

Tom Cohen 2005: *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies. Volume I. Secret Agents*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P. 284 pp. ISBN: 0-8166-4206-0; ISBN -13: 978-0-8166-4206-9

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A panoramic shot of the city of London ominously turns to focalise a crowd that, on the banks of the river Thames, attends an improvised electoral speech. The attention of the audience is violently perturbed when a young lady's nude corpse appears floating on the waters. The cause of murder: strangulation. The weapon: a tie around the deceased's neck. This brief summary corresponds to the initial scenes of Hitchcock's penultimate feature film, *Frenzy* (1973). All the elements that orchestrate the grisly cadence of this opening will be perfectly identifiable for anyone well acquainted with the British director's filmography. Thus, as François Truffaut accurately pointed out to Hitchcock during one of their encounters: "*Frenzy* is the combination of two series of films: those in which Hitchcock invites us to follow a murderer's itinerary: *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Stage Fright*, *Dial M for Murder* and *Psycho*, and those in which the torments of an innocent wrongly accused of a crime are described: *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *I Confess*, *The Wrong Man* and *North by Northwest*" (1984: 321). Indeed, *Frenzy* acts as a sort of epitaphic film that integrates Hitchcock's favourite signatures and motifs coined in his silent films and recurrently revisited in subsequent cinematic productions. This is precisely what Tom Cohen's extensive monograph in two volumes is mostly concerned with: Hitchcock's idiosyncratic universe of "citational" terms, objects, aural and visual puns, signature effects, and agents" (vol. I: 49).

However, before proceeding further into the evaluation of *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies*, it is essential to highlight that this study demands a genuinely specialised target audience. To begin with, Cohen's approximation to Hitchcock's motion pictures is *asystematic* insofar as the films he selects are mostly considered as a pretext or a point of departure to develop and reaffirm his poststructuralist theoretical views on *teletechnics* and *deauratic* and *deautorised* cinema. Furthermore, Cohen does not deliberate over what seems immediately perceptible onscreen, but is interested in the particular and more often apparently insignificant elements that, with absolute probability, will escape the scrutiny of the most attentive viewer. To cite a couple of examples, in considering one of the most successful films by Hitchcock, *Psycho* (1960), Cohen obliterates any allusion to the famous shower episode in the Bates Motel but, instead, concentrates on peripheral examinations such as the *atopical* location of Norman Bates' mother, or the black hole capacity of the bog where Norman drowns Janet Leigh's car (vol. II: chapter 5). Equally, when dealing with Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929) – the first British talking

film –, he articulates his exploration around three seemingly anecdotic moments that involve characters reading and, most particularly, the interruption of the act of reading (I: chapter 4). Otherwise, Cohen deploys an intricate network of poststructuralist argumentation that will most likely obfuscate those not too familiar with radical assaults on traditional epistemological parameters. Not in vain is Cohen a reputed expert on several of the pivotal poststructuralist figures such as Paul de Man or Jacques Derrida, and he has researched widely on the topic of anti-mimesis that he continues to expand all throughout his new publication. All these allusions to the considerable theoretical opaqueness of *Cryptonymies* are not meant as detrimental but, quite on the contrary, as an appraisal to his daring attempt. Hence, the cryptic *aporias* in *Cryptonymies* propitiate an authentic subversive rereading of Hitchcock's films and cinema under the light of the evaluation of the aesthetic image, not as a reliable and straight reproduction of the object reflected, but as an autonomous constructed and mediated production, not *specular* anymore but *spectral* in a Derridean sense.

The organisational frame of *Cryptonymies* in two volumes, subdivided into secondary thematic parts and a closing coda, replicates the poststructuralist singular logic of Cohen's thrust since a precise theoretical internal division is almost imperceptible. Despite this playful disruption between the external demarcations and the contents, Cohen purports that the first volume analyses *cryptonymies* as "epistemopolitical agents mobilized against the home state's ocularcentric and auratic premises", while its companion "asks how that 'revolutionary uplift' operates after that war's end" (II: xv). Furthermore, the intricate theoretical intertwining of Cohen's argumentation, its narrative style and the minute examination of minimal objects in the films selected, rather than the comprehensive consideration of whole plots, prevents the tracing of a definite structural articulation whatsoever. Nevertheless, a flexibility that seems perfectly attuned to Cohen's theoretical framework can produce an inexplicable misplacement such as that observed in a chapter devoted to providing a general glossary of Hitchcockian tropes (I: chapter 2). This 'User's Guide to Hitchcock's Signature Systems' is awkwardly located in a specific thematic section despite its generality and overall applicability. Subsequently, from a theoretical perspective, it would seem more appropriate to place it independently as a way of introductory clarification. In addition, neither of the two volumes includes a standard bibliography and all the bibliographic citations are inserted into the final note sections, which will probably pose considerable difficulty for a reader interested in giving an overall glance at the bibliographic archive or looking for a specific reference.

Leaving aside structural shortcomings, what makes Cohen's ambitious project noteworthy is his endeavour to supersede previous theoretical approaches to Hitchcock's films. In so doing, he dismisses the predominant trend in Hitchcockian criticism characterised by "an occlusion by and large of an entire order of signifying agents and writing experiments, ... the dominance of ocularcentric and identificatory response (pro and con), an alliance between thematic and Oedipal modes, historicism and various rhetorics of 'gaze'" (I: 5). This tendency was initiated with Éric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol's *Hitchcock* (1957), and pursued by critics such as Paul Duncan or Thomas Leitch who have placed their focus of analysis on the factual dimension of

Hitchcock's filmography. In their encyclopaedic projects, whose lack of critical relevance is rampant, these two authors have reiterated a diachronic revision of the director's production. Thus, taking Duncan's *Alfred Hitchcock: The Complete Films* (2003) as a paradigmatic example of this critical mode, we observe how his book follows a systematic linear pattern where the director's biography is accompanied by a chronological revision of each of his films which, in turn, are solely regarded from a thematic point of view. Other approaches within this trend have been undertaken from historicist, social or gendered perspectives that, according to Cohen, have privileged anthropomorphic evaluations over the complex inner aesthetics of the films, consequently consolidating the dominant stereotyped canon of Hitchcock's works as merely propagandist, monomaniac or misogynist. Cohen also refers to Elisabeth Weis and John Belton's *Film Sound* (1985), Tania Modleski's *The Women Who Knew Too Much* (1988), Thomas Leitch's *Find the Director and Other Hitchcock Games* (1991), or Peter Conrad's *The Hitchcock Murders* (2000), which could be grouped as those timidly aiming at introducing alternative readings on Hitchcock, but irrevocably falling back on 'theological inflections' that emphasise mnemonic and empiric interpretations rather than allowing the necessary autonomy to cinematic practice as a self-contained, self-sustained performative construction. Nonetheless, there has also been a second movement in the theoretical corpus on Hitchcock, the one that Cohen exhausts and even surmounts in his analysis. Among those listed by Cohen as providing a real challenge to traditional heuristic approaches to cinema and to the premised binarism of the sign – which in this context takes the form of a cinematic image – we can find key names in the fields of deconstructivism and historical materialism: Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida or Fredric Jameson. In keeping with their praxis, Cohen aspires to break down to pieces the dominance of meaning consumption that propels commercial cinema and to confront it with the "secret visual elements ... that traverse all of [Hitchcock's] works linking each to each in perpetual if active interface" (I: xi). However, Cohen does not replicate these authors' postulates *acritically* but, quite the opposite, reveals numerous instances where most of them proved to be too much threaded to the screen, unable to develop their arguments to the extent of rupturing completely a dependency on mimesis.

Three essential and interlinked operations are those that constitute Cohen's deconstructive enterprise in *Cryptonymies*:

- 1) The reconceptualisation of the notion of cinema by demolishing the 'metaphysics of presence' and revoking the potentiality of Benjamin's *aura* – a term that can be translated as personification or anthropocentrism – in film studies. Therefore, the cinematic image, despite its visual immediacy and its apparent transparency, does not invoke by itself any inextricable mimetic connection, as Cohen demonstrates in his examination of the first version of Hitchcock's classic thriller *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) (I: chapter 9). This movie is presented as a continuum of impasses articulated in the form of a relentless series of references to light and solar symbols in confrontation with blindness, black suns and visual occlusion. Paradoxically enough, light and *solarity* are but deceiving simulacrum that, in reality, constitute the "secret

agencies” that from within the film itself are set to lead an undercover battle against “purely [visual] cinema” (I: 247). This dematerialising process achieves in Hitchcock’s works a rhythmic tempo that is translated into a multiplicity of ‘hosts’ whose objective is to sabotage the aesthetic structures they parasite. This operation even reaches *epistemo-political* dimensions since, as Cohen states: “From *The Lodger* to *The Birds*, something unrepresentable is avenging against a totality, a home state and police system routinely under threat of having its interiority turned inside out” (I: 99). Coming back to *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, this film is constructed as a peculiar Moebian strip where a superficial viewing will conclude that the film is but an ordinary thriller, whereas an exhaustive enquiry into its numerous and non-casual visual tropes will reveal an underlying system which by its mere existence calls into question any pretence of unambiguousness, while at the same time it challenges the cognitive abilities of the viewer.

- 2) Exposing the viewer overtly to the dilemma of meaning creation on the screen through two of the most remarkable Hitchcockian conflictive semiotic manoeuvres: the MacGuffin and the director’s own cameos. The former represents the very essence of what Cohen underscores in *Cryptonymies*, the conspicuous diatribe between *ocularcentrism* and the pecking out of the viewers’ conventional ways of seeing and interpreting. The MacGuffin – a random denomination without a proper definition– incarnates a zero function conceived with a self-cancelling logic.<sup>1</sup> In *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935), one of Hitchcock’s more prominent espionage plots, the MacGuffin reaches colossal proportions, becoming almost synonymous with the film in its entirety. Briefly, its protagonist, Richard Hannay, is fiercely chased both by Scotland Yard and by the members of an obscure organisation, the Thirty-Nine Steps, in a constant exacerbation of motifs without any final resolution. Thus, as the film ends tracing a circular detour, we are perplexed by three questions: What exactly are the Thirty-Nine Steps? What is the vital secret they conceal? Does it justify the frenetic persecution suffered by Hannay? More than two decades later, in his series of Hollywood films, Hitchcock will resort again to the same tactics of the prolonged MacGuffin in his celebrated thriller *North by Northwest* (1959), which the director appraised as the best and the most derisory of all his MacGuffins (Truffaut 1984: 45). Precisely all the pre-eminence that most critics have conceded to the MacGuffin is undermined by Hitchcock himself when he declared that “the MacGuffin is nothing”. For Cohen this radical negation of any transcendental implication is a process of “deontologizing identification” (II: 156), a total subversion of the cinematic image “that is disclosed to be not

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<sup>1</sup> Hitchcock ironically ‘clarified’ to Truffaut the nature of this concept: “The word MacGuffin comes from a story about two men in an English train ... The first one says, “Well, what’s a MacGuffin?” “It’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish highlands”. So the other says, “But there are no lions in the Scottish highlands”. And he answers, “then that’s no MacGuffin” (1984: 43).

mimetic or representational but *something else*" (II: 259, emphasis in original). As a consequence, in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* or in *North by Northwest* there is no plausible explanation or resolution as there is no original to refer back to, no truth to be discerned, but just an obvious neutralization or implosion of meaning, in a sense parallel to that theorised by Jean Baudrillard in relation with the collapsing of reality and communication at the hands of mass media and hyperreality (2002: 79-86).

Similarly, in every Hitchcock film we are exposed to the director's unmistakable profile, his picture or his elusive role as an extra. These cameos do not indicate that we are facing the real director, nor even an actor, but a surrogate, an 'external-internal' figure, a *parergon* element or frame. This *in-betweenness* evidences that cinema can just be a self-conscious fiction: "a simulacrum [that] destroys auteuruality and authority, [and] voids the mimetic logic" (I: 242). The recurrence of Hitchcock's cameos, as much as their potentiality to originate "the complex network of traces and effects that we call 'Hitchcock'" (II: 261), makes Cohen designate this practice with a proper denomination: *cameonomies*. In addition, the functional analogies between the MacGuffin and the cameo are obvious, as Cohen explicates: "like the cameo, the MacGuffin voids referential contracts, converts objects into citations" (II: 156).

- 3) Revealing that the transition from "mimetic media's representational humanism" (I: 12) to the era of *teletechnics* and *globalisation* is an integral part of Hitchcock's filmography and in evident interconnection with Cohen's interest in "[situating] 'cinema' in the accelerated histories of writing and memory systems, including, today, the entire advance of electronic image culture, media, artificial memory, techno-weapons, and global capital" (I: 249). Most specifically, Cohen emphasises the deluge of machines, transports and telecommunication mechanisms of the most variegated kind –telephones, radios, fans, telegraphs, mills, bombs, trains, etc.– that, from Hitchcock's first silent films, inundate the screen. For instance, the opening scenes of his silent film *The Lodger* (1926) constitute an authentic barrage of images depicting enormous printing presses publishing information on the latest murder by the serial killer known as The Avenger. *The Secret Agent* (1936), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Strangers on a Train* (1951) or *North by Northwest* are some of the various creations in which the central action or crucial moments of the plot take place on a train, one of Hitchcock's favourite signatures symbolising, as Cohen interprets it, the motion of cinematic production. As stated by Cohen, this obsessive inscription of technological artefacts has been unjustly ignored by most critics when, in fact, it represents a basic clue to unearthing an internal anti-mimetic operation that illustrates "a transition from a bibliocentric culture to one of telemedia ... or, beyond that, as a perhaps still unexplored event in a broader set of histories, say, in the globalization of what can be called the tele-archive and the epistemology of the image" (II: xiii). Also, in so doing, Hitchcock would be launching a war on cinematics through its very technical

premises and their representation onscreen. Indeed, most of Hitchcock's plots promote an inverted logic of the image and its inception since the filmic image is originated not in memory, analogy or mimesis but by means of the generating capacity of technology that precedes any promise of the anteriority of the senses. Cohen exemplifies this aspect referring to the editing of newspapers in *The Lodger* as a *preoriginary* momentum where "the giant machines issue dead repetitive prints" (II: 259). The centrality of the machine, as the origin or the centre of discourse in a sort of *adamic* conception, connects with the Derridean proposal on the immanence of the signature and its dependency on *repeatability*: the signature is detachable from the signatory, that is to say, it is an autonomous entity in a parallel sense to that of Hitchcock's cinematics that "apprehends its technical premises as a war within and over the tele-archival, as an anarchist, which is also to say over the production of virtual pasts and alternative futures (II: 262). Accordingly, Hitchcock's 'war machines' are allied to the cinematic project of suspending conventional notions of *auterism* and *ocularcentrism*. This disturbing awakening of the technological is emphasised in the lethal attack that birds unleash on the population of Bodega Bay in Hitchcock's classic film *The Birds* (1963). As Cohen reiterates, the birds in the movie are not intended to represent living organisms in a biological sense; in fact they behave automatically with an inordinate fury and cruelty. What matters is the savage combat they, as *animemes*, unleash against their observers as responding to a blinding programmed revenge.

Taken as a whole, what Cohen ultimately discusses in *Cryptonymies* is the *undecidability* –the play of presence and absence– at the origin of cinematic meaning and the sabotage potential of *teletechnics*, *animemes* and tropes. All aspects considered, it could be affirmed that Cohen echoes Nietzsche by proclaiming the death of cinema as traditionally conceptualised. This categorical assertion, which Cohen implicitly formulates throughout *Cryptonymies*, calls for a new set of definitions for a cinematic practice that refutes the very basis of cinema viewing and interpreting, and this is exactly what the author aspires to effect in these two volumes. Finally, it is always rewarding to come across a critical work that so audaciously escapes from theoretical stagnant conventions to magnificently achieve the aim of revealing and interpreting artefacts that are central in understanding Hitchcock's filmography. Thus, despite the high level of epistemological complexity and its sinuous structure, *Cryptonymies* is a welcome contribution that will open promising new ways of readdressing the otherwise presumably exhausted field of Hitchcockian criticism.

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