

**David Baggett and William A. Drumin, Eds. *Hitchcock and Philosophy. Dial M for Metaphysics*. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2007, 273 pp. ISBN 978-0812696165. Soft back \$14.00.**

**Reviewed by**

**Gregory Minissale**

“Becoming is never imitating. When Hitchcock does birds, he does not reproduce bird calls, he produces an electronic sound like a field of intensities or a wave of vibrations, a continuous variation, like a terrible threat welling up inside of us” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987: 305).

“It is the camera, and not a dialogue, which explains why the hero of *Rear Window* has a broken leg (photos of the racing car in his room, broken camera)” (Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, 2001: 201).

These short quotes are worth more than all the dismal moral platitudes that most essay writers in *Hitchcock and Philosophy* try to extract from Hitchcock’s films. Such a book that brings together nineteen essays on the topic could have been wide-ranging and exciting. Unfortunately, this is not really the case: too many writers here use quotes from the screenplays in Hitchcock’s films to illustrate issues to do with ethics, identity, epistemology and love, which are all blown out of proportion given such flimsy pretexts. In such cases, one wonders why it is necessary to watch a Hitchcock film at all if one is merely using the script to demonstrate well-known and unremarkable philosophical concepts that can be found almost anywhere: one may as well just read extracts from the screenplay, theorise about them at will, and be done with it.

Hitchcock’s richly evocative visual sequences enable his films to unfold fluently without a slavish dependence on commentary. These non-verbal forms of communication also indicate a different kind of philosophy at work in Hitchcock, one which has an intimate relationship with psychology and visual phenomenology. See, for example, the vertical lines that keep reappearing in *Spellbound* and in Dali’s dream sequence that articulate the nature of obsessive behavioural disorder and the uncanny. There is also the continual use of parallel lines in the composition of many scenes in *Strangers on a Train*. The opening sequence of the parallel rail tracks crossing over implies notions of being and nothingness, destiny and freedom of choice. On a simplistic level, these visual patterns reinforce the themes of the two strangers whose lives become dangerously entangled, only to end up in the regressive, spiralling form of the carousel, the film’s coda, where all havoc is let loose on the world. The constant doubling of the visual exposition and the rapid cross-cutting techniques are all very telling and drive home a *visual* dualistic thinking struggling for sublation that is indicative of the deep structural relation of the subject-object. One could go on, but this shows us that a broad range of philosophical approaches are possible with Hitchcock, why resort to dry epistemological explanation or safe and homely moral sureties, when his films promise so much more?

It might have been interesting to do a study of how the Hegelian master-slave dialectic helps us to appreciate not only the verbal enunciations replete with emotional

obviousness in *Rope* or *Strangers on a Train* but also, the techniques of montage, lighting and cross-cutting, and the innuendo of gesture and glance. Moreover, in *Vertigo*, the spiral motif articulates cyclical time, *l'amour fou*, infinite regress and predestination; *Rear Window* repeats framing and *mise en abyme* devices, the cinema screen, the camera aperture, the window to engage with the philosophy of reflection—it is not simply a moral tale warning us of how sinister voyeurism is (Silberstein, 187-202). Similarly, *Rope* should not be seen simply as a Hitchcockian rejection of an errant strand of Nietzscheanism (Binderman and Jacobowitz, 33-47) but rather, as an attempt *to film* the 'perfect' murder, an enterprise which reflects back on Hitchcock's primary objective to transform a (not very exciting) stage bound play, and a grubby murder, into art, using cinematic values—very few of which are acknowledged in this book.

These visual leitmotifs are no mere tricks of the trade for Hitchcock; they show us an overwhelmingly important aspect of the director's philosophy of film: that it should speak volumes in visual terms, using a visual method of organising thought by modelling space and form in time with the use of lighting, camera angles and editing techniques. Hitchcock was always keen to represent visual knowledge: in many of his films there is a threefold reflexive manoeuvre whereby the characters construct their identities through visual revelation (*Spellbound*, *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, *Marnie*) and in a sense, so do the audience, and even, ultimately, Hitchcock himself who explores his own artistic language.

One of the few essays in this book that indicates an alternative to treating Hitchcock's films as snippets of a screenplay upon which to expand on ill fitting and convoluted ethical discourse is Thomas E. Wartenberg's 'Ethics or film theory?' (141-155). The writer correctly emphasises Hitchcockian self-reflexivity: "although *North by Northwest* appears to be about a conflict between ethical perspectives, it turns out that it is really about the power of film itself" (Wartenberg, 154). It is a pity that this important theme could not have been developed instead of wasting time discussing possible ethical motivations for character's actions in *North by Northwest*. One would have thought that this would be the bare minimum requirement for a convincing characterisation by any competent director, but surely secondary to Hitchcock's other concerns, such as his interest in visual rhetoric.

Nöel Carroll's, '*Vertigo* and the pathologies of romantic love' (99-101) also, thankfully, treats Hitchcock's films as films. In one of the most perceptive passages in the whole book he writes:

"Scottie follows Madeleine into the somewhat drab, near entrance of a building. When he peeks through the door that she has just closed behind her, there is a wondrous burst of color. She is in a florist's shop and there are flowers everywhere. The contrast with the muted palette in previous shots is striking. One feels that one has just been introduced into a new realm. What has been saliently marked is the exfoliation of Scottie's fantasy. The pronounced color, like that of the land of the Wizard of Oz, in the film of the same name, suggests that we are within Scottie's mind, privy to his subjectivity" (107).

Here, at least, is someone who recognises Hitchcock's visual intelligence, so pivotal in ordering his universe and developing the criss-crossing psychologies of his characters for all to see. The use of flowers by Hitchcock suggests an uplifting flourish bringing spring to mind, and even Carroll's writing about the scene achieves something similar amongst those other essays in the book which, in contrast, appear muted and grey, dealing with dry issues of the rights and wrongs of the characters' public enunciations. It is, however, the visual language which reveals the primacy of the hidden worlds of his characters, and even Hitchcock's own passions. Hitchcock's films are profoundly amoral and they allow viewers to make their own minds up about good and bad. True, Hitchcock's characters were often punished but beyond the moralising endings of the Hollywood system that constrained Hitchcock's work, we are left with images of people who speak for themselves unconventionally and occasionally methodically. Nevertheless, these are never really Hitchcock's major themes. Above all, his films attest to the pursuit of scopophilia by projecting his characters' scopophilia.

It is difficult to accept the view that Hitchcock is a moral *auteur* (Sander Lee, 96), as his films are often elaborately malicious. He had a methodical approach to visualising psychoanalysis and the projections of repressive mechanisms in particular. He devised clever ways to visually suggest and enhance a prurient interest in the libido. And he took his time and care celebrating a precisely aesthetic visualisation of cruelty as a form of entertainment and art. Testament to this is the marvellously visual extended carousel sequence in *Strangers on a Train* where petrified children, suddenly knocked off their seats, hang on for their lives as the carousel swings wildly out of control. The two main protagonists, the strangers on the train who are now on an entirely different method of transport, kick and punch each other under the stamping hooves of surreal, ornamental horses. The visual rhythms are gripping, and the suspense of the old man creeping underneath the carousel to get at the brakes is ingeniously sadistic. It is only when things are brought to a calamitous end and the carousel spins off its axis to fling its passengers into the world are we released from the director's vision of cyclical torment.

Of course, all this pales into comparison with the iconic shower scene in *Psycho*: spiteful, yet abstract, the stream of water edited with flashes of light and sharp metal evoking lightning and rain, inhuman, beyond our power, and like a series of birds pecking, or electric shocks, uses up the space of dialogue and moral deliberation altogether. But then, slowly, comes a surge of pathos: the camera focuses on rivulets of water, tears that stream down irreversibly into the drain dissolving the victim's blood, life and identity, seeping imperceptibly into a spiralling abyss and lost forever. The sequence is brought to a close by the shot of the stark punctum of the victim's eye, frozen in an empty stare. It is a murder scene elevated to the realm of beauty by anyone who knows anything about cinematic technique. The imagery of water is not lost on us: the life giving force, the washing away of sin, the victim's, the murderer's, Hitchcock's, there is no closure here, and that is its finesse. To impute a message of moral judgement in his work with an appeal to what his characters say is surely one of the basest ways to praise his work.

Sometimes the book provides some interesting controversy. Michael Silberstein in '*Rear Window*: Hitchcock's allegory of the cave' (187-202) claims that *Rear Window* "is a

filmic Platonic dialogue about the moral nature of film” (194) and that Hitchcock wanted to “free his fellow prisoners from the illusion-engendering cave”. Hitchcock wanted nothing of the sort. *Rear Window* only ‘moralises’ in order to set up straw men. Like any artist, Hitchcock desperately needed his viewers to be enthralled by his configuration of visual elements. Viewers and commentators have always enjoyed the erudite allusions to film and its methods which *Rear Window* insinuates visually, but this does not simply procure a critical distance (which Silberstein curiously associates with moral superiority) but instead, induces an even deeper involvement.

After viewing *Rear Window* are we really “wiser about the dangers and thrills of voyeurism”? (194). I think not. The dictionary definition of voyeurism is that some form of sexual gratification should be derived from the object of observation. Jeff the photographer is, in fact, desexualised as he is demobilised. What does come under analysis in this film is the wide array of the scopic drive, and it deals with this subject not with any convincing commitment to pithy moral instruction but by representing different examples of what it means to look. The film, in any case, is not some pill that we should take in order to cleanse us of our ‘voyeurism’—such a characterisation is tantamount to the ‘Walt Disney-fication’ of Hitchcock. Instead, *Rear Window* unashamedly revels in its seductive power and visual style. Those who would see it as a Sunday school parable just miss the point. If anything, the film teaches us to have a critical distance from those who pontificate about ethics and see every scopic pleasure as a form of perversion. After all, Jeff the photographer (Jimmy Stewart) laid up with a broken leg, and in a sense, forced to view all of this specular predestination unfold before him, refuses to succumb to the women’s vacuous moralising and instead, exposes the murderer by visually tracking him down.

To be fair, Silberstein is aware of the ugliness of creating a film “with a clear, starkly articulated unambiguous message [...] usually berated as being pedantic or preachy” (199) but surely, this should also be true for those commenting on his films. Silberstein’s possibly admirable attempt to save film from the moral disapproval of the Neo-Platonists unfortunately reinforces the most important Platonic (or in modern terms, utilitarian) principle, that art should be high-minded and do-goody in order to come up to Platonic standards. He does this by insisting that *Rear Window* is a critique of voyeurism. The mistake is to set up a binary between accepting voyeurism and damning it. One could instead, contemplate the scission of voyeurism and film: they are not the same thing, and it is foolish to confound them.

Indeed, Aeon J. Skoble, ‘*Rear Window*: Looking at things ethically’ (203-212) notes that spectators have no moral duties towards the characters in a film, and this is precisely why the notion that watching ‘voyeurs’ in *Rear Window* makes the filmgoer also a ‘voyeur’ is a *non sequitur*. He writes that Hitchcock is inclined not to criticise voyeurism *per se* but instead, a disinterested kind that encourages us to become indifferent to the problems and suffering which we observe in others (204). How convenient for someone interested in making his films more involving. It justifies Hitchcock’s enduring commitment to embrace his viewers deeper into cinematic experience both critically *and* emotionally. Most of the characters in the film—bar the murderer—end up being ‘voyeurs’ at some

point. And they are not indifferent to each other or to what they see; they care passionately about the security and health of all the people that they decide to get involved with by studying them, and with no ill intent.

The wonderful thing about *Rear Window* is not its disapproval of voyeurism but its enhancement of visual experience as a creative involvement. The way in which we create narratives about people's lives in reality and in fiction is not indicative of our maladjusted, introverted, antisocial self-loathing (197) but instantiates our empathy for others, and exercises the power of our art. All the characters in *Rear Window* are fictional and so is their 'voyeurism'. Nevertheless, they reflect our concern to connect not only to others but to our own creative imagination which we use to negotiate a multiplicity of points of views and perspectivism. Many art historians have identified a similar visual dynamic in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* which, like *Rear Window*, questions the privileged vantage point of the transcendental knowing subject in favour of a radical intersubjectivity. In a sense, *Rear Window* makes artists, writers and film directors out of us all. Gadamer, Ricoeur, Iser all believed that the viewer or reader of a work of art is its co-creator. If *Rear Window* visually represents a fusion of horizons—Hitchcock's, the characters', actors' and the cinemagoers'—it does this not by lecturing us on the wickedness of peeping Toms but by teaching us to get more involved in the intersubjective processes of experience where voyeurism plays not a necessarily immoral part, just a minor one. In many of Hitchcock's films, we witness the sublimation of the libidinal scopic drive into an aesthetic experience. *Rear Window* achieves this and shows it to be morally justified. The next logical step is to see Hitchcock's elevation of the scopic drive into the philosophy of reflection. And this is achieved because *Rear Window* shows us that the scopic drive can be turned onto itself to examine its own modalities as being in the world.

One could have used Foucault (his panopticon and his essay on *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things*); Lacan's mirror stage, or even Bataille's concept of visual inter-repulsion to understand Hitchcock's scopophilia. At the very least, philosophers should signal an awareness of the traps of logocentric reductionism when dealing with visual material; heed the dynamics of Derrida's *parergon* while writing about the framing devices of *Rear Window* (not to mention Deleuze's essays on sensation and Merleau-Ponty's on Cézanne), and show an interest in avoiding the pitfalls of denigrating visual perception (a good start would have been to consult Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*). Sartre's keyhole sequence in *Being and Nothingness* provides an opportunity to show how complex are the conscious processes of voyeurism: we do not have to dull our brains to its transformations and subtleties. Hitchcock, at least, was eager to explore the exciting possibilities of this grey area in *Rear Window*, *Vertigo* and in many other films as part of a visual, cinematic and ultimately philosophical investigation into the visible world and our attachment to it. Indeed, there is unfortunately little in this book that indicates an understanding of this, Hitchcock's lifelong commitment to exploring the economy, wisdom and becoming of visual experience.