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Introduction

Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980) is, of course, one of the most renowned as well as one of the most commercially successful filmmakers the world has ever known. Although he began his career in Great Britain, and learned much of his craft in Berlin, arguably Hitchcock's greatest and certainly his most acclaimed films were made in the United States. It is there that such masterpieces as *Notorious*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, and *The Birds* were scripted, shot, and distributed; there too that a number of only slightly lesser accomplishments, such as *Rope*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Spellbound*, and a host of others, were conceived, birthed, and sent out into the world.

Fifteen years ago, Richard Millington and I edited a volume devoted to the claim that Hitchcock's work is essential to the understanding of American life in the twentieth century, and vice versa. With respect to the central features of American life in this period – such matters as the rise of the national-security state, anonymity and voyeurism in urban life, and the increasing consciousness of the farther shores of psychic organization – we and our contributors argued that Hitchcock's films are as site-specific as his frequent allusions to such national monuments as the Statue of Liberty, the United Nations building, and Mount Rushmore.¹ The contributors to this volume would agree, and go further, suggesting that Hitchcock's American films are of such substance and such importance, so vitally engaged with as well as so fully energized by the national situation in which they were conceived, produced, and consumed, that he is entitled to be included in a series devoted to American icons. This volume surveys the whole of Hitchcock's career but focuses with particular intensity on his American films because these seem the most compelling to us – for Hitchcock's time, and for our own.

But, as I read over the essays, and watch and think about Hitchcock's films, it seems to me that one may want to push further still. For with respect to such charged issues as sexuality and identity, freedom and surveillance,

FREEDMAN

madness and sanity, Hitchcock's films continue to provoke and challenge our normative ideals as much as they did those of the audiences of his own time. Working within the framework of his time and place, his art continues to speak to our imaginations – and our imaginings of disaster – in ways that unsettle. He is not just an American master but a maker of modernity at large – at least if one is to define modernity, as I do, not by the masterworks of high modernism or, *pace* Fredric Jameson, the cultural logic of high capitalism, but rather as the process of undermining complacencies of all sorts: about knowledge and the self, about one's place in the world, about the stability of that world. That his films frequently do so with a mordant wit only adds to their unsettling effect.

By way of introduction, I want to flesh out these points in the context of Hitchcock's career, before and after his move to America. Hitchcock, I suggest, transformed central topoi of his own times and places – the late nineteenth century just after which he was born and in whose cultures he was steeped; that period's surprisingly subversive understanding of sexuality, which he made his own; and the America he moved to and moved in – in ways that startle and subvert across the twentieth century, and beyond. Critically reflecting upon and redirecting the culture industries by which he was shaped, commenting on and augmenting the imaginative structures of the country in which he spent most of his career, his cinema works in such a way as to extend and even call into question their *raison d'être* – and prepares us to question our own.

Hitchcock and the *Fin de Siècle*

It is important to remember, as Sara Blair reminds us in this volume (Chapter 3), that Hitchcock was born in 1899, when Queen Victoria still sat on the British throne. This was the same year in which Freud was putting the final touches on his first masterpiece: *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Each of these historical markers is important for understanding Hitchcock's conjunction with a transforming United States.

The *fin de siècle* just after which Hitchcock emerged is often thought of as one of cultural decline and imperial overreach – the moment when the sun began to set on the British Empire – but it was also a time of extraordinary cultural ferment and experimentation.² On the level of high culture, aestheticism and decadence moved to the head of the queue. Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) – a novel that Hitchcock knew and admired – put into currency the figure of the aristocratic dandy and the pursuit of art for art (both with an undertone of sexual perversity); their sensational appeal was barely dissipated – it was, if anything, augmented – by Wilde's trial

Introduction

and imprisonment in 1895. The best-selling status of that novel reminds us that the period also witnessed the rise of a mass print culture, facilitated by changes in technologies, the availability of cheap pulp paper, and the rising literacy rate, including popular books and magazines and sensational newspapers such as the *News of the World*, which made its reputation via narratives of serial killers and other sensational crimes. Stage performances, too, boomed, with music halls and spectacular melodramas challenging the bourgeois West End theater for popularity, and a host of other mass entertainments – pantomimes, puppet shows, fairs – were supplemented with new ones: dioramas, magic-lantern shows, and primitive motion picture devices such as the zoopraxiscope. Through the efforts of Eadweard Muybridge, whose studies of horses and (nude) men and women began cinema in the contemporary understanding of the word, and those of (among many others) Thomas Edison in America, G. A. Smith and Robert Paul in England, and the Lumière brothers and George Méliès's in France, a new medium seemed suddenly to appear, as if by magic: cinema.

Hitchcock entered the historical stage, in other words, at a moment of media revolution. He brought all of the forms gestating in the years before his birth and in his youth to bear on his work. Wilde's dandy, as David Greven notes in Chapter 7, informs such characters as Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and Bruno in *Strangers on a Train* (1951). So does the figure of the double, which, as Carl Freedman suggests in Chapter 5, originates in Hitchcock's encounters with such texts as *Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and works itself out throughout his oeuvre, for my money most memorably in *Strangers on a Train*, where it is thematized as the logic of "criss-cross," and *North by Northwest* (1959), where Roger Thornhill is haunted by a nonexistent entity for whom he is mistaken and whom he arguably becomes. The legitimate stage enters into the *mise-en-scène* of *Murder!* (1930), as well as becoming the subject of Hitchcock's 1950 Hollywood-meets-England extravaganza, *Stage Fright*; it's alluded to at the opening of *Rear Window* (1954), whose credits appear over bamboo shades that open like a theater curtain and whose set is indebted to the physical architecture of the theater in many ways. Radio makes an early appearance in Hitchcock's films – news of "the Avenger"'s murders on the streets of London is broadcast on that medium in *The Lodger* (1927), five years after the first news program on the BBC. So, more prominently, do the wider array of popular entertainments that flourished in Hitchcock's youth including the chorus girls who open Hitchcock's first film, *The Pleasure Garden* (1926); the fashion-cum-girlie-show in *The Lodger*; the circus in *Murder!*; and, memorably, the music hall in *The 39 Steps* (1935). The Edwardian popular press's serial-killer obsession is explicitly

FREEDMAN

referenced in *The Lodger*, and Hitchcock appears in a cameo role in the newsroom. That obsession remains in place, as Mark Goble reminds us in Chapter 12, throughout Hitchcock's career, reaching its ugliest formulation in *Frenzy* (1972).

Most compelling of all the new media forms of the era is the emerging film industry itself. It is striking to see how much early films anticipate later Hitchcock, and not just because they already realize, in prototype form, his ideal of "pure cinema."³ The British filmmaker G. A. Smith was, in the years immediately before and after Hitchcock's birth, making movies that anticipated the latter's interest in technologies of visuality and its links to the psychic derangements of voyeurism. In Smith's *As Seen Through a Telescope*, shot in 1900, for example, a gleeful gentleman witnesses a young man surreptitiously patting his girlfriend's ankle through that device, then finds himself cuffed on the head as punishment – a move Hitchcock himself makes at the end of *Rear Window*, when Jeff's voyeuristic camerawork, no matter how accurate, earns him a second broken leg.

Hitchcock cited Smith to Truffaut, in their book of interviews, as essentially inventing, along with the American filmmaker Edwin Porter, the technique of montage, or cutting.⁴ That founding cinematic technique was later perfected by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and (especially, Hitchcock felt) Lev Kuleshov – whose famous experiment showing that audiences ascribed quite different emotions to a screen actor after witnessing shots of him gazing intercut with differing point-of-view shots of what he is gazing at, proved crucial to his own cinematic practice. Hitchcock's other great influence was German film, which he viewed extensively alongside avant-garde Soviet cinema at the London Film Society but which he also, more significantly, witnessed when his British employer, Gainsborough Films, sent him to intern at the finest, most advanced film studio in the world, UFA (Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft), in Berlin. There he encountered both technical and narrative forms that marked his *mise-en-scène* for the rest of his career. Hitchcock absorbed the lessons of expressionist styles prominent in UFA films – distorted camera angles, aggressive use of light and shadow, and a host of other devices frequently deployed in the service of depicting extreme states of emotion, distress, or madness. And he had the chance to work with the best, most advanced directors of his moment, most prominently F. W. Murnau, whose filming of *The Last Laugh* (1924) Hitchcock directly observed, and whose use of a mobile camera he adapted to his own purposes.⁵ UFA's films, too, provided a thematic as well as a stylistic bridge to Hitchcock. The tracing of the thin line between sanity and madness that is on display in such films as the expressionist classic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) or Fritz Lang's brilliant *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*

Introduction

(1933), and the shifting of audience sympathy from police to criminal that is magnificently instantiated in Lang's *M* (1931) (even if already present in *The Lodger*), provide structural patterns that either anticipate or mirror Hitchcock's plot devices and index his persistent obsessions.

What Hitchcock can be said uniquely to do, then, is bundle together media cultures forming in the early years of the twentieth century and make them broadly available for the new modes of cinematic storytelling emerging at midcentury. He does the same with respect to that period's theorizing of the unconscious and its relation to sexualities – commonplaces for a contemporary audience, but in their moment, controversial ways of thinking about the human psyche and its pulsings and compulsions. Again, a long tradition of thought stands behind Hitchcock. The idea of an unconscious force within human beings, dictating their actions beyond their knowledge, is one that originates with the Greek idea of the daimon; it was articulated most fully in the nineteenth century by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose notion of an all-determining “will” was transformed by his student Eduard Hartmann into the notion of an “unconscious,” which, with contributions from French medical practitioners such as Jean-Martin Charcot, became the basis of Freud's paradigm-resaping writings. I mention this history because it suggests just how common, powerful, and shared this idea was before Freud put it into cultural play, and how fully Hitchcock, like Freud himself, was shaped by a general habit of European thought as he reshaped it in his films. Indeed, the sinister alienist in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) rings with many fin de siècle echoes, as does the weird hypnotic episode in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934 version). Hitchcock's interest in unconscious motivation came to the fore in his American films in ways that do not simply illustrate but move well, and sometimes creepily, beyond Freud – as the subject of *Spellbound* (1945), as the basic ground of *Vertigo* (1958), and, as Stephen Tifft shows in Chapter 8, as an object of vibrant contestation and dialogue as late as *Psycho* (1960).

The relation of psychic life to sexualities is perhaps Hitchcock's most fertile engagement with this broad theorizing of a darker or hidden aspect of the normative psyche. The crucial text here is Viennese psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), a book that anatomizes a whole range of deflections from the sexual norm. Krafft-Ebing's work emerged in the 1880s and gave currency in the decades that followed to the ideas of sadism and masochism (already put in cultural play by the figures after whom they were named); to these he added a wide variety of so-called perversions, including pedophilia, nymphomania, and fetishism, as well as homosexuality and lesbianism, all described in extensive case studies combined with classifications offered in an authoritative-sounding nomenclature

FREEDMAN

from which, it might be noted, we have yet to recover. Here, too, what is important about Hitchcock is the way he encapsulated these relatively new formulations and repackaged them for a mainstream audience. His films may be thought of as a cinematic equivalent of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, running through just about every standard “perversion” and adding his own Hitchcockian touches to them, ranging from cross-dressing in *Murder!*, erotic handcuff play (anticipated in *The Lodger* [1927]) in *The 39 Steps*, extending to *Rebecca* (1940), with its sadomasochistic, lesbian-inflected relationship (complete with the fondling of underwear) between the nameless second Mrs. DeWinter and Mrs. Danvers, to *Rear Window* (1954) (scopophilia), to *Vertigo* (1958) (fetishism combined with a species of necrophilia), and to *Psycho* (which invokes all of the above). And there is a career-long fascination with the erotic psychology of sadism and masochism, never better anatomized than in *Notorious* (1946), in which a relationship begins with a knockout punch delivered by secret agent Devlin (Cary Grant), and where the more rigidly and judgmentally he acts toward the recipient of his attentions, Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman), the more deeply she falls in love with him, and *Vertigo*, in which Judy’s decision not to flee but rather to stay and make Scottie fall in love with her leads to her subordination to his obsession and, ultimately, her death.

This investigation of sadism and masochism, and its connection to a self-destructiveness so great that it might be thought of as a death impulse, is one of the most profound themes in Hitchcock, leading him to his subtlest and most sublimely tragic representational engagements. Of equal importance, perhaps, is his interest in queer desire – especially, but not exclusively, male homosexuality. (Aside from the dynamics between Mrs. DeWinter II and Mrs. Danvers, direct references to lesbianism are few and far between in Hitchcock – as an example, I can think only of a classically butch patron at the diner in *The Birds* [1963].) The late nineteenth century, many critics have argued, was the era in which “homosexuality” was identified, named, and defined, and a host of literary and paraliterary texts as well as Wilde’s example constructed the modern notion of homosexual desire: Proust’s *Sodom et Gomorre* (1921–1922) and Gide’s *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (1925), for instance. If the works of these and a host of other writers in the twentieth century taught people, in David Halperin’s words, “how to be gay” (or, more precisely, how to be gay men), so did Hitchcock’s films, especially *Rope* (1948) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951), in which flamboyantly homosexual men defined the lineaments of the type.⁶ And even though in both cases – in *Strangers* in particular – the gay man is represented as a kind of psychopath, Hitchcock works, as he does throughout his films, to break down the barriers between straight and queer, normal and deviant.

Introduction

It is, after all, the hyper-straight guy, appropriately named Guy (played, with a Hitchcockian touch, by an openly bisexual actor, Farley Granger), who brushes his leg against the ostentatiously queer Bruno (played, in an equally mordant piece of counter-typecasting, by the thoroughly straight Robert Walker), initiating the contact between the two of them. There is, in Hitchcock, no untroubled sexuality of any sort; it is all – that is to say, fundamentally – queer, none more so, perhaps, than the normative variety as represented by the likes of Guy, much less the scopophile L. B. Jeffries or the impotent fetishist Scottie. Of the major American films, only Roger Thornhill can be said to be a straight straight man, but, come to think of it, about that thing he has for his mother...

Hitchcock the American

Just as Hitchcock instructed an American audience in the hidden byways of the human, so too his American films both reflected and articulated the rapid transformations of state and society that marked the United States' emergence as a world power. It is all here: World War II (*Lifeboat* [1944]); post-war national-security hysterics (*Strangers on a Train*, *North by Northwest*); imperial tourism and worldwide adventurism (*The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956]); even impending ecological catastrophe (*The Birds* [1963]). In his American films, he gives us a remarkable response to the changing conditions of American life, which frequently merge seamlessly with his own thematic and stylistic preoccupations.

Shadow of a Doubt is a classic example. Playing off the familiar small town–big city dichotomy emerging from such contemporaries as Frank Capra in the 1930s and 1940s (think of the contrast between Bedford Falls and Pottersville in *It's a Wonderful Life* [1946]), *Shadow* deconstructs that opposition, suggesting as it sends Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) from a seedy urban rooming house to the idyllic locus of Santa Rosa, California – where he meets relatives who discuss magazine descriptions of murder scenarios with relish, and a niece with whom he shares an intimate relation not untouched with incestuous overtones – that the small town is itself a fit locus for the sexual and murderous fantasies that are realized in the big city.⁷ (This small town, it should be noted, also contains a dive bar as sinister as anything one could imagine in an urban setting.) Hitchcock's ambitions to lay siege to the small-town ideal are suggested not only by his much-publicized (and not-so-consequential) employment of Thornton Wilder as a scriptwriter for the film but by his hiring of Sally Benson, who had just published a collection of stories full of nostalgia for a small town hovering on the verge of modernity, *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), which was

FREEDMAN



Figure I.1. Young Charlie at the threshold of dark knowledge in her own home.
Shadow of a Doubt (1943).

made into a movie by another great director, Vincente Minnelli, the year after *Shadow* premiered.

Hitchcock's style here goes a considerable way toward enacting this process. Following for the most part Young Charlie's unfolding awareness of her uncle's guilt and her recognition of the kinky nature of his relation to her – at one point he gives her a ring he has taken from a woman he has seduced and murdered – the film becomes literally darker, a film noir before the term had been coined. Exterior shots of her house, initially sunlit, become dappled with shade; more of the film comes to take place at night (not only Charlie's walk to the library to learn of her uncle's perfidy but also her confrontation scene with him at the bar); interiors, too, become full of shadows (Figure I.1), climaxing with a remarkable shot of Young Charlie, having read the newspaper item describing the crime that he has tried to hide from her, standing in the public library casting an enormous shadow that enacts her haunted consciousness (Figure I.2).

This device is taken straight from German expressionism; so too are the odd, contorted camera angles that define Uncle Charlie as well as Young Charlie (Figure I.3).

It is as if Hitchcock enacts the undoing of the all-American small-town ideal by representing it with a European-born technique, a tactic Orson

Introduction



Figure I.2. Shadow of a certainty: Young Charlie faces Uncle Charlie's guilt.
Shadow of a Doubt.



Figure I.3. UFA angles in a California bungalow.
Shadow of a Doubt.

Wells adopts in his most commercially successful film, *The Stranger* (1946) – a film that rings with echoes of *Shadow of a Doubt*.

If the myth of the small town is on Hitchcock's American radar, so is the critical examination of the big city and its moral and behavioral effects

FREEDMAN



Figure I.4. Urban sunbathing ...
Rear Window (1954).

on its inhabitants, effects that line up neatly with film itself. Consider, for example, that hymn to urban voyeurism *Rear Window*. Early on, Jeff is staring out his window when two young women climb up to the roof, toss their clothes on the railing, and prepare to sunbathe. Although their bodies (in bikinis?) are hidden from Jeff – and from us – a helicopter hovers overhead, getting the glimpse of female figures that is denied us and Jeff alike. Hitchcock critics might want to concentrate on the ways in which our own desire to look is both implicated and frustrated by the helicopter's ability to spy on what is hidden from us (Figures I.4, I.5, I.6).

But equally important is the way this episode implicates an entire cultural formation in the acts of voyeurism. “We’ve become a race of Peeping Toms,” Stella, the attending nurse, exclaims; even if this is true, that propensity is a product as much of environment as of genes. Everything in *Rear Window* is designed to suggest that it is the lineaments of urban modernity – the design of apartment houses, the lives of the culture workers who populate the building (no working-class folk would have the leisure time Jeff, the composer, the artist, and Miss Torso do to contemplate or perform for one another) – that create new possibilities of visual consumption and display. This most self-conscious of all films shows itself to be a part of that ensemble, a commentary on but also a component of the voyeuristic/exhibitionistic sphere of urban modernity.

Similarly, the opening-credit sequence of *North by Northwest* firmly plants Roger Thornhill in a space of urban modernity – a city of sleek, mirroring glass windows and jostling crowds through which Roger maneuvers