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Introduction

Philosophical categories illuminate films, and cinematic works invite philosophical questions. My students recognize both points immediately, and a favorite director for them is Hitchcock, be it *Blackmail*, with its consistent ambiguity; *Shadow of a Doubt*, with Charlie's identity crisis and battle with her uncle; *Strangers on a Train*, with its diabolically fascinating antihero; *I Confess*, with its tragic structures and hint at reconciliation; *Rear Window*, with its deep self-reflection; or *North by Northwest*, with its combination of adventure, wit, and philosophical resonance. Artistic works give life to philosophical puzzles and often push them forward, offering different perspectives and asking new questions. Hitchcock's favorite cinematic emotion is fear. In an era when fear of an invisible virus has upended countless lives, creating an almost universal sense of uncertainty and vulnerability, Hitchcock's films have even greater resonance.

There are good reasons why Hitchcock is among the most interpreted directors and why he thought good films should be seen more than once (*Alfred 50*). Like Shakespeare, Hitchcock reaches wide audiences, in his case with chase scenes, murder suspicions, and complex human interactions, but with enough depth and nuance to fascinate a smaller set of viewers who recognize an inexhaustible richness of form and content, including ambitious philosophical questions.

My experience of Hitchcock began as a child, before I knew what philosophy was, but over time, as his films continued to fascinate me, I realized that my enduring interest emerged from a mix of entertainment and reflection. Film depicts characters whose thoughts and actions intrigue us for their own sake, but these portrayals also reveal essential aspects of the world. Art is a source of knowledge. In engaging Hitchcock, we encounter themes that are existentially rich. This is another reason

why Hitchcock is so popular. Sure, we experience suspense, laden with a sense of unease and often danger, and we laugh, but we also identify with the struggles of characters who undergo challenges that most human beings experience on a less grand scale: unexpected difficulties, uncertainty in knowledge, identity crises, a sense of isolation, wrestling with and combating evil, recognizing deficiencies in ourselves and those we love, and the human desire for some kind of reconciliation.

In fighting the micro-management of his first American producer, David Selznick, Hitchcock found that envisaging every scene in advance, such that Hitchcock could shoot in a targeted and limited manner, creating a distinctive “jigsaw” puzzle, that in the editing room could be combined in just one way, meant that only he—and not the producer—could finalize the film (Bogdanovich 516). The puzzle method enhanced Hitchcock’s autonomy. In *Spellbound* Dr. Alex Brulov says that dreams “tell you what you are trying to hide. But they tell it to you all mixed up, like pieces of a puzzle that don’t fit. The problem of the analyst is to examine this puzzle and put the pieces together in the right place.” In *Vertigo*, Scottie is intertwined in a complex world of yearning that represents longing for love and knowledge, and his face in the crucial dream sequence expresses not so much loss as “puzzlement,” as Robert Pippin notes (*Philosophical Hitchcock* 92). Even in Hitchcock’s less overtly psychological works, puzzles and mysteries surface. Mystery implies depth and can be alluring, as with Charlie’s love for her uncle in *Shadow of a Doubt* or Scottie’s fascination with Madeleine in *Vertigo*. Most Hitchcock films have elements of complexity: how to interpret a character who is an enigma to others, if not also themselves. Some of Hitchcock’s shots are visual puzzles. Consider the “visual incongruity” of Cary Grant in a business suit waiting at the bus stop while standing in the midst of cornfields (*Hitchcock on Hitchcock* 1.296). In its incongruity the image is almost comical, but it is also unnerving. We as viewers must constantly work to interpret and piece together the various elements of Hitchcock’s films in order to grasp their hidden meanings.

Hitchcock’s films address a wide array of philosophical puzzles:

- They explore incongruities and ambiguities, which are rich sources of philosophical reflection and essential to both the comic and the horrific.

- The films, which frequently revolve around the difficulty of knowing what is inside the mind of another person and often portray characters who know more than those around them, invite questions about the fragility and complexity of knowledge.
- Identity crises, mistaken identities, and doubles repeatedly surface; these, too, interweave artistic and philosophical questions.
- Many Hitchcock characters are inadvertently thrown into worlds they did not choose. The resulting question, what do they make of their situations, dramatizes ideas at the heart of existentialism.
- Hitchcock's films exhibit fascination with the structures and power of evil. Who is evil, and how does evil shield and reveal itself?
- The topics of knowledge and identity often lead to the question: how should I act in the light of what I know? In this context Hitchcock explores courage. What is at stake when one knows the truth but cannot move others?
- Hitchcock's heroes are often isolated and alone, but they are for that no less desirous of love; his films offer nuanced insights into the dynamics of love.
- An interest in narrative arcs, in the combination of individual action and unanticipated aid, and in gestures to reconciliation raise broader questions of providence.
- By way of self-reflection Hitchcock interrogates the relation of art and reality.
- Hitchcock plays with diverse philosophical genres, including tragedy, but his most distinctive mode may be a fascinating middle ground between acceptance of the world as it is and hatred of that world; his critique of human weaknesses is a loving critique and so embodies what philosophers have called humor, a relatively uncommon comic form.

Hitchcock does not treat these issues in isolation but creatively winds them together. The director has crafted a remarkably coherent philosophical universe; each of these themes is ultimately related to the others. Knowledge of complexities interweaves ambiguities and uncertainties. Such knowledge can also elicit crises of identity, especially when the world as we knew it differs from what we suddenly encounter. Uncertainty in recognizing evil reminds us how thin the line is between goodness and evil. The mystery of evil, which Hitchcock accentuates,

forces characters to focus on knowledge and counter-strategies. Knowledge of evil impels otherwise ordinary characters to rise to the occasion. Evil is challenged with courage and often love, at times love of a higher ideal, at times love of another person, occasionally both. These topics also drive Hitchcock's play with genre. Incongruities are essential to horror as well as to tragedy and comedy. Hitchcock recognizes and exposes human weaknesses, including vulnerability to evil from within and without, but he does not hate humanity for this. Despite his engagement with terror Hitchcock almost always concludes his films with a gesture toward reconciliation. The director's focus on original sin does not mean that he has a negative or cynical view of humanity. To say that something is evil is to suggest that it is not as it should be, that is, original sin has meaning only insofar it presupposes deviation from an ideal that we can recognize and seek to realize. Only by knowing evil can we effectively guard against it, and only by knowing evil as part of a larger plan can we feel sympathy for villains even as we challenge them.

Hitchcock affirms American individualism, but tempers it with a Catholic worldview that recognizes the value of transcending individuality.¹ In Hitchcock we encounter isolated characters whose lives are endangered by the collective. Government institutions, including the police, are unreliable, in many cases corrupt. Hitchcock identifies with the modern embrace of autonomy and its skeptical attitude toward tradition, consensus, and authority figures. Yet elevation of individuality is only part of the Hitchcock narrative. Having grown up in Essex, a Catholic enclave within Protestant England, having attended Mass at the church where his father's nephew was a priest, having served as an altar boy himself, having gone to a Jesuit school, where daily Mass and weekly confession were obligatory, having had a private audience with Pope Pius XI, Hitchcock remained a Catholic throughout his life (*Alfred* 12; McGilligan 17–19, 176). He was a donor to Catholic churches and organizations, called himself a Catholic, and was buried as a Catholic (Truffaut 204; McGilligan 440; Hurley, *Soul* xi). Hitchcock recognizes the value of, and need for, help from others; embraces the primary Christian virtue, love; acknowledges moments of grace; and invokes providence. Still, true to his natural irreverence, Hitchcock both developed and questioned Catholic positions.

This book interweaves Hitchcock's layered accounts of philosophical issues with his technical brilliance. Hitchcock experienced film at its

origin when it was still a silent medium. He then carried his work forward to the age of talkies, color films, and ever new technical innovations. Like few others, Hitchcock mastered cinematic means of indirect communication: camera angles, framing, light, editing, and sound.

My focus in these pages is artwork aesthetics, that is, a film's ideas and form, the interrelation of the two, and the interrelation of parts and whole. Production and reception aesthetics play minor roles; they interest me here only insofar as they cast indirect light on the works or on the relevance of the films for us today. This is why even when it comes to the topic of women, which has received considerable attention in recent Hitchcock literature, I look primarily at women in the films themselves, not at the director's personal relations with women, which Donald Spoto has harshly criticized in *The Dark Side of Genius*.²

In Chapter 1, "Hitchcock's Philosophical Universe," I explore the philosophical questions Hitchcock raises and the positions his films adopt. His integration of incongruities opens up the horrific and the comic. Hitchcock reflects on uncertainty in knowing others, challenges to identity, means of exerting power, and ways of wrestling with evil. He returns again and again to the concepts of courage and love. His critique of human inadequacy, which reinforces his assessment of an impulse toward cruelty, a kind of original sin, is nonetheless compatible with an ultimately affirmative view of humankind, one enhanced by concepts of grace and providence. The topics he explores bring his films into conversation with objective idealists, such as Plato and Hegel; skeptics, such as Nietzsche; and philosophers of art, such as Hermann Cohen, who articulates a theory of humor as the loving critique of an inadequate world.

My second chapter, "Hitchcock as a Master of Form," opens with observations on film as a distinctive art and analyzes some of Hitchcock's film-specific ways of conveying meaning and arousing emotions. The chapter moves on to broader artistic dimensions, including Hitchcock's integration of doubles and symbolic forms, and concludes with his play with genre, from self-reflexive art, which is by nature philosophical, to tragedy, comedy, and a complex third form beyond tragedy and comedy.

Chapter 3 interweaves the themes above with a close analysis of *Shadow of a Doubt*, one of Hitchcock's favorites. The young heroine, Charlie, is bored with the ordinary world and wants to transcend it. What

she discovers, however, is horrific. The film explores the dialectic of love and hate and engages a range of genre categories. Here Hitchcock is both critical of the ordinary and aware of its ultimate dignity. Charlie must wrestle with uncertainty in intersubjective relations, esoteric knowledge, and the complexity of evil. We see in this film the ways in which Hitchcock interweaves the universal and the contemporary, which leads me to introduce a new concept, “evocative allusion,” a mode of drawing attention to specific historical events without, however, reducing a work to allegory.

Two shorter chapters conclude the work. “Hitchcock’s Real and Apparent Gaps” analyzes areas in which Hitchcock can be evaluated for potential weaknesses: his relative neglect of social challenges; his portrayal of women; his unevenness in dealing with psychological issues; and his occasionally implausible plot lines and black-and-white character portrayals. All of these have a moment of truth, but they can also be at least partially countered. “Hitchcock and Beyond” initiates a broader intellectual conversation. Hitchcock’s themes shed indirect light on a wide range of contemporary issues, including the dichotomy of superior and inferior beings, opposition between fear and openness, the rise of disinformation, and the advancement of power as an end in itself. Hitchcock’s elevation of the unrelenting search for knowledge, his loving critique of contemporary inadequacies, and his hope despite adversity provide unexpected resources as we think through contemporary dilemmas.

The book shows how one can philosophize indirectly by engaging the films of a great director. Via Hitchcock’s exemplary case, we see how productive film can be for philosophy and philosophy for film analysis.³ I am arguing that Hitchcock’s films evoke philosophical ideas, not that Hitchcock intended to express them. The meaning of a work is not reducible to the consciousness that created it. Already Plato observed that poets are poor interpreters; they write not so much out of wisdom as out of instinct or inspiration. Great artists may have an unconscious sense of what is fitting, as when they step back to view a canvas before continuing to paint or make revisions after rereading lines of a poem, but they less commonly have the categorical apparatus to describe the value of their works or their meanings. Hitchcock downplays ideas and views himself as a technician: “I am not deeply interested in the moral or the message of the film.”⁴ By referring to the form and content of a

work, we can ferret out meanings of which the director may have been at most only vaguely aware. The trick is not to read into the works but to recognize the patterns, structures, dimensions of the works that allow the viewer to defend this or that interpretation.

The book should interest not only scholars and students in philosophy and film but also educated film connoisseurs. It is not the first book to explore Hitchcock and philosophy, but its style and selection of themes differ from what is otherwise available.⁵

