Newsletter of the Film/Alfred Hitchcock Special Interest Group

The MacGuffin

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EDITORIAL

Everyone remembers the baggage-car scene with its magician's props in **The Lady Vanishes** (1938). It's where more than one of the film's numerous 'vanishing acts' take place. In a radio talk, part-transcribed in this 'MacGuffin', lecturer John McConchie refers to how an important aspect of the film is 'fantasy in full flight'. And he specifically cites the baggage-car scene.

Film critic of 'The Australian', Evan Williams, counts **The Lady Vanishes** as his favourite film. He, too, singles out the baggage-car scene for special attention in his appraisal of the film printed in this issue. He notes how the scene is highly accomplished, being both comic and dramatic at virtually the same time. The leather-jacketed magician, Signor Doppo, is likened by Williams to another of Hitchcock's villains, Herr Gromek in **Torn Curtain** (1966).

Doppo, in fact, belongs to a whole line of Hitchcock villains. If the suave Dr Hartz in **The Lady Vanishes** is the 'brains' among the villainous plotters on board the train, Doppo is the 'brawn'. These two thus correspond to the characters played respectively by James Mason and Adam Williams in **North by Northwest** (1959), which of course has its own memorable train scenes.

But I want to come back for a moment to the idea that Doppo is like Gromek in **Torn Curtain**. In the last 'MacGuffin', I suggested in an article on that film that when Michael Armstrong (Paul Newman) grapples with Gromek in a life-and-death struggle, he's effectively encountering the vital-force called Will, which he shares with Gromek and with everyone else in the film. Similarly, you could say that when Gilbert (Michael Redgrave) fights hand-to-hand with Doppo in the baggage-car in **The Lady Vanishes**, he is coming to grips with the reality of a situation which, although already highly sensuous and dynamic, hasn't yet been fully 'realised'. (For a discussion of some similar ideas, see a review of the original novel of **The Lady Vanishes** in the 'Book Reviews' section of this issue.) And you could also say with some accuracy, I suggest, that the train journey in the film is itself a metaphor for the Will that is shared by **all** the characters.

Near the end of the film, when the English party have finally eluded the foreign villains, Dr Hartz speaks a valediction in two languages: his own and English. And the magnanimous sentiment he expresses is also English, in that he wishes his adversaries 'jolly good luck'. No doubt some film critics influenced by the ideas of theorist Jacques Derrida would seize on the implied 'closure' to tell us that ultimately the film itself becomes 'an enclosed, self-reflexive system'. (Again see 'Book Reviews', where reference is made to 'Hitchcock's Rereleased Films' and a critic's use of Derrida to describe the 1958 **Vertigo**.)

Still, I wonder about that. As Evan Williams reminds us, no viewer of **The Lady Vanishes**, now or earlier, could miss noticing its implicit, never-actually-stated suggestion of the political events unfolding in Europe when it was being made. To categorically refer to the film as 'self-enclosed' may be rather like burying your head in sand. Once again, the 'Book Reviews' section in this issue takes up the matter, notably when English novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch ('Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals') is shown there to contest some of Derrida's views.

There's much else in this issue. In a new column called 'Short Takes', Melbourne film lecturer Christine Davis reports that Australia was well-represented at this year's Cannes Film Festival, where Jane Campion's **The Piano** (Australia/New Zealand/France) shared the Palme d'Or award with Chen Kaige's **Farewell to My Concubine** (China).

Finally, thanks to all our readers and others who have given 'The MacGuffin' their support lately. (Particular thanks to Tina Kaufman, editor of 'Filmnews', for mentioning us in the June issue, just out.)

To everyone, good viewing.

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LETTERS

Evan Williams, Lindfield, NSW, Australia

Thank you for the loan of [Stephen Rebello's 'Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of **Psycho**']. I enjoyed it enormously, though the treatment is a little uneven. One is rarely given a mental picture or impression of the personalities involved, what sort of people they were. The emphasis is very much on direct quotation. A few photos of the leading crew members would have been interesting. Indeed the whole book is rather skimpy on pictures - no doubt a result of Hitchcock's obsessive on-set secrecy.

But there are excellent insights and revelations. I was most interested to read the quote attributed to [costume designer] Rita Riggs (p. 113) concerning Margo Epper (the Perkins stand-in): 'Margo, because of her horsemanship, is long and lean and had almost a male set of hips. Of all possible people she came closest to having Tony's square shoulders and thin hips'. This entirely bears out the view expressed in my letter to 'The MacGuffin' [issue 5] that the glimpse we have of Mother in the shower scene is indeed suggestive of Norman in drag, and that Hitchcock must have been aware of this resemblance and accepted it. If one looks at the frame stills of the shower scene it is also clear that the attacker is much taller than Marion. I am more than ever convinced that we are never in doubt - or at the deepest level, **meant** to be in doubt - that Norman is the murderer, and that 'Mother' is Norman. If so, this sheds new light on the meaning of the film and the motives and intentions of Hitchcock. He could not have been as cynical and manipulative as we thought, or as he pretended to be!

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Neil Jillett, Melbourne, Australia

All power to 'The MacGuffin'! I have a great affection for A. Hitchcock, or his heirs, since I've recently had three short stories published in the 'A.H.'s Mystery Magazine', New York.

[Editor's note. Neil Jillett is film critic for the Melbourne 'Age' and author of the crime novel 'Copycat'.]

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James Goldsworthy, R.R. 1, Box 152, Venango, PA 16440-9605, USA

I enjoyed issue no. 8 of 'The MacGuffin. Enclosed herewith please find payment for back issues.

P.S. I am writing several articles on the Hitchcock television series which has been popular here with a wide audience for several decades (original versions and re-runs) but, unlike his films, received hardly any serious study or precise documentation.

[Editor's note. James enclosed a list of the 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents' and the 'Alfred Hitchcock Hour' programmes he has on video, including several directed by Hitchcock himself: 'The Case of Mr Pelham', 'One More Mile To Go', 'Revenge', 'I Saw the Whole Thing'. Many of the others feature stars or players from Hitchcock's films: e.g. Pat Hitchcock, Edmund Gwenn, Oscar Homolka, Hume Cronyn, Sir Cedric Hardwicke,

MacDonald Carey, Jessica Tandy, Joseph Cotten, Ray Milland, Michael Wilding. James adds that he has many more titles coming soon and that he would like to trade - not sell - videos with other Hitchcock scholars. Anyone seriously interested in trading should write to James for his full list of titles.]

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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.)

On books

Slavoj Zizek has edited a book of essays called - take a breath - 'Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)'. Contributors include Frederic Jameson, Pascal Bonitzer and Michel Chion as well as Zizek himself and several of his colleagues at the University of Ljubljana. One of Chion's pieces will be of special interest to 'MacGuffin' readers, who may recall that Adrian Martin once recommended it in these pages. It's about the use of music in **The Lady Vanishes**, and especially about what happens during the film to the tune that contains the coded message. The piece is called "The Cipher of Destiny", and the book is published in London and New York by Verso (New Left Books).

Incidentally, Zizek must be a shrewd fellow. Simultaneously with the publication of the above book, he has brought out 'Enjoy Your Symptom' which elucidates Lacan by relating each of the French psychiatrist's fundamental notions to a Hollywood film or popular culture in general. No doubt many readers will feel compelled to refer from one book to the other.

Meanwhile, Melbourne film academic Barbara Creed has contributed a chapter to a new book exploring notions of masculinity in the Hollywood film. The book is called 'Screening the Male' and is edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. Barbara's essay is called "Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film".

Also noteworthy is the publication of 'Daphne du Maurier' by Margaret Forster. The book, which has been highly praised, discloses that the novelist found happiness for a time in her marriage to Frederick 'Boy' Browning, a preposterously romantic figure who distinguished himself in both World Wars, but that she also had love affairs with two women: Ellen Doubleday, wife of the American publisher, and actress Gertrude Lawrence. In her later life, with both these lovers dead, du Maurier's writing tended to dry up - although it was at this time that she wrote her most macabre tales, notably 'Don't Look Now' and 'The Birds'.

On critical practices and the real world

(a) The use of 'close reading' as a strategy for analysing popular culture has itself come under intense scrutiny since, of all things, the police beatings of Rodney King in Los Angeles. It was the use of this strategy that enabled the defence lawyers to successfully 'read against the grain' of the video evidence, and which resulted in the acquittal of the four accused policemen.

The American Society for Cinema Studies actually issued an official resolution acknowledging that close readings can sometimes incur misreading.

(b) This thumbnail review of Christopher Norris's 'Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War' comes from 'Sight & Sound', April 1992: 'Norris begins with Baudrillard, whose infamous comments on the non-existence of the Gulf War seriously damaged his credibility as an "advanced" thinker. In lively and provocative style, Norris takes apart the work of intellectuals from Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard to Chomsky, Said and Jameson, arguing that postmodernism is both intellectually and politically bankrupt.'

Donald Spoto promotes his 'Marilyn Monroe: The Biography'

Of course, it isn't only intellectuals who distort the truth. A particular target of author/lecturer Donald

Spoto, when he visited Australia recently on a three-month world tour, were all the 'unscrupulous journalists and writers who have made up stories about' Marilyn Monroe.

Norman Mailer, for instance, did it; he admitted as much later on television, and said his reason had been that he needed 'quick cash'.

Some of Spoto's claims: that Marilyn Monroe 'was a good and decent woman who took her relationships and her craft seriously'; that she was killed - poisoned - by her obsessed psychiatrist and the housekeeper he had installed in her house to spy on her; that she produced and starred in 'two of the finest motion-pictures given to us during the 1950s' (**Bus Stop, The Prince and the Showgirl**).

Cut-rate Hitch a sign of the times in Japan

To the familiar signature-tune, Gounod's 'The Funeral March of a Marionette', Alfred Hitchcock is making his ghostly presence felt on Japanese TV - selling cars.

Hitch had always been a popular figure with Japanese viewers. So, in a sense, it was natural recently that recession-hit advertisers should turn to him and some other dead foreign celebrities for help in cutting costs without reducing viewer-impact. The creative-manager of an advertising agency claims his firm has thereby incurred a saving of 75% to 80% on the cost of paying a top-class living artist.

A further advantage of using dead celebrities, according to another advertising executive, 'is that you don't have to worry about being sued or about them embarrassing you with scandals which might force you to pull the commercial'. That's a particularly sore point with Japanese advertisers after they were forced to scrap expensive commercials featuring Rob Lowe, sprinter Ben Johnson and Peewee Herman.

Is Geoffrey Wright wrong?

Recently, the former programme manager at London's Scala cinema was convicted of breach of copyright after showing Stanley Kubrick's **A Clockwork Orange** (1971), banned in Britain twenty years ago by its director who believed it encouraged violence.

As recent media articles have pointed out, he had a point. In Lancashire, a young woman was raped in a ritualised replay of a scene in the film; in Oxford, a 16-year-old boy acted out another scene by kicking to death a tramp.

Not surprisingly, then, Australian director Geoffrey Wright's 1991 **Romper Stomper** - which contains scenes reminiscent of **A Clockwork Orange** - has been attracting world-wide controversy. Set in Melbourne, it follows members of a neo-Nazi skinhead gang as they wage war on local Vietnamese.

In Germany, a large cinema chain refused to show it; consequently, it has had only limited release there. The local critics were lukewarm in any case, their main objection reportedly being that Wright doesn't disclose his own opinion in the film.

Footnote. Kubrick's next project is said to be a road-movie set in Nazi-era Europe.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

The sources of **Vertigo**; Adrian Martin on "'Poor Alex': A Reading of **Notorious**"; book reviews (e.g. 'Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan...'; 'The Films of Alfred Hitchcock'). Plus 'News', 'Short Takes', etc. Additional items always wanted.

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BOOK REVIEWS

White, Ethel Lina: 'The Lady Vanishes' (1936);
Murdoch, Iris: 'Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals' (Chatto & Windus, 1992; hardcover);
Lapsley, Robert, and Westlake, Michael: 'Film Theory: An Introduction' (Manchester University Press, 1988; paperback);
Raubicheck, Walter, and Srebnick, Walter: 'Hitchcock's Rereleased Films: From **Rope** to **Vertigo** (Wayne State University Press, 1991; paperback);
Kapsis, Robert E.: 'Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation' (The University of Chicago Press, 1992; paperback)

If anything, the novel called 'The Lady Vanishes' (originally 'The Wheel Spins') is even more 'English' than the Hitchcock film it gave rise to. Winifred Froy, a middle-aged spinster and governess, on her way home by train from working in a remote corner of Europe, repeatedly thinks of her elderly parents ('Pater and Mater') and her Old English sheepdog, Socrates, awaiting her at journey's end. These thoughts sustain her during her ordeal of being abducted and held prisoner on the train, which of course is the novel's central episode.

In turn, that central episode is at least as old as the famous story of an English mother and daughter on their way home from the Orient who stop off at a Paris hotel from which the mother mysteriously vanishes - whereupon everyone at the hotel denies that she was ever there. One version of the story forms the basis of Mrs Belloc Lowndes's 'The End of Her Honeymoon' (1913). Another version is told in 'The Lady Vanishes' by the English engineer called Max (in the film, Gilbert) to the English girl called Iris. For Iris had seen Miss Froy before **her** disappearance, although no-one else on the train seems to remember her. The implication is that Max thinks that Iris had once read the story and now is simply imagining Miss Froy.

But of course Miss Froy eventually reappears, thereby vindicating Iris's very British trust in what her senses had told her (cf. the British empirical philosophers!) against the duplicitous schemings of foreigners. It's a classic situation and one echoed, in a way, in Iris Murdoch's new book on morals - of which, more in a moment. As for Ethel Lina White's novel, by all means read it and enjoy it. It contains things that the novel omits, including the bleakly autumnal early chapters establishing both Iris's mainly likable character and her vulnerability (wandering in the mountains by herself, she gets lost and tumbles down a valley). On the other hand, it anticipates the film in a couple of ways. Not only are some of the familiar incidents there for the reading (e.g. the business with Miss Froy's name on the train window - tangible proof of her existence until the condensation evaporates and the name disappears), but there's even reference to how Iris on the train 'had the impression that the whole scene was flickering like an early motion-picture'. (This also anticipates another film adapted from an Ethel Lina White story about a vulnerable heroine, Robert Siodmak's 1946 **The Spiral Staircase**, with its famous opening scene showing an audience watching an old-time picture-show) ...

* * *

You can read 'The Lady Vanishes' in a sitting or two. To properly read 'Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals' might take you months. But it would be worth it. English novelist and moral philosopher Iris Murdoch spent about a decade writing the book, which includes chapters on Schopenhauer, Derrida & Structuralism, and Wittgenstein & the Inner Life. My reasons for reviewing it here are several, and will become clear. Here's one. In the last 'MacGuffin' I reported how the 'transcendental pretence' had ended, leaving the individual (the former transcendental subject) anywhere but in full control and understanding of his/her existence. One reason I value Murdoch's book is that it points out how such a situation is nothing new: for instance, we've long known that 'often we cannot say quite what we mean and do not know quite what we mean' (p. 188). At the same time, the book takes Derrida's ideas about these matters seriously, explains the ideas cogently, and offers comments like how it is now, as always, largely up to the artist to assert 'the presence of the **transcendental object**' (p. 5), i.e. to thereby help give us back our sense of purpose.

But that's only the beginning. Like her namesake in 'the Lady Vanishes', Iris Murdoch stoutly resists the foreign 'plot'. She has her incidental reasons, such as the damage done to students by university

literature departments which have put excessive emphasis on Theory ('students spend their time studying the very obscure books which propound it, rather than reading the great works of literature' - pp. 194-5). Moreover, she defends many of the traditional ways of seeing:

> The 'old', and in my view good, proper, literary critic, approaches a literary work in an open-minded manner and is interested in it in **all sorts of ways**: which certainly does not exclude treating a tale as a 'window into another world', reacting to characters as if they were real people, making value judgments about them, about how their creator treats them, and so on. (p. 189)

Also, she confronts specific theories about how we are all invariably 'spoken' by language and shaped by its 'architecture'. Here's a typical passage, not irrelevant to film-viewing:

> We can also be said to think and use concepts in all sorts of perceptual and 'feeling' states where no systematic language is present; indeed (probably) most conscious states are of this kind. (p. 196)

But, above all, Murdoch stands up to Derrida on moral grounds, on how some of his theories in effect deny our necessary dealings with the real, everyday world. (I'm not sure that she reports Derrida altogether correctly in the following passage, but if we think of 'The Lady Vanishes' and the attempt made there to deny its heroine's very consciousness, we shan't go far wrong.) Here's the sort of thing I mean:

> What makes metaphysical ('totalising') coherence theories unacceptable is the way in which they in effect 'disappear' what is individual and contingent by equating reality with integration in system, and degrees of reality with degrees of integration, and by implying that 'ultimately' or 'really' there is only one system. (p. 196)

So where does all this leave us? I obviously can't begin to give a true sense of the thrust of Murdoch's more than 500 pages, but I'll answer my question anyway by reporting that the author tells us that 'meaning and truth are what they have always seemed. (A study of philosophy may be likened to a catharsis, like that of the Zen Buddhist who begins with rivers and mountains, doubts rivers and mountains, then returns to rivers and mountains.)' - p. 189. I was greatly stimulated and encouraged by this noble book, a more-than-worthy successor to the author's 1970 'The Sovereignty of Good' (whose title hinted at both her Englishness and her interest in truly universal matters).

* * *

What is refreshing about another English book, 'Film Theory: An Introduction', is that by and large it, too, keeps its head when all about are losing theirs - for theory (or Theory) is a risky business at the best of times. (For my part, I'm someone who uses theory but who doesn't believe it's indispensable. Method yes, theory no.)[1] Like Murdoch, the authors of this book are capable of seeing that 'No one theory can hope to encompass the irreducible particularity of the real' (p. 207). Their project is to trace what happened when in 1969 'Cahiers du Cinéma' announced to the world its change in direction: henceforth its writers would adopt a new 'scientific criticism' in place of 'the tradition of frivolous and evanescent writing in the cinema' (p. 214). Showing a thorough acquaintance with their subject-matter, the authors concentrate largely on the theoretical and critical outpourings, post-1969, from 'Cahiers' itself and from 'Screen' in England. (But unlike Murdoch, they don't end up taking sides. Instead, they adopt a line which is usually sympathetic to the overlapping projects of both camps.)

As a representative example of the authors' objectivity, I'll mention their reporting of the memorable 'debate' (invective?) between Stephen Heath of 'Screen' and the American Noël Carroll which took place across several issues of 'October' magazine. (Regular readers of 'The MacGuffin' will know where my own sympathies principally lay at the time, and still lie.) Carroll 'attempted to bring down the whole enterprise of film theory operating under the sign of Althusser and Lacan' (p. 143):

> In the first place, Carroll charged that in so far as Heath was working within an Althusserian perspective his position was untenable. The line imputed to Heath on such grounds was that the spectator was reduced to an effect of the text and that any given text would interpellate ['speak'] all spectators in exactly the same way - typically, [if paradoxically,] in a way that would cause

> spectators to misrecognise themselves as transcendental egos. According to Carroll, such 'discourse determinism' was inadequate in its failure to account in any way for the undeniable fact of spectator resistance, for example, that of a spectator of **Birth of a Nation** refusing to accept the Ku Klux Klan as Aryan heroes. (p. 143)

The authors say that David Bordwell would probably have supported Carroll in this matter, as he had recently noted the latest findings of perceptual psychology showing that in watching a film spectators actively exercise a number of discriminatory skills. And the authors admit that 'there was, undeniably, a tendency in much 1970s film theory to impute a solely determining force to the text itself' (p. 144). However, they stop short of raising the sorts of moral objections to Althusser, et al. that Iris Murdoch would use - no doubt because to do so would be 'unscientific'.

On the other hand, we're told that far more important to Heath than Althusser was Lacan: 'Heath's appropriation of Lacan makes him not so much opposed to the conception of the [active] subject demanded by Carroll as determined to go beyond it' (p. 145). Once again, though, the authors play fair, for they suggest that for Heath (as for Foucault and Barthes and for 'Screen' - to all of whom, remember, the authors are sympathetic) the point now becomes 'not to interpret the world but to change oneself and, by implication, others' (p. 147):

> And for Barthes and Heath the vehicle for change was Lacanian psychoanalysis, and its justification was political: you change the world by altering the modes of being within it. All of which ... undoubtedly shifts the domain of the debate away from the purely academic. This said, however, the thorny problem of specifying the effectivity of a particular text in a particular historical moment remained unresolved. (pop. 147-8)

Only at the end of the book does its scrupulous - if dogged - tone fade a little. The following point seems exact enough:

> The search for a satisfactory theory of meaning has been at the forefront of analytic philosophy for over a century, to the extent that all other philosophical questions can be seen as waiting for its formulation or for agreement that there can be no such thing. (p. 217)

So that when the authors proceed to claim 'that the terrain of film studies, more so than any other area of cultural studies, has been won, and held, by the Left' (p. 219), you wonder if this isn't a non-sequitur or, at any rate, premature. Personally, I prefer to recall again Iris Murdoch's defence of open-mindedness in criticism, and of the critic's right to operate 'in **all sorts of ways**'. To employ another of Murdoch's felicitous terms, I believe in 'attending' to (and taking your cue from) the text itself - if possible, without the mediation of (general) theory.

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Schopenhauer once wrote as follows: 'To have original, extraordinary, and perhaps even immortal ideas, one has but to isolate oneself from the world for a few moments so completely that the most commonplace happenings appear to be new and unfamiliar, and in this way reveal their true essence.' As I come now to 'Hitchcock's Rereleased Films', I have a particular reason for quoting Schopenhauer - as will be seen. The book boasts a Foreword by Andrew Sarris which, frankly, is as level-headed and as specific about what constitutes Hitchcock's genius - as well as his occasional lapses - as anything that follows it. This, despite Sarris's admission that he doesn't know how to pronounce 'diegesis' or 'why one must approach Freud only through Lacan' (p. 12). (I've wondered about that too. In the light of the previous book, the answer can only be political. But you never see it admitted. Here once again, academia hardly does itself credit by its lack of openness and by its seemingly cowered obedience to what the invisible hand of, in this case, the Left directs it to say and do.)

Sarris says of Hitchcock's films that 'They can withstand any snobbish assault, and nourish any theoretical system.' (p.12) That's true, and it nicely anticipates one of the findings in Robert Kapsis's book on Hitchcock's reputation (which, again, I'm coming to). My only quibble with any of Sarris's points might concern his suggestion that 'the blandness of MacDonald Carey as the "straight" suitor in **Shadow of a Doubt**

(1943)' marks an occasion when Hitchcock 'nodded' (p. 12). I've always thought, rather, that Carey, with his flappy ears, suitably represents part of Hitchcock's joke at the expense of policemen in the film (and at the expense of small-town life generally). He is, after all, the film's equivalent of the plodding detective called Joe in **The Lodger** (1926), of which the American film is the virtual remake. To employ Lacanian terminology, both policemen come from the dull world of the Symbolic, whereas Hitchcock's real 'heroes' are the Oedipally under-developed - but insightful - guilty parties (the Lodger, Uncle Charlie) who represent the Imaginary. You might even say that the policemen are the critics, whereas the more alert and, in a sense, more open-minded 'villains' are the artists.[2] It invariably requires both luck and time for Hitchcock's police to catch up with his criminals - if they ever do.

And there you have the keynote for my attitude to this book, which I approached with high expectations. A book of essays about five of Hitchcock's best films (**Rope, Rear Window, The Trouble With Harry, The Man Who Knew too Much, Vertigo**)? How could it miss? But, very largely, that's what it does. Mind you, its editors do all the proper things, such as providing introductions which locate and summarise the essays in terms of current Theory. For instance, they make several references to Derrida. Here's a typical passage:

> Derrida insists that truth and reason, the highest values of traditional humanism, are infected by relativity to the utmost degree; that in fact all hierarchical distinctions or logical sets of opposition within human discourse are untenable. (p. 26)

Nothing exceptional there, in any sense of that expression. And two of the essays are immediately identified for us as conforming to Derrida's position (which of course is a good thing). 'Thomas Hemmeter's discussion of **Rope** in this volume deconstructs the film's ostensible moral basis.' 'Katie Trumpener's analysis here of **Vertigo** demonstrates how all facets of the film replicate each other to create an enclosed self-reflexive system.' All well and good - if with a touch of blandness about the writing which threatens to evoke MacDonald Carey's playing in **Shadow of a Doubt**. But let's look at some of the essays.

First, Hemmeter's piece on **Rope** ('Twisted Writing; **Rope** as an Experimental Film'). Some of it is good, especially when it notes the James Stewart character's rationalisation of why he couldn't have committed murder. 'Something deep inside me would have stopped me', he claims, thereby echoing his own earlier mocking of people who use vague language. He had been chatting with Mrs Atwater (Constance Collier). Taking his cue from her remarks, he had told her that he'd once seen a film whose title was 'the something something. Or was it just plain something?' Thus Hitchcock makes a serious point: there's a sense in which we are all capable of murder even if we deny the fact (here, it prompts Stewart's vagueness); for to employ Lacanian terms again, the Imaginary (where anything is conceivable) is residual in all of us. But Hemmeter's attempt to relate the Stewart character's self-deception to some theories of the fashionable Derrida is clumsy, and ends up producing silliness like his final paragraph:

> The audience is a necessary part of the staged events. The neon sign blinking a repeated S outside Brandon's windows speaks the language of the roped-in audience, a theatrical hiss at Brandon and Rupert which itself is duplicated visually by the camera's slithering glide through the film ... (p. 264)

Moreover, the author had earlier been guilty of conveniently distorting the truth when he'd claimed that critics hitherto had seen **Rope** in either one of two ways: as strictly an experimental film (employing ten-minute takes, elaborate camera movements, etc.) or as strictly a film of serious moral purpose 'despite its technical experiments' (p. 254). The truth of course is that some latter-day critics before Hemmeter had been capable of seeing and respecting how Hitchcock's fondness of technical experiment had actually facilitated his finding deeper meanings.

John Belton has written intelligently on Hitchcock before now. Sadly, his piece in this book ('The Space of **Rear Window**') is just a formal exercise. It's got plenty of footnotes and lots of qualifying phrases and clauses, but very little insight or new information. Even more sadly, the book's other essay devoted just to **Rear Window**, Anthony J. Mazzela's 'Author, Auteur: Reading **Rear Window** from Woolrich to Hitchcock', is jejeune and, yes, silly. I can't resist giving an example. The name of the James Stewart character in this film is of course L.B. Jefferies. I'm surprised that no-one has yet speculated in print about what those initials might stand for or suggest (a future President perhaps?), but anyway Mazzela does better. He tells us that the second syllable of 'Jefferies' is 'pronounced like "frees" as in "the act of freeing," or (if

film is paramount) "freeze," as in a "freeze frame."' Then he explains: 'The James Stewart character in the film is frozen in a sterile life from which he is freed by the murder of Anne Thorwald and the love of Lisa Fremont.' (p. 66) Mazzela sees further significance in the first syllable of **Lisa**'s surname: her love frees Jefferies 'from his sexual fears and anxieties' (p. 66). But the first syllable of Mrs Thorwald's (or Mr Thorwald's) surname goes unremarked. I guess that by this time Mazzela considered the matter too obvious to need pointing out.

Doug Tomlinson's article on Hitchcock's performers ('"They Should Be Treated Like Cattle"') is, frankly, woeful. Still, to liven us up, it does contain the classic howler, 'extenuated montage' (p. 98), which Tomlinson uses to describe the drawn-out moment when a terrified Scottie (James Stewart) in **Vertigo** clings to a roof. (A later article, at page 124, employs the word 'discrete' when it's clear that 'discreet' is meant. I mention this, and the use of 'extenuated' instead of 'attenuated', only because both of the book's editors are professors of English, after all. The reader expects better.)

Next comes William G. Simon's 'Hitchcock: The Language of Madness'. This is at least mildly interesting, and I was pleased to see Simon noting how Scottie in **Vertigo** is a victim of repetition-compulsion among other ailments. (Regular 'MacGuffin' readers will recall that in the last issue I noted that Lina in **Suspicion** and Marnie in **Marnie** suffer from a similar complaint - which, incidentally, happens to be very cinematic.) However, Simon is another critic who sometimes stretches truth. In **Vertigo**, the coroner (Henry Jones) at the inquest into Madeleine's death gives a succinct if caustic summing-up which criticises Scottie. At one moment, in order to reprimand Scottie's superior-officer for negligently employing him in the first place, the coroner speaks sarcastically of 'the great city to the north' (where, presumably, everyone is supposed to be infallible). Here's my point. For reasons of his own, Simon considers the coroner 'excessively verbose' and misquotes him to that effect (substituting 'metropolis' for 'city' - p. 112). Not only is the accusation unfair, but the coroner's sarcasm (and, for the viewer, the humour involved) seems to have gone over Simon's head.

In truth, until the reader of the book is nearly halfway through it, there has been only one reasonably satisfying piece, that by Thomas M. Leitch on the films scripted by John Michael Hayes ('Self and World at Paramount'). Leitch's main point is that all these films end up stressing a hitherto alienated protagonist's re-integration into society. This chimes with what Hayes told me when I met him in Hollywood in 1975. He also told me that from the start he had regarded Hitchcock as a 'cool' director (Leitch refers to 'Hitchcock's customary pessimism' - p. 37), and that he saw his main task as being to inject 'warmth' into each script. He gave the instance of the gag near the start of **Rear Window** where Stella (Thelma Ritter) claims to have predicted the stock market crash in 1929 because she had noticed the head of General Motors going 'to the bathroom ten times a day'. At this point in the film, Hayes said, the audience is won over. The ice has been broken.

Speaking of screenplay writers, a highlight of the book is the transcript of a talk given by Samuel Taylor, who wrote **Vertigo**. He tells a similar anecdote to Hayes', about how when he read someone else's earlier draft of the script, he knew what the problem was. He reported to Hitchcock: 'It's a matter of finding reality and humanity for these people. You haven't got anybody in this story who is a human being; nobody at all. They're all cut-out cardboard figures.' (p. 288) The result was that Midge was invented, in effect to humanise Scottie for the audience by showing that he was an ordinary man.

Incidentally, Taylor didn't write the scene with the coroner. That was already in the script when Taylor received it, and he feels that Hitchcock probably wrote it himself (p. 290). All Taylor did was to change a couple of things and give the scene some rhythms.

Now I come to what is probably the best thing in the book, Robert Stam's 'Hitchcock and Bunuel'. After all the dry application of theory, re-hashing of old information, and generally poor writing that has preceded it, Stam's piece is one of the book's few oases. (Another is Ina Rae Hark's comparison of the two versions of **The Man Who Knew Too Much**: I would like to think that film academics won't fail to notice that both of these articles are **comparisons**, i.e. they're relatively concrete and are concerned with realities, not just notions. Still, I won't bet on it.) The article runs for thirty pages, but here's perhaps its central point about the two Catholic directors:

> The real relation between Hitchcock and Bunuel is not one of either simple identity or contrast, but rather of complementarity. To the gothic underside of Bunuel - witness the horrific ambulatory hand of **The Exterminating Angel** - corresponds the quiet surrealism and sense of the 'marvellous' of much of Hitchcock. (p. 119)

Stam here gives examples. 'The extroverted Spanish surreality of **L'Age d'Or** is echoed by the understated 'English' absurdism of **The Trouble With Harry**. The dystopian banquet and spatial confinement of **Rope** are recapitulated in **The Exterminating Angel.**' And he decides that 'Hitchcock's obsession with dream, his Bretonian **humor noir** and his love for narrative implausibilities qualify him as at least a crypto-surrealist.' (p. 119)

On this matter of surrealism, I do have a criticism of Stam. It's largely that he seems unaware of previous work comparing the two directors, notably as published in the book 'Surrealism and the Cinema' (1976) by Michael Gould - who was just 26 at the time and a recent graduate of the film department at York University in Toronto. It's a stimulating work which has chapters on The Surrealist Sensibility, Bunuel, Sternberg, Hitchcock, Fuller, Animated Film, and The Artist-Inventor (on Edison, Warhol, Snow). Several of its points anticipate Stam's, and it makes many others. For instance, it quotes the passage from Schopenhauer I gave above and reveals that this was the inspiration for the ideas of the Italian surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico. In turn, Gould notes parallels between Chirico's art and Hitchcock's:

> Hitchcock's clarity of vision finds an ideal representation in **Vertigo**. If he tried for the Chirico quality in **Spellbound**, he truly reaches and surpasses it here ... All these exteriors are shot late in the day, when a low sunlight casts long shadows and a golden glow, giving the scenes their feeling of deep perspective.

Here I suspect that Gould was quoting Hitchcock himself who had once described to Peter Bogdanovich the Chirico quality: 'the long shadows, the infinity of distance, and the converging lines of perspective'. And I wouldn't be the first person to be reminded by this of the cornfield scene in **North by Northwest** (1959).

I think that Gould actually makes the surrealist point better than Stam. But the latter has much more to write about. For instance, he says of the two directors that 'the repressed anticleric in Hitchcock corresponds to the closet believer in Bunuel' (p. 125). And he adds:

> Religion, pervasive in Bunuel, also subliminally informs much of Hitchcock. His 'wrong men' recapitulate - at times comically (Roger Thornhill), at times tragically (Father Logan) - the Golgotha of their exemplary prototype: Jesus Christ. (p. 129)

Yes, and you think also of Mary Rose, in Hitchcock's cherished project to film J.M. Barrie's mystical play, coming back to haunt the living - with additional connotations of the Mary Immaculate.

Which brings me to a final point about Stam's generally excellent article. On page 126 he claims that the ideal of celibacy, 'critised in **Nazarin** and hysterically lampooned in **Simon of the Desert**, is subtly undermined in **I Confess**'. He points out that the audience of Hitchcock's film is frustrated by the non-consummation of the romance, shown in flashback, between Logan (Montgomery Clift) and Ruth (Anne Baxter). But as Logan becomes a priest in the film, and is then prepared to die for his faith, I can only say that on this occasion Stam is being insensitive to the beauty of Hitchcock's concept. The audience may indeed be made to suffer, but it is (or should be) suffering **with** the Clift character for his sacrifice, and not suffering turned **against** the Church, as Stam believes. As Schopenhauer and others long ago realised, the world itself - its Will - is ultimately responsible for our suffering. So let's not blame the Church, or Norman Bates's mother, or the bird realm. Not if we want to be realists, that is.

There are other articles in the book, including an interesting piece on Brian De Palma. But that's my cue to turn, finally, to Professor Kapsis's book.

* * *

The first half of 'Hitchcock; the Making of a Reputation' traces the shifts in Hitchcock's fame during his

fifty-year career in film and television, and considers his posthumous reputation. A later chapter examines the career to date of frequent 'Hitchcock-imitator', Brian De Palma. At issue is 'whether an artist's fame is earned or unearned' (p. 242). Kapsis says that the factors affecting artistic reputation are twofold, being either intrinsic (the films or texts themselves) or extrinsic. But in Hitchcock's case, at least, his continuing high status seems deserved, not just 'because of the great range of his work but also because many of his films have been able to sustain a diversity of interpretations' (p. 243).

It's equally clear, though, that non-textual factors contributed to Hitchcock's prestige. Kapsis treats several of these - the director's self-promotion, sponsorship by others, changing aesthetic codes - before he finally nominates changing aesthetic codes as having been crucial. The rise of auteur criticism in the late 1960s helped Hitchcock's self-promotional efforts 'in ways inconceivable in the pre-auteur era' (p. 243).

Brian De Palma's case necessarily involves a different emphasis. Kapsis uses it to illustrate a 'time-of-entry' hypothesis whereby a promising artist (e.g. De Palma) may find himself being penalised for following too closely - in a double sense - the work of a towering predecessor (e.g. Hitchcock). No matter how gifted the later-comer, 'critics will tend to view [his] work as imitative and unoriginal' (p. 189).

Now, I would have to say that there are few great surprises in the book. Nor is Kapsis, to judge from the rare occasions when he ventures his hand, himself a major critic. In fact, at times he appears positively philistine. Nowhere is this more marked than at the point where, having rebuked Robin Wood for his allegedly over-zealous defence of **Marnie** (1964), he immediately offers his own trite interpretation of a scene from the same film (pp. 130-1).

Still, he has compiled his masses of material with vigour and clarity. And there are many incidental pleasures for the reader who may be sceptical about the 'scientificity' of the overall project. (How do you **prove** a time-of-entry effect?)

What Kapsis has to say in a section (pp. 64-8) about **The Birds** (1963) may stand as representative of the mixed feelings the book is likely to arouse in the reader. After the first American TV network screenings of the film (in January 1968 and February 1969), Hitchcock received hefty deliveries of 'fan' mail complaining about the open ending and the lack of explanation for the bird attacks. (Similar complaints had arrived at the time of the cinema release.) Instead of tending to reply, as he had previously, that (1) there were real-life precedents for birds invading homes, or that (2) the bird attacks represented 'any catastrophe', he now usually commented that (3) the ending leaves open to the audience's imagination what will happen next, or that (4) if he could say why the birds were attacking humans, he 'could also tell you why **people** are trying to kill people'.

This is surely fair comment. As I see it, all four of Hitchcock's 'explanations' - of the inexplicable - are apposite. I particularly appreciate the 'Schopenhaurian' perspicacity and forthrightness of the last (as I think Iris Murdoch would too). So I'm baffled when Kapsis seems to 'freak' and says that (3) is 'cantankerous' and that (4) 'makes clear that Hitchcock's honeymoon with his fans was indeed over' (p. 68). Is this perhaps another sign of Kapsis's philistinism, of his not seeing that art may - at times - be multivalent or ambiguous? Surely not, for later in the book he praises a certain (feminist) reading of **Marnie** for showing how that film is a 'multivocal' text (p. 139); and later again he cites the same film as one which gives 'compelling support' to Richard Posner's argument that an artist's posthumous reputation 'is facilitated by the generality, variety and ambiguity of the reputee's work' (pp. 243-4).

So although, as I say, I'm baffled and annoyed by moments in the book, I'm not denying its general air of readability - like an airport novel's. Kapsis has other interesting findings to offer about **The Birds**. For example, he deals with Hitchcock's concern over a lack of characterisation in the script. (You find yourself thinking that what was needed was a fixer like John Michael Hayes or Samuel Taylor.) And despite Kapsis's lower than top-grade performance as a critic, I did appreciate at least one of his 'textual analyses'. He neatly describes the characteristic titles-sequence of the 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents' programmes, including the use of a barely perceptible cut. 'The impression given by this sequence', he concludes, 'is of Hitchcock the creator, Hitchcock the dominant force behind the show, Hitchcock the magician and master of illusion' (pp. 31-2). This is precisely how I view the opening of **The Wrong Man** (1957), as readers of 'MacGuffin' 6 may recall.

There's an adage which says that failed artists become critics. Now we may add another such adage: failed (or would-be) critics become writers of reputation histories. Nevertheless, in his field Kapsis has set a generally high standard.

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Notes

1. The most salutary illustration I can give of the pernicious effect of adherence to mere theory - where trust in the evidence of one's senses was called for - concerns the 'father of modern philosophy', René Descartes (1596-1650), and a group of his seventeenth century followers. Descartes, not wishing to be heretical, i.e. for reasons of expediency, taught that humans aren't mechanistic beings but are unique in having immortal souls - which he identified with consciousness. The perfectly logical outcome of this doctrine for the Catholic philosopher and his adherents was that animals could not have consciousness. They were mere machines, automata. So Descartes himself proceeded to dissect living animals in order to advance his knowledge of anatomy; and at the Jansenist seminary at Port-Royal the work of experimenters was noted by an eye-witness:

> They administered beatings to dogs with perfect indifference, and made fun of those who pitied the creatures as if they felt pain. They said the animals were clocks; that the cries they emitted when struck were only the noise of a little spring that had been touched, but that the whole body was without feeling. They nailed poor animals up on boards by their four paws to vivisect them and see the circulation of the blood which was a great subject of conversation.

Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) would have understood - and been suitably appalled. The essayist and moralist wrote:

> Presumption is our natural and original disease ... 'Tis by the same vanity of imagination that [man] equals himself to God, attributes to himself divine qualities, and withdraws and separates himself from the crowd of other creatures.

Concerning theory's potential for untruth and arrogance, then, I rest my case. (I've drawn most of the above information from the highly-respected work of Peter Singer, a professor of Philosophy at Monash University, Australia. See especially his book, 'Animal Liberation', second edition 1990, pp. 198-202.)

2. I'm reminded of something said by Somerset Maugham: 'Only the artist, and maybe the criminal, can make his own life.'

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BLOOPERS

We got the details wrong last issue of where Hitchcock obtained the footage of the flame seen in the titles-sequence of **Torn Curtain**. It was, in fact, the 'Rocketdyne' works where engines to be used in the Apollo moon flight were being tested. Hitchcock: 'We were able to go out and photograph just the core of the flame and steam from half-a-mile away with a long-focus lens. On the morning [we] shot, $34,000 worth of fuel was used just for three takes! We didn't pay, they were testing.' ('Film', Summer 1966)

It seems that there may be some contention about which film the narrator of Chris Marker's **Sans Soleil/ Sunless** (1983) means when, referring to the felled sequoia scene in **Vertigo**, he says he remembers 'another film in which this passage was quoted'. Last issue, Adrian Martin ('Letters') suggested Alain Robbe-Grillet's **L'Immortelle** (1962) is the film meant. However, Michael Gould's 'Surrealism and the Cinema' (1976) says that the **Vertigo** moment is 'similar to a moment in Chris Marker's [own] **La jetée**' (1963) ...

We're all fallible. Back in 'MacGuffin' 5 I wrote that author Charles Dickens (1812-70) was, like

Hitchcock, a Cockney. Wrong! Dickens was of course born in Portsmouth, Hampshire. So although his typically London-centric novels are full of 'Hitchcockian' humour and suspense, and include vivid Cockney characters (e.g. the Wellers), apologies to our readers are called for - and hereby given.

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CANNES, 1993

As this 'MacGuffin' goes to press, the Cannes Film Festival has just concluded and the word 'triumph' is being heard loud in the land following the awarding of the Palme d'Or to the Australian entry **The Piano**, directed by Jane Campion. **The Piano** shared the prize with the Chinese film **Farewell to My Concubine**, directed by Chen Kaige. To quote from the Prime Minister's telegram to Campion: '... Another triumph for the Australian film industry, an Australasian triumph ...'[1]

Cannes has lately become the most important international showcase and launching pad for new Australian films, a development spurred on by the success of Jocelyn Moorhouse's **Proof** (special mention from the Camera d'Or jury in 1991) and Baz Luhrmann's **Strictly Ballroom** (close runner-up for the Golden Camera Award for best first film in 1992). Both these films went on to win a clutch of Australian Film Institute awards, including Best Film.

Each year one Australian movie seems to become required viewing for virtually everyone in the country. **Strictly Ballroom** was last year's designated 'biggie'. It's a lighthearted dance-comedy in which, **Dirty Dancing**-style, ugly duckling girl blossoms into swan when hurled by Fate into the dominant arms of handsome leading man (Paul Mercurio). The pair take on bitchy opponents and corrupt officialdom to win the National Ballroom Dancing Championships, and simultaneously find true love. I'm told that teenage girls, under Mercurio's spell, were treating the ticket office as a revolving door, some clocking on for seven straight viewings on the same day!

I should mention director Luhrmann's recent contribution to Australian political culture. Volunteering to design the nationally televised campaign launch for Prime Minister Paul Keating's ruling Labour Party, which seemed poised for electoral defeat after four terms in government, Luhrmann and the **Strictly Ballroom** production team transformed the less-than-glamorous interior of the Bankstown Sports Club in Keating's working-class electorate into a starkly elegant television environment - dubbed for the night the 'Strictly Paul Room'. When, two weeks later, Labour grabbed victory against the predictions of pollsters and pundits alike, Luhrmann's launch was generally agreed to have been the turning point. Moral: 'When you're hot ...'

This year's 'biggie' may be Yahoo Serious's new comedy **Reckless Kelly**, directed by and starring Serious as a modern-day descendant of famed Australian outlaw-hero Ned Kelly. Serious will be hoping for big business in the US and Europe to repeat the success of his first feature **Young Einstein** (1989). Australian critics have not been so generous this time around, however, taking issue with the film's strained, highly artificial plot and lack of funny lines and memorable moments (with most of the latter said to feature in the film's trailer). Under these constraints, it seems that Serious's studiedly naive screen persona may be wearing a little thin.

To return to Cannes: of the twenty or so films selected for Official Competition, three were Australian: Campion's **The Piano**, Stephen Elliott's **Frauds**, and Laurie MacInnes's **Broken Highway**. Tracey Moffat's **Bedevil** screened in the 'Un Certain Regard' programme.

Campion has made the trip to Cannes several times. **Peel**, her powerful, minimalist study of family members under stress, won the Best Short Film award in 1986.

Her first feature, **Sweetie** (1988), a stylised comedy of Australian family life, played deadpan against claustrophobic, highly coloured settings, did not fare so well with its Cannes audience but went on to successful art-house release in Australia.

An Angel at My Table (1990), Campion's account of the early life of New Zealand novelist Janet Frame, offered a complete change of style and theme. Softly coloured and painstakingly naturalistic, **Angel** was based on the idea that the least event in the life of an artist ought to be celebrated as being of value and significance - arguably a very romantic notion.

The Piano, set in New Zealand in the 1850s, and starring Holly Hunter, Harvey Keitel and Sam Neill, tells the story of a woman who journeys to New Zealand to marry a man she has never met. Campion has spoken recently of her love for nineteenth century literature, especially Emily Bronte's 'Wuthering Heights' and the poetry of Emily Dickenson.[2] With its starry cast, starkly beautiful settings and music by Michael Nyman, **The Piano** (as yet unseen in Australia) would seem to offer wide scope for the expression of Campion's romantic impulse.

A record number of Australian films screened in the Market at Cannes this year. Among them was **Redheads**, a thriller directed by Danny Vendramini, which came fresh from the International Action Film Festival in Valenciennes where it was named Best Film. Its co-star Claudia Karvan picked up that festival's Best Actress award. (Cannes' Best Actress award went to Holly Hunter for her role in **The Piano**.)

Of course, by the time the next 'MacGuffin' rolls around, the state of play of all these films - critical responses, further festival successes (or otherwise), distribution deals, public excitement/controversy/ outrage - will be clearer. I'll pick out a few to discuss in more detail then.

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Notes

1. Campion is a New Zealander who has lived in Australia for fourteen years. **The Piano** was conceived, developed and written in Australia, the production company is Australian, but much of the film's funding is French. **The Piano** is set in New Zealand and features two well-known American actors in leading roles. Hence the P.M.'s reluctance to claim an undiluted Australian triumph. 'Australasian', a word seldom used here in the last twenty years, could be due for a revival, courtesy of **The Piano**.

2. Interview in 'Cinema Papers', May 1993.

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Another 'best of 1992' list

Last issue we printed academic and critic Tom Ryan's 11-best films of 1992. Tom's list was drawn mainly from feature-films that had received a commercial first-release in Melbourne during the year. (His top film was Chabrol's **Madame Bovary**.) But Adrian Martin, film writer and critic, ventures a little further afield in his 14-best list printed below, and includes both short and feature films seen on TV, on video and at festivals, as well as at regular commercial screenings. Fascinatingly, if not altogether surprisingly, the two lists are totally different, with no overlap.

1. La Belle Noiseuse (Jacques Rivette, 1991)
2. A Man Escaped (Robert Bresson, 1956)
3. Barton Fink (Joel and Ethan Coen)
4. Raise the Red Lantern (Zhang Yimou)
5. The Match that Started My Fire (Cathy Cook)/ The Illustrated Auschwitz (Jackie Farkas)
6. My Own Private Idaho (Gus Van Sant)
7. The Hairdresser's Husband (Patrice Leconte)
8. Husbands and Wives (Woody Allen)
9. Antoine and Antoinette (Jacques Becker, 1947)
10. Slightly Scarlet (Allan Dwan, 1956)
11. Poison Ivy (Katt Shea Ruben)
12. The Disenchanted (Benoit Jacquot, 1990)
13. Bright Angel (Michael Fields, 1990) - video-only release, scripted by novelist Richard Ford
14. The Last Days of Chez Nous (Gillian Armstrong)

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TRAINS AND THE CRIME NOVEL

[In the 1930s a flurry of crime novels with trains as their principal setting was published in England. Authors who immediately come to mind include Agatha Christie, Graham Greene, and Ethel Lina White. Few articles have done fuller justice to the reader's enjoyment of the train-crime novel than this fondly-remembered piece by Hugh Douglas, an employee of British Rail. The article was originally called 'Commuting'.]

Ships and planes have been used successfully by crime writers, but as a location they suffer from the disadvantage that they're not really in our world as they travel: their routes don't relate to real life or

death, so they are soulless phantoms orbiting beyond man's environment until the moment they touch land. And then, seaports or airports are not at the heart of cities - where people live, love and commit violence against their fellow man. Even the motor car is a capsule sealed off from humanity.

The train is different. It has all the good qualities that other modes of travel offer to the crime novelist, but it has more. Although quite isolated from its environment, the train never ceases to be a part of it. A real world of houses, villages, cities, fields, cows and even people pass by the window. Yet this world is quite out of reach, unable to affect the traveller for good or ill. Reality is just beyond his fantasy world, but quite unattainable. The wheeled thing rolls on, out of the reader's control. There is no escape. In this enclosed space the tension heightens all the way to journey's end.

The train is a universe of its own. It is confined, remote and comfortable. Whodunit victims always travel first class so their blood soaks into the thick plush cushions, leaving no vulgar mess. Indeed, the whodunit train resembles that other favourite venue of the thriller, the secluded country house, with the compartment as closely confined as a smoking-room. Here must be no vulgarity, no undue ostentation, no overindulgence - just solid comfort.

But unlike the country house the reader's companions on the train are strangers - or so he thinks. Who are they? Who is victim and who villain? Half a dozen people eye one another, reading (or is it lurking?) behind a newspaper, dozing fitfully, or glancing apprehensively from window to fellow passengers and then to the door. The train rushes into a tunnel, and the overhead reading lamp clamps a mask over the face of the man opposite, turning him from a benign Dr Jekyll to a savage Mr Hyde. Can he really be as sinister as he looks, or is he one of the red herrings with which the whodunit's track is strewn? And who is that old lady knitting in the other corner? Her eyes are everywhere. Is she waiting for the chance to thrust a No.10 needle six inches into someone's heart, or is she dear Miss Marple biding her time to unravel the problem?

Truly, travellers are strange bedfellows. Bedfellows? My God, the sleeping car is lethal. Here is the most isolated place in the whole world, a tiny square of space, lonelier than the summit of Everest. And what are all these switches, buttons and bolts for? Does the door lock securely? It is impossible to try it without opening it again. And will the distant clanging of the bell be answered by the steward, or will it bring some sinister caller?

Day restores the scene to that comforting , comfortable country house, filled with elegance and peopled with feudal staff. In the dining car the stewards show all the attentiveness of old family retainers, and breakfast is as generous as it would be for a house party in Devon, with only the food-loaded sideboard missing. But in the train there can be no relaxed feeling for long, because murder has been committed and work is in hand to solve the crime. While the innocent hover in fear, the murderer's confidence crumbles. He is as much the victim of the confined space as of the detective's skill.

The train journey has shape, and shape is what the writer is seeking when he plans his novel: within a time-scale the crime will be perpetrated, discovered and solved. Journey's end will reveal all, convict the guilty and release the innocent. It is very tidy.

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HITCHCOCK AND TRAINS

[Recently, as part of a radio talk on 'Films and Trains', lecturers Noel Purdon and John McConchie of Flinders University, South Australia, referred to the connection in British society between trains and 'class'. In Hitchcock's **Suspicion** (1941), for example, when Cary Grant invades the first-class compartment of Joan Fontaine, he effectively transgresses both her space **and** her social class.

John McConchie develops his ideas about Hitchcock in the following excerpt from the programme.]

Right from the outset of his career, Hitchcock connected trains with a sense of disaster. This is clearly something he was quite in love with: bringing down aeroplanes in **Foreign Correspondent** (1940) and that sort of thing.

By the time you get to **The Lady Vanishes** (1938), (1) you've got a very tense European situation which is immediately picked up in the film; (2) you've got the kinds of divisions of not so much classes this time but of nationalities across the train; (3) you've got the idea of fantasy in full flight.

Everyone who knows **The Lady Vanishes** can remember discovering the box of magician's tricks in the baggage-van. Or the way, for example, that when the rear of the train is uncoupled only the English are left aboard because they were all having tea up the front of the train - whereas all the other European nationalities don't indulge taking tea and are therefore left behind.

All these are discrete elements that Hitchcock, particularly as a formalist, took great delight in being able to stitch together into clearly what is one of his most fascinating and enjoyable films.

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'The Lady Vanishes' (1938): an appraisal

In a recent poll of international critics[1] I was asked to name my ten favourite films, and without much hesitation I put **The Lady Vanishes** at the top of my list. But like many of those who responded to the survey I qualified my judgment. A list of one's favourite films, I pointed out, a little pompously, was not necessarily a list of the greatest or the most important. But wasn't this qualification - it later occurred to me - a mark of critical snobbery? Was I not saying that while I loved this film most of all, having seen it so often that I knew it by heart, I still felt a need to pretend that other films were in some way superior? Hitchcock, who had no illusions about the artistic significance of his films, and who would have disapproved of critical insincerity far more than critical misjudgment, would no doubt have said that one's favourite films and one's opinion of the best films are logically one and the same, and that if a film pleases an audience, that is all that matters.

The Lady Vanishes, as we know, was far from being Hitchcock's own favourite. Of the films of his British period he preferred **The 39 Steps** (1935). But he was not, as we also know, necessarily the best judge of his work. (His special fondness for **The Trouble With Harry** [1956], for example, has always puzzled me.) So whenever I am asked, as I was by the editor of 'The MacGuffin', to account for my opinion I usually fall back on the comment that **The Lady Vanishes** is the film that best combines the three great elements in Hitchcock's work - comedy, romance and suspense - and maintains them in the most delicate equilibrium. The screenplay by Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat is, I think, the wittiest and most ingenious of all Hitchcock's scripts, the most appealing in its development of character, and the most slyly satirical in its depiction of national stereotypes and human foibles.

In their adaptation of Ethel Lina White's novel, Launder and Gilliat added the two silly-ass Englishmen played by Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne, and with Hitchcock's approval devised a new ending. The result, simple and effortless as it seems on the screen, is among Hitchcock's most intricately plotted concoctions, yet one of his most seamlessly constructed and coherent. And few films have done more for their makers' careers. When premiered at London's Cambridge Theatre in August 1938, it was the first film to be billed with the director's name above the title (though on the film itself Hitchcock's name still appears in the usual way). It marked the beginning of Michael Redgrave's film career as well as that of Radford and Wayne, who went on to play Charters and Caldicott in subsequent films. Buoyed by the success of **The Lady Vanishes**, Launder and Gilliat set up their own production company; Paul Lukas went on to bigger things, winning an Academy Award two years later for **Watch on the Rhine**; and the obscure Gainsborough trademark got a boost as well. The oval portrait of the Restoration lady (in all prints I have seen of **The Lady Vanishes** it appears only as a miniature at the end), was later promoted to up-front status, rivalling the Rank gong or the shot of Big Ben used for Alexander Korda's London Films, the other prestige trademark of the time.[2]

Of course it's not a perfect film. For all its charm and ingenuity, I am often struck by its insolent carelessness, its inattention to finer detail. Even by the relaxed standards of its time, the opening table-top set, with its lifeless models and seemingly driverless car, is extraordinarily crude. The follow-through movement into the chalet is accomplished with a quick dissolve, suggesting that the continuous tracking shot for which Hitchcock was probably hoping was abandoned as too difficult. (A similar

movement was attempted 22 years later for the opening of **Psycho**, and likewise failed to come off.) Odd lapses of continuity persist. Margaret Lockwood's outfit changes at least twice during her train journey, once on her return to her compartment from the dining car (the monogrammed scarf is soon discarded) and once during the taxi ride to the Foreign Office. Even lines of dialogue are recycled: 'If this is some sort of joke I'm afraid I don't see the point,' says Iris after Miss Froy's disappearance; and 'If this is a practical joke I warn you I shan't think it very funny' (Caldicott before the gun battle). We are given no information about the only actual murder in the film, the strangling of the 'folk-singer' under Miss Froy's window. I always look among the train passengers for a man with a ring on the fourth finger of his right hand - the one visible clue to the killer. So far I haven't spotted him.

Hitchcock and his screenwriters were just as careless about details of climate and season. Our first thought is that the story takes place in winter: the chalet is snowbound, and when Miss Froy leaves the building through the front door she walks into a blizzard outside. Next day the sky is clear, and talk of the test match ('hope the weather's like this in Manchester') suggests that it is summer. The flower-pot dropped on Iris's head (has there ever been a sillier and less convincing murder attempt in a film?) is full of blooms, though the men are still wearing heavy coats. Of course the weather could be just as fickle in central Europe as it is in England, but a winter setting seems consistent with the idea of frost on the train windows. When I first saw the film I took it that Miss Froy was writing her name in condensation on the glass, but later viewings suggest that she is writing in a film of dust. If she had written in condensation I suppose the letters would have run by the time Iris sees them again. I think we must assume that this is just another dirty European train from which buckets of scraps are routinely thrown by careless foreign railway staff. (Incidentally, although Miss Froy tells us that the words 'A million Mexicans drink it' appear on the label of Harriman's Herbal Tea, they are not visible on the packet that clings to the train window.)

The jokes and send-ups are among Hitchcock's best, sharp but never malicious. The recurring cricket joke, for example, though somewhat laboured, is still quaintly appealing. Like the other main subplot involving the philandering barrister and his mistress, it makes possible those sudden and plausible changes of testimony from Iris's fellow passengers which leave her increasingly baffled without confusing the audience. The logistics of these scenes are as beautifully and unobtrusively orchestrated as any in Hitchcock. I have only one difficulty with the cricket joke. It is hard to believe that the chalet can be totally isolated from news of the outside world when Charters and Caldicott are able to read the New York Herald-Tribune in bed together. (Perhaps it is an old copy.) The newspaper is, of course, used to screen their view of the maid undressing in the room. The idea of excessive prudery is familiar in Hitchcock (Bernice Edgar, Norman Bates), but it is the least satisfying aspect of the Charters and Caldicott performance. Of rather more interest is the spectacle of the two of them in bed. Male bedmates were acceptable in comedies until well into the 1940s (see Laurel and Hardy), though it is surprising to find Caldicott naked to the waist and Charters without his pyjama pants. Perhaps it was summer after all!

Although the scenes at the chalet are usually regarded as no more than a prologue to the main action (and an overlong one at that), they contain some of the film's funniest moments. Charters and Caldicott are given half a dozen lines that would have had them up before an anti-discrimination tribunal in today's more sensitive climate. The joke lies in the fact that every put-down of the central European or 'Balkan' type ('third-rate country', 'all grown-up children, y'know') is delivered by an Englishman whose own behaviour is no less risible or offensive. It is, after all, the English who are shown to be uncultured (mistaking the 'Hungarian Rhapsody' for a national anthem), boorish (cutting off strangers' phone calls) and indifferent to the comfort of their fellow guests. The exception is Redgrave, never more likeable than here. After a certain reediness, a namby-pamby querulousness in his first encounter with Iris, his character grows steadily more debonair, intrepid and robust. The parody of ethnic folk-dancing rituals over which he presides is shrewdly timed and wickedly accurate. I used to wonder why one of the ethnic dancers was dressed in a dinner suit until a fellow Hitchcockian pointed out that he was the waiter from the dining room downstairs.

Redgrave is such a perfect foil for Lockwood's spoilt and world-weary Iris that it's surprising they weren't paired more often in subsequent films. They appeared a year later in **The Stars Look Down**, but never again thereafter. Yet in **The Lady Vanishes** they generate the sort of chemistry that Hollywood discovered all too rarely: Gable and Colbert in **It Happened One Night** (1934), Russell and Grant in **His Girl Friday** (1940). The

names and the voices were British, but the mood was pure Hollywood. No English film so clearly anticipated the Hollywood of the Forties. Iris's line - 'I've been everywhere and done everything, what is there left for me but marriage?' - exactly foreshadows the throw-away pop-cult cynicism of a later generation: 'Been there, done that'. The difference is that Iris is rewarded for her coquettish bitchery and self-pity (she ditches her unfortunate fiancé Charles at Victoria Station without so much as a pretty speech) by finding happiness with the man she loves. And as usual in Hitchcock, we are on the side of the heroine, however flawed and undeserving she may be. Linden Travers, as the genuinely deserving 'Mrs Todhunter', the one woman in the film who is truly wronged, enjoys no compensating good fortune - though the death of her caddish lover, Eric Todhunter, played by Cecil Parker, is probably a blessing in disguise.

It was **The Lady Vanishes** that first signalled Hitchcock's obsession with psychoanalysis and psychiatrists. They kept bobbing up in his films for years afterwards, offering their pat explanations, spouting whatever Freudian or neo-Freudian mumbo-jumbo was fashionable in their day: 'I've known cases where a sudden shock or blow can induce the most vivid impressions'. Hitch never tired of this sort of thing. Paul Lukas, as the brain surgeon Dr Hartz, is the consummate Hitchcock villain - urbane, handsome, humorous (even gallant enough in the final moments to wish the fugitives good luck). We like him far more than we like Eric Todhunter, the film's one genuinely contemptible figure. It is through Eric that Hitchcock and the writers articulate their political stance, which is powerfully anti-pacifist and anti-appeasement. **The Lady Vanishes** would have angered Chamberlain as much as the 'pro-German' sentiment of **The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp** (1943) is known to have angered Churchill. In 1938 appeasement was still a perfectly respectable attitude in Britain's ruling circles. In questioning appeasement Hitchcock was taking a commercial risk. And he got away with it. I think it quite likely that **The Lady Vanishes** did more than any other film to sway British opinion in favour of war with Germany. Two years later, in **Foreign Correspondent**, he tried to do the same with public opinion in America, and may well have succeeded.

But Hitchcock was far too shrewd an artist to let political attitudes distort or dominate his work. The overtly patriotic **Saboteur** (1942), which is underrated in my view, and the strongly 'anti-German' **Lifeboat** (1943) were both films of high artistic integrity. What comes through most strongly in **The Lady Vanishes** is not the director's political stance but the central philosophical notion that was to shape most of his work: the idea of an ordered world threatened by chaos, the deceptiveness of external reality. These ideas are treated with an engaging and mystifying levity that masks Hitchcock's inner seriousness.

Miss Froy's disappearance is of course the central mystery, but the sequence in the luggage van, when Iris and Gilbert search for her among the props of Signor Doppo, the Italian magician, is for me the supreme comic summation of all Hitchcock's attitudes and skills. There is no more richly inventive and effortlessly accomplished passage in all his work: it is to be compared, in my view, with the entire Grand Hotel sequence in **Young and Innocent** (1937) and the famous set-pieces in **North by Northwest** (1959). Within a few minutes we have several major plot twists, Iris's own disappearance (and reappearance), a couple of engaging impersonations by Redgrave (Sherlock Holmes, Mr Chips), the discovery of a vital clue (Miss Froy's glasses), one or two frivolous closeups of watching animals from the magician's act, Signor Doppo's capture (and disappearance), and a final dénouement, all logically linked and integrated, and executed in a lovely mood of romantic teasing and playfulness. Reality has never looked so precarious. And for good measure there are eerie premonitions of later films: the fluttering of doves and pigeons when Iris falls amid a clutter of boxes is like a foretaste of **The Birds** (1963), and the overpowering of the leather-jacketed Doppo has always reminded me of the laborious killing of Gromek in **Torn Curtain** (1966).

While writing this piece I asked another trusted Hitchcock admirer if she had any fresh thoughts about **The Lady Vanishes**. 'WHy should there be a grand piano in the Foreign Office?' she replied. It's another improbability, of course. (Why, come to think of it, would Iris's dearest friends not return with her to England for the wedding?) But the piano gives a charming flourish to the ending. This is one of several Hitchcock films in which music is vital to the plot; indeed the whole subject of music in Hitchcock is a study in itself. Hitchcock rarely used music as a mere overlay for the visuals: he used it to advance his stories, to illuminate both mood and character. And the characters in **The Lady Vanishes** are all memorably defined. Admittedly some are stereotypes; but stereotypes rely on an underlying truth, and someone, after all, must first define that truth. Miss Froy may be a stereotype of the lovable but deceptively sharp-witted old lady, a Miss Marple, but she is nonetheless believable. The baroness ('wife of the propaganda minister') is a stereotype as well, but has any woman in Hitchcock - Mrs Danvers excepted -

looked more sinister, and done so with fewer words? With characters like these there are no lapses of interest. Without a director of Hitchcock's genius **The Lady Vanishes** might have fallen flat whenever Miss Froy was absent. She is a figure of such charm that audiences would have missed her. It takes a special ingenuity to compensate for her absence in the middle of the film, and Redgrave and Lockwood are of course the key. The reunion at the end is genuinely exhilarating.

No Hitchcock film is so quintessentially the work of its director yet so obviously the product of inspired collaboration. Acting, script, casting, settings, music, timing and thematic construction - every element comes close to perfection. **The Lady Vanishes** is the most accomplished light entertainment I have seen in the cinema. Perhaps it **is** a great film, not just one of my sentimental favourites.

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Notes

1. [Editor's note. See 'John Kobal Presents the Top 100 Movies' (London: Pavilion Books, 1988).]

2. [Editor's note. The Gainsborough lady in the oval portrait - or a version of her - appears at the start of some Gainsborough films made before **The Lady Vanishes**, e.g. the 1935 **The Clairvoyant**. It's possible, though, that the lady in question was soon afterwards 'retired'. I'm fairly certain that 1940s Gainsborough films feature a different up-front lady.]

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ODD SPOT: CONFUSING THE ISSUE

James Monaco has recently edited an 'International Encyclopedia of Film'. No doubt it's excellent, and lacks blemishes like this one from his earlier 'The Connoisseur's Guide to the Movies'. Praising Billy Wilder's **Irma la Douce** (1963), he notes that it's based on a French musical. Then he adds: 'Putting such thoroughly American stars [as Shirley MacLaine and Jack Lemmon] in French roles ... confuses the tone, but the songs are good. In fact, the film turns out to be very much an American parody of French musical culture.' Interesting. For the film version, Wilder deleted all the songs.

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