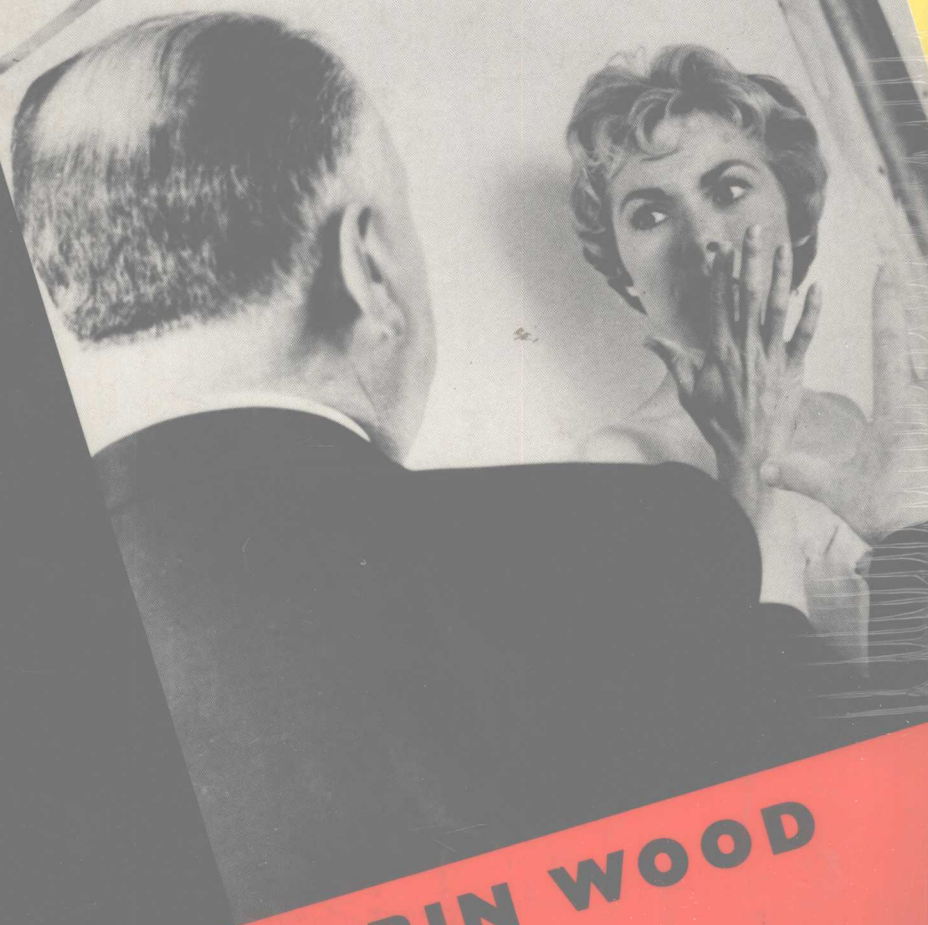


HITCHCOCK'S FILMS REVISITED



ROBIN WOOD

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Careers are dependent, in so many cases, not on personal determination and ambition but on more-or-less chance occurrence. The first piece of film criticism that I submitted for publication was an article on *Psycho* that, in a considerably expanded form, was the basis of the chapter in *Hitchcock's Films*. I wrote it purely because I was engaged at that time in fairly automatic (though not actively unpleasant) manual labor (weeding baby fir-trees on a plantation in Scotland) and became so bored that I had to think about *something*, and *Psycho* was what I had just seen. I submitted the article to *Sight and Sound*, and it was rejected by Penelope Houston, who informed me in a very courteous letter that I had failed to grasp that the film was intended as a joke. I wish to thank her now both for the courtesy and the rejection. I then sent the article to *Cahiers du Cinéma* and, to my amazement, it was accepted by Eric Rohmer, then the editor of that illustrious publication. My career as a film critic and teacher really dates from that moment.

It was Peter Cowie who, during a late night party, suggested I write a book on Hitchcock for his publishing company the Tantivy Press. If I had been halfway sober I would certainly have laughed and swept aside such a ridiculous suggestion; as it was, I took the idea home to my then wife Aline, recounting it to her as a joke, and she calmly told me that of course I must do it. I thought she must be crazy, too, but I allowed myself to be talked into it. The original book was, and remains, gratefully dedicated to her. I wish also to thank Peter Cowie for what at the time seemed a hopelessly misguided faith in my abilities and stamina. The "Retrospective" of 1977 belongs to the period when I lived with John Anderson. John is still a loved and valued friend, and I wish to thank him again for the strength and firmness he provided during the most difficult period of my life.

Some of the more recent material in this book has already appeared in periodicals and is reprinted here with the permission of the various editors. “Ideology, Genre, Auteur” (now chapter 14) appeared in *Film Comment* and “Male Desire, Male Anxiety” (now chapter 18) in *American Film*; I have slightly revised and expanded the former and have written a new introduction for the latter. The essay on *Blackmail* and the section of the new introduction on F. R. Leavis were originally published in *CineAction!*. Many of the stills were supplied by the Ontario Film Institute, and I want to thank Gerald Pratley for his generous cooperation.

One name crops up repeatedly in the text, that of Andrew Britton. Andrew is both a dearly loved friend and the major influence on my work over the past decade.

Finally I want to thank Richard Lippe, but there is so much to thank him for that I hardly know where to begin or end. Richard and I have lived together for almost twelve years, and our work as critics and teachers has become increasingly collaborative. Beyond that is the incalculable debt I owe Richard for his emotional support, love, and comradeship.

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INTRODUCTION (1988)

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP

The project undertaken in this book has posed a problem to which there is probably no completely satisfying solution. *Hitchcock's Films* was written in the early '60s: it has been through three editions (accruing extra material in its different incarnations) and has been out of print for a number of years. When I wrote it the technology of film study was still in a fairly primitive stage (as was the critical apparatus): with most of the films I worked from memory, or from notes scribbled in movie theaters during public screenings: the most sophisticated machinery I had (occasionally) at my disposal was a standard 16mm. projector. Many Hitchcock films, including "key" works like *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Under Capricorn* were not available at all at that time in England; others were available only in errant formats (the chapter on *Vertigo* was written using a low contrast 16mm. black-and-white print).

More important, however, than the deficiencies of technology and availability is the fact that the book belongs firmly to a certain phase in the evolution of film theory/criticism whose assumptions are no longer acceptable without qualifications so drastic as effectively to transform them: the high point of auteur theory in its original, unmodified form, as developed out of Bazin and the early *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Those assumptions (to a degree new to the criticism of Hollywood movies, though not foreign to many of the forms of traditional aesthetics) can be spelled out quite crudely as follows: The critic's task is to discover great works and explicate their significance, acting as a mediator between the artist and the less educated, less aware public; great works of art are produced by great artists; the interest—degree of success or failure—of

any work derives unproblematically from the artist who created it; aspects of the work that cannot be argued to be personal to the artist can be dismissed as insignificant or as unfortunate impediments or irritants; the artist's "great" works must be singled out and pantheonized, the lesser works pushed aside as relatively unimportant, their interest (if any) lying in their relationship to the "great" works; these "great" works are statements about the human condition, about "life," and they are essentially self-contained and self-sufficient. Assumptions such as these will be found to inform *Hitchcock's Films*.

Finding, twenty years later, that I have more to say about Hitchcock, and wishing to discuss some of the films the original book neglected (rectifying, for example, its completely indefensible attitude to the British period), what relationship should I establish between the new work and the old? Two solutions immediately proposed themselves (and were proposed by interested editors and their professional readers). One: to consign *Hitchcock's Films* to oblivion and produce an entirely new book. Two: to revise the original in order to bring it into line with my current critical position, incorporating the new material so that the films would be treated (as in the original) in chronological order. Both these solutions swiftly proved impossible for me; I think they are also undesirable.

First solution: Whatever my own present attitude to *Hitchcock's Films* (it is far from simple), it is clear that many people continue to regard it as important. Some have told me that it is still the best book on Hitchcock; I am frequently asked why it is out of print and whether it is possible to obtain a copy anywhere. And the tone of these remarks and inquiries suggests clearly enough that the book is not regarded as of merely historical interest. Even if I wished to repudiate it altogether, who am I among so many? But the matter is not so simple. If my list of underlying assumptions suggests repudiation, I would have to qualify this by saying that those assumptions, even today, do not seem to me entirely untenable and cannot simply be swept aside contemptuously (they would of course need careful and thorough reformulation). It is also true that a book (like a film) cannot be reduced to its underlying assumptions (though it is very important to be aware of them). The analyses in *Hitchcock's Films* seem to me, by and large, to stand up still (which is not to claim that they are "correct" or exclusive, the only possible readings); and, on the whole, I stand by the evaluations to

which the analyses lead (where I now think I was wrong I have indicated my disagreement with myself in endnotes). A difference in critical position may and often does produce radically different insights, but this is not necessarily the case. Raymond Bellour's account of *Psycho*, for example, though the theoretical apparatus he employs is vastly more sophisticated, does not seem to me to differ in its basic apprehensions from the one I offered in *Hitchcock's Films* (both center their argument on the continuity the film establishes between "normal" and "abnormal," neurosis and psychosis); it was simply written from a different ideological position and in another language (I don't just mean French). In general I have no urge to produce new essays on the films covered in the original book (I have made an exception in the case of *Vertigo*, though there too the new reading will be found to recapitulate many of the insights of the old, from a different ideological position).

It is the ideological shift that renders the second solution impossible: I cannot now "revise" *Hitchcock's Films*. If the perceptions and the insights would be broadly similar they would invariably be expressed quite differently, the difference being one of viewpoint and attitude.

The author of *Hitchcock's Films* was totally innocent even of any concept of ideology: he literally didn't know what the term meant. In effect, of course, what this amounted to was that he saw everything through the tunnel vision of bourgeois ideology, its assumptions naturalized into "truth," "reality," "the human condition," "human nature," "common sense." He was also untouched by feminism: the relative positions of men and women in our culture were taken as natural and "given," as a fact of life, and if you had told him that gender roles were culturally constructed he would not have listened. Somewhere around 1970 he received a rude awakening on two fronts simultaneously, personal and professional.

Certain critics have expressed the view that the result of this awakening has been constricting, that my approach to the cinema has become limited by ideological concerns and my adopted political position. I disagree entirely. I believe that I now see far more in films than I used to, because I have allowed myself to become aware of depths, tensions, conflicts that lie beneath the "auteurist" surface, that enter the film through the author from the culture of which both he and his work are products (though never *mere* products).

There is another issue here, that of honesty. It is notorious that W. H.

Auden, when he passed from his Communist period to his Christian period, revised a number of his earlier poems in order to eliminate their Communist references and make them conform to his later position. That this could be achieved relatively easily testifies to the superficiality of his Communism, but it also seems to me deeply dishonest, amounting to a pretense that he didn't say what in fact he said. There are strong moral grounds, then, on which I must decline to "translate" (or disguise) my earlier work. It was written from the viewpoint of a somewhat confused and despairing liberal humanist, at a period when I could still convince myself (with a certain struggle and many suppressions) that such a position was viable amid the conditions of modern capitalism.


Hence the unorthodox (as far as I know unique) structure of the present book. The first half consists of the original *Hitchcock's Films* reprinted "warts and all" as it was written, preceded by an introductory account of some of the basic developments in film criticism/theory since the '60s and the problems they have given rise to, with footnotes that correct its errors and record my own disagreements with its readings. The errors are, I think, worth registering rather than surreptitiously correcting: to draw attention to their existence should help to counter the very common tendency among film students to quote from printed texts uncritically, as if they were assumed to be sacrosanct and infallible. I have also restored to its proper place the "retrospective" that I wrote for the third edition: I always intended it to come at the end of the book, not at the beginning, and it now forms a transition to the book's second part. With the exception of chapter 14 (1976), all the material in book 2 has been written since 1980. If the primary text remains the analysis of Hitchcock's work, this unusual structure provides the book with a sub-text: the shifts in critical perspective (both personal and more-than-personal) over the past three decades. It becomes as much a book about critical practice as a book about Hitchcock.

One major characterizing difference between the two halves of this book will immediately strike the reader: the original text constitutes a coherent whole (or the illusion of such), the essays that make up the book's second half do not. I am not proposing this as a relative *weakness* of the new material, rather the contrary. The coherence of *Hitchcock's Films* was the logical consequence of its commitment to auteur theory; the absence of coherence within its sequel follows from the dissolution of that "theory," at least in its original, unmodified form. *Hitchcock's*

coherent

Films had as its premise not only that the films—insofar as they are significant—belong exclusively to Hitchcock, but that every great artist's work follows a logical and progressive development. The book was centered firmly on the notion of Hitchcock-as-artist, and could trace the evolution of his thematic concerns chronologically. No such simple structuring principle operates in the second half of this book. Hitchcock, to be sure, remains a constant reference point (the films could not possibly have come into existence without him and his presence remains their strongest connecting link). But the films do not belong *only* to him: they belong also to commercial cinema (British or American), its conventions and constraints, both what it enables and what it prohibits, its various systems (studio, star, genre); and they belong to the culture, its institutions, its values, its ideology, its internal conflicts and struggles. The essays in book 2 are still arranged, for the most part, chronologically, but here this is largely arbitrary, a matter of convenience and convention rather than necessity. Rather than seeking to build a coherent, step-by-step argument (demonstration of an artist's greatness), they seek to explore individual films from a variety of approaches, retaining an awareness of the complex of influences and determinants operating upon the production of a given work. I certainly do not wish to deny that the dominant approach, within which all others are contained, remains "auteurist" (this is still a book about *Hitchcock's* films); but I have wanted to take into account and make use of the many valuable critical developments of the past two decades—work on generic convention, the principles of classical narrative, the construction of "classical Hollywood films" both overall and from shot to shot, stars and how they signify, the relation of films to our culture's construction of gender. I do not, of course, mean "absence of coherence" to be synonymous with "incoherence": the essays that form the second half belong to each other, but loosely, in a complex and far from comprehensive interdependence, not as steps in a sequential argument.

One thing further has to be said about the relation between the books' two halves: If I am now "some kind of a Marxist" (in the rather dubious sense in which Hank Quinlan was "some kind of a man"), I have reached that position without abandoning my basic humanist assumptions. Indeed, I would argue that a Marxism that finds humanism totally incompatible and rejects any attempt to rethink and incorporate it invalidates itself: there is something very peculiar about a Marxism that finds



no place for the recognition of individual human skills, intelligence, and emotion. The ultimate aim must always be a society in which individuals can develop and fulfill themselves to the maximum. The possibility of doing so, however, must be available to all human beings equally, not just to those of a privileged class, color, gender, sexual orientation, etc. The values of capitalism, the cruder, more blatant aspects of its ideology, must also be countered and undermined: the concept of individual fulfillment becomes perverted and ludicrous if it is perceived in terms of money, power, status, “success.” There must be the recognition that fulfillment can be achieved only through human cooperation not competition, and that, if there is a final, irreducible component of “human nature,” it is precisely the ability to cooperate, to relate. Such, roughly, seem to me the fundamental and constitutive ideals of humanism, and they could only conceivably be realized through a socialist organization of culture—a Marxism informed by feminism and the revelations of psychoanalytic theory.

One of the more obvious continuities between my early and later work is the consistently critical, hostile attitude to the dominant trends of our culture. In the early work the criticism of culture is weakened by various factors, particularly by an unthinking belief in something called “the human condition,” a belief that “life is like that,” that its basic conditions are universal and unchangeable. Such a belief is clearly an indispensable staple of bourgeois intellectualism: it automatically precludes the necessity of analyzing the actual conditions of life in our culture and the social forces that have constructed those conditions. Ideological blinkers apart, it was impossible for me then on a personal level to challenge (or even imagine the possibility of challenging) the bourgeois concept of the nuclear family (and the gender roles and positions it is built upon and reproduces) as a supreme value. I had a very generalized sense that capitalist civilization had reached an extreme phase of degeneracy and decadence, and the family seemed the only refuge from that outside world, existing somehow apart from it. The only hope for positive change I could see lay in education, especially education in the arts: if people could learn to love works of art (our “storehouse of recorded values,” in I. A. Richards’ famous and beautiful phrase) they would be transformed as individuals and gradually this would lead to the transformation of our culture. I don’t think I was ever really convinced by this belief: I was constantly haunted by a sense of

impotence and desperation (my gravitation during this period to the films of Ingmar Bergman and my close identification with them—or at least with the image of them that I constructed—is symptomatic). Now, of course, the sheer absurdity of such a belief is fully evident. Back then, I couldn't allow myself to grasp that the damage and brutalization wrought upon the human sensibility by consumer capitalism had already progressed far beyond hope of any incidental bits of repair work, and I had no concept of base and superstructure and the relationship between them. Neither could I grasp, being myself then a schoolteacher, that the “progressive” work that is possible within our educational system is necessarily extremely limited, that system being itself the product and instrument of bourgeois patriarchal capitalism, hence fundamentally inimical to anything that seriously threatens it.

Many would argue that the logical consequence of such a shift in position would be a commitment to the school of structuralism and semiotics, with its admixture of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, as offering the most penetrating radical analysis available of our culture, its inhabitants, its artifacts. I have always had a strong inbuilt resistance to such a step, which I now think subsequent developments have justified. The resistance was always partly the result of personal deficiency, my incapacity for abstract theorizing; my mind (such as it is) has always demanded the practical and the concrete, and the only abstract ideas it seems capable of assimilating are those that it can relate directly to experience. Another, less self-denigrating way of putting this would be to say that I am very British, with deep roots in a peculiarly British tradition that my semiological fellow countrymen have rejected (implicitly, on occasion explicitly) with an unreflecting and comprehensive contempt, in favor of a peculiarly French tradition. I am no isolationist, I am opposed to all forms of political nationalism, and I believe firmly that we should expose ourselves to influences from other cultures; but I also think we do ourselves a very substantial injury when we deliberately cut ourselves off from our cultural roots. The British tradition to which I refer (both creative and critical) might be represented by such figures as William Blake, George Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, F. R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams: the range and partial incompatibility of those writers should effectively counter any suggestion that I think any one of them (any more than Freud or Marx) should be accepted unquestioningly.

Indeed, it is precisely the phenomenon of unquestioning acceptance—the illusory and misguided search for an oracle who reveals “truth”—that I have always profoundly mistrusted in the semiotic structuralist tradition: the parade of gods—Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida—has become embarrassing. The sense of Divine Revelation is epitomized in one constantly recurring, peculiarly irritating trait: we are never told that “Barthes (etc. . . .) *argues* that . . .,” always that “Barthes *shows* that” We must not, *cannot*, argue with something that has been *shown* to be so. For myself, I don’t dismiss the French tradition, and I make use of whatever odds and ends of it I can assimilate; but I need something more concrete, more directly engaged with life as it is lived and with culture as it practically exists; I have come to find Raymond Williams more useful than Barthes. The political thrust of the semiotics movement seems now largely lost: the adoption of Lacan was the decisive step in the process, his idiosyncratic combination of obscurantism, essentialism, and abstraction leading inevitably away from any practical and direct political involvement in actual social practices. With Lacan “the human condition” and its fixed and unchangeable gender roles come back with a vengeance, and political engagement is abandoned in favor of the furthering of academic careers through the churning out of increasingly hermetic learned “papers.”

Revisiting Hitchcock twenty-five years later necessarily involves reopening the issue of authorship. So much has happened in the interim. At the most extreme, the author as controlling and responsible agent has disappeared altogether: Barthes’ celebrated formulation, “The author does not write, he is written,” seems to have gained widespread currency throughout the semiotic/structuralist school. There have also been numerous attempts to reformulate the notion of the author: Peter Wollen’s suggestion that we distinguish between Hawks (a person) and “Hawks” (a body of work bearing his signature as director); the *Cahiers du Cinéma* notion of “inscription” (it is Ford’s “inscription” that is held largely responsible for the ideological rupturing of *Young Mr. Lincoln*); Raymond Bellour’s substitution of the term “enunciator.” All of these seem to me interesting, suggestive, useful up to a point, but finally unsatisfying—the usefulness being primarily a matter of drawing attention to the problems.

Initially, the assault on the notion of personal authorship was a

perfectly justifiable response to the early excesses of auteur theory. Auteurism emphasized the personal signature at the expense of everything else (sometimes valuing a director's work just because it could be demonstrated to have one) and, at the worst, claimed or at least implied that the author was solely and exclusively responsible for the meaning and quality of his texts. Its opponents countered this by pointing out that the author did not invent the language and conventions of his medium, the genre within which the work was located, the ideological assumptions inherent in the culture and necessarily reproduced (with whatever inflections) in the individual text; neither did the author control the conditions of production. However necessary at the time to counterbalance auteurist excess, this scarcely constituted a novel or startling revelation. Anyone with even a casual familiarity with the history of Shakespeare criticism will be aware that critics through all periods have not generally credited Shakespeare with the invention of the English language, blank verse, the iambic pentameter, the forms, genres, and conventions of the Elizabethan drama, or even the plots of his own plays. No sane person, as far as I am aware, has ever sought to claim that a work of art or entertainment has ever been produced by some kind of immaculate conception and virgin birth, or like Minerva springing fully armed from the head of Zeus.

The crux is of course the introduction into criticism of concepts of ideology. If one begins to see a film as the product of multiple determinants—the auteur, other contributors, generic conventions, studio conditions, the prevailing social/political climate, etc.—one quickly sees that all these are contained within something much bigger, all-embracing: the assumptions, values, and ideas available within the culture, which may extend back from this week's latest trend to the dawn of the human race. Behind “the author does not write, he is written” lies the assumption that we are all the slaves or prisoners of ideology, that we have neither control, responsibility, nor the power of decision, that everything we do, say, or write is determined: we are the prisoners of language, and language is ideology made concrete. It seems true that we cannot live outside ideology—if by ideology we mean the human need to formulate ideas about and attitudes to life and relationships, ideas, and attitudes that will inevitably be influenced (positively or negatively) by those already available within the culture, or available from other cultures to which we have access. In this sense, ideology would appear

everything
comes from somewhere
else