

WHY HITCHCOCK IS STILL OUR CONTEMPORARY?

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There are pieces of classical music which, in our culture, became so deeply associated with their later use in some product of commercial popular culture that it is almost impossible to dissociate them from this use. Since the theme of the second movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No 20 was used in *Elvira Madigan*, a popular Swedish melodrama, this concert is even now regularly characterized as the "Elvira Madigan" concert even in editions by serious classical music editions like *Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft*... But what if, instead of exploding in an Adornian rage against such commercialized music fetishism, one makes an exception and openly confesses the guilty pleasure of enjoying a piece of music which is in itself worthless and draws all its interest from the way it was used in a product of popular culture? My favorite candidate is the "Storm Clouds Cantata" from both versions of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

When, in 1934, Hitchcock was preparing the first version, he hired Arthur Benjamin (1893-1960), an Australian composer, pianist and conductor, to write a piece of music especially for the climactic scene at Royal Albert Hall. (A curious anecdote: on 31 July 1918, Benjamin's aircraft was shot down over Germany by the young Hermann Goering, and he spent the remainder of the war as a German prisoner of war.) The music, known as the "Storm Clouds cantata", on words by D. B. Wyndham-Lewis (called by Auden "that lonely old volcano of the Right"), is also used in the 1956 remake, one of Hitchcock's underrated masterpieces. Bernard Herrmann, who was given the option of composing a new cantata, found Benjamin's piece to be so well suited to the film that he declined. Herrmann can be seen conducting it during the Royal Albert Hall scene - the sequence runs 12 minutes without any dialogue, from the beginning of Storm Clouds until the climax, when the Doris Day character screams.

Although the Cantata is a rather ridiculous piece of late-Romantic kitsch, it is not as devoid of interest as one may think. Already the words are worth quoting:

There came a whispered terror on the breeze
And the dark forest shook

And on the trembling trees
 Came the nameless fear
 And panic overtook each flying creature of the wild
 And when they all had fled
 Yet stood the trees
 Around whose heads
 Screaming
 The night birds wheeled and shot away
 Finding release
 From that which drove them onward like their prey
 The storm clouds broke and drowned the dying moon
 The storm clouds broke
 Finding release

Is this not a minimal scenario of what Gilles Deleuze called an “abstract” emotion-event: peace full of tension which grows unbearable and is finally released in a violent explosion? One should recall here Hitchcock’s dream of by-passing the narrative audio-visual medium altogether and provoke emotions in the spectator directly, manipulating through a complex mechanism his emotional neuronal centers. To put it in Platonic terms: *Psycho* is really not a film about pathological or terrorized persons, but about the “abstract” Idea of Terror which is instantiated in concrete individuals and their misfortunes. In the same way, the music of the “Storm Could Cantata” does not illustrate the words, and even less does it refer to the cinema narrative; on the contrary, it directly renders the emotion-event.

It is in this spirit that the pages on Hitchcock in my *Looking Awry* should be read: as an attempt to subtract from Hitchcock’s films all their narrative content and to isolate the intensity of their formal pattern. If we want to do a serious socio-critical reading of Hitchcock, we should discern social mediation already at this purely formal level. So let me add to the analyses contained in the book a new example of how a hidden social mediation sustains formal paradoxes. One of the most revealing, although apparently trivial, features of Alfred Hitchcock studies is the extraordinary amount of factual mistakes – much greater than the (already low) cinema studies standard. These misrepresentations concern narrative elements as well as formal features of a film: how often, when a point is being made through a detailed description of the exchange of subjective (point-of-view) and objective shots and the cuts

between them, when we take care to check it on video or DVD, we discover with surprise that the description is simply false. And, since the theoretical point of the analysis based on such misperceptions is often very perspicuous, we are tempted to adopt the attitude (falsely) attributed to Hegel: »If facts do not fit theory, so much worse for the facts!« The outstanding cases of such persisting misrepresentations concerns one of the most famous scenes in *Vertigo*: the magic moment when, in Ernie's restaurant, Scottie sees Madeleine for the first time.¹ More precisely, the misrepresentation concerns the status of two shots.

After seeing the entrance to Ernie's from the outside, there is a cut to Scottie sitting at the bar counter in the front room of the restaurant and looking through a partition into the large room with tables and guests. A long panning shot (without a cut) then takes us back and to the left, giving us an overview of the entire crowded room, the soundtrack reproducing the chatter and clatter of a busy restaurant – we should bear in mind that this, clearly, is not Scottie's point-of-view. All of a sudden, our (or, rather, the camera's) attention is caught by a focal point of attraction, a *fascinum* which fixes our gaze, a bright dazzling stain which we soon identify as the naked back of a beautiful woman. The background sound is then drowned out by Hermann's passionate music, which accompanies the camera in its gradual approach to the *fascinum* – we first recognize Elster, Madeleine's husband, facing us, and from this fact we deduce that the woman must be Madeleine. After this long shot, there is a cut back to Scottie peeping at Madeleine's table, and then another cut to Scottie's point-of-view and what he sees (Madeleine covering her back with her jacket and getting ready to leave). After Madeleine and Elster leave their table and approach Scottie on their way out, we get another famous shot. Scottie sees that the couple is getting close and, in order not to betray his mission, he looks away towards the glass across the partition of the bar, just barely peeping over his back. When Madeleine comes close to him and has to stop for a moment (while her husband is settling things with the waiter), we see her mysterious profile (and, the profile is always mysterious – we see only the half, while the other half can be a disgusting, disfigured face - or, as a matter of fact, the »true« common face of Judy, the girl who, as we learn later, is impersonating Madeleine). This fascinating shot is thus again not Scottie's point-of-view shot. It is only after Elster rejoins Madeleine, with the couple moving away from Scottie and approaching the exit from the restaurant, that we get, as a counter-shot to the shot of Scottie behind the bar, his point-of-view shot of Madeleine and Elster.

The ambiguity of subjective and objective is crucial here. Precisely insofar as Madeleine's profile is *not* Scottie's point-of-view, the shot of her profile is *totally* subjectivized, depicting not what Scottie effectively sees, but what he imagines, that is, his hallucinatory inner vision (recall how, while we see Madeleine's profile, the red background of the restaurant wall seems to get even more intense, almost threatening to explode in red heat turning into a yellow blaze – as if his passion is directly inscribed into the background). No wonder, then, that, although Scottie does not see Madeleine's profile, he acts as if he is mysteriously captivated by it, deeply affected by it. What we get in these two shots which are subjectivized without being attributed to a subject is precisely the *pure pre-subjective phenomenon*. The profile of Madeleine is a pure appearance, permeated with an excessive libidinal investment – in a way, precisely *too subjective*, too intense, to be assumed by the subject.

We thus get, twice, the same movement from the excess of subjectivity without subject to the standard procedure of what in the cinema theory is called »suture« (the exchange of objective and subjective shots, when we are first shown the person looking and then what he sees). Through such »suturing« the excess is domesticated, clearly located within the subject-object mirror relationship as exemplified by the exchange of objective shot and point-of-view counter-shot. And it is in order to erase the intensity of this subjectless-subjective shot, displaying a kind of acephalous passion, that the large majority of interpreters, from Donald Spoto and Robin Wood onward, strangely insist, in their detailed description of the scene at Ernie's, that the two excessive shots render Scottie's point-of-view. In this way, the excess is contained, reduced to the level of the standard exchange of objective and subjective shots.

What we encounter in this excess is the gaze as object, free from the strings which attach it to a particular subject. We all know the uncanny moments in our everyday lives when we catch sight of our own image and this image is *not* looking back at us. I myself remember once trying to inspect a strange growth on the side of my head using a double mirror, when, all of a sudden, I caught a glimpse of my face from the profile. The image replicated all my gestures, but in a weird uncoordinated way.

It is in such weird experiences that one catches the gist of what Lacan called gaze as *objet petit a*, the part of our image which eludes the mirror-like symmetrical relationship.

When we see ourselves from outside, from this impossible point, the traumatic feature is not that I am objectivized, reduced to an external object for the gaze, but, rather, that *it is my gaze itself which is objectivized*, which observes me from the outside, which, precisely, means that my gaze is no longer mine, that it is stolen from me... This eccentricity of the *objet a* has unexpected temporal consequences, which bring us back to Hitchcock: in his admirable text on *Vertigo*, Jean-Pierre Dupuy deployed a temporal logical paradox:

“An object possesses a property x until the time t; after t, it is not only that the object no longer has the property x; it is that it is not true that it possessed x at any time. The truth-value of the proposition ‘the object O has the property x at the moment t’ therefore depends on the moment when this proposition is enunciated.”²

One should note here the precise formulation: it is not that the truth-value of the proposition “the object O has the property x” depends on the time to which this proposition refers *even when this time is specified, the truth-value depends on the time when the proposition itself is enounced*. Or, to quote the title of Dupuy’s text, “when I’ll die, nothing of our love will ever have existed”. Think about marriage and divorce: the most intelligent argument for the right to divorce (proposed, among others, by none other than the young Marx) does not refer to common vulgarities in the style of “like all things, love attachments are also not eternal, they change in the course of time”, etc.; it rather concedes that undissolvability is in the very notion of marriage. The conclusion is that divorce always has a retroactive scope: it does not only mean that marriage is now annulled, but something much more radical – a marriage should be annulled because *it never was a true marriage*. And the same holds for Soviet Communism: it is clearly insufficient to say that, in the years of Brezhnev “stagnation” it “exhausted its potentials, no longer fitting new times”; what its miserable end demonstrates is that it was a historical deadlock *from its very beginning*.

How is this circle of changing the past possible without recourse to travel back in time? The solution was already proposed by Bergson: of course one cannot change the past reality/actuality, but what one can change is the virtual dimension of the past – when something radically New emerges, this New retroactively creates its own possibility, its own causes/conditions. A potentiality can be inserted into (or withdrawn from) past reality. Falling in love changes the past: it is as if I ALWAYS-ALREADY loved you, our love was destined, “answer of the real.” My present love causes the past which gave birth to it. The same goes

for LEGAL POWER: here also, synchrony precedes diachrony. In the same way that, once I contingently fall in love, this love was my necessary Fate, once a legal order is here, its contingent origins are erased. Once it IS here, it was always-already here, every story of its origins is a myth, like the Swift story of the origin of language in *Gulliver's Travels*: the result is already presupposed.

In *Vertigo*, it is the opposite that occurs: the past is changed so that it LOSES *objet a*. What Scottie first experiences in *Vertigo* is the LOSS of Madeleine, his fatal love; when he recreates Madeleine in Judy and then discovers that the Madeleine he knew already was Judy pretending to be Madeleine, what he discovers is not simply that Judy is a fake (he knew that she is not the true Madeleine, since he recreated a copy of Madeleine out of her), but that, *because she is NOT a fake – she IS Madeleine – Madeleine herself was already a fake – objet a* disintegrates, the very loss is lost, we get a “negation of negation.” His discovery CHANGES THE PAST, deprives the lost object of *objet a*.

Are, then, today's ethico-legal neoconservatives not a little bit like Scottie in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*: in wanting to recreate the lost order, to make a new distinguished Madeleine out of today's promiscuous and vulgar Judy, they will be sooner or later forced to admit not that it is impossible to restore to life Madeleine (the old traditional mores), but that Madeleine WAS already Judy: the corruption they are fighting in modern permissive, secular, egotist, etc. society was there from the beginning. It is like with Zen Buddhism: those who criticize the Westernized New Age image and practice of Zen, its reduction to a “relaxation technique,” as the betrayal of the authentic Japanese Zen, obliterate the fact that the features they deplore in the Westernized Zen were already there in Japanese “true” Zen: after World War II, Japanese Zen Buddhists immediately started to organize Zen courses for business managers, during the World War II their majority supported Japanese militarism, etc.

In true love, after discovering the truth, Scottie would have accepted Judy as “more Madeleine than Madeleine herself” (he DOES that just before the rise of the mother superior...): here Dupuy should be corrected. Dupuy's formula is that Scottie should left Madeleine to her past – true, but what should he have done upon discovering that Judy IS Madeleine? Past Madeleine was an imaginary lure, pretending to be what she was not (Judy played Madeleine). What Judy is doing now in playing Madeleine is TRUE LOVE. In *Vertigo*, Scottie does NOT love Madeleine – the proof is that he tries to recreate her in Judy,

changing Judy's properties to make her resemble Madeleine. The result like Marx brothers joke: "Everything about you reminds me of you – your lips, hair, arms, legs... everything except you *yourself*." A person doesn't resemble itself, it IS itself No wonder *Vertigo* can be read as a variation of the Ravelli-joke from Marx brothers: "You look like Emmanuel Ravelli!" "I AM Emmanuel Ravelli!" "Well, no wonder, then, that you look like him!" No wonder Judy looks like Madeleine – she IS Madeleine... This is why the idea to clone a child to parents who lost him (or her) is an abomination: if the parents are satisfied, their love was not true love - love is not love for the properties of the object, but for the abyssal X, the *je ne sais quoi*, in the object.

In his *Wissen und Gewissen*, Viktor Frankl reports on one of his post-WWII patients, a concentration camp survivor who reunited with his wife after the war; however, due to an illness contracted in the camp, she died soon afterwards. The patient fell into total despair, and all Frankl's attempts to drag him out of depression failed, till, one day, he told the patient: "Imagine that God would give me the power to create a woman who would have all the features of your dead wife, so that she would be indistinguishable from her – would you ask me to create her?" The patient was silent for a short time, then he stood up, said "No, thanks, doctor!", shook his hand, left and started to lead a new normal life.³ This patient did what Scottie, who precisely tried to recreate the same woman, wasn't able to do: he became aware that, while one can find the same woman as to her positive features, one cannot recreate the unfathomable *objet a* in her.

There is a science-fiction story, set a couple of hundred years ahead of our time when time travel was already possible, about an art critic who gets so fascinated by the works of a New York painter from our era that he travels back in time to meet him. However, he discovers that the painter is a worthless drunk who even steals from him the time machine and escapes to the future; alone in today's world, the art critic paints all the paintings that fascinated him in the future in made him travel into the past. Surprisingly, it was none other than Henry James who already used the same plot: *The Sense of the Past*, an unfinished manuscript found among James' papers and published posthumously in 1917, tells a similar story which uncannily resembles *Vertigo*, and caused penetrating interpretations by Stephen Spender and Borges. (Dupuy notes that James was friend with H.G.Wells – *The Sense of the Past* is his version of Wells' *Time Machine*.) After James' death this novel was converted into a very successful play *Berkeley Square*, which was made into a movie in 1933 with Leslie

Howard as Ralph Pendrel, a young New Yorker who, upon inheriting an 18th century house in London, finds in it a portrait of a remote ancestor, also named Ralph Pendrel. Fascinated by the portrait, he steps across a mysterious threshold and finds himself back in the 18th century. Among the people he meets there is a painter who was the author of the portrait that fascinated him – it is, of course, his own portrait. In his commentary, Borges provided a succinct formulation of the paradox: “*The cause is posterior to the effect, the motif of the voyage is one of the consequences of this voyage.*” James added a love aspect to the trip into the past: back in the 18th century, Ralph falls in love with Nan, a sister of his (18th century) fiancée Molly. Nan eventually realizes that Ralph is a time-traveler from the future, and she sacrifices her own happiness and help him return to his own time and to Aurora Coyne, a woman who had previously rejected Ralph but would now accept him... This story just psychotically (in the real) mystifies the circle of symbolic economy, in which effect precedes the cause, i.e., retroactively creates it.

And – here is the surprise - exactly the same holds for the legal status of the rebellion against a (legal) power in Kant’s legal philosophy: the proposition “what the rebels are doing is a crime which deserves to be punished” is true if pronounced when the rebellion is still going on; however, once the rebellion wins and establishes a new legal order, this statement about the legal status of the same past acts no longer holds. Here is Kant’s answer to the question “Is rebellion a legitimate means for a people to employ in throwing off the yoke of an alleged tyrant?”⁴:

“The rights of the people are injured; no injustice befalls the tyrant when he is deposed. There can be no doubt on this point. Nevertheless, it is in the highest degree illegitimate for the subjects to seek their rights in this way. If they fail in the struggle and are then subjected to severest punishment, they cannot complain about injustice any more than the tyrant could if they had succeeded. /.../ If the revolt of the people succeeds, what has been said is still quite compatible with the fact that the chief, on retiring to the status of a subject, cannot begin a revolt for his restoration but need not fear being made to account for his earlier administration of the state.”

Does Kant not offer here his own version of what Bernard Williams developed as “moral luck” (or, rather, “legal luck”)? The (not ethical, but legal) status of rebellion is decided retroactively: if a rebellion succeeds and establishes a new legal order, then it brings

about its own *circulus vitiosus*, i.e., it erases into ontological void its own illegal origins, it enacts the paradox of retroactively grounding itself – Kant states this paradox even more clearly a couple of pages earlier: “If a violent revolution, engendered by a bad constitution, introduces by illegal means a more legal constitution, to lead the people back to the earlier constitution would not be permitted; but, while the revolution lasted, each person who openly or covertly shared in it would have justly incurred the punishment due to those who rebel.”

One cannot be clearer: the legal status of the same act changes with time. What is, while the rebellion goes on, a punishable crime, becomes, after a new legal order is established, its own opposite – more precisely, it simply disappears, as a vanishing mediator which retroactively cancels/erases itself in its result. The same holds for the very beginning, for the emergence of the legal order out of the violent “state of nature” – Kant is fully aware that there is no historical moment of “social contract”: the unity and law of a civil society is imposed onto the people by violence whose agent is not motivated by any moral considerations: “since a uniting cause must supervene upon the variety of particular volitions in order to produce a common will from them, establishing this whole is something no one individual in the group can perform; hence in the practical execution of this idea we can count on nothing but force to establish the juridical condition, on the compulsion of which public law will later be established. We can scarcely hope to find in the legislator a moral intention sufficient to induce him to commit to the general will the establishment of a legal constitution after he has formed the nation from a horde of savages”.

What Kant is struggling with here is nothing other than the paradoxical nature of the political ACT. Recall, from the history of Marxism, Karl Kautsky’s defense of the multiparty democracy: Kautsky conceived the victory of socialism as the parliamentary victory of the social-democratic party, and even suggested that the appropriate political form of the passage from capitalism to socialism is the parliamentary coalition of progressive bourgeois parties and socialist parties. Lenin saved his utmost acerbic irony for those who engage in the endless search for some kind of “guarantee” for the revolution. This guarantee assumes two main forms: either the reified notion of social Necessity (one should not risk the revolution too early; one has to wait for the right moment, when the situation is “mature” with regard to the laws of historical development: “it is too early for the Socialist revolution, the working class is not yet mature”), or the normative (“democratic”) legitimacy (“the majority of the population is not on our side, so the revolution would not really be democratic”) - as Lenin

repeatedly put it, it is as if, before a revolutionary agent risks the seizure of power, it should get the permission from some figure of the big Other – say, organize a referendum which will ascertain that the majority supports the revolution. With Lenin, as with Lacan, the point is that a revolution *ne s'autorise que d'elle-meme*: one should assume the revolutionary ACT not covered by the big Other - the fear of taking power "prematurely," the search for the guarantee, is the fear of the abyss of the act nicely rendered in the anecdote about the exchange between Lenin and Trotsky just prior to the October Revolution: Lenin said: "What will happen with us if we fail?" Trotsky replied: "And what will happen if we succeed?" *Se non e vero e ben trovato...*

Even some Lacanians praise democracy as the "institutionalization of the lack in the Other": the premise of democracy is that no political agent is a priori legitimized to hold power, that the place of power is empty, open up to competition. However, by institutionalizing the lack, democracy neutralizes – normalizes – it, so that the big Other is again here in the guise of the democratic legitimization of our acts – in a democracy, my acts are "covered" as the legitimate acts which carry out the will of the majority. In contrast to this logic, the role of the emancipatory forces is not to passively „reflect“ the opinion of the majority, but to *create* a new majority – as Trotsky put it, a revolutionary subject should act "*not in statically reflecting a majority, but in dynamically creating it.*" Kautsky's worry that the Russian working class took power „too early“ implies the positivist vision of history as an „objective“ process which in advance determines the possible coordinates of political interventions; within this horizon, it is unimaginable that a radical political intervention would change these very „objective“ coordinates and thus in a way create the conditions for its own success. An act proper is not just a strategic intervention into a situation, bound by its conditions – it retroactively creates its conditions.

We can see where Kant's weakness resides: there is no need to evoke "radical Evil" in the guise of some dark primordial crime – all these obscure fantasies have to be evoked to obfuscate the act itself. The paradox is clear: Kant himself, who put such an accent on the ethical act as autonomous, non-pathological, irreducible to its conditions, is unable to recognize it where it happens, misreading it as its opposite, as the unthinkable "diabolical Evil." Kant is here one in the series of many conservative (and not only conservative) political thinkers, from Pascal and Joseph de Maistre, who elaborated the notion of illegitimate origins of power, of a 'founding crime' on which state power is based; to obfuscate this origins, one

should offer to ordinary people “noble lies,” heroic narratives of origins. And the surprise is that a formal analysis of the works of great artists like Hitchcock enables us to disentangle such ideological mystifications.

END NOTES

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¹ I rely here on Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, *Hitchcock et l'aventure de Vertigo*, Paris: CNRS Editions 2001, p. 123-126.

² Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Quand je mourrai, rien de notre amour n'aura jamais existé," unpublished manuscript of the intervention at the colloquium *Vertigo et la philosophie*, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris, October 14 2005.

³ Viktor Frankl, *Wissen und Gewissen*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1966.

⁴ Available online at <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kant/kant1.htm>.