is more than hinted at by a corset that we know he's prone to wear - in that Judge Dominguez is obsessed with being his own underworld informer by means of class and gender shape-shifting; sometimes he's Hugo the junkie, sometimes *Femme Letal* the female mimic. But Dominguez/Letal is hardly at the centre of *High Heels* in the way that Scottie is at the centre of *Vertigo*. Which means that the evocation of remarriage comedy in *Vertigo* is not matched in Almodóvar's retelling of the story - despite Rebecca's pregnancy, despite the judge's marriage proposal -- if only because Dominguez/Letal never learns the truth about Manuel's murder. Scottie knows, and forgives. Letal does neither - even if he gets to make the film's only emphatic reference to a classical Hollywood comedy in telling Rebecca, as Joe E. Brown tells a wigless Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot*, that 'Nobody's perfect'.

Put another way, if Scottie is, by implication or interpretation, both the lost daughter and the searching mother in *Vertigo*, Almodóvar presents a far more literal and more melodramatic interpretation of the mother/daughter tangle. Here it is Rebecca who seems lost in the past. Indeed, her affair with Letal is an affair with the 1970s version of her mother; during Letal's first performance his wig is a match for the hairdo that Becky sports in the sequence when (the younger) Manuel asks her for an interview, which is quickly followed by Becky's refusal to take Rebecca with her to the Mexican film location, though she promises that, upon her return, they will always be together. Little does Becky know, at the time, that Rebecca had killed to make the Mexican trip possible. She will not know until the mother/daughter interview stage-managed by Dominguez/Letal that Rebecca had killed Alberto.

This latter confession scene is in many ways the passage where *High Heels* most deeply declares its melodramatic inheritance, hence its kinship to *Vertigo* and to Hitchcock. Here Rebecca delivers a classic 'aria of divorce' - though she offers her confession in the form of film criticism, taking her relationship to Becky as figured by the mother/daughter relationship in Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata*. She even speaks in the voice of Ingrid Bergman's mother figure, who declares her daughter's piano-playing a vulgar 'imitation' of her own, as if the daughter were only a 'shadow'. Rebecca, we might say, understands herself here - as Scottie understands Judy and himself alike in *Vertigo* -⁶ as a 'copy', as a 'counterfeit'. Though she killed Alberto in order to advance her mother's career, to give Becky back her voice, Rebecca experiences herself as unheard. When a penitent Becky asks what she can do, Rebecca replies 'You can only listen'. In that sense, like George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*, like Scottie Ferguson in *Vertigo*, Rebecca experiences herself as unborn, as unknown. Indeed, it's as if Rebecca had given birth to 'Becky' before Becky could finish giving birth to Rebecca. How difficult giving birth or claiming it can be is fully displayed in Rebecca's incoherent declaration that she had wanted Becky to live her own life so that Becky could keep her promise never to separate from Rebecca.

The existential difficulty pictured in Rebecca's desire to be both mother and daughter, connected yet separate, is elaborated with great delicacy in Almodóvar's handling of both incident and narration in *High Heels*. We hardly need emphasize how the 'imitation' theme is played out in Letal's female mimicry, which is troped again via his lip-sync singing and his cross-dresser chorus. (A similar emphasis on coordinated action is evoked in the happily Godardian dance sequence that takes place in the exercise yard of the women's prison.) A recurrent visual motif, moreover, involves a whole series of reflected images that leave the viewer uncertain of their provenance; are we seeing *through* the

glass, to an object on the other side, or are we seeing a reflecting surface, which yields up a reverse image of something from the opposite visual field?

Against this pattern of uncertainty or reversibility the film establishes certain facts unequivocally - mostly having to do with male villainy. This is most obviously the case with Becky's second husband, whose monologue on wifely duties marks him as a second cousin to *Gaslight's* Gregory. Though we never know why Becky and her first husband broke up, it is the case that he collaborates in the scheme to separate Becky and Rebecca on the occasion of the Mexican film shoot. Manuel's initial relation to Becky is undercut by the way the one shot of their Mexican idyll together resembles the seaside kiss of 'Madeleine' and Scottie in *Vertigo*; what we see of him in Madrid, a scowl on his face and a gun in his pants, is unappealing from first to last. His status as a melodramatic male villain is established via the television show he watches while waiting for Becky to arrive for dinner; while women apply red lipstick, a voice-over narrator informs us that Theatre, music, and dance were solely for the monarchy to enjoy'. Rebecca is attracted to him *only*, or so we can infer, because he used to be Becky's lover. (Is the same also true for Becky on her second go-around with Manuel? Such is Rebecca's accusation in her aria.) For that matter, Isabel, this film's 'mute woman', who sits beside Rebecca during newscasts and signs the stories as Rebecca reads them, is sexually involved with Manuel only for mercenary reasons. And even *Femme Fatale* is tainted, however positive his shape-shifter inclinations might be, in the heartbreak he brings to Paula, which Rebecca does not allow him to forget.

The world of *High Heels* is thus similar in its psychological and social structure to the Hegelian world of *Vertigo*, split, as if forever, between men and women. There seems no healing balm for this. What healing we see takes two forms, and always as between women, though men, melodramatically enough, remain the source of pain. Paula and Rebecca both resort to picture-taking as a way of memorializing lost love. (This 'picture' motif is taken up by *Fatale's* mother, with her scrapbooks of celebrities, and by Becky, whose walls are awash with family photographs.) The other balm is also a matter of swirling images, of prints; call them fingerprints, the ones that Becky leaves on Manuel's gun. In thus becoming a 'lethal woman', Becky gets a second chance at giving birth to Rebecca; the film's last shot evokes this birth trauma in its vision of an exhausted mother lying next to a crying child. Indeed, the blue walls of the room and the framed photo at screen center evoke the passageway panel of the '*Vertigo*' credit triptych. To the extent that Rebecca accepts this birth, this passage, she becomes something more than a shadow, though nothing more than a reproduction, as are we all. Yet finitude has its pleasures, among them the pleasure of connecting, of discovering reality together in the mesh and clash of fantasy. Thus does Almodóvar make Hitchcock that much more real for me. Cut. Print.

©1993, 1998, by Leland Poague

Notes

1. L. Poague, "Engendering *Vertigo*", 'Hitchcock Annual' (1994), pp. 18-54.
2. K. Mogg, "Engendering the Truth about *Vertigo*: thoughts on an article by Leland Poague in the 1994 'Hitchcock Annual'", 'The MacGuffin', no. 17 (November, 1995), p. 14. See also Mogg's "The Fragments of the Mirror: *Vertigo* (1958) and its Sources", 'The MacGuffin', no. 11 (November, 1993), pp. 7-22.
3. See P. Brooks, 'The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess' (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976) and S. Cavell, 'Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman' (Chicago: Uni. of Chicago Press, 1996), especially pp. 39-43.
4. Let me quickly acknowledge that my sentence-level formulations of the 'intricate relation' (p. 36) of *Vertigo* to remarriage comedy - as 'participating' in it, as 'inheriting' it - allow Mogg's construal, though the larger drift of my argument is also, I believe, clearly announced, and I never, in fact, assert that *Vertigo* is a comedy of remarriage, however much the generic story is evoked. In rereading the original essay, I am struck by just how 'intricate' the relation of remarriage comedy and melodrama can become, so I take Mogg as responding to an important implication of the essay, if at some cost to his grasp of my basic claim.
5. For an alternative analysis of the melodramatic aspect of *High Heels* see L. Fischer, 'Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre' (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), pp. 162-178. [Editor's note. 'Almodóvar on Almodóvar' (Faber & Faber, 1995), edited by Frederic Strauss, contains two or three pages in which the director talks about his admiration of Hitchcock's films.]
6. She a 'copy' or 'counterfeit' of Madeleine, he of Elster.

Ken Mogg responds

Let's be specific here. In his paragraph beginning 'It is plain ...', (paragraph 9), Professor Poague claims that when I note how the Mama Lucy's episodes in Hitchcock's *Mr and Mrs Smith* are adapted from similar episodes in King Vidor's

The Citadel. such a match-up by me is no more valid than his own involving the clothesline episodes in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*. Well, that's nonsense. Hitchcock's 'borrowing' in *Mr and Mrs Smith* is, as I say, 'palpable and demonstrable'. Just run the two films. By contrast, Poague's Capra-Hitchcock parallel, I now repeat, 'simply lacks all proof'.

But such failure to attend - and to hold scrupulously to a high standard of what constitutes evidence - is typical of Poague's article (I'm sorry to say), and was certainly one of the things I was most concerned to note in my original piece. And now Poague's latest offering, above, contains distortions and a questionable tone of its own. (As to whether Poague's attempt to link *High Heels* to *Vertigo* is any more valid or convincing than a similar attempt that might be made to link Almodóvar's film to, say, *Citizen Kane*, is something I must largely leave the reader to decide.) So here are some further responses by me to what Poague has lately written. I specifically deny that any 'revenge-fantasy' is involved in what I say here. Moreover, I'm deeply grateful to Professor Poague for his 'MacGuffin' piece, and for the courteous tone of all his correspondence with me by letter and email. He is very welcome to take the matter further in these pages.

Working from the top now. First, I think Poague may indeed have followed 'the wrong trail, or the wrong man' (para. 1)! My original article, beyond its Schopenhauer references, was concerned to suggest that *Camille Paglia's* remarkable 'Sexual Personae' (1990) may ultimately prove a far more estimable contribution to cultural studies - painting, literature, film, etc. - than anything produced by the 'Harvard school' of Cavell, Rothman, Keane. The main reason? Paglia's truly acute, no-nonsense, superbly penetrating eye - and the lucidity of virtually every unencumbered sentence filling her brilliant book ...

I shall do no more than note a certain snideness in parts of Poague's response to mine. One instance (I think): much of para. 2.

I'm grateful for the compact explanation by Poague (para. 3) of what his "Engendering *Vertigo*" was aimed at doing. It wasn't stated so succinctly there!

I'm rather at a loss to reconcile the last sentences of, respectively, paragraphs 3 and 4. If there is 'no way' except one of 'comprehending the power and poignancy of [*Vertigo's*] last shot', something that Poague 'insists' on, then it comes as a surprise to me to be told that such an insistence 'does not necessarily deny other connotations and influences', i.e., with their own power and poignancy.

I'm *happy* to note Poague's reference (following Cavell and Rothman) to Hitchcock's 'femininity' (para. 4) - something that I assumed in the last 'MacGuffin', apropos *Rear Window*. (I'd touched on it previously: e.g., in 'MacGuffin' 12, reviewing Theodore Price's 'Hitchcock and Homosexuality', and 'MacGuffin' 15, in relation to Dr Brulov in *Spellbound*, whom I called a 'male mother'.)

Poague has suitably summarised in a couple of sentences at the end of para. 5 a major thrust of my original argument. But he has distorted (or misunderstood) one or two points just before this. The 'open' type of Faustianism I was referring to is *not* necessarily a matter of transcending opposites (that merely happens to be what Helen of Troy arguably means to Faust), but of being 'open to all experience', something which the Romantics quested for - p. 14 and p. 17. (One such Romantic was Schopenhauer.) And 'a willed ... assertion of a concept over a particular [circumstance]' is decidedly *not* 'Schopenhauerian' - for a couple of reasons. One: Schopenhauer wanted the very opposite state of affairs to prevail, and regretted that it seldom did so. Two: human willing, in the popular sense of assertion or wanting (which Poague seems to mean here, though I may be wrong) is only an accompaniment of, a tiny part of, the working of the world's 'Will' (life-force).

Para. 6. What kind of self-defence is Poague offering here?! Still, if it's any comfort to him, let me note that I've also (on the Web) lately accused someone else, Professor Royal Brown, of being single-visioned, and hence 'neglectful of duty', concerning *Vertigo* - in Brown's case, re his 'Orphic' reading of that film. And once again, I expressed the wish that the person concerned had (by now) considered my piece in 'MacGuffin' 11, where I demonstrate how that film evokes *many* and *diverse* 'archetypes' and associations - but only in passing, one after the other. The effect is cumulative and cinematic rather than literary. To seek to rigorously interpret *Vertigo* as embodying the Orpheus myth - or the essence of Shakespearean remarriage comedy - is to invite a strained and even absurd misreading, I'd suggest ...

Let's take para. 7 slowly. What I objected to in Poague's saying that Hitchcock in *Vertigo* carries a flashlight was not the error itself but the elaborate, pretentious interpretation that Poague, Cavell-like, adduced from it. (Compare Cavell's wordy 'explanation' in one of his essays for why the title of *North by Northwest* alludes to 'Hamlet' - when we know that no such allusion was meant by the filmmakers. See the entry about that on the Hitchcock Scholars/'MacGuffin' Web

site.) Now, by 'pretentious' here, I only mean pretentious in this context. The point itself, that 'Hitchcock thus marks *himself* as mortal, as seeking no exemption' ('Annual', 1994 edition, p. 50), is precisely the one I made about Hitchcock's pre-credits appearance in *The Wrong Man*, when I analysed that film in 'MacGuffin' 6 (reprinted in revised and expanded form in 'MacGuffin' 20). I pointed out in my original response to Poague that he had failed to 'acknowledge' his (actual, physical) reading of my *Wrong Man* piece, which we had long ago corresponded about. Now he has done it again! Moreover, I'll show below that he has used another of my observations from 'MacGuffin' 6, this time about *Rebecca*, and yet again without 'acknowledgment' (whether of the special Cavell/Rothman kind or just the ordinary scholar's kind).

Still on para. 7. Yes, but ... Being pedantic now, I never wrote that *Judy* is talking to God rather than to Scottie in Muir Woods/Big Basin when she says, 'It was only a moment for you'. I wrote that it's *Madeleine*, and really *Judy-as-Madeleine-as-Carlotta*, who apostrophises God here (though I grant that the remark is ostensibly made to the tree, as Poague has now shown). She is thereby playing on Scottie's sense of weakness established both symbolically and actually in the film's opening scenes, i.e., Scottie's own sense of being mortal - as opposed, surely, to the *immortality* of God. (For the 'eternal' aspect of *Vertigo*, and the symbolism of its missions and churches, as well as its forts, art galleries, shops, etc., see my article on that film in 'MacGuffin' 1. Then, for a precise reference by me to how Muir Woods/Big Basin is itself like a *cathedral*, see my article on *Vertigo* in 'MacGuffin' 11.)

Para. 9. I'm wondering what precisely *is* the echo of *It Happened One Night* in the hotel scene of *The 39 Steps*?

Para. 10. Also, I'm wondering why Poague keeps quoting unhelpfully, or in the wrong context, things I wrote? My point about Scottie's being 'a discontented all-rounder' was made to refute Poague's own notion that Scottie was inclined just to dwell with women (like Midge, for example), when there's no evidence, I think, that he didn't also drop in occasionally on male acquaintances, including some of his former buddies in the police force, or have them drop in on him. ('Being on the bum', as I understand it, basically means just being out of a job and drifting/'wandering'.) As for Poague's contention that I wanted to deny that 'acknowledgment' is Hitchcock's deepest subject, that is indeed true. The typical ending of a Hitchcock film, I wrote (p. 19), *isn't* necessarily asking selfishly, 'Why don't you acknowledge me?' And I cited the works of several outstanding authors to show how such a thing is indeed possible! (See, especially, p. 21.)

Para. 11. Poague says he never claimed that *The Lady Eve* and *Vertigo* are alike in being 'comedies of remarriage'. Well, he certainly compared them, and my point was that it's a rather wild comparison. And in footnote 4 to his present article he says that he never in fact asserted 'that *Vertigo* [by itself, alone] is a comedy of remarriage' - even though he did call *Vertigo* 'a failed comedy of remarriage' ('Annual', p. 35) and used similar expressions about it!

Para. 12 I wasn't so much asking whether Cavell or *Schopenhauer* 'provides the better picture of human existence or behaviours' as I was asking whether, at the level of practical criticism, Cavell or *Camille Paglia* is the better writer and the critic/scholar with the wider perspective. My answer to that is: Paglia. Taking all culture as her province, and wielding Nietzsche's Apollonian-versus-Dionysian distinction with far more acumen than, in the field of film writing, Royal Brown, she is an aesthete in the best sense and a brilliant perceiver - whose every pithy, quite un-Cavell-like sentence is a gem.

My own hope for an essay on *Vertigo* yet to be written - I'm unsure by whom - is that it might combine aspects of Schopenhauer (who provided Nietzsche with the basis of his theory of tragedy, and whose own writing spans West and East) and Paglia. The latter would understand every nuance of this very sexual - yet also in some ways, 'chaste' - film, and know how to speak of them meaningfully and with precision. The applicability of Schopenhauer to *Vertigo* I hope I have already sufficiently shown (e.g., in 'MacGuffins' 1, 8, 11, 17, et al.). Now, here's a personal (by me) observation about Stanley Cavell. Very soon after I started to read him, I realised who he and his 'methodology' reminded me of: it was myself, in my formative tertiary film-teaching days when I was being deeply influenced by my yoga teacher, Shri Vijaydev Yogendra, a sort of Krishnamurti figure. Many is the time that a film under discussion in my class would become for me the occasion of a discursive interpretation done impromptu and taking in all matters that seemed to me germane - and they would be many! The result might be both film analysis and (unashamed) cadenza, aesthetic discourse and Weltanschauung. Consequently we broke a lot of barriers and trespassed beyond the sort of film analysis available in the textbooks of the time.

Here's my point. From Veejay (Shri Vijaydev) I knew how vital it was, for everyone concerned, that you address a *particular* audience, and moreover that you refer in every sense to *particulars*. I also learned that you must be on your guard on these occasions against finding too many 'marvellous correspondences' between films and indeed whole topics - something to which I've referred in my earlier response to Poague. Reading Cavell, though, and especially the Cavell of the earlier books (rather than, say, 'Contesting Tears'), I detected few such precautions taken. Tania Modleski's gibe

that Cavell engaged 'in conversations with himself' seemed to me right-on. I also found Cavell's writing undisciplined and - much the same thing - arrogant.

Still on para. 12. Poague claims 'that the field of comparisons is far from stable', and I'm aware of what he means. But, for me, a whole outlook is involved here. From the East, I have learned to want to see 'things as they really are', and be prepared to shed the self in order to do so. (I'm still a learner, though.) In suggesting that we interpret *Vertigo* through the optic provided by *The Lady Eve* (near-risible?) or *Obsession* (understandable) or *High Heels* (questionable), Poague seems to me to be risking us in an arid, if fashionable, approach to film study: a mere exercise. A couple of recent cases in point come to mind, both from the 'Hitchcock Annual'. Lesley Brill's attempt to elucidate Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* by comparing it with DePalma's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was a failure. Brill was clearly out of sympathy with the Hitchcock film to start with (without sympathy, or compassion, no true seeing, I believe ...), and his piece felt arbitrary and stilted ('Annual', 1995 edition). Likewise, James M. Vest's attempt to expound Truffaut's *The Story of Adèle H.* - a film I deeply admire - by citing its echoes from several Hitchcock films, struck me again as only slightly pregnant, if I may so put it ('Annual', 1997-98 edition) ...

Finally, as promised, let me draw attention to another instance of where Poague has failed to 'acknowledge' me! In para. 14, he writes of *Rebecca*: 'Though provoked by Rebecca, Max did deliver the blow that resulted in her death, a death which will doubtless be ruled ... a suicide.' I'm pleased, in a way, that Poague feels that. As I pointed out in 'MacGuffin' 6 (which Poague read when it first came out), a couple of feminist film critics quoted in David Bordwell's 'Making Meaning' (1989) completely swallow Max's own assertion (or the Joan Fontaine character's) that Rebecca's death was accidental. My analysis showed how likely it was that Max did in fact 'kill her (as in the novel): he strikes her in one of his notorious temper tantrums, and she lives just long enough to give an "almost triumphant" smile' ('MacGuffin' 6, p. 8).

©1998, by Ken Mogg

(Reader response to any or all of the above is definitely invited.)

BLOOPERS

Once again thanks to Steven L. DeRosa for telling us about a slip (or two) in the latest 'MacGuffin' - this time the *Rear Window* issue. And the slips - plural - were this time just about all mine!

The 'theme-song' of *Rear Window* is not so much "Mona Lisa" as the piece of music on which the composer/song-writer seen in the film is working throughout and which is finally heard played in full orchestral form on a gramophone record in the film's final scene. By then the song has acquired *its* title, "Lisa".

(On our Web site recently, I noted how Hitchcock's 1933 musical drama, *Waltzes From Vienna*, uses a similar strategy of having a piece of music being composed throughout the film until it's given a public performance at the climax - a scene of reconciliation and general enjoyment.)

By contrast, the song "Mona Lisa", which had already won an Academy Award for its writers, Livingston & Evans, is heard *just once* in the film, ostensibly coming from a radio. As noted last time, that significant moment occurs when the film's Lisa (Grace Kelly) has finally succeeded in getting Jeff (James Stewart) on-side, prepared to acknowledge the worth of her 'feminine intuition'.

Steven L. DeRosa adds this further information. "Lisa" was composed by Franz Waxman, and the lyrics were written by Harold Rome.

He also notes that the lyrics were mis-quoted last time (we'd in fact copied them in good faith from Robert J. Benton's article, "Film as Dream"). The final line should read: 'If this is dreaming, I hope I never wake. But dream forever, in your arms O Lisa.'

*

Back in 'MacGuffin' 12, reviewing the book 'Hitchcock and Homosexuality' (1992) by Theodore Price, I wrote: 'nobody to my knowledge has ever suggested that [the misogynistic playwright August Strindberg] was gay. The two attitudes

aren't synonymous' (p. 5). Well, maybe not. But checking out the very informative 'Gay Book of Days' (1985), by Martin Greif, recently, I noticed that Strindberg's name was listed there as 'suspect' ...

Hitchcock, Sexuality, and the Self

Article by Jason Rasmussen

OSCAR WILDE SAID THAT 'criticism is a mode of autobiography', and the truth of that axiom is manifested by the wide diversity of opinion among film critics/scholars concerning Hitchcock's treatment of homosexuality. Otherwise highly-perceptive people abandon their objectivity when writing about this subject, casually bending Hitchcock's life and work to their own causes and theses. The diagnoses range from Hitchcock as a raving homophobe on the one hand to Hitchcock as a sly, modern-minded gay-rights spokesperson on the other. Critics who subscribe to either of these extreme views are robbing themselves of the complexities of an artist whose ambivalent fears and sympathies with regard to homosexuality show at least as much about the culture to which he responds as they reveal about his personal beliefs and experiences. Almost everyone I've read neglects to distinguish between Hitchcock the human being and the larger 'Hitchcock' - that is, the mythological figure produced by a culturally- and historically-specific series of films and by the sundry forces that shaped that cinematic canon.

If we are to attempt objective analysis of Hitchcock's treatment of queerness, we must constantly remind ourselves that we are viewing these films in 1998 - post-Stonewall, post-AIDS, and post-Ellen DeGeneres. Most of us have been exposed to a wide-range of open discussion on sexual orientation, if not in our own lives, at least in the media and in the legal sphere. But in Hitchcock's era, gay people were usually not talked about, or at best discussed only via monolithic, heterosexist, dehumanizing mythology. We should not reduce our analysis to the rather simplistic question: was Hitchcock homophobic? Rather, we should ask a series of questions, on a film by film basis ... How homophobic was Hollywood in a given year? What techniques were used to present queer people given the restraints of censorship? How did Hitchcock perceive queer people? How did audiences perceive queer people? How does Hitchcock's work compare to its predecessors and its posterity? We should refrain from making moral judgments on Hitchcock the man, and instead focus on learning what his works can show us about the era in which he lived, and how his work shaped the art of moviemaking. Biographical details are by no means insignificant, but we must examine them in their appropriate historical and cultural context.

There is a tendency among critics to either overemphasize or downplay the significance of queerness in Hitchcock's works. Raymond Durgnat's 'The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock', Donald Spoto's 'The Art of Alfred Hitchcock', and François Truffaut's 'Hitchcock' mention the presence of gay characters without fully examining their significance. Conversely, Theodore Price treats Hitchcock as if sexuality is his only concern: 'Hitchcock and Homosexuality' relies almost entirely on stereotypical heterosexist notions to suggest that nearly all the men in the Hitchcock canon can be understood as homosexual if one only knows how to read Price's highly-questionable 'code' - but he doesn't bother to explore how the presentation of these 'gay' individuals fits into Hitchcock's explorations of, for example, the 'failure' of all types of individuals to fulfill societal role-playing games. In his essay "Hitchcock's Homophobia", John Hepworth rightly seeks to identify some of Hitchcock's shortcomings and prejudices about gay men, but completely fails to consider historical or cultural context and easily-accessible evidence that contradicts his central points. In their respective essays "Crisscross" and "The Murderous Gays", Sabrina Barton and Robin Wood both offer well-balanced analyses of Hitchcock's attitudes toward gayness, acknowledging his ignorance and personal anxieties about it, but also showing how his films reveal the nature of the gender role constructions of his era, and examining the effects of Hollywood censorship.

Though Spoto's analysis tends to be over-generous in its portrayal of Hitch's 'gay friendliness', the comprehensive multi-source evidence he gathers in 'The Dark Side of Genius' ultimately captures Hitch's ambivalence and contradictions well: interestingly, Spoto quotes one source as saying that 'Hitchcock was always quite comfortable with homosexual or bisexual people' (96) yet has earlier told us that Hitchcock was 'not even comfortable in the company of women, let alone homosexual men' (75) - referring here to Hitchcock's meeting with the gay director Murnau. Spoto goes on to describe Hitchcock's interaction with gay actors like Ivor Novello and Montgomery Clift, but hardly resolves the above discrepancy. However, there's another rich clue in the book: we're told that Hitchcock, ever fascinated by all forms of social deviance, had a lifelong obsession with the famous - and gay - Oscar Wilde.

Wilde heavily influenced Hitchcock, and Hitchcock was quite conscious of the fact. He sometimes quoted Wilde in interviews, and an examination of his films yields many allusions to Wilde and his work through borrowed dialogue,¹ shared themes, and in at least one case (*Frenzy*, 1972) a direct reference to Wilde. By the time he began his film career,

Hitchcock had an 'intimate' knowledge of Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' (1891), having read that work 'several times' (Spoto, 'The Dark Side of Genius', 276, 351). In this essay I will examine some parallels between 'Dorian Gray' and *Strangers on a Train* (1951), showing how the works establish gay characters through the use of the doppelgänger and by deliberately placing men as object of other men's 'gaze'. I will avoid using simplistic stereotypes to label characters as gay (though Hitchcock may well have believed these to be markers of gayness); instead, I will use concrete evidence contained in the works to show that they can be viewed as examinations of the sexual dynamics between men. I will then address how gayness fits into psychoanalytic themes of alienation, repression, and the instability of public personality.

I hope that examining Hitchcock and Wilde together may show something about the way Hitchcock was fascinated by all forms of deviance from Puritan and Victorian societal norms. In 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' (published just four years before the public exposure of Wilde's homosexuality in 1895), Hitchcock found a rich text concerning aestheticism, sexual desire and repression, the nature of the self, and one's relationship to society – a book that fits right into Hitchcock's obsessions. Arthur Laurents describes Hitchcock as a

child who's just discovered sex and thinks it's all very naughty ... He might have been indirect in dealing with sexual things in his films, but he had a strong instinct for them. He thought everyone must be doing something physical and nasty behind closed doors - except himself: he withdrew, he wouldn't be part of it. (Spoto, 'The Dark Side of Genius', 322)

Hitchcock seems to have found it easier to explore other people's repression than to consider his own; significantly, he and Wilde both had an intense desire to separate themselves from their works. Hitchcock 'displayed a cool disinterest' in efforts to find meaning in his work (377), maybe because a critical viewing of his films reveals that they parallel his relationship to his mother (306), his relationships with his wife and daughter (249), his romantic longings (328), and his overuse of alcohol (249). Although Wilde insisted that no conclusions of a personal nature should be drawn from art, he also claimed that 'I mean every word I have said, and everything at which I have hinted in "Dorian Gray"' (Ellman, 321), and pointed out in the book's Preface that 'all art is at once surface and symbol', thus suggesting that the book deals symbolically with such matters as gayness. Both artists were clearly interested in the nature of the self, and produced works concerning the idea of a split personality and suggesting our hidden 'dark side'. Now, Philip Cushman tells us how 'the Victorian self was conceptualized as containing secret, mysterious, and dangerous urges for sex and aggression' (Cushman, 33). The doppelgänger is a common vehicle for presenting this idea in the literature of that era. I contend that Hitchcock and Wilde both used the doppelgänger to imply concealed homosexuality.

Hitchcock was almost certainly familiar with Freud's concept of 'the id' and Jung's of 'the shadow'. The latter concept is particularly suggestive here. Jung identified in literature the idea of the 'personal shadow' (Jacobi, 109-112), the archetypal 'dark' figure that personifies the psychic features that have been rejected and repressed by another character – in effect, an element of the self that has proved to be intolerable to the conscious ego. In 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', the title character owns a portrait of himself which proves mutable – it grows uglier with each sin he commits, as if it were an extension of himself. In *Strangers on a Train*, Bruno (from the Italian word for 'dark') acts out Guy's murderous urges – he makes a choking gesture as miles away Guy angrily says of his wife 'I could choke her'; Guy says 'I could strangle her', and Bruno proceeds to do just that. Hitchcock pointed out that 'though Bruno has killed Guy's wife, for Guy, it's just as if he had committed the murder himself' (Truffaut, 199). Dorian's hideous portrait is 'the most magical of mirrors' (Wilde, 1995, p. 125), an 'emblem of conscience' that carries the 'burden of his shame' (108), keeping Dorian's crimes secret from the world by growing more ugly with each sin he commits but allowing Dorian himself to stay young and innocent-looking. The word 'shadow' appears 48 times in the text of 'Dorian', or about once every five pages – certainly enough to draw attention to itself. These occurrences coincide with discussions of sin: Wilde's diction reminds us of the contrast and connection between Dorian and his dark double. Hitchcock employs the same technique in *Strangers*. Guy is constantly seen in sunlight, in light-colored clothes, in open spaces and in public performance, where Bruno is seen at night, in his dark mansion, and wearing dark clothes. His boat is aptly named after Pluto, god of the underworld.

'Dorian Gray' describes 'the terrible pleasure of a double life' (201) and suggests that 'each of us has a Heaven and Hell in him' (181). Spoto catalogs a plethora of examples of the 'double' image that permeates *Strangers*: the movie begins by showing two pairs of feet and two sets of train rails that cross twice; when Bruno and Guy meet, Bruno orders a pair of double drinks; the story contains two women with eyeglasses, two women at a party discussing the idea of the perfect crime, two sets of detectives in two cities, two old men at a fair, and two rich and influential fathers; Guy's wife has two boyfriends; Hitchcock makes his cameo carrying a double-bass (Spoto, 'The Art of Alfred Hitchcock', 192). All of this doubling fits with how Bruno is Guy's 'shadow'. Bruno's notion that 'you should do everything before you die' is the perfect foil to Guy's 'watch-and-wait strategy'. It's pretty clear in 'Dorian Gray' that the ugly painting is Dorian's alter

ego; further, Camille Paglia identifies Lord Henry (an ambiguously-close friend of Dorian's) as a second doppelganger in that work (Paglia, 519). Just as Bruno encourages Guy to 'do things' like commit murder, Lord Henry asserts that 'the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it' (102). He claims 'people are afraid of themselves' (28), summing up the central motif in these works – the idea that Guy and Dorian fear the secret, unrealized aspects of themselves represented by their 'shadows'.

We've identified the doppelgangers in both of these works, and we've seen that both Dorian and Guy have a secret 'dark side', but how does that show that they are gay? To understand these characters as gay, we must carefully examine their interaction with others, their dialogue, and the manner in which the artists present them. As Alan Sinfield has it, 'Dorian Gray' 'invokes the queer image ... despite at no point representing it' (Sinheld, 103). Wilde couldn't very well write about gays in a society that failed to acknowledge even the existence of homosexuality - Jonathan Katz reports that until the mid-1880s even medical professionals did not perceive gays as a distinct category of people (Katz, 209-249). Audience pressure and the Hollywood 'code' forced Hitchcock to be subtle in his presentation of homosexual repression (Russo, 94-99). It is interesting to consider the British version of *Strangers*, which, as described by 'Los Angeles Times' writer Bill Desowitz, features 'a notable amplification of [Robert] Walker's charming flamboyance, psychotic personality and homoerotic attraction to [Farley] Granger' that is toned down in the American release. Similarly, Richard Ellman's biography describes how Wilde cut 'an explicitly homosexual sentence about [Basil] Hallward's affection for Dorian' because he was worried about how his publishers would react (Ellman, 322). The vagueness of the homosexual implications in these works is perhaps appropriate, because, as Sinfield suggests of 'Dorian Gray', they are not about the 'cunning masking of already known queerness', but about people who have not acknowledged their homosexual desires to themselves (Sinfield, 103), people who do not quite understand what it is to be queer.

Sabrina Barton describes how the opening scenes of *Strangers on a Train* announce an interest in the dynamic between men by employing, in reverse, Hollywood and Hitchcock conventions for presenting heterosexual interactions. After the credits, the camera scrutinizes the men's legs, and offers no one's glance to justify the leg fixation. These scenes show Hitchcock's characteristic cross-cutting which emphasizes both our doppelganger theme and the (potential) doubling of desire between these men. The suggestive dialogue – 'I like you – I'd do anything for you' – makes Bruno's affection clear, and the film's Freudian concern with the slippage of male identity intimates that Bruno represents a projection of Guy's own nature. Barton points out that Bruno is always in the place Guy is going to be soon (train stations, tennis courts, the party, the amusement park). She also presents a chart of cinematic codes to show how, in the strict, regular alternation of shots that present the two men, the camera alternates between the two in 58 of the first 67 shots – they represent one character who is doubled or split like the parting train tracks that begin the scene.

Camille Paglia identifies how Wilde describes men as objects to be watched in order to present homosexual desire. Basil is 'dominated, soul brain and power' by seeing Dorian's masculine beauty, so fascinated that he could be 'absorbed' (140) by him. The doppelganger painting makes Dorian's object-status literal.

As object of Bruno's desire, Guy plays the 'blonde-function' of Hitchcock's other films (we may note that the blonde is noticeably absent in this film). The movement of the sequence implies that their meeting is inevitable – much like the shot/reverse pattern of a Bacall/Bogie pairing announces Bacall's 'femininity' and Bogart's 'masculinity' through contrast - and makes their meeting the greatest interest of the audience (Barton, 217-228). The interaction between Ann Morton and Guy is rather lifeless and doesn't hold our interest. When Bruno commits the murder, and when Barbara Morton exclaims how wonderful it would be to have someone 'who loves you so much he'll kill for you', these words intended to describe Guy's love for Ann take on an irony in that Bruno actualizes them in his devotion to Guy. According to Bruno's accusation ('pretty smart, marrying the boss's daughter') and Guy's silent reaction, Guy is interested in Ann primarily because of the public appearance she helps him to maintain. Dorian Gray is in love with the actress Sibyl Vane only while she is on stage wearing boy's clothes. By having Dorian fall out of love with her when she stops performing, Wilde suggests Dorian's heterosexual love is an act.² Dorian says Sibyl has 'killed his love' (103), surely revealing that he was never in love with her in the first place, but only with her stage personae and the fake world she helped him maintain. One can't help but think of Guy's relationship to Ann: just as Dorian is in love with the world of theatre acting, Guy is in love with the acting inherent to politics. Both Dorian and Guy are eager to stay out of other people's gossip because they need to preserve their public personae. Guy works in Senator Morton's office, and we learn that Morton is influential enough to have the detectives 'recalled immediately' if he should request it. By using Ann Morton as a means of political ascension, Guy demonstrates a willingness to utilize marriage as a tool for gaining popular acceptance. By having Guy's 'shadow' point this out, and by making it clear that Guy would be happy to have Bruno kill his first wife (through repeated outbursts on Guy's part, saying things like 'I could strangle her'), Hitchcock implies that Guy is homosexual.³

If Ann and Bruno's worlds represent alternate possible manifestations of Guy's personality, Hitchcock's film reveals much about the volatile nature of sexual identity. During the final race-against-time tennis match – the ultimate battle between Guy's personae – the 'treat those two imposters just the same' quote from Kipling's 'If' (seen above the court-entrance) points to Hitchcock's concern with the social construction of masculinity. (In the poem, its narrator foresees a series of obstacles that a youth must overcome, and tells him that if he does so, 'then you'll be a man'). By playing out the film's battle under this quote about sameness, Hitchcock may be alluding in part to Freud's notion of innate constitutional bisexuality. Note that Bruno represents many of Freud's stereotypes about the causes of homosexuality – he hates his father, is excessively devoted to his mother (whose inept abstract painting of a male figure distorts her husband's masculinity), and hasn't completed the Oedipal cycle (compare Freud, 43-49).

Robert J. Corber's 'In the Name of National Security' examines these Freudian ideas about homosexuality and suggests that Hitchcock used them to present the sense of danger that gay men posed to their heterosexual counterparts – Corber argues that the idea of fluid sexuality made gays American 'national security risks' who might prevent people like Guy from obtaining fixed, 'masculine', heterosexual identities (Corber, 14). The idea that Bruno might be a threat to a traditional image of masculinity is emphasized when he pops the balloon of the boy dressed up as a cowboy – the cowboy being the quintessential image of American masculinity. The movement of the film is the destabilization and reconstruction of masculinity (but only after Bruno has died with a broken neck). Watching this lamentable process shows us the dangerous sexism and homophobia inherent in maintaining masculine identity. The film offers a rare 1950s look at subjectivity outside the exclusive realm of the heterosexual male. By placing men as objects of study, the film gives us an insight into the way gender roles are constructed and function in society.

The depiction of the homosexual as deranged killer is a problematic aspect of these works that cannot be ignored: it is typical of modern film and literature to depict gay men as unhappy, unstable, and dangerous (Russo, 94), and it would be easy to write off Hitchcock's work as a typical piece of heterosexist bigotry. Hitchcock had previously made a connection between homosexuality, fascism, and murder in *Rope* (1948). But we must assess the value of these works in historical context. One could argue that Hitchcock's work – most notably his film *Psycho* (1960) – is essential to the liberation of cinema that occurred after the 1960s. Wilde's murderous Dorian fits the historical pattern that shows dangerous gay men who threaten to 'convert' their straight counterparts. But does the association of gay desire and murderous urges mean that these works are saying that all gay people are murderers, or does it simply imply that we all have murderous urges that we hide, and that we all are subject to certain sexual desires that we suppress? And if these works do associate homosexuality with being psychotic, can't we read that as an indictment of the effects of homophobia and repression, rather than as an innate aspect of homosexuality? Guy's winning an acceptable social identity depends upon his playing out homophobic, murderous, and sexist games – that is as much a critique of heterosexism as it is of homosexuality. It would be a gross distortion to say that Hitchcock's goal was simply to show that gay people are dangerous. Hitchcock was probably no more interested in depicting gays than he was any other so-called 'marginal' societal group.⁴ Hitchcock's interest in homosexuality was not to make a comment on gayness, but rather to show something about the nature of personality and sexuality – the idea that chaos lurks beneath the illusion of order and stability that we constantly take for granted. *Strangers on a Train* is about Guy – our everyman-figure – not a film about gay men. Homosexuality is not the subject of this film.

Strangers on a Train and its likely influence, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', enrich our understanding of ourselves by encouraging us to examine our identities. Like most of us, Hitchcock was not immune from the thinking of the heterosexist culture in which he lived, nor was he free from prejudice and homophobia. He bought into conventional stereotypes about what it is to be gay, and he likened homosexual desires to murderous urges. But unlike the work of most of the other filmmakers of his era, his films offer an examination of human nature that questions the rigid sexual and gender constructions of our society, and move beyond Victorianism. Hitchcock demands that we face ourselves and discover our true natures.

©1998, by Jason Rasmussen

Notes

1. Editor's note. A case in point is *Under Capricorn* (1949), where Adare's scepticism about 'society' in early Australia ('Is there any?') seems to echo a remark of Mrs Vane in Chapter Five of 'Dorian Gray' ('I believe there is no society of any kind in the Colonies, nothing that I would call society').
2. Editor's note. Camille Paglia cites a perhaps not dissimilar case. Noting that bisexual author Virginia Woolf wrote 'Orlando' (1928) with fellow-author Victoria Sackville-West in mind, she claims that the novel's fictive energy comes from Woolf's imagining Sackville-West as a man. 'When, halfway through, Orlando turns into a woman - that is, when Vita becomes simply herself - the life goes out of the book.' (Paglia, 'Sexual Personae', Chapter 17)

3. Editor's note. Of course, 'strangling' is ambiguous here, having erotic associations as well as deathly ones. But Theodore Price, 'Hitchcock and Homosexuality', is someone else who seems to have few doubts that Guy is really a homosexual. See Price, Chapter 1.
4. Editor's note. Yes! Think, for instance, of the chorus girls in *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), the boxing troupe in *The Ring* (1927), the circus freaks in *Saboteur* (1942), etc.

Bibliography of Works Cited and Sources Consulted

- Barton, Sabrina, "Crisscross: Paranoia and Projection in *Strangers on a Train*", 'Camera Obscura', Indiana University Press, 25-26, pp. 75-100.
- Corber, Robert J. 'In the Name of Masculinity: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America'. Durham, California: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Cushman, Philip. 'Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy'. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995, p. 33.
- Desowitz, Bill, "*Strangers on a Train*", 'Los Angeles Times', November 17, 1996.
- Durgnat, Raymond. 'The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock'. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1974, pp. 217-231.
- Ellman, Richard. 'Oscar Wilde'. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.
- Freud, Sigmund. 'The Ego and the Id'. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Incorporated, 1960.
- Hepworth, John, "Hitchcock's Homophobia," 'Christopher Street', 6.4.1982, pp. 42-49.
- Hitchcock, Alfred, director. *Strangers on a Train*. Warner Brothers Pictures, Incorporated: Hollywood, 1951.
- Jacobi, Jolande. 'The Psychology of C.G. Jung'. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1973, pp. 109-135.
- Katz, Jonathan. "The Invention of the Homosexual, 1880-1950", 'Gay/Lesbian Almanac'. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers Incorporated, 1983, pp. 209-249.
- Miyoshi, Masao. "Masks in the Mirror: The Eighteen-Nineties", 'The Divided Self'. New York: New York University Press, 1969, pp. 289-340.
- Paglia, Camille. "The Beautiful Boy as Destroyer: Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'", 'Sexual Personae'. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 512-530.
- Price, Theodore. 'Hitchcock and Homosexuality'. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1992.
- Russo, Vito. 'The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies'. Harper & Row: New York, 1987.
- Schmidgall, Gary. 'The Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar'. New York: Dutton, 1984.
- Sinfeld, Alan. "Aestheticism and Decadence", 'The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment'. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Spoto, Donald. 'The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock'. New York: Random House, 1983, pp. 339-381.
- Spoto, Donald. 'The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures'. New York: Doubleday, 1992, pp. 187-197.
- Truffaut, François. 'Hitchcock: The Definitive Study'. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983, pp. 179-208.

Wilde, Oscar. 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'. Ed. Michael Hulse. Kneman: Hungary, 1995.

Wilde, Oscar. 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'. Bibliomania: The Network Library. Ed. Data Text Publishing Ltd. www.bibliomania.com/index.html, 1997. [Search engine used.]

Wood, Robin. "The Murderous Gays", 'Hitchcock's Films Revisited'. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, pp. 336-57.

Wood, Robin, "Letter to the Editor", 'Christopher Street', 6.4, 1982, pp. 4-5.

The other Hitchcock journal

As we hope most of our readers already know, besides 'The MacGuffin' there's the 'Hitchcock Annual', a quality publication whose 1997-98 issue runs to nearly 200 pages. Its main content this time is drawn from papers originally given at the Austin Hitchcock Conference in 1996. We particularly like in this issue David Sterritt's very readable "Alfred Hitchcock's Registrar of Births and Deaths" (on *Family Plot*, 1976) and Richard Allen's "Avian Metaphor in *The Birds*" (a very thorough study of the 'meaning' of the bird imagery in Hitchcock's 1963 film). Subscription rates (US currency) are: individuals \$10, institutions \$12. Foreign rates: add \$3. Send a cheque or money-order to 'Hitchcock Annual', P.O. Box 2568, New London, NH 03257, USA.

OUR BASIC OVERSEAS SUBSCRIPTION RATE is \$22 Aust. (\$18 US) for 4 air-posted issues every 12-15 months. For 4 surface-mailed copies, the rate is \$16 Aust. (\$14 US). Make drafts, etc. payable to 'The MacGuffin'. AUSTRALIAN SUBSCRIBERS please pay \$16 for 4 issues. THE BASIC OVERSEAS BACK-ISSUE RATE is \$6 (Aust. or US) per air-mailed copy (1-3 copies). Otherwise, \$5 (Aust. or US) per air-mailed copy (4 or more copies), \$4 (Aust. or US) per surface-mailed copy (at least 4 copies please). BACK-ISSUES IN AUSTRALIA are \$5 each. Some past 'MacGuffins' have featured *Rear Window* (issue 23), *Rich and Strange* (22), *The Trouble With Harry* (21), *The Wrong Man* (20), *Vertigo* (17, 11, 1), *Foreign Correspondent* (16), *Spellbound* (15), Thomas Elsaesser on "The Dandy in Hitchcock" (14), *Young and Innocent* (13), *The Paradine Case* (12), *Notorious* (10), *The Lady Vanishes* (9), and *Torn Curtain* (8). These are the issues most recommended. Write or email for more information, or refer to our Web site (address below). NB: issues 18 and 19 are permanently out-of-print.

ODD SPOT: CRACK!

Fly a kite on the Internet and see whether lightning strikes ... It did for me last year when I asked for information about the line from a children's game heard in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), 'Step on a crack and break your mother's back!'

Among the things I learnt ... The saying is familiar to many present-day Americans from when they were kids. Also, it's heard many times in books, movies, etc. It's spoken by Mary Katherine in 'We Have Always Lived in the Castle', the popular late novel by New England writer Shirley Jackson (1919-1965), who was best known for her ghost story, 'The Haunting of Hill House'. The well-known rock group DEVO included the saying in their 1980 single, "Whip It".

One person even sent me a wonderful short rumination about cruelty in children's games. An extract: '[Not fearing] to 'step on a crack' may be a psychic 'rite of passage' showing that a child doesn't fear separation or loss of the mother - he's all grown up! Not heeding this taunt is also a signal the child probably gives that he is now fully rational, has reached the age of reason.'

(Thanks to: Angelique Skiman, Robert Guttke, Dan Kenneally.)

'The MacGuffin' is indexed by the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP), Brussels, and in 'Film Literature Index', New York. This issue printed by TS Press, Fitzroy, Victoria, Australia. Publication authorised by Australian Mensa. Opinions expressed herein are those of individuals, unless otherwise indicated. Mensa as a body has no opinions. Anyone may write for or subscribe to 'The MacGuffin'. Correspondence, etc. should reach the Editor, Ken Mogg, at 177 Simpson Street, East Melbourne, Victoria 3002, Australia. Our email address is <muffin@labyrinth.net.au>, and we're on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~muffin>>.