



The MacGuffin

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EDITORIAL

'The MacGuffin' is a year old. Thanks to all of you who have lent it your support. May our second year vindicate our first!

Here's a query to Australian readers. Does anyone know of a would-be specialist columnist? I'm looking for a willing person to provide us with regular coverage of new Australian movies.

Now, about this issue. At the very least, it draws a few threads together. For instance, I've just noticed how Laurence Giavarini's description (see 'News') of Peter Weir's early films raises notions of 'the uncanny' like those discussed back in 'MacGuffin' 2. In turn, Giavarini's comments bear on Hitchcock's Rebecca (and even more, Vertigo) which figures several times this issue.

And again, Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier) in Rebecca epitomises what critic Robin Wood calls the monogamous male heterosexual of our patriarchal culture. So much so, that when Maxim learns of the (in Freud's words) "polymorphous perversity" of his first wife, he's literally shocked. Both Daphne du Maurier's novel and Hitchcock's film may be said to hinge on a resultant 'danger', namely, that Maxim won't fulfil his expected role of patriarch/father ... Hence our 'News' item referring to Olivier and du Maurier carries a touch of irony. And then there's our book review of Wood's 'Hitchcock's Films Revisited' ...

Speaking of gender matters, critic Adrian Martin has sent us a review of the deftly-titled He Said, She Said. Adrian's stimulating comments reflect his knowledge of contemporary and classic Hollywood movies and their rich "intertextual" meanings.

Also in this issue, Ronald Conway evokes the work of those leading Hollywood composers, Erich Korngold, Max Steiner and Franz Waxman; Irene Radek reviews actor/director Kenneth Branagh's latest film, Dead Again - which clearly owes some of its plot and effects to Hitchcock's Spellbound and Marnie; and there's a long analysis of Hitchcock's 1932 comedy-thriller, No. 17, an early exercise by its director in creating madcap confusion. The print of No. 17 discussed here was screened in Australia by the Channel 9 network, but I understand that the film is available in the US on video.

Special thanks this time must go to our letter-writers for making the 'Letters' pages particularly readable and informative (see if you don't agree).

To everyone, good viewing.

P.S. No, I haven't forgotten that Maxim in Rebecca kills his first wife. But I don't believe that's what causes his state of shock. Rather, the shock already exists, as does Maxim's hate (that was once love).

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Note. A contents index for 'The MacGuffin', issues 1-4, is on page 21.

LETTERS

Christine Matthews, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia.

I'm interested in 'The MacGuffin' because (1) I am a great fan of Hitchcock, and (2) I like movies, any movies (well, almost).

My favourite Hitchcock: Notorious.

My favourite movie/s: Citizen Kane, Casablanca, To Have and Have Not, Chinatown, Chariots of Fire, Dead Poets Society. (Sorry, too hard to name just one.)

(Editor's note. Christine is one of our Australian Mensa members. Thanks for your letter, Christine. Everyone seems to have a different favourite Hitchcock! Don Gilbert, I know, favours Shadow of a Doubt. Evan Williams, whose letter on Psycho follows, likes The Lady Vanishes. I prefer Vertigo. What about some of you other readers? Send along your favourite film lists! Incidentally, I can endorse most of Christine's non-Hitchcock favourites - except perhaps Chariots of Fire. That seems to me too much like an 'advertisement for myself' made by a committee called 'England'!)

* * *

Evan Williams, Lindfield, New South Wales, Australia

Your article on Psycho in 'MacGuffin' 4 prompts me to make a point about that film that has long been in my mind, but which I have not seen made before in all the literature on the subject. Was Hitchcock at any time during the film really trying to conceal the identity of the killer, or was he not content that we should guess - or even know - that the murderer is Norman?

The silhouetted figure with the upraised knife that appears clearly before Marion in the shower, and the less shadowy figure seen running from the bathroom after the murder, is clearly not that of a frail, elderly woman. It is unmistakably the figure of a tall, broadshouldered man, in drag. If Hitchcock had really wanted us to believe that the killer was Norman's mother, he could easily have set up or edited his shots to conceal the physique of the murderer. (And he could have done so without making it obvious that he was hiding something, which is the effect of the crane shot on the stairs.) That he allows us to see Norman exactly as he would have appeared to Marion suggests not only that Hitchcock is (typically) playing fair, but that he wants the audience to know the truth - if only sub-consciously, or as part of a confused memory. If the killer had really looked like a woman the film might have been more mystifying but it would not have been as disturbing, or, in the end, as complex and satisfying. The thought that, yes, we knew or should have known the truth all along intensifies our own sense of ~~complicity~~ complicity. It is an example of Hitchcock's sacrificing suspense or mystery in his later films in favour of psychological and moral ambiguity, as with the revelation of the murder plot of Vertigo before Scottie himself discovers the truth.

Norman's identity as the killer is never really hidden. The truth may simply be that we are unwilling, or too frightened, to accept it.

(Editor's note. This astute observation on Psycho sent me back to the Truffaut interview book. Discussing the scene, mentioned in Evan's letter, where Norman carries his mother downstairs, Hitchcock says that he had Norman conduct an argument with his mother in order to distract the viewer from the camera's movement - which was itself a deliberate distraction! Otherwise, we'd have been asking what was going on and why we weren't seeing 'Mother' up close.

Now, about the shower scene. I think Evan is basically right. Hitchcock shot views of Mother in such a way that they were 'in character' for either a man or a woman. Similarly, he'd already given her a voice that was at once that of a dotty old lady and a hammy male actor. By the time the shower scene arrives, we've been carefully worked over to accept that Mother is "ill" though still "strong", and that she "just goes a little mad sometimes". When we do finally glimpse her larger-than-life figure, it seems to accord with what we think we already know about her. Besides, at this point we're supposed to be reeling with shock, not speculating too much about appearances!

In sum, it's true that "Norman's identity as the killer is never really hidden". Equally, though, his real identity isn't emphasised either, until the dénouement in the cellar. Further comments, anyone?)

* * *

Adrian Martin, Brighton, Victoria, Australia.

I'm overjoyed that you have the stamina, time and obsessiveness to put out your own publication. I have always been a believer in, and supporter of, the 'small magazine'. The true blood of film culture flows through such publications. For a serious film lover, they form the 'secret history of the twentieth century' of which Greil Marcus speaks so passionately in his book 'Lipstick Traces'.

Here's some random Hitchcockian notes and queries I would like to share with your readers:

1. A Lost Hitchcock Conference? In 'Framework' 13, 1980, there is reference to a Hitchcock Conference held in Rome, May 1980. Some of the fascinating-sounding presentations included "Hitchcock the Dandy" by Thomas Elsaesser, "Hypnagogic Structures in Hitchcock" by Charles Barr, and "Griffith and Hitchcock" by Pascal Bonitzer. Does anyone know if the proceedings of this conference were ever published? And if not, what about a few free copies of 'The MacGuffin' sent to Elsaesser and Barr at the University of East Anglia, with a request for a printing of their manuscripts? What a publishing coup that would be!

2. French Articles on Hitch I Would Most Like to See Translated. I have collected a hefty file of French discussions/studies of Hitchcock down the years, particularly from the major magazines 'Cahiers du Cinema', 'Positif' and 'Cinema'. Many would be great to see translated ... any takers? Here are some of the highlights, several from the explosion of Hitchcockiana that happened in 1984 with the famous re-release of the "lost" and classic films.

a. "Interview With Jean Douchet", 'Cinema' 305, May 1984. Douchet is one of the greatest French critics. He wrote a classic book on Hitchcock in 1967 (Editions de l'Herne). Only a fragment of his 1959 discussion on Psycho has ever been translated (that's in the 'Hitchcock Reader'). Later, in 1980, he contributed an in-depth study of Family Plot to Raymond Bellour's anthology 'The American Cinema'. For the past several years - now a 'grand old man' of the French critical world - he has written a remarkable 'Chronicle' column in 'Cahiers du Cinema', including important reflections on everything from Godard, Demy and Rossellini to the Australian film Ghosts of the Civil Dead. On the occasion of the Hitch re-releases, 'Cinema' magazine interviewed Douchet at length about the state of his thinking about the director, and how he would evaluate his own 1967 book, with its system of the 'three orders' underlying Hitch's oeuvre - the occult/metaphysical or esoteric order; the logical or aesthetic order; and the everyday or psychological order. The particular focus of the discussion is Vertigo.

b. "Desire By the Rope, or: The Pleasures of Hell, The Hell of Pleasure (notes on the fetishism of the long take in Rope)" by Jean-Pierre Coursodon, 'Cinema' 314, November 1985. This piece, by the co-editor of the fine 2-volume 'American Directors' series, is, in my reading, the most brilliant and penetrating discussion of Rope around.

c. "Figure of Destiny" by Michel Chion, 'Cahiers du Cinema' 358, April 1984. Chion is an acclaimed experimental composer and the author of a 3-volume work on sound in cinema. This article is an analysis of the use of music in The Lady Vanishes. Note also that, in his 3-volume series, Chion devotes sections of Vols 1 and 2 to Psycho, and an important chapter of Vol.3 to Rear Window.

d. "A Little Diptych for 'Sir Alfred'" by Gerard Legrand, 'Positif' 234, September 1980. Legrand is another of the 'grand old men' of the French critical scene, surrealist, philosopher and author of the classic 'Cinemanía'. He published this fascinating article - a rewritten version of his contribution to the above-cited Rome conference - on the occasion of Hitch's death.

e. There's also a French film magazine called 'Vertigo'. I have issue 5 (1990) on food and eating in the cinema. It's not a magazine devoted solely to Hitch, but this issue has Raymond Bellour comparing dining

scenes in Shadow of a Doubt and Sternberg's Scarlet Empress; plus a long and fascinating piece by Claude Beylie on the significance of food in Hitchcock's oeuvre. On re-checking the latter, I discover that it, too, hails from the 1980 Rome conference!

3. Other Reading Notes. I should mention an article on Notorious by John Beebe, a Jungian analyst, in 'Journal of Popular Film & TV', Vol.18 No.1, Spring 1990. It was presented, in a very compressed way, in a recent series on Jung on TV, "Wisdom of the Dream". Finally, a note to Australian readers (at least) that a long article "Rope: The Hitchcock Room" by John McConchie recently appeared in the art magazine 'Broadsheet', June 1991, published in Adelaide.

That's the end of this communique! I'm looking forward to the next 'MacGuffin'.

(Editor's note. Thanks hugely, Adrian. I've been teaching myself French for a while now in order to read exactly the sort of articles and books on Hitch you've listed. Future 'MacGuffins' should reflect some of this reading. Now, about the 1980 Rome Conference on Hitchcock. I once heard that papers from it were going to be published, presumably only in Italian, by Savelli of Rome. So in 1987 I wrote to them at an illustrious-sounding address - "via Visconti 20, 1/00193 Roma" - only to have my letter returned marked "Trasferito ... Irreperibile". The bird had flown. I guess my next move will be to follow your suggestion and write to Messrs Elsaesser and Barr in England.)

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NEWS

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

Australian films honoured in France

Film festivals in France have recently featured several movies from Down Under. At Douarnenez, an "Australian Aboriginal Retrospective" screened 29 documentaries and feature films, including Charles Chauvel's Jedda (1955), Peter Weir's The Last Wave (1977) and such moving recent works as Essie Coffey's My Survival as an Aboriginal.

Speaking of Peter Weir, screenings at the La Rochelle festival and in Paris highlighted his three earliest features: The Cars that Ate Paris (1971), Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975) and The Last Wave. Commenting in the September issue of 'Cahiers du Cinema', critic Laurence Giavarini suggested that the films crystallise "the age-old fears dear to the fantastic imagination: fear of the loss of bodily integrity and the unity of the self, fear of the return of dead things; also, the fascination with [new?] beginnings, and the suspicion of parallel worlds".

But it isn't only the Old Wave of Australian directors who have received French acclaim lately. At Cannes, during the prestigious Directors' Fortnight, newcomer Jocelyn Moorhouse's Proof was given a standing ovation.

* Incidentally, Moorhouse's film, with its curious premise of a blind man seeking to know the world through photographs, has scooped the pool at an Australian Film Institute presentation, including winning the prize for Best Feature Film.

Vale Sumner Locke Elliott (1917-1991)

The author of 'Careful, He Might Hear You', which was made into one of the best Australian films of the '80s, has died in New York. Among the 200 mourners at his funeral were friends Elaine Steinbeck (widow of author John Steinbeck), actress Linda Hunt (diminutive winner of an Academy Award for her performance in Peter Weir's The Year of Living Dangerously) and screenwriter Whitfield Cook (whose credits include Hitchcock's Stage Fright).

Summer Locke Elliott was born in Sydney, Australia, but became an American citizen in 1955. Besides his many plays and novels, he wrote scripts for television. A timely paperback edition of his story 'Fairyland' has recently been published. Here's how Abbey's Bookshop (Sydney) describes it:

The partly autobiographical story of the growth of an outsider. At a young age a boy realises that he is not only socially from the wrong side of the fence but also sexually. Nevertheless, the boy (who we have surely met in 'Careful, He Might Hear You') is keen to make the best of opportunities that present themselves, all the while longing to find the other with whom he could be fully himself ... Set initially in pre-World War II Sydney, and then in the theatre world of New York, [the story] smoothly relates ... the muted sense of emptiness of one for whom happiness is withheld, quite arbitrarily.

Two for the Hitchcock scholars

~~(a)~~ The dream sequence in 'Spellbound'. Film producer James Bigwood contests Ingrid Bergman's claim that the well-known Spellbound dream sequence, designed by Salvador Dali, was meant to be fully 20 minutes long. In an elaborately-researched article, "Solving a Spellbound Puzzle", published in 'American Cinematographer', June 1991, Bigwood suggests that the sequence was meant to run just 40 or 50 seconds beyond its present 2 minutes and 49 seconds.

Bigwood even quotes from a script of the missing portion, known as The Ballroom Sequence, and provides a ~~script~~ showing that the actors were rehearsed and costumes made. The script describes 'J.B.' (Gregory Peck) dancing with Constance (Bergman), and an orchestra "dressed in white fur hats" being led by Dr Brulov (Michael Chekov).

As for the business, enthused about by Bergman, of a cracked statue crawling with ants, Bigwood says categorically that "Hitchcock quickly put a stop to that idea".

~~(b)~~ Hitchcock's vanished 'Mary' shown on East German television. Hitchcock told Truffaut that he shot two versions of his film Murder! (1930): an English version and a German version. But until recently only the former has been available for viewing. Now the German-language version has not only surfaced on television, under its title Mary, but the Germans have made available a print to Britain's National Film Archive for research purposes.

In 'Sight & Sound', Autumn 1990, Richard Combs describes in detail the differences between the two versions. The German version runs some 12 minutes shorter and, ironically, is missing some of the 'German Expressionist' touches of the English version. Gone, for instance, is the comic business with the thick carpet in Sir John's office into which a character's feet literally sink. Also missing is the sexual ambivalence of Handel Fane (Esme Percy) in Murder!, "both in terms of performance and the doubly contemptuous epithet, 'half-breed', which is used to refer to his homosexuality".

Combs concludes that Mary, devoid of the "messy" elements of Murder!, is merely "a neat little potboiler, efficient but rather empty".

"Outing the Dead"

The phrase is novelist Fay Weldon's, and it's had quite an airing lately. For instance, the late Daphne du Maurier (author of 'Rebecca' and 'The Birds') has been "outed" as lesbian, and the estate of Noel Coward (whose 'Easy Virtue' Hitchcock filmed) is reportedly trying to stop publication of a biography which shows that the playwright's private life had a particularly nasty side.

Even more spectacular is the disclosure made by Donald Spoto's forthcoming 'Laurence Olivier: a Biography'. Spoto, who was less than kind, certainly less than objective, towards Hitchcock in his controversial 1983 biography of the director, alleges that Olivier had a 10-year love affair with the comedian and actor Danny Kaye.

Although both parties were married at the time - Olivier to actress Vivien Leigh - Spoto claims that Kaye managed his schedule to enable him to see Olivier in Los Angeles and London, and by 1950 had insinuated himself into Olivier's life.

* Press reports on the new Spoto book don't mention what has happened to his biography of Marlene Dietrich, announced two years ago. Has it been shelved?

Soon for TV

On a lighter note, British television is to make a four-part mini-series based on Somerset Maugham's Ashenden Stories. Hitchcock buffs will know of the character Ashenden and his espionage exploits in World War I from seeing the 1936 film The Secret Agent, itself based on at least two of Maugham's stories, 'The Hairless Mexican' and 'The Traitor'. Ashenden himself (played in Hitchcock's film by a young John Gielgud) is a flattering self-portrait of Maugham.

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Dramatic Film Music in Hollywood's Golden Years (Part 1)

When the talkies came to Hollywood in the late '20s, music ensembles in the stage pit went into rapid decline. The sheer fascination of hearing conversation on film was sufficient to captivate audiences for at least four years after the synchronous sound recording was introduced. So before about 1934 music for the dramatic film was frequently limited to a splash or two of Liszt or Tchaikovsky under the opening credits, with 'Swan Lake' and the love theme from the 'Romeo and Juliet' tone poem doing stout service for many a boy-girl clinch at the fade-out.

Meanwhile, the expulsion of large numbers of liberal-minded artists from Nazi Germany after 1933 coincided with Hollywood's growing need for musicians, and few composers were more welcome than the Austrian-Jewish emigrés Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Max Steiner (though the latter had actually been in America since 1924). Between them they established a new grammar of music for the romantic-tragic-epic movie and their influence still lingers in the work of living writers of film scores from John Williams to Maurice Jarre.

Korngold and Steiner did their best work at Warner Brothers where they enjoyed the services of the superb composer-orchestrator Hugo Friedhofer. Warners was the first studio to employ a full symphony orchestra for high-prestige soundtracks, replacing the erratic dronings of the tiny chamber ensemble which was all the early '30s studio could usually afford. 1935 proved to be a watershed year since Korngold, after composing an almost complete symphonic score for Captain Blood, quickly followed it with the longest full score written up to that time, that for Anthony Adverse (1936). Part of Warners' secret lay in their superior recording placements and their use of a big, resonant sound stage to give depth to the music.

When Darryl Zanuck became production head of the Fox-Twentieth Century merger in 1935, he gave orders that an increasing budget be devoted to the music department. By 1940 the Fox orchestra and sound recording under the direction of Alfred Newman were well abreast in quality with those of Warners. Curiously enough, the mighty MGM and the long-established Paramount remained relatively indifferent to high quality symphonic music. It was reputed that both Louis Mayer and his wunderkind Irving Thalberg had a tin ear for classical music. As a result, dramatic scores from Herbert Stothart, long-time MGM music director, tended to be mere sentimental re-workings of traditional melodies recorded fuzzily in a studio without real ambience. Here the brass belched rather than hymned, tympani clattered like fruit cases, and the higher strings were frequently played vulgarly with mutes. Their sound was usually poured on like molten fudge. If Metro needed a special score it was likely to hire a Franz Waxman (for Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, 1941) or a Bronislaw Kaper (for Green Dolphin Street, 1946).

Erich Korngold did not score very many films but all were done for Warners. All reflected the ripe vein of Richard Strauss-ian late romanticism which had shone through Korngold's youthful but gorgeously scored 1920 opera, 'The Dead City'. A child prodigy whose gift for orchestral composition astonished Strauss, Mahler and Puccini in turn, Korngold flowered rather too early and seemed to have lost a large part of his creative

spark by about 1950. His Violin Concerto merely borrowed the key theme from his score for The Prince and the Pauper (1937). Korngold's only post-Hollywood work of real distinction was his sinewy Symphony in F Sharp (1950).

Korngold scored films as he would an opera libretto. No other composer tried and succeeded so well to translate the emotive counterpoint between stage/screen action and theme music which Wagner had pioneered at Bayreuth. The music for The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938) is Korngold's best remembered score, and indeed sumptuous string writing for the combined theme of Robin and Maid Marion puts it among the loveliest ever penned for a love scene. But most aficionados agree that King's Row (1942) produced the finest of all Korngold's music for film. An arresting declamatory fanfare under the credits begins in the difficult key of B flat major and its richness contains enough material to develop a full symphonic movement. King's Row has many marvellous touches, with broodings in the lower strings doubled occasionally by piano to represent the darker secrets of the small New England town. For the grandmother Madame Von Ein there is a theme of yearning nostalgic nobility scored for strings and horns. The transformation of the main theme provides a concluding paean of triumph for the young doctor hero Parris Mitchell, and is one of the most stirring finales to any film.¹

Max Steiner grew up in much the same Viennese tradition as Korngold. His more than 300 film scores, or parts of scores, represents an output never likely to be equalled. Like Korngold he preferred plangent, almost over-ripe, romantic writing, but he could use a jazz idiom when needed. Steiner's gift for coining so many memorable themes remains a legend. Contrary to popular imagining, the writing for Gone With the Wind is not his best. The Tara theme, of course, is justly famous, but hearing of the full score shows much highly derivative material padded out with fragments of the war songs, ballads and bugle calls of the Civil War period. The score shows many signs of Steiner's enforced haste in its preparation. Its tonal textures are often too thick, the woodwind writing is often anaemic, while the strings and brass tend to be too intrusive at moments of dramatic tension. However, Steiner's pioneering score for RKO's King Kong (1933) deserves its esteem as perhaps the finest really sophisticated symphonic score ever done in Hollywood. Also, buffs will find his music for such vehicles as The Adventures of Don Juan (1949), The Big Sleep (1946), All This and Heaven Too (1940) and Key Largo (1948) rather more brilliant and rewarding than that for the celebrated Selznick epic of 1939.²

A third composer in the earliest group of distinguished cinema musicians was Franz Waxman who hailed from Germany and forsook the lushness of Steiner and Korngold for more contrapuntal, occasionally dissonant, writing in the technical tradition of Brahms and Reger. His most celebrated early score was a highly original and dissonant backing for The Bride of Frankenstein (1935) with the celebrated 'Bride' theme intoned by the ondes martenot as the first true electronic solo instrument ever used in serious film music. Universal Studios later worked the score to death, using snatches of it in all their Flash Gordon serials.

Perhaps Waxman's best remembered film music is his darkly glowing writing for Hitchcock's Rebecca (1940). An emphasis on heavily doubled strings in the lower register firmly backed by horns is typical of his classical style. So, too, is his use of motifs, drawn in this case from nature - water and fire. Waxman could also write lighter music for Hitchcock, as for the master's famous Rear Window (1954), though neither director nor composer were happy with the result.³ Another Hitchcock opus, The Paradine Case (1948), was better suited to the foreboding Waxman style, and its music is fondly remembered as helping to augment the tension in what was even then a rather time-worn story.⁴

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(Part 2 of this article will discuss the work of Dimitri Tiomkin, Alfred Newman, Miklos Rozsa and Bernard Herrmann.)

Notes

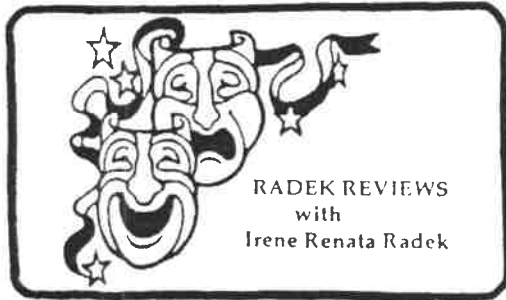
1. Fortunately the RCA vinyl record series of Korngold film score excerpts has now been completely transferred to CD. A full Varese-Saraband CD of the music for King's Row has been available for some time.

2. Liberal excerpts from all these scores are on RCA CDs.

3. Not that it mattered too much. The film's soundtrack, incorporating both music and non-music 'effects', is itself of near-symphonic richness. A suite of the better musical segments from Rear Window has just been issued with other Hitchcock music on CD (Pro Arte, CDS 524).

4. A CD devoted to Waxman's best music is available on RCA CD, and includes his sombre modern idiomatic American score for Sunset Boulevard (1950). Other compilations are around, but less well done.

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DEAD AGAIN (d. Kenneth Branagh). (Warning. The following is a film analysis as well as a review so, unless you want most of the movie's plot divulged to you, see the film first!)

Dead Again is to Hitchcock what instant pudding is to mousse. The film's ingredients are basically the same as in Hitchcock (murder mystery with dashes of the supernatural and film noir) but they're put together in such a careless way that little remains after ingestion except a vaguely unpleasant taste.

The story of composer Roman and pianist Margaret Strauss (Kenneth Branagh, Henry V and real-life wife Emma Thompson, ditto) is told during the film's opening sequence by the use of newspaper clippings written by '40s journalist Gray Baker (Andy Garcia, The Godfather, Part 3). Roman has been executed for murdering his wife though he proclaims his innocence to the very end.

With the aid of a dream sequence, we are transported into the present-day lives of American "finder of heirs" detective Mike Church (also Branagh) and Jane Doe amnesiac "Grace" (also Thompson). At the request of a friend - and because he's taken a fancy to her - Mike takes Grace into his care, placing an ad in the paper requesting information on his initially mute boarder. Grace has lost voice and memory due to some unknown trauma she has recently suffered.

Before you can say 'predictable', a hypnotist/antique dealer named Franklyn (Derek Jacobi, Henry V - virtually a cinematic stock company here ...) appears and offers to help Grace regain her voice and identity by delving into her past life - as Roman Strauss. Mike is also regressed after Grace determines that he was in her past, only to discover that he was the distaff Strauss. Since Franklyn encourages Grace to merely witness her past life during regression therapy rather than actively participate in it, the gender-bender twist is revealed late in the film.

So we have a full-colour present intercut with sepia-toned black and white flashbacks to 1948, mostly narrated by a hypnotised Grace. Two plot-propelling items (aka "MacGuffins"), an anklet and scissors ad nauseam, help link past to present along with the word-symbol (aka "Rosebud") "disher", which is later revealed to be "Die Scherer" ("the cutter") - German words engraved on the scissors used to kill Margaret.

Director/star Kenneth Branagh's German accent is reminiscent of campy Colonel Klink in TV's Hogan's Heroes but the Brit does deliver an amazingly accurate American way of speaking. However, Branagh's constant gesticulating together with his grimacing, eyeball-rolling and other exaggerated facial contortions are entirely too broad. His chronic overACTing and dialogue-PUSHing keep the audience emotionally distanced. Stage-vet Branagh seems to forget that for cinema he need not play to the back row.

As Grace/Margaret, Emma Thompson is also somewhat "stagey-big" but not quite as noticeably as her hammy hubby. Thompson shows fear well with her very expressive doe-eyes but, even so, her permanent deer-caught-in-the-headlights look loses its effect before long. In a nutshell, Mike and Grace come across as little more than the cinematic equivalent of that loathsome twosome from the Taster's Choice TV ads.

Conversely, Andy Garcia is casual, suave and sexy as bon vivant/yellow journalist Gray Baker. Though his character is a '40s film noir stereotype, Garcia's performance is ultimately more believable than either

Branagh's or Thompson's. Garcia, as he is wont to do, steals the show whenever he appears and, even as a scruffy, smirking drunk, is considerably more likable and attractive than the cold tight-assed Roman. Furthermore, Garcia deftly delivers a blow of very black humour as a crotchety old man with a repulsive need for cigarettes. And kudos to Dead Again's makeup person for the incredible age effects.

As Franklyn Madson, Derek Jacobi is appropriately comedic in his bumbling and greed, yet surprisingly sinister at the core. Both personalities coexist believably within Franklyn thanks to Jacobi's precise performance.

Various other actors of considerable stature appear in Dead Again. Of particular note is an unbilled Robin Williams (The Fisher King) as foulmouthed ex-psychiatrist, now grocery store owner, Cozy Carlisle. This seedy, bizarre shopkeeper contributes most of Dead Again's comic relief with his brash pronunciations on "the karmic credit plan".

Hannah Schygulla (The Marriage of Maria Braun) gives a quietly effective performance as Roman's lovestruck German housekeeper Inga. And Gregor Hesse as Frankie, Inga's stuttering son, evokes sympathy with his soft innocence and haunted, sad eyes which make his eventual behaviour all the more shocking - even a little hard to swallow.

More comedic realism is contributed by Wayne Knight as Mike's sidekick Pete who whistles while he talks. I'm not sure if this annoying whistle is intentional ... if it is, why? If not, it should've been erased. Also, Pete's tale of personal trauma is a pinprick against Dead Again's plot holes but bothersome nonetheless. Pete tells of a man he encountered who had gone on a bloody rampage with hedge clippers which only ended after he'd cut off both his own arms. Yes, both of them! Maybe he was a contortionist.

Other Dead Again cameos feature Christine Ebersole (Mac & Me) as Lydia Larson, a Hedda Hopper-like society columnist who consorts with Baker, and Campbell Scott (Dying Young) as Doug O'Malley, Grace's fake fiancé.

It's quite a coup for Branagh to have gathered so many renowned performers for his first Hollywood film. I imagine these actors particularly wanted to work with this classical British auteur, somehow believing the collaboration would add to their own credibility. And, conversely, for Branagh, the Hollywood group must have appealed because they'd help draw audiences to a film starring little known actors. Yet I can't help feeling that small parts like Scott's and Ebersole's could've been executed just as expertly by newcomers who could use the career break.

What stands out most about Dead Again is scissors, scissors, scissors!!! Scissors on the table and in paintings, scissors cutting hair and snipping bacon ... The camera repeatedly zooms in on scissors while ominous music builds in a melodramatic minor key. After a while Dead Again's ceaseless scissor symbolism brings to mind a Saturday Night Live parody skit and I just want to laugh. Not good. Even Grace's real name turns out to be "Amanda Sharp". Again, ha ha.

Dead Again also features murder mystery essentials like numerous thunderstorms (somewhat out of character for sunny Los Angeles), a creepy mansion and a soundtrack to wake the dead. This obtrusive music not only telegraphs but also destroys what little suspense exists. The more effective use of deliciously ominous silence is a rare commodity in this film.

However, the worst bit of telegraphing occurs visually in a potentially edge-of-the-seat scene when Frankie kills his mother. After he's put Inga to bed we can still see Frankie's shadow in motion so we know that, a) Frankie hasn't left, and b) since Inga is lying face up/eyes shut, Frankie's probably picking up a pillow with which to smother her. Which he does. Surprise, surprise.

And the ending is far too busy, ambitious and confusing, with too many, er, cutaways, too many characters and too much mind-blowing music for any of the action to be the least bit frightening - or even interesting.

Now a few questions for writer Scott Frank and director Branagh:

* Why is Mike totally oblivious to his past when HE (Margaret) was the one murdered - especially as he slips

into his past life as easily as Grace when under hypnosis? And why is Grace afraid of scissors and protective of her throat when Margaret (Mike) was the one stabbed? Shouldn't Grace be afraid of chairs instead since she (Roman) was zapped in an electric one?

* As for Franklyn, why does he try so hard to bring out Grace's past, thereby implicating himself? When Franklyn first got wind of Grace's existence, why didn't he just pack up and hightail it out of town? Surely no legal system would pursue Franklyn based on a few nonspecific flashbacks to an amnesiac's past life!

* Especially since he's a private detective, wouldn't Mike be a TEENSY bit suspicious when Franklyn just HAPPENS to have a magazine at hand that features an article from 40-plus years ago about the VERY cast of characters that Grace conjures up in her first regression session?

* And when the three of them are examining said magazine featuring photos of Roman and Margaret, DOES NO ONE NOTICE THAT MIKE IS THE SPITTING IMAGE OF ROMAN? Everyone remarks on Grace's resemblance to Margaret but only later does Cozy make a glancing reference to the Roman/Mike similitude. Dead Again would've been much more suspenseful and 'believable' if the two couples had been played by four different actors (as was originally intended). But, instead, Kenneth "I can do EVERYTHING!" Branagh bit off more than he or wife Thompson could chew and Dead Again suffers as a result.

* Why does no one notice that the old Strauss mansion/scene of the murder and the St Audrey's Catholic Home for Boys (where Mike grew up and to which Grace runs in her amnesiac hysteria) are one and the same? It's pointed out to the audience via a tell-tale close-up of a treble clef on the mansion's gate, but no-one in the film ever brings it up.

* If you could hypnotise someone by simply gazing into their eyes for a few seconds and stroking their hand, wouldn't you be out controlling the world? Or at least appearing on a few talk shows? Franklyn hypnotises Grace just a bit too easily/quickly for my liking - especially since she's just met him! A trusting gal, that Gracie!

* And, finally, why does Grace lock her door to keep Mike from entering only AFTER he arrives? If Grace were THAT scared, wouldn't she lock all her doors and draw all her blinds the minute she got home? Or, here's a wild thought - why not just spend the night in a hotel ...?

Dead Again is a harmless attempt at incorporating a 1940s Hitchcockian murder mystery into the present. Unfortunately, the plot is too full of holes and the performances too full of ham to be effective. Dead Again should be renamed "Try Again".

Copyright 24 October, 1991, by Irene Renata Radek

['Radek Reviews' welcomes correspondence. Write to either 'The MacGuffin' (address on back page) or direct to Irene Renata Radek, 3 Louisa Drive, Guelph, Ontario, Canada N1E 4T4.]

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

Real-life crimes and Hitchcock's films: The Wrong Man; Hollywood composers, part II; book reviews (e.g. 'The World Viewed', 'Cary Grant: The Lonely Heart'); the production process illuminated; alternative cinema. Plus 'News', 'Radek Reviews', etc. Additional items always wanted.

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BOOK REVIEW

Wood, Robin: 'Hitchcock's Films Revisited' (Columbia University Press, 1989; hardback)

~~Terminology~~ oxymoron: this is a new-old book. Most obviously, while one half of it consists of a reprint of Wood's seminal 'Hitchcock's Films' (1966) plus material added for the 1969 and 1977 editions, its other half comprises a new 50-page Introduction and several new chapters such as one called "The Murderous Gays: Hitchcock's Homophobia". I hasten to add that Wood's general tone remains one of unbending seriousness: his ~~repetition of the~~ title of rival author William Rothman's 'Hitchcock - The Murderous Gaze' is positively the nearest thing to a joke you'll find in this book.

It's new-old in other ways as well. Wood acknowledges that despite his "radical change in ideological position" (a reference to his latter-day Marxism and sexual politics, and now religion), this "has had little effect on which films I value", just "a fairly drastic effect on why I value them". Clearly, what this amounts to is a case of plus ça change ... , though it's not necessarily one whose implications Wood has fully thought out.

He denies that his new-found ideology has constricted his performance as a critic:

I believe that I now see far more in films than I used to, because I have allowed myself to become aware of depths, tensions, conflicts that lie beneath the [film's] "auteurist" surface, that enter the film through the author from the culture of which both he and his work are products (though never mere products).

You certainly hope that Wood sees "far more in films than [he] used to"; after all, he has been teaching and writing about them professionally for a quarter of a century. And during that time, film academics generally, not just Wood, have been busily learning to de-construct texts, i.e. films, in ways that indeed surpass any simple "auteurist" approach. (Wood's contribution to this "common pursuit" has been substantial but, I'd argue, increasingly subordinate to initiatives from others.) The specific question he should have asked is whether his own active espousal of causes like feminism and gay liberation has benefited his analyses of films.

On the evidence of this book, I doubt that it has. There's one particularly staggering moment (pp. 342-3) when Wood suggests that the reason Hitchcock in the 1920s (a) suddenly began putting on weight and (b) decided to get married was that he wanted to protect himself against feeling attracted to gay actor Ivor Novello (whom Hitchcock directed in just two pictures, during 1925-27). Though I'd have thought that it would be sufficient to account for (a) to say that Hitchcock was now beginning to feel a measure of happiness and security in his life, and for (b) to say that he and Alma Hitchcock (née Reville) loved each other, still, with hindsight, Wood's further point that Hitchcock may have had "a hysterical resistance to being physically attractive to anyone" does seem plausible. Yet the speculative element is typical of the book's tendency: the films risk being smothered in surmise.

In a chapter on Blackmail (1929), which is rather less revelatory than Wood may have intended, he breaks off at one point to tell us about his parents (both were antique dealers) and how with his "typical British middle-class upbringing" he "never heard the word 'sex' spoken within my family, either by my parents or by any of my four older brothers and sisters". Soon he breaks off again, i.e. to give an aside to an aside, this time about the state of education, both pre-World War II and today ("though the taboos now are more likely to be political than sexual"). None of what he says is altogether irrelevant or wrong, but nor is it especially illuminating of the films; and far more perspective on sexual matters can be had by turning to, say, the first chapter of Steven Marcus's 'The Other Victorians' (bearing as it does on the start of this century, when Hitchcock was growing up).

However, Wood's new analysis of Rope (1948) is excellent as far as it goes, focussing on the 'gay' elements:

Brandon and Philip may or may not be "lovers" in the technical sense. What the film conveys so impressively, and so accurately, is the intensity with which they hate each other.

Wood argues convincingly that the murder of David Kentley - the apparently 'meaningless' crime at the core of the film - reflects upon the society that forbids and punishes homosexual love. But once again the impeccably formulated observation isn't as original as Wood probably thought. In an unpublished monograph on Rope sent to me a few years ago by its author, Mensan Victor Graf, the latter argues just such a case as Wood's. That monograph became a collaborative effort by Victor and myself, and I hope to publish some of it in a future 'MacGuffin'. For now, let it suffice to say that our analysis is born out by Wood's, and at several points goes further. For instance, while Wood notes the unwitting complicity of Brandon's former teacher Rupert Cadell (James Stewart) in instigating the murder - Rupert is one of Hitchcock's deeply flawed lead-characters of the Hollywood period, beginning with Maxim de Winter in Rebecca (1940) - he doesn't pursue the matter. Claiming "the film is notably reticent on the subject of Rupert's own sexuality (he is a bachelor)", Wood ends his analysis there. Thus he neglects to recall Rupert's war-wound mentioned by the housekeeper Mrs Wilson (a wound whose significance even Woody Allen, in another context, understands) as he also neglects to recall Rupert's specific jobs: housemaster in a boys' prep school, minor publisher of other people's writings. It's clear, I think, that the film makes Rupert's impotence a symbol of his victimisation by - and a certain divisiveness in - society; there are matched signs of impotence in Brandon and Philip themselves (consider Brandon's struggle to open a champagne bottle, which Wood notes, and Philip's trauma concerning chickens).

My point is that Wood's rather curtailed analyses of Blackmail (imitation Raymond Bellour much of the time) and Rope (where pretty nearly only the film's 'gayness' is remarked) typify the new sections of his book: they're often predictable and they leave you up in the air. Another instance is provided by Wood's passing comments on that very rich film, Rebecca. He starts by noting how

it is Hitchcock's first Hollywood film that establishes definitively two of the major bases of his later work: the identification with the woman's position, and the preoccupation with male sexual anxiety in the face of an actual or potential autonomous female sexuality: the central structuring tension of many of his greatest films.

Fair enough - but misleading. Maxim's position is not exactly overlooked by the film (though you'd hardly know that, to judge from recent feminist criticism, including Wood's). Like the Hon. Michael Fitzhubert in the Australian film, Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975), aristocratic Maxim is an idealist: he'll be half in love with his first vision of Rebecca, whom the novel describes as being like a boy in a sailing suit and having a face "like a Botticelli angel", for the rest of his life. (Consider his response in the film when Joan Fontaine refers to her late father's painting the same tree over and over again: "I'm a firm believer in that myself".) Also, to quibble, I'm not certain how a film may identify "with the woman's position" yet simultaneously be preoccupied "with male sexual anxiety".

Here, too, Wood should have analysed further. After Maxim loses Rebecca, in what is tantamount to murder, a pall descends on the film: once or twice it's almost visible. A general sterility prevails, represented by such figures as the seemingly lesbian housekeeper Mrs Danvers and the "harmless" old seaman known as 'Barmy' Ben. In all of this there are parallels with Rope, Vertigo (1958) and, again, Picnic at Hanging Rock. Now, Wood does indeed notice that the film fails to attain an unambiguous 'happy ending':

The heroine's opening and closing voice-over narrative nowhere suggests present happiness (though Manderley is burned, Mrs Danvers dead, and Rebecca's ghost officially laid to rest): indeed, it fails even to establish that the couple are still together.

Actually, a glance at the novel (which producer David Selznick insisted be followed to the letter) shows that the couple do stay together. But they remain childless and, as the film's narration does tell us, they "can never go back to Manderley". Instead, they spend their days trailing from one obscure Mediterranean hotel to another: a far cry from Maxim's boyhood on his beloved Cornish coast, now forever associated in his mind (and ours) with the pernicious Rebecca. Appropriately, Daphne du Maurier's desolate prose in these passages approaches that of the great pessimistic philosopher Schopenhauer.

If only Wood had been able to sublimate his 'political purpose' when writing the new sections of his book, they would surely have cohered more. He would also have grappled more directly, as his mentor, the literary critic F.R. Leavis, was able to do, with what Wood himself calls "human nature". That, after all, is the

real Schopenhauerian bedrock of Hitchcock's films. (And, I dare say, it provides the explanation of Wood's own unchanging regard for certain films over others.) Ironically, he insists on the concept:

We must repudiate above all the notion that "human nature" is a construction of bourgeois ideology. Certainly, bourgeois ideology has attempted to impose its view of human nature as the only one, naturalizing itself and its institutions, passing them off as "real," hence unchangeable: this is one of Marxism's great, radical, seminal perceptions. But to leap from this to a belief that "therefore" there is no such thing as human nature is a most extraordinary and dangerous non sequitur.

Quite so. Because Wood takes his stand on this, because he continues to often perceive trenchantly both films and life, and because he strongly criticises the shortcomings of other critical positions (though not always unambiguously: e.g. re Bellour), he remains a force to reckon with. Many of us can tolerate his evident narcissism and his solecisms, for we see both what he is up against and (vide his endorsing in this book of Janaček's "religious" music) his possible future individuation at a still higher level.

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Contributors to this issue

Adrian Martin is a Melbourne critic and broadcaster whose work is highly regarded in several fields, but notably film. His projected book on 'teen movies' has yet to find a publisher, which is a pity. Adrian has promised to contribute further articles to 'The MacGuffin' when he can.

Ronald Conway is a clinical psychologist and the author of several books about Australian society. Always a music and film buff, he owns an extensive collection of records, CDs and soundtrack albums.

Ken Mogg was already a Hitchcock enthusiast and film teacher when he joined Australian Mensa in the 1970s. These days he edits 'The MacGuffin'.

Irene Renata Radek is a Canadian actress and entertainment journalist. A graduate of The American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles, she has appeared on stage, film, television and radio - and has even been a stand-up comedienne! One of Irene's remaining ambitions is to appear in films overseas.

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Review: 'He Said, She Said'

(Modelled after the Tracy-Hepburn comedy romances of the '40s and '50s, this intriguing new film was released in Australia straight to video. Adrian Martin hurried to watch it.)

I was eagerly looking forward to the release of this film in Australia after seeing the advance promos for it from America. It has an interesting conceptual premise: the story of a modern relationship told first from the man's (Kevin Bacon's), then the woman's (Elizabeth Perkins') point of view - with the two parts directed by a real-life directing couple, Ken Kwapis and Marisa Silver. The really interesting filmmaker of that pair is Silver; I have particularly admired her teen movies Old Enough and Permanent Record. Her most recent film before this was Vital Signs, a rather formulaic entry in the 'young medical student' cycle that also includes the flamboyant Flatliners and the interesting A Cut Above.

Like Vital Signs, He Said, She Said eventually surfaced here on video; and also like Vital Signs, it has a strangely alienated sheen about it. The principal 'intertext' of the film is the array of popular lifestyle magazines (like 'Cleo') that, at present, talk out endlessly the differences between male and female psychology - not in order to change men and women or even necessarily bring them to a mutual understanding of their differences, but in a sense, to generate some compensatory frisson out of the total abyss between the sexes, the complete cultural 'alienness' of each sex faced with its opposite number.

In contemporary mainstream cinema terms, this puts He Said, She Said clearly in the train of When Harry Met Sally - a hugely successful film taking off from the old-but-newly-fashionable assumption that, in relationships, men want casual sex whilst women want romantic commitment. When Harry Met Sally is a 'neo romantic comedy' (like Green Card), but one needs to see clearly the difference between these new romances and a film like Adam's Rib. Cukor's film, too, was a celebration of the differences between men and women; but in the 'classic' romantic comedies there was always the possibility of a dynamic interchange of traits designated 'male' and 'female', a generative reciprocity between men and women. He Said, She Said is simply content to play out the amusing 'stand off' of the sexes. Indeed, even its genuinely poignant moments - the way the lovers separately agree, unbeknownst to each other, to drop their own beliefs and accept those of their partner, and the scene of Bacon confessing his true feelings of love to Perkins while she is asleep, with the later revelation that she was indeed awake but didn't let on - hold to this contemporary 'wisdom'.

The film's structure - 45 minutes of his version, then 45 minutes of hers, with a framing device that rather mechanically brings the couple together at the end - doesn't really take advantage of the possibilities of the contradictory points-of-view concept. It's very unlike the scene, say, in Annie Hall, where Allen uses a jazzy split-screen to immediately compare-and-contrast a man and a woman's attitude to the relationship they share; here, you have to wait an hour for some of the best 'pay-offs' and reversals. And a serious thematic problem of the structure is that getting so much 'he said' at the start tends to make us accept his version as some kind of baseline reality or truth, against which her version can be checked for its exaggerations, lies and distortions - although this is not strictly what the film says, or means to say.

There are a number of interesting elements in the film, considering it further in terms of its contemporary genre, or intertext. On one level, the film is part of a largely unheralded post-thirtysomething movement in contemporary cinema: relationship-centred films (including the remarkable and grossly underrated Immediate Family) that focus on the everyday lives and loves of ordinary yuppies. This is a genre that, like any other, deserves careful attention rather than kneejerk derision, since it is where a certain very honourable tradition of 'quiet', sometimes subtly disturbing drama has reappeared today - with the same attention a dramatist like Chayevsky once paid to the minutiae of mortgage payments or suburban apartment block living now trained on the consumer paraphernalia, cultural tastes and 'personal spaces' of the professional middle-class.

Since He Said, She Said is also a film about a couple who play out their relationship in the eye of the media - first in print, then on TV - it also picks up on other neo-romantic comedies like, especially, the fascinating Broadcast News, and the last Front Page remake, Switching Channels. What we are seeing in this cycle is an intense contemporary take on the His Girl Friday idea of romantic fun - living and loving and working together, breaking the big story whilst on honeymoon. Yet in He Said, She Said, another reduction of the 'classic' romantic comedy equation takes place: rather disconcertingly, the film cheerily upholds the nec-entertainment idea that, on TV, all that matters is the charming and dynamic interplay of personalities, not issues, ideas or opinions. The TV series Murphy Brown leaves itself at least a little room to be cynical about such a state of affairs, as Broadcast News is both cynical and saddened - while neither have anything to propose in its place; He Said, She Said simply smiles and acquiesces - that's the way it is, let's enjoy it. This is of course what clinches the film as a 'light comedy' - or, more exactly, taking Raymond Durnat's suggestion, a 'comedy of manners', a genre almost always committed to 'the way things are'.

Kevin Bacon's character is the most interesting of the two (something that further unbalances the film in his favour). He has a 'complex' that I haven't seen before in a light comedy: basically, a death-wish, expressed in a worship of icons like the Wolf Man and Dracula, and in his recurring early morning terror-fits. As in recent John Hughes productions like Only the Lonely, the distant neighbour 'heavy' genre of horror is fleetingly evoked (windows slamming shut on the 'entrapped' Bacon) to embody the fierce double-bind of the character's deep longing for, yet defensive reaction to, commitment.

The film gives short shrift to at least two things (strategies of evasion and sleight-of-hand in recent films like this and Once Around deserve extended consideration). First, Perkins' intellectualism - which is never granted the status of a complex or fascinating trait, like Bacon's death-wish. She's dismissively tagged by the film as a 'liberal' - which means that she reads, has leftistish political opinions and befriends artists. Only in the wonderful (and too-brief) scene of her family at dinner - a spirited, opinionated

bunch of liberal thinkers - does the film even attempt to give the character her rightful aura of specific social 'difference'.

The other thing elided in the course of the film is sex - specifically, the 'great sex' that 'Cleo'-style magazines used to promise came with great romance plus a great career. The only great sex mentioned in the film is the sex Bacon used to have with his casual girlfriends (whereas it is implied that Perkins and her artist-politico ex had lousy sex). When they get together you wait for the warm, celebratory gags about the wonderful time they're having in bed - like the way Shirley Maclaine eulogises her relation with Jack Nicholson in *Terms of Endearment*. But they never come. For these yuppies at least, romantic fulfilment seems to include all the joy-and-pain of getting together, breaking up, and working out a detente, but no sex. This seems like a strange alienation indeed.

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Hitchcock the Cockney: 'No. 17' (1932)

"'Ere - 'arf a mo'!" exclaimed Ben, catching hold of Fordyce's arm. "Why not 'op it, guv'nor - why not? ... "

"Well, I'll tell you why not, Ben," responded Fordyce gravely. "Hopping isn't much in my line. We've put one girl into safety, and I won't feel that we've quite finished our job until we've done the same for the other. There - now you've got it."

"Ah, but the hother's a wrong 'un," urged Ben.

"Sometimes," said Fordyce, "it's just the wrong 'uns who need the greatest help."

- J. Jefferson Farjeon, 'No. 17: A Novel, based upon the Play' (1926), pp. 259-60.

William Rothman notes what he calls a "chilling" use of the term "wrong 'un" in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).¹ In doing so, he bends the term's customary meaning ("a dishonest character, a rogue" - 'Chambers 20th Century Dictionary) to his own purpose. For him, the term means someone "condemned from childhood to a life of isolation". In the present article, it will be convenient to accept both meanings, and to recall that Hitchcock grew up in East London, the son of a Cockney greengrocer.

The tramp, Ben, who with unconscious irony - in the novel of *No. 17* - scorns "wrong 'uns", is one of the few Cockneys to figure prominently in Hitchcock's more than fifty films. Not only that, but the Cockneys who do thus figure are often crooks or murderers: think of the various criminals in *Blackmail* (1929), the manservant Rowley in *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), the greengrocer Bob Rusk in *Frenzy* (1972). Altogether, Ben appears to be an exception to the rule - he's a genuinely amiable, if faint-hearted, merchant sailor who has lately "lost" his ship. Moreover, the film's Ben (Leon M. Lion), like his counterpart in the novel, finds himself in a situation where he must repeatedly assert that he's not dishonest, thus defying a popular notion about Cockneys. (Even today, some etymologists link the word cockney to the French coquin, meaning precisely a rogue or "wrong 'un".) No doubt that's one reason why 'Fordyce' (John Stuart), who proves to be a famous detective on the trail of diamond thieves, at first is suspicious of him when the two encounter each other in an old house (the number 17 of the title).

~~In sum, one of the points of structure in both novel and film is the resurrection of Ben's self-respect. He spends half his time trying to escape (at one point, literally crawl) from the old house with its unnerving goings-on, but eventually he ends up a hero - the saviour of the famous Suffolk diamonds. True, along the way he must use some Cockney 'skills', such as pickpocketing and getting blindly drunk, yet finally he's in little danger of being called a wrong 'un. He's proved his mettle.~~

Now, if that's true of Ben, it's just as true of the lady-like Nora (Anne Grey). The book 'Elstree: The British Hollywood' offers this synopsis of the film: "the story of the reformation of a lady jewel thief who assists a detective to foil a gang's getaway". Is it coincidental that the lady's salvation parallels the

salvation of the jewels? Hitchcock would play with that idea again. Also, if the notion of the reformation of a lady criminal anticipates Under Capricorn (1949) and Marnie (1964), various ingredients in the 1932 film confirm the link. There's even a moment when Nora leaves her purse with Fordyce as an earnest of her loyalty - probably the first occurrence of this arresting sexual symbol in Hitchcock's films (compare Suspicion, Rear Window and Marnie).

Nora enters the story as the niece of a man (Barry Jones) who poses as a potential buyer of the old house. The fact that this pair arrive at the front door after midnight, and are immediately followed inside the house by another man, Henry (Donald Calhoun), who falsely claims he's a nephew of the first, is in keeping with the burlesque nature of the film. (In fact, all three persons are crooks using the house as an escape point for smuggling themselves and stolen booty to the Continent: a train connecting with a cross-Channel ferry runs directly under the house.) In the same vein, Nora's 'uncle' passes her off to Fordyce as being deaf and dumb when she's anything but that. Perhaps he already senses that she (his mistress?) may betray him - though Hitchcock apparently first conceived the idea as a way of sending up the invariably 'dumb' heroines of film thrillers of the time.

And again, as someone who is basically a victim of others' malfeasance, Nora anticipates Mrs Drayton of The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956). Mrs Drayton first sides with her husband when, for political reasons, he kidnaps a small American boy in Morocco, but she later becomes revulsed by the prospect that the boy may have to be killed, and frees him. Likewise, though Nora at first only hints to the other crooks about her mounting doubts, when she sees Fordyce and the innocent young girl, Miss Ackroyd (Ann Casson), shackled and left to face mortal danger from a collapsing banister rail, she alters tack; releasing both prisoners, she returns to the crooks and announces her intention of quitting. (In the meantime, Miss Ackroyd has been given back to her father's custody - hence Fordyce's comment to Ben about putting "one girl into safety" - which in turn frees the detective and Ben to go and rescue Nora in the film's exciting chase climax between a train and a bus.)

Even Fordyce's remark that "Sometimes it's just the wrong 'uns who need the greatest help" anticipates a line from The Man Who Knew Too Much (again the 1956 version). In that film, it's the ill-starred Frenchman, Louis Bernard, an undercover agent, who in the opening scene on a bus observes how "there are moments in life when we all need a little help". It does him no good - he is killed by Drayton's assassins soon afterwards - but as in the novel of No. 17 the line itself alerts the audience to the larger issues raised by the story.

* * *

I've contrived above to give an outline of No. 17 that makes of it less than a jumble. Certainly the plot of the film is hard to follow, for Hitchcock was obviously most concerned with keeping things moving. (But contra Howard Hawks's The Big Sleep, to name another film where speed and surprise are paramount, everything crucial can be worked out in hindsight.) Matters aren't helped by some low-quality sound recording and by Ben's Cockney idioms (e.g. his use of rhyming slang such as "apples and pears" for "stairs"), nor by the fact that modern prints appear to run five minutes shorter than the original (compare Jonathan Rosenbaum's review of No. 17 in the 'Retrospective' section of 'Monthly Film Bulletin', August 1975). Against all of this, one makes allowance for how Hitchcock was having himself some fun with a project imposed on him by his producers at Elstree, British International Pictures, and how the film represents his first experiments with the comedy-thriller.

A word about J. Jefferson Farjeon (aka Anthony Swift), author of the play and the novel. Rohmer and Chabrol's Hitchcock book describes Farjeon as "a prolix and popular writer who was halfway between the best and the worst, between John Buchan and Fergus Hume, between the good Edgar Wallace and the bad Edgar Wallace". That sounds about right. I've read two of Farjeon's novels and found both of them, well, readable - in a suburban lending library sort of way. Both of them ('No. 17', 'The Windmill Mystery') exploit the potential for comedy and suspense of an 'old dark house' situation. But quite soon the general effect comes to seem contrived - for instance, Farjeon may spend several pages getting two people up a single flight of stairs. Hitchcock's film keeps the best of the general zaniness but improves on it structurally, not least by adding the action finale.

The film obtained the actor who plays Ben, Leon M. Lion, from the original stage play, 'Joyous Melodrama', which was first produced in London by Lion himself (on July 6th, 1925). In his appearance (sailor's cap, scarf, cropped hair), Ben is a character in the 'lovable larrikin' mould, perhaps inspired by the Cockney son in the famous British film My Old Dutch (1915, re-made in 1934). Australian film-lovers may equally be reminded of the larrikin hero of The Sentimental Bloke (1919, re-made in 1932), though undoubtedly that is more of a classic than the other works I've just named. In any event, Lion was such a success in the part of Ben that the play ran for lengthy seasons in two theatres and promised to become "a hardy annual"; a naturally delighted J. Jefferson Farjeon wrote at least seven other works featuring his Cockney sailor (e.g. the novel 'Ben Sees It Through').

So much for background - let's now look at Hitchcock's film in detail.

* * *

Like The Trouble With Harry (1956), much of No. 17 is a film about a body. One windy night, Fordyce enters the deserted house in Amhurst Park, London, where he immediately encounters Ben who's sheltering there after seeing a 'To Let' sign outside; near the head of the first flight of stairs lies a man, apparently dead. Ben's concern to remove himself from suspicion of murder marks him as the predecessor of that other Hitchcockian 'sailor', Captain Wiles (played by Cockney actor Edmund Gwenn) in Harry. More exactly, Captain Wiles, retired, had once served on a tug-boat but had never been "more than a mile off shore". (So is Ben, too, an impostor?) Moreover, in the same way that the young artist called Sam Marlowe in Harry plays the straight-man (in every sense) to Wiles, so Fordyce has a similar role regarding Ben. As we've seen, Ben's redemption back into society - his 'straightening' - is close to being the heart of the film.

But about the body. Like Harry's, it comes and it goes. The explanation in this case is that it belongs to Mr Ackroyd from the house next door (number 15) and that Mr Ackroyd isn't really dead - only knocked out and left for dead by yet another crook lurking in the old house, number 17's burly owner called Shelldrake (Garry Marsh). Ackroyd had been spying on his neighbour for the police, but had been rumbled. Ben and Fordyce come upon the body together and, in one of Hitchcock's early uses of 'subjective effect', their startled faces are seen in the light thrown from a train that suddenly clatters by. Simultaneously, Hitchcock anamorphoses the image by filming it in a distorting mirror: one recalls a similar use of visual distortion in such German pictures as The Last Laugh (1924) and Überfall (1928). What makes Hitchcock's application of the effect particularly sophisticated is the way the characters' shock is matched to that of the film audience. You can see the same process working in Vertigo (1958) and North by Northwest (1959) where the director 'blanches' the image when a character feels faint or aghast - and in Psycho when as a distressed Norman Bates comes running towards the scene of Marion's murder the shot starts a few frames 'late', causing a jarring effect, visually and aurally.

Without letting on that he's a detective, Fordyce asks Ben to turn out his pockets. Amongst other items, we see a photo of Ben's young daughter (whom he identifies proudly, though with an ambiguous use of the past tense). Curiously, the chubby little girl in the photo looks rather like Hitchcock's daughter, Patricia, who was then about the same age. Perhaps it is her. There exists a contemporary studio still of Patricia visiting her father on the No. 17 set (reproduced in George Perry's 'Hitchcock', p. 27). Anyway, a note of pathos is struck, and affects Fordyce's (and our) attitude to the out-of-work Ben thereafter.

Typically Hitchcockian, though, is how the mood is quickly deflated by comedy and 'business'. (Freud, amongst others, has shown how to profess "I was only joking" is often the surest way of making one's point!) Grateful to Fordyce for (a nip of brandy) from a flask, Ben thinks he hears himself being offered another. In fact, the detective is ~~continuing his~~ interrogation and, dissatisfied with one of Ben's answers, asks him to "have another think". Replies Ben: "Don't mind if I do." This neatly establishes the character's propensity for alcohol, basis of an extended gag later. Meanwhile, when Fordyce's hand goes to his pocket, and Ben's eyes greedily follow it, it comes out not with the expected brandy flask but with just ... a handkerchief.

Hitchcock's ability, indeed his delight, in compounding his effects like this distinctly resembles that of another Cockney, the novelist Dickens. George Orwell has remarked that the "outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens's writing is the unnecessary detail" - as when, on a memorable occasion in 'Great Expectations',

corn and seed merchant Pumblechook is not just bound and gagged but tied to a bedpost and his mouth stuffed by his assailants "full of flowering annuals". Orwell hastens to qualify his use of the epithet "unnecessary", explaining that it is by means of just such details "that the special Dickens atmosphere is created". (You wonder what those people who object to the "sadistic" touches in Hitchcock's films would make of the above Dickens scene.) Allowing for the different constraints imposed by their respective media, it's possible that Hitchcock was knowingly imitating Dickens in this matter. He'd studied several of the author's novels at school.

Other possible parallels between Dickens and Hitchcock are something I'll come back to. For the moment, let's look further at Hitchcock's compounding of effects. A striking variant of the business with the handkerchief is played out when the 'uncle' makes a threatening gesture with a gun, then gratuitously sneezes, i.e. we expect one outcome but are presented with another (and an absurdly brandished handkerchief is again the pay-off: compare, in a more dramatic vein, the death of the dapper Cecil Parker character in The Lady Vanishes). Similarly, having established Fordyce's possession of a brandy flask, the film re-introduces it when Miss Ackroyd enters the film by falling through a skylight and Ben, mistaking her for a felon,² knocks her cold; fortunately, the brandy soon revives her. In turn, Ben is soon constantly clobbering the wrong person. This wild continuity of effect is like a game of tag, integral to the Hitchcock atmosphere and whirling the film towards its contrasting straight-down-the-line climax.

Strangely, Hitchcock did later say that No. 17 showed a "careless" approach to his work. Perhaps he meant that some of the film's abundant ideas could have done with more elaboration and, at the same time, more emphasis. Take what I'll call the 'wrist' motif. Left to mind the body, Ben finds on it a pistol and a pair of handcuffs. Both the latter items have roles to play. When Fordyce returns soon afterwards with the newly-arrived 'house-hunters' (we note that already the body has vanished!), Ben's truculent manner causes offence, and a scuffle ensues. Ben accidentally fires the pistol. A bullet, which would otherwise have hit Nora, is stopped by Fordyce's wrist. Not only is this unconvincing in itself (the fleshy part of a wrist able to halt a bullet?), but Hitchcock uses the incident as almost the only substantial basis for the relationship that later grows between the detective and the lady. It's the latter who saves Fordyce and Miss Ackroyd when they are strung up by the wrists and tied to a banister which collapses, suspending them in space. In turn, it's the detective who again saves Nora at the film's climax; this time, her wrists manacled by the crooks with Ben's handcuffs, she's in danger of drowning after the runaway train crashes onto the ferry at Dover. When they're both safely back on land, Fordyce/Detective Barton hints at the possibility that they might marry.

All this is like a rough sketch for the Hannay-Pamela relationship in The 39 Steps (1935). But there the couple go through successive trials together, constantly handcuffed to each other and sharing the enforced dangers and intimacies. Not only aren't there equivalent frissons in No. 17, but the latter film misleads its audience and ends up broken-backed. For a time, it looks like the film's love interest will develop between Fordyce and Miss Ackroyd, not Nora. Admittedly, the detective would have to be almost a cradle-snatcher, but it's really only in Miss Ackroyd's voice that her youth is stressed. (At one point, fearing that her father is dead, she cries out "Dad, Dad" in piteous, high-pitched tones.)³ The at best cerebral 'wrist' motif, and the business of the purse, hardly prepare us for Fordyce's eventual choice of partner, especially as it's Miss Ackroyd - not Nora - who figures as co-victim with him in the crucial scene of the collapsing banister. (Never one to make the same mistake twice, Hitchcock got it right five years later with the scene of the collapsing mine-shaft in Young and Innocent ...)

Hitchcock buffs will have spotted yet another foreshadowing. One thinks of Rebecca (1940) and the need for Maxim to accept his new wife as something more than a girl. But whereas in that film the theme of 'growing up' is embedded in a complex psychology (both male and female, though the former has been neglected by Rebecca's recent feminist commentators), in No. 17 the theme is embryonic. More interesting is how Hitchcock, having generated certain basic situations, would so soon re-deploy them in meaningful ways in the later films.

Again, Hitchcock may have been "careless" thematically, and in matters of emphasis, in No. 17, but he was already showing-off his talent for building cinematic rhythms and piling on the action, i.e. two more forms of compounding. Just before the crooks bolt for the underground railway, an extended fist-fight breaks out between Sheldrake and Ackroyd. (No doubt Hitchcock relished such 'neighbourliness'.) In its way, the scene

is as elaborately staged and edited as the shower scene from Psycho. And like most Hitchcock set-pieces designed for maximum effect, it's shot mainly in close-ups. At first everything proceeds at normal speed: biffs and shoves are exchanged and Hitchcock allows his quick cutting and the inherent drama to carry our interest along. Then things become wilder, the pace speeds up (including that of the film image itself), and the characters fling each other about. At this point Ben is awoken from his 'slumbers' in the bathtub - where he'd earlier been dumped by Sheldrake - and enters the fray. Unfortunately, he misjudges his aim and knocks out the wrong man, Ackroyd ... Now, the scene having been milked for its full worth, the way is opened for the crooks to make their planned escape.

* * *

Taking the resisting Nora with them, the crooks leap aboard a goods train headed for Germany via the cross-Channel ferry. (Maurice Yacowar is wrong to say that it's "ludicrous" to think of a train running beneath a suburban house. Such a house exists just up the road from where I'm writing this! More to the film's point, the railway-under-a-house idea is intriguing anyway, worthy of several surrealist painters of the time like René Magritte and Paul Delvaux.) Although Fordyce and Ben soon give chase, only Ben manages to scramble aboard the crooks' train.

For the remainder of the film Fordyce goes hatless (shades of the "well-tailored" Thornhill in North by Northwest who finally doffs his jacket as the cliff-hanger climax begins). He'd stolidly worn the hat indoors since chasing and catching it when it blew away at the start of the film (compare also Foreign Correspondent), only to lose it again when the banister collapsed. Now he stands in the street, a forlorn figure, until an all-night bus conveniently comes by for him to commandeer.

Jack Cox's night cinematography never falters. If the earlier scenes are full of splendid effects (e.g. faces illuminated by candlelight), the scenes aboard the train and the pursuing bus are vivid, without murk and always well-matched to the model-shots that establish the surroundings. In turn, these model-shots invariably have verve and point, and they actually heighten the comedy-thriller element. As Yacowar adroitly says, the bus and train twice "seem to be converging until a sudden bridge slips the bus under the speeding train".

Even in the cutting and related matters, Hitchcock plays his jokes. When Ben scrambles aboard the train, he finds himself in an open van filled with cases of Emu Tonic Wine. After fortifying himself with a courage he's conspicuously lacked till now, he proceeds to edge along the lurching train to where he'd seen Nora and the crooks jump aboard. Somehow the train's movement doesn't affect him - a variant, this, on a joke involving a shipboard drunk in Rich and Strange (also 1932). Still, we follow his progress with concern until he reaches Nora's carriage where she's alone, the crooks having gone to confront the guard. Preparing to pull Ben inside, Nora exclaims, "You might have been killed" - whereupon a wipe-cut gives the impression of a passing train running him down! (That cut proves to be proleptic: at the film's climax a worker at the ferry dock is run down. Such preparing of the audience for a specific effect, again in line with Freud's theory of jokes, would become an integral part of Hitchcock's suspense technique: there's a classic instance in the river-caves scene of Strangers on a Train.)

The soundtrack, too, contributes to the excitement of the train scenes. The highly realistic clanking of the carriages provides an almost musical ground from which the film rhythmically cuts away and returns. Likewise the whine of the bus's motor contributes its note of urgency, allowing subtle effects like a cut to a hanging sign outside a tea-house when the bus speeds by. "Stop here for dainty teas" invites the sign, and the faintest of breezes sways the board as silence begins to settle again on the countryside.

Late in the piece, reminding us of how the chase has continued through the night, there's a shot of a sleeping village complete with 'dreaming spire'; in the sky, the first trace of dawn reveals some fluffy small clouds and the promise of a fine day ahead ...

But by now the crooks have shot the train's driver, and the train itself is out of control. Magisterially, Hitchcock cuts ahead to the dock where a ferry moves slowly to its berth. Then back to the speeding train. The inevitable crash is superbly filmed. Though all done with models, it's just as effective as the climax of Arthur Hiller's comedy-thriller Silver Streak (1976), in which a real (passenger-) train crashes at speed into its Chicago terminal.

* * *

The film's final image is of Ben. It's he who, like the jester at the end of Blackmail, literally has the last laugh. Safe after his ducking in the sea at Dover, and wrapped in a blanket (foreshadowing in this respect the cautionary endings of Psycho and Torn Curtain), he shows he's still the incorrigible rogue. Around his neck for safe-keeping, as he reveals with an obliging grin, is the missing Suffolk necklace. He'd pickpocketed it from Sheldrake back at the house.

So this dispossessed Cockney father helps save the day. There was never much risk of Hitchcock's audience being offended by the idea: a beloved Dickens character named Sam Weller, a Cockney valet, had long been, in Chesterton's phrase, "the great symbol of the populace peculiar to England". And weren't the crooks in No. 17 attempting to flee to Germany with a significantly-named piece of English jewellery? CF SF

Still, speaking of dispossessed characters, it was precisely the notion that Dickens spoke for the real downtrodden poor that Orwell strenuously objected to; and we should heed his point - for it presumably applies to Hitchcock, too - that Dickens "is a south-of-England man, and a Cockney at that, and therefore out of touch with the bulk of the real oppressed masses, the industrial and agricultural labourers". What Dickens "does not noticeably write about", adds Orwell, "is work". The charge is doubtless true, though scarcely unanswerable. For a start, there's more than one way, as Ben's case shows, of being downtrodden. A lack of work, for instance, has a universal significance. And again, just as Orwell, admirable novelist though he was, never wrote as good a book as Dickens's 'Great Expectations' or 'Bleak House', so Hitchcock's principal detractor on the grounds of his films' lack of serious social content, John Grierson, himself never went beyond making a few well-intentioned, but faintly absurd, documentaries about North Sea herring fishermen and railway workers on the mail train from London to Glasgow. Perhaps film critic Andrew Sarris put the matter least prejudicially, in his book on film and politics, when he commented that James Joyce isn't Vladimir Lenin - and vice versa.

In fact, of course, No. 17 prepared the way for that spirited series of '30s comedy-thrillers like The Man Who Knew Too Much (1934), The 39 Steps, Young and Innocent and The Lady Vanishes which, seen today, must surely confound Hitchcock's critics. Not the least part of these films' vast appeal is how they feature some sort of "wrong 'un" - often in a broad or symbolic sense - at their picaresque centre: consider Canadian man-of-leisure Richard Hannay jaunting over Britain, yet pursued by both police and underworld figures, and grateful for whatever real kindness he encounters. Not much dialectical materialism there. But, inasmuch that we're all "wrong 'uns" one way or another, a figure like Hannay represents the 'Ben' in each of us - a 'travelled' Ben, though. Closer, indeed, to Joyce's 'common man', Leopold Bloom, whom Orwell nevertheless objected to for turning out "to be a Jew and a bit of a highbrow at that". (What would Orwell have made of 'Scottie' in Hitchcock's Vertigo - a Presbyterian, or non-believer, in a city of Catholics, one who visits something called the Argosy Bookstore and who is given to citing Chinese philosophy?)

I've come at the end of this article a long way from straight description of the journeyman thriller that No. 17 represents. But, then, so did Hitchcock come a long way from his earlier films. My point is that even in the later works it's possible to see something of the Cockney - person or essence - carrying on from the earlier ones.

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Notes

1. William Rothman, 'Hitchcock - The Murderous Gaze' (1982), p. 53. Rothman's "The Wrong One" is ultimately a damned figure - an interpretation not applicable to any of the characters in No. 17 (given the terms on which the film operates), I fancy.
2. Mistaken identity is commonplace in this film. Ben merely parodies it, becomes its butt.
3. In Shadow of a Doubt (1943) a sharp distinction is made in vocal tones between the young and dreaming

Teresa Wright character (whose voice tends to be shrill and excited) and the 'awakened' Teresa Wright who has learnt of her uncle's evil (at which time her voice becomes typically low and measured, approaching an adult's).

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ODD SPOT: MUCH ADO ABOUT VERY LITTLE?

Like nothing so much, indeed, as a yachtboard version of Agatha Christie's 'Ten Little Indians', Herbert Ross's The Last of Sheila (1973) is a film curio which some people seem to have over-extolled. No doubt they were impressed in the first place by the film's writer-credits: the script was a combined effort by actor Anthony Perkins and composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim. The same people would have heard, too, how this murder mystery boasts other unlikely points of interest, in that several of its characters are satirical versions of well-known identities, and that the script itself is constructed as a form of elaborate British-style crossword where puns, anagrams and wordplays run rampant (well, almost). The film's title is itself a clue ...

It's certain that astute critic Pauline Kael was never among the film's admirers (she called it "witless" and "desiccated") but, at the other extreme, you had this amazing estimation of the film by James Monaco (in his 'The Connoisseur's Guide to the Movies!'): "If James Joyce had made movies they might have looked something like this."

'MacGuffin' readers may care to check out The Last of Sheila for themselves ...

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