

# The Existential Hitchcock



“The whole of Hitchcock’s *oeuvre*...is haunted by the anamorphic skull of the *memento mori*.”

--Pascal Bonitzer

## Some Existential Themes in Hitchcock’s Movies

The anamorphic skull that Pascal Bonitzer refers to is in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533). In the painting, two richly attired men of evident success stand amid the accoutrements of their success, instruments of science, learning, and the arts, all indicative of great wealth. At the base of the painting there is an anamorphic blot that, when looked at from an oblique angle, clicks into focus as a skull, a *memento mori*. All of these trappings of success will do nothing to avert death. There is something grimly amusing about the contrast between the worldly pride that the men display, and its revelation as a *vanitas* by the anamorphic skull once seen in focus. “*Vanitas*” is from the Latin for “empty,” and *vanitas* paintings were meant to be commentaries on the emptiness of worldly values, and reminders of other values that will prove more real when confronted with the reality of our death.

I take the anamorphic skull that haunts “the whole of Hitchcock’s *oeuvre*” to be, like the skull in Holbein’s painting, a sign of an underlying emptiness. The very idea of ‘suspense,’ the genre for which Hitchcock was famous, suggests an abyss beneath, an emptiness over which one is suspended. His famous McGuffin is a figure for the nothing that drives his plots. When, in *North by Northwest* (1959), Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) asks Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) what

the “O.” of his middle initial stands for, he says, “Nothing.” There is a funny, sad, tragic truth to this description of nothing at the center of his identity. There is a similar abyss that haunts virtually all of Hitchcock’s films. His grappling with this abyss distinguishes him as an existential filmmaker of the first order.

Roger Thornhill’s problem with his ‘I’, however, is not just his problem alone. We all have problems with our ‘I’s’ these days. There is a mystery to the ‘I’ that takes a particularly pressing form in modernity. The identity crisis seems to be a peculiarly modern phenomenon. Where once one was born a king or a peasant, a soldier or a slave, in the modern world of bourgeois wealth and freedom, one’s identity becomes a thing of choice, hence a problem to be solved. Descartes, as the first ‘modern’ philosopher, orients his whole philosophy around the question that he asks in the second Meditation, “Who is this ‘I’ who asks, ‘Who is this I?’”<sup>1</sup> This is a deeply existential question (although Descartes himself evaded its existential import).

Heidegger introduces two important existential ideas that recur in the films of Hitchcock: “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) and “fallenness” (*Verfallen*). ‘Thrownness’ refers to the fact that we are thrust into a world we do not choose, with a gender, class, race, nation, historical period, none of which are in our control. ‘Fallenness’ refers to our condition of inauthenticity, our tendency to fall in with the values of the crowd. We live as a ‘they’ when we avoid confronting the reality of our eventual death, and hence in denial about the real nature of our life. This is the condition that Heidegger calls our ‘fallenness.’ Hitchcock repeatedly plays with the trope of the threat of a fall, as in, for example, *Saboteur* (1942), *Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief*, and *North by Northwest*. This idea of the threat of a fall has overtones of the Biblical Fall, a remnant perhaps for both Hitchcock and for Heidegger of their catholic upbringing,<sup>2</sup> as well as of a fall out of authentic being into the inauthentic condition of ‘theyness.’ The sense of the Fall is translated, in Hitchcock’s films as well as in Heidegger’s philosophy, into the experience of a continual threat of falling. The apparent obverse of the fall is grace, a similarly arbitrary (in our experience of it) and troubling phenomenon. As Slavoj Žižek says about the “religious problematic of grace” that pervades Hitchcock’s films, “Alfred Hitchcock, the English Catholic, in whose films a change in relations between persons, in no way rooted in their characters, totally external to them, changes everything, deeply affects them (say, when, at the beginning of *North-by-Northwest*, Thornhill is wrongly identified as Kaplan).”<sup>3</sup> Falling in love, one of

the most frequently used themes in Hitchcock's films, can have the same sense of arbitrariness and disconnectedness from one's character, and from whom one feels oneself to be.

These are deep existential issues, which are raised by the definition of existentialism given by Sartre in his essay "The Humanism of Existentialism." He begins by describing several varieties of existentialism, but then identifies their fundamental similarities: "What they [the variety of existentialisms] have in common is that they think that existence precedes essence..."<sup>4</sup> or, as Sartre says a few paragraphs later, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself."<sup>5</sup> This seems to be the core idea of existentialism, that who we are depends on what we make of ourselves, what choices we make in the world. But what are we to make of ourselves? We seem, at once, to have an infinite number of choices about who we will be, and no choice at all. Our futures are at once completely open and overdetermined by the matrix of ideological forces into which we have been thrown (or into which we have fallen). Hitchcock's most characteristic narrative trope depicts a protagonist thrown into a situation that has a backstory with which he or she is wholly unfamiliar. They must work their way through by whatever means their guile and creativity can summon, explicitly confronting the existential challenge we all face. This makes Hitchcock a deeply existential director. In what follows I will offer a Sartrean reading of a scene from *Psycho*, a Heideggerian reading of *Vertigo*, and an existential take on Hitchcock's idea of the idea of the MacGuffin.

### **The Existential Drain Hole of the Universe in *Psycho***

The best visual evidence that Hitchcock read some twentieth century existentialist philosophy is the "peeping Tom" sequence in *Psycho*. In a famous section of *Being and Nothingness* called "The Look," Jean-Paul Sartre describes a scene that he presents as representative of the human condition; it is a scene of extreme humiliation. The scene that Sartre describes begins with a man looking through a keyhole into a room in which there is someone whose image is a source of fascination for the man, say, a woman undressing for her shower.<sup>6</sup>

Sartre sees the essence of our identity as being doubly constituted: we are part subject and part object. Each of these two sides of our identity has its drawbacks for us. As subject, we are aware of our incompleteness, our need and vulnerability. As object, we are less than human, no better than a clod of dirt, and without any intrinsic value. What we want, according to Sartre, is to be a subject, a consciousness, that has the invulnerable completeness of an object. We want to

retain our subjectivity but lose our vulnerability. We want to be an invulnerable subjectivity. This condition is what Sartre understands to be the condition of God. What we want, according to Sartre, is to be God, which is impossible; hence Sartre says, “Man is a useless passion.”<sup>7</sup>

In the keyhole example, however, there is a momentary experience of a kind of infantile, narcissistic bliss in which we feel ourselves to be pure subject, pure consciousness, simply fascinated by the object of our gaze. This bliss is rudely disturbed when the man looking through the keyhole suddenly hears footsteps coming down the corridor in which he is crouching. With horror and humiliation the man now feels himself to be rendered a mere object in the gaze of another subject. We are made most excruciatingly aware of our own extreme vulnerability, according to Sartre, by the gaze of another subject. What we are vulnerable to is being made into a mere object by the gaze of another.

This is how Sartre describes the experience of this kind of encounter with another human being, the situation in this case is seeing a man while walking in a park:

...suddenly an object [the Other, another human being] has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place; everything still exists for me; but everything is traversed by an invisible flight and congealed in the direction of a new object. The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a congealed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting. ...it appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole.<sup>8</sup>

The drain hole of the world is the eye of the Other. Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) is determined to put an end to this efflux of the world. Instead of draining the world from him, he will drain the world from it, and we see the world, quite literally, flow down a drain into the abyss of nothingness, a vibrant ‘I’ rendered a mere object, an unmoving eye. Whose footsteps provoke the shame that initiates the desperate need to end the objectifying gaze? Norman’s mother’s, of course.

It is the footsteps of his mother echoing down the hallways of his subconscious, or, perhaps, not so sub-conscious in Norman’s case, that prompts Norman to identify with, and then to become, his mother once again. But Hitchcock is not just playing with Norman. He is playing with the audience as well. We are set up to identify with Norman, his struggles, his stutter, and his gaze, especially when he is looking through the peephole at Marion Crane. What sets him off may not

be just the footsteps of his mother. It may be that he has a vague sense of being watched, of being seen, by someone other than his mother, and that it is this that ignites his sense of guilt and outrage. Of course, he is being watched. We, the audience, are watching him. And, in so far as we identify with Norman, we are watching ourselves, seeing ourselves, and we are, presumably, alarmed by what we see, which is ourselves enjoying a guilty pleasure which we are enjoying both literally and vicariously. Watching movies is a kind of guilty pleasure in so far as it is more or less passive, voyeuristic, and scopophilic. Watching Janet Leigh strip down to her underwear is a guilty pleasure that I assume women can enjoy as much as men. And, vicariously, we are enjoying this pleasure through the eyes of Norman, who is peeping through a hole in the wall. We, the audience, become the objects of our own subjective vision. Norman feels his own life flowing down the drain hole of the world when he is overwhelmed by the gaze of his mother and the audience. This leads him to attack Marion, who is the only source for the drain of the world that he has actually access to at that moment, as if in his seeing of her he felt also seen by her. And our seeing him seeing her is as if we were being seen by him and ourselves. In this way we share Marion's fate. It is our life, our world that flows down the drain hole of the world, which has its source in Norman's and our own subjectivity. Our own subjectivity is the cause of the death of our subjectivity. We die with Marion and it is our own dead eye at which we gaze when we gaze at that dead still eye that had been Marion's. Or, maybe it is, and has always been, Norman's mother's dead still eye that is the drain of the world, which is what the final scene of the movie would suggest.

The shower scene in *Psycho* appears to be a visual re-creation of a quite famous philosophical passage from an important twentieth century philosopher (though stranger coincidences are indeed possible). It seems to offer not just a re-creation, but also a commentary on that passage. The archetypal sequence described by Sartre is visually rendered by Hitchcock, and we feel the emerging ideas as we experience its series of cuts and reframings. First the intimate conversation between Marion (Janet Leigh) and Norman, then Norman looking through the peephole, Marion reduced to an object for Norman's (and our) gaze, Norman's sudden moment of self-consciousness and shame (due, in this case, to the scrutiny of Mother, his alter ego), the attack, the drain, the eye (now dead), and the lost 'I'.

Hitchcock is not just recreating this famous philosophical scene visually, however; he is also offering an implicit critique of Sartre's philosophy. This is

not how the world is for the average man: Norman is clearly pathological. In retrospect, the surprise is not so much that Norman kills Marion, but that he did not stuff her as well. His mother's gaze was the original conversion by him of another competing subject into an object, and he stuffed her. Hitchcock seems to be saying that this is not the universal human condition, as Sartre suggests, but the condition of the developmentally stunted and the pathologically violent. One way of interpreting Hitchcock's films is to see many of them as being devoted to the "construction of the couple."<sup>9</sup> This seems true enough, but it is worth noting that Hitchcock devotes some of his most powerful films to the failure to construct a couple, especially *Psycho*, and *Vertigo*. It is as though Hitchcock were arguing, via montage, that Sartre is right as far as he goes, that this sense of antagonism between subjects is there, but it is not necessarily where all human relationships must end.

### **The Ethics of Anguish in *Vertigo***

There is perhaps no more striking image of existential despair than that of Scottie Ferguson standing at the edge of the top of the San Juan Bautista tower, arms spread in supplicant disbelief. What he cannot believe is what has just happened (again). What he supplicates is some account from the abyss about what this could possibly mean. He gets no answer and is forlorn. This is the ending of *Vertigo*, the film that immediately precedes *North by Northwest*. If *North by Northwest* is a positive rendering of how to deal with the ambiguities of our existence, then *Vertigo* is Hitchcock's most pessimistic depiction of how powerless we are in the face of the contingency of the world. It is not clear, however, that the message is really different. One way to account for the tragedy that Scottie experiences is by identifying his fatal flaw as his inability to transcend the facticity of the past. Judy is there, in his arms, revealing herself to him in all her human vulnerability, her desire, her fear, her guilt, her love for him. What does she see in him? She sees the lingering cloud of his ambivalence. That cloud is given substance in the moving penumbra that emerges from the shadows. This penumbra will take the form of a nun who has come to discover the source of the sounds she was hearing, but by then it is too late, too late. Judy, terrified by what she sees, falls.

*Vertigo* is a deeply ethical film (Laura Mulvey's objections notwithstanding<sup>10</sup>), but its ethics are difficult to discern. What we clearly experience is the deep anguish in both Scottie and Judy. Scottie seems well-adjusted enough chatting with Midge (Barbara Belle Geddes) in her brightly lit apartment, but when he gets

vertigo climbing the little foot ladder, we see the crushing anguish of his guilt and shame concerning his failure to stop the death of the policeman that is just below his cheerful surface. This anguish of guilt and shame will be compounded many times over after the death of Madeleine, for which he also feels responsible. We see the terrible anguish that Judy experiences, when we see her try to write Scottie a letter telling him what really happened and about her leaving. We see it again, in her anguished confession as he drags her up the San Juan Bautista Mission tower, and when she pleads with him to love her as she is, as Judy, when they are up in the tower. What philosophical theory does such anguish bring to mind?

For Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, *angst* (anxiety or anguish) offers a way out of ‘theyness’ and into authentic existence. ‘Theyness’ is the mode of impersonality to which we flee in order to escape our authentic self, because being authentic entails confronting the inevitable reality of our own death. That terrifies us. The ‘they’ disperses our terror, but also our authentic self. As Heidegger says, “The Self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic* Self—that is, for the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way. As the they-self, the particular Dasein has been dispersed into the ‘they’, and must first find itself.”<sup>11</sup> Heidegger describes our experience of entering the ‘they’ in terms of “falling” and “fleeing”: “Dasein’s falling into the ‘they’ and the ‘world’ of its concern, is what we have called ‘fleeing’ in the face of itself.”<sup>12</sup> We flee ourselves because of our anxiety about our own death, but it is also through anxiety that we are able to move out of our state of ‘theyness,’ because “anxiety individualizes.” As Heidegger put it, “Anxiety makes manifest in Dasein its *Being towards* its ownmost potentiality-for-Being—that is, its *Being-free for* the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself.”<sup>13</sup>

Authentic Being, for Heidegger, requires a confrontation with the full range of our possibilities for our Being towards the future, which will include the fact of our death. “As potentiality-for-Being, Dasein cannot outstrip the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that possibility which is one’s ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped.”<sup>14</sup> To fully confront this fact about our Being, that we will die, is what Heidegger calls authentic Being-towards-death [*Sein zum Tode*].<sup>15</sup> To live with the anguish that this Being-towards-death provokes Heidegger calls “resoluteness.” As Heidegger says, “The disclosedness of Dasein in wanting to have a conscience, is thus constituted by anxiety as a state-of-mind,

by understanding as a projection of oneself upon one's ownmost Being-guilty, and by discourse as reticence. This distinctive and authentic disclosedness, which is attested in Dasein itself by its conscience—*this reticent self-projection upon one's ownmost Being-guilty, in which one is ready for anxiety [Angst]*—we call “resoluteness”.<sup>16</sup>

All of the major themes of *Vertigo* are here: the desire for, and the torture of, having a conscience; the sense that both Scottie and Judy are confronting their own Being-guilty, which makes them “ready for anxiety;” the continual threat of falling, which is the anxiety we feel in foregoing the call of conscience, and fleeing to the ‘they’ by not being sufficiently resolute; the preoccupation with a previous death that haunts and stands as a figure for their own deaths. When Judy (as Madeleine) and Scottie meet, each is a mirror of the anxieties of the other.

Authentic ethics will be an ethics of anguish. Inauthentic ethics will be the ethics of the ‘they.’ Inauthentic ethics will be about what ‘they’ are concerned with: money, jobs, conventional norms, and appearing to be a good, ethical person. Authentic ethics will be about recognizing the Being-towards-death of another. Our real concerns only emerge when we consider our life in light of the inevitability of our own death. To really see another, is to see them in this light. Both Judy and Scottie emanate anguish. Stanley Cavell has remarked on Jimmy Stewart's exceptional capacity for displaying suffering.<sup>17</sup> As an actor, he is able to make visible what is mostly invisible in us, our existential anguish.

In *Vertigo*, Judy and Scottie alternate between the two modes of allowing and denying disclosure, between falling, fleeing into the ‘they’ (in their desires, in their expectations of money or of love) and transcending the ‘they’ in acts of radical conscience. They are working with their Being-guilty, and toward a real seeing of the other in all of their existential anguish. They fail in the end, each in their own way, Scottie in failing to be open to new future possibilities, Judy in failing to be resolute. We feel their struggles, we feel Judy's pain and compassion when undergoing the transformation that Scotty tries to impose on her, just as we feel Scottie's anguish in trying to recover the lost thing. So we condemn him and feel for him at the same time.

While we condemn Judy for being a part of Gavin Elster's (Tom Helmore) plan to trap Scottie, we also feel the desperation that must have driven her to participate in it. There are clues about what the sources of her desperation might be: when she is telling Scottie about her life in Salina, Kansas, about her mother's

remarriage and her desire to leave home because of her new step-father (which suggests the possibility that there might have been some inappropriate sexual advances from her mother's new husband). All Judy says is, "I didn't like the guy..." and what we know of her recent past suggests that Judy is especially vulnerable to an older man with evil intents.

The ethics of anguish is about recognizing the deep ambiguity that another wrestles with; in fear and trembling, and, in bearing witness to their struggle, one makes space for a new, more hopeful version of one's self to emerge. The opposite of the ethics of anguish is a righteously strident, judgmental moralism. The former entails forgiving the other for their frailties, for the acts they may have done as one of the fallen 'they.'

We repeatedly see this act of forgiveness in Hitchcock's films, and it is often performed reciprocally. Roger Thornhill has to forgive Eve Kendall for trying to kill him, and she him for the terrible things he said about her at the auction. Scottie has to forgive Judy for brutally manipulating him, and his feelings, as part of Galvin Elster's plot, and she him for callously trying to transform her into Madeleine, despite her vehement protests. In *The 39 Steps* (1935), Hannay (Robert Donat) has to forgive Pamela (Madeleine Carroll) for betraying him to the authorities, and she him for his initial uninvited kiss, and then involving her in a very complicated adventure that endangers her life. In each of these examples (and there are many more among Hitchcock's films), from the perspective of the ethics of anguish, we see the deep ambiguity of the situations these couples are in, the combination of contingency and necessity (from within their own characters as well as from external circumstances) that catches them in these situations. We feel the anguish that drives them together and apart. To see and feel these things is to begin to understand how the authentic ethics of anguish works. Hitchcock is exposing us to the ethics of ambiguity achieved through an ethics of anguish. That is what makes *Vertigo* a deeply ethical film.

### **The Existential Nature of the 'Murderous Gaze'**

The complimentary Hitchcockian dynamic to the 'creation of the couple' is nicely captured by the title of William Rothman's book, *The Murderous Gaze*, which refers to the way Hitchcock's camera assumes the perspective of his murderers. As Rothman puts it, "the murderer and the camera have a mysterious bond."<sup>18</sup> The 'murderous gaze' is as operative in *Vertigo* as it is in *Psycho*. Scottie's desperate gazing at Judy in order to find Madeleine in there is as

murderous to Judy as Norman's gaze is to Marion. The additional level of irony is that Hitchcock simultaneously makes us complicit in this murderous gaze—we too want to find Madeleine in Judy and to see Marion's naked body—and indicts us for our complicity. As Rothman puts it, "A Hitchcock film provokes us to imagine that our nature...may be monstrous. It conjures this suspicion and this suspense, this anticipation and dread, into wakefulness."<sup>19</sup>

According to Sartre the evil of the murderous gaze is an inescapable part of the human condition. It is pure bad faith, *mauvaise foi*, to deny this evident reality and to think that we could avoid it. For Sartre, the encounter with another consciousness always threatens our own.<sup>20</sup> Love, for Sartre, is unavoidably doomed. What we want in love is as impossible to achieve as what we want for our being. We want absolute control over, and absolute certainty about, the reliability of our love object, but, we also want the subject of our love to give their love to us freely.<sup>21</sup> This combination is impossible, according to Sartre. Either we can have another give us their love freely, and we will never be sure about whether they will revoke it (or whether it is exclusively oneself who is loved), or we can demand complete submission from our beloved, and lose the sense of a love freely given. Love, which is part of the nature of our being, is a useless passion for Sartre. The 'passion' that Sartre refers to is clearly not just the passion to possess something, but also includes the original Latin root and Christian association with the word which refers to suffering, and which is why love hurts.

The sudden recognition of the secret murderous gaze is a pervasive theme in Hitchcock's films. Young Charlie (Teresa Wright) comes to recognize it in the gaze of her Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotton). Richard Hannay in *The 39 Steps* suddenly recognizes the murderous gaze in Professor Jordan (Godfrey Tearle), the man he has gone to for help. L. B. "Jeff" Jefferies suddenly recognizes it as focused on him when he sees his own gaze returned by Lars Thornwald (Raymond Burr). In *The Lady Vanishes*, Gilbert (Michael Redgrave) begins to see it in every gaze from every other person on the train. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether the gaze is murderous or not, as in, for example, *The Lodger* and *Suspicion*. Even in *North by Northwest*, when Roger Thornhill returns from his ordeal at the crossroads and discovers Eve Kendall in her hotel room at the Ambassador East, he recognizes the violence that lurks in her gaze because he knows that she has willingly sent him to his death. That does not make him stop loving her, exactly, but it definitely changes the rules of engagement.

For Beauvoir, the ideal relationship that we can have with the world, with others, and even with ourselves, is conversational. The Latin roots of “conversation” are ‘a turning with’ another. This ‘turning with’ involves a reciprocal, mutually engaged willingness to change as a part of the process of interacting with the world or another human being. This is precisely what we must do in order to have an authentic conversation. We can choose to BE in a (non-) conversation by constantly attempting to assert our being, by dominating, controlling, and commandeering every moment. We can alternatively choose to make a space for the other’s ideas, thoughts, and insights to emerge (what Beauvoir describes as making ourselves a lack of being, in order that there might be being).<sup>22</sup> This process of allowing disclosure is, according to Beauvoir, the true ethical imperative. It is how authentic relationships are created, nurtured and maintained. We can allow disclosure in the world, to facilitate what will emerge, or we can shut down such an emergence through control, through the quest for certainty, through Being. We can allow others to disclose themselves to us, or we can insist that they fit the ready-made categories that we have created to pigeonhole them. Beauvoir’s argument for allowing disclosure of others turns, in part, on our own desire to be able to disclose ourselves to others. If we do not allow others to disclose, there is no possibility of our own disclosure to them. Disclosure is a reciprocal process and a mutual need.

When couples are successfully created in Hitchcock’s films, they are created through mutual disclosure. What will emerge when we allow disclosure will be what we do not expect, and cannot anticipate, unlike what is determined in the realm of ready-made values. It will be something *sui generis*, something odd looking and probably frightening. Once these things emerge, they must be acknowledged and affirmed. This is the trajectory of the narrative of *North by Northwest*. Roger Thornhill and Eve Kendall are attracted to the other’s beautiful exteriors, but quickly fall into genuine conversation—the amazing conversation over dinner on the train—where real self-disclosure goes surprisingly deep (into issues of identity, social expectations, and love and sex), surprisingly quickly.

They will eventually have to go all the way in revealing their darkest aspects, first in the forest (after the fake shooting in the Mount Rushmore tourist café), then suspended by their fingertips over the abyss beneath Mount Rushmore itself. They must each reveal the worst secrets about themselves, hear the worst secrets of the other, and affirm that they can live with those secrets. This is the ultimate

human gesture, to affirm that one can live with the humanity of the other. This is the ultimate creative act, signaled by Hitchcock by a train going through a tunnel.

### **The Existential MacGuffin: The Horror of Banality**

In *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway*, Slavoj Žižek contrasts two types of horror. The first is what he identified as “the fantasmatic horror of the nightmarish noir universe of perverse sex, betrayal and murder.” This is contrasted with a form of horror that Žižek suggests is even worse: the “despair of our drab, ‘alienated’ daily life of impotence and distrust.”<sup>23</sup> The figure of the obscene father is a screen to hide an even more horrific possibility: “This figure of the obscene rapist father, far from being the Real beneath the respectful appearance, is itself a fantasy formation, a protective shield—against what? Is the rapist father...not, in spite of his horrifying features, the ultimate guarantee that *there is somewhere full, unconstrained enjoyment?* And, consequently, what if the true horror is the lack of enjoyment itself?”<sup>24</sup> The true horror is not that something terrible will happen, it is the suspicion that nothing ever does happen. The true horror is the spectre of the ultimate banality of our lives.

In a brief (three pages), but brilliant essay entitled “Being—A MacGuffin: How to Preserve the Desire to Think”, Hans Blumenberg offers a striking interpretation of the nature of this recurrent trope.<sup>25</sup> Blumenberg quotes some lines from Hitchcock’s conversations with Truffaut: “My best MacGuffin, and by that I mean my emptiest, the most nonexistent, the most absurd, is the one we used in *North by Northwest*...Here, you see, the MacGuffin has been boiled down to its purest expression: nothing.” This brings to mind the conversation scene on the train between Roger Thornhill and Eve Kendall from *North by Northwest*, in which, seeing his initials on his matchbook, ‘ROT,’ she asks him what the ‘O’ stands for and he replies, “Nothing.” Stanley Cavell takes Roger Thornhill’s initials to invoke Hamlet’s famous, “Something is rotten in Denmark” line, and maybe it is so meant. A more obvious intended meaning may be, given Hitchcock’s remark about the MacGuffin of the film, that there is a MacGuffin at the center of Roger Thornhill’s identity.

Discussing the incomplete nature of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, and alluding to the rest of the book that Heidegger refers to but never wrote, Blumenberg says, “Anyone who has ever let himself be influenced by the preparations for the expedition into the center of Being as it is understood by *Dasein*, shudders before the banality of that which could be brought to light at the end of all existential

analyses....”<sup>26</sup> I understand Blumenberg to be suggesting something very similar to what Žižek is saying, that the ultimate horror is not the prospect of death, but the possibility of the meaninglessness of life. I take Blumenberg’s suggestion about Heidegger’s unfinished business in *Being and Time* to be that Heidegger himself had this intimation, and saw that his own existential analysis was moving in that direction. To preserve his life he quit that line of thought. With what did he replace it? Blumenberg’s suggestion is: a MacGuffin.

After the deeply disturbing (and existentially compelling) *Vertigo*, Hitchcock made *North by Northwest*, a successful creation-of-the-couple movie that seems to be anti-existential, to be affirming bourgeois bad faith about the niceness of couples and love and marriage. One reading might be that *North by Northwest* is, in Dante’s phrase, a sop for Cerebus, i.e., for the vast majority of movie goers hungry for life affirming, death-and-mortality-denying narratives that celebrate the triumph of ready made bourgeois values. Another interpretation could be that after the darkness of *Vertigo*, Hitchcock saw where that was leading, and decided he needed a new MacGuffin. Hell, according to Blumenberg, is not ultimately about pain, but about boredom: the real horror is banality. Blumenberg ends his essay with this paragraph: “Boredom is, when the fire of all fires has been lost as the punishment of all punishments, the remaining optimization of the ennui of Dasein. For it there is no desire more urgent than to be disturbed. Curiosity is the disturbance of boredom. The MacGuffin is its epiphany.”<sup>27</sup>

This is Hitchcock’s deepest existential wisdom. It is a version of Nietzsche’s famous contention in *The Birth of Tragedy* that “... it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*...”<sup>28</sup> (Nietzsche’s emphases). This is Nietzsche’s response to the “wisdom of Silenus” who told King Midas that the best thing for man is “not to be born, not to *be*, to be nothing. But the second best for you is—to die soon.”<sup>29</sup> Vehemently disagreeing with Silenus, Nietzsche thinks that the satyr has overlooked the transfiguring power of the human imagination, especially as it is expressed in art. Art has the power to make a meaningless world meaningful. Art supplies, as Nietzsche says, “redemption through illusion.”<sup>30</sup> This is our only possible redemption from meaninglessness, by a world of meaningful illusion. Works of human imagination make us feel that life is meaningful, livable, and justified.

As Hitchcock says, “the main thing I’ve learned over the years is that the MacGuffin is nothing.”<sup>31</sup> The MacGuffin is a something that turns out to be

nothing, but it is also a nothing that is turned into something, a work of art. Art is both the ultimate existential answer and the ultimate MacGuffin, and Hitchcock was a master of the MacGuffin.

## Richard Gilmore

### Notes

- 1 Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 65.
- 2 Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films*, translated by Stanley Hochman (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1979), 113-14.
- 3 Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.
- 4 Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism," translated by Bernard Frechtman in *Essays in Existentialism*, (Secaucus: The Citadel Press, 1977), 34.
- 5 Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism," 36.
- 6 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969), 347-49.
- 7 *Being and Nothingness*, 784.
- 8 *Being and Nothingness*, 343.
- 9 See, for example, Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 14-16.
- 10 Laura Mulvey, in her famous essay "Narrative Cinema and Visual Pleasure," specifically identifies Hitchcock, and *Vertigo* in particular, as perpetuating patriarchal evils by encouraging the "male gaze." I do not disagree with Mulvey that in *Vertigo* Hitchcock invites a certain kind of pleasure in gazing, but I contend that the moral force of the film is to catch our conscience for that very activity. Laura Mulvey, "Narrative Cinema and Visual Pleasure" in *Screen* 16.3, Autumn 1975, 6-18.
- 11 *Being and Time*, H 129.
- 12 *Being and Time*, H 185.
- 13 *Being and Time*, H 187-88.
- 14 *Being and Time*, H 250-51.
- 15 *Being and Time*, H 234.
- 16 *Being and Time*, H 297.
- 17 Stanley Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film" in *Themes Out of School* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 180.
- 18 William Rothman, *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 8.
- 19 *Murderous Gaze*, 17.
- 20 *Being and Time*, 349-51.
- 21 *Being and Time*, 374-76.
- 22 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1997), 11.
- 23 Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 13.
- 24 Žižek, *Ridiculous Sublime*, 31.
- 25 I owe Michael Sullivan a word of thanks for giving me a copy of this essay.
- 26 Hans Blumenberg, "Being—A MacGuffin: How to Preserve the Desire to Think," translated by David Adams in *Salmagundi*, vol. 91, Sp./Sum. 1991, pp. 191-193. 192.
- 27 Blumenberg, 193.
- 28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vantage, 1967), 52.

29 *Birth of Tragedy*, 42.

30 *Birth of Tragedy*, 45.

31 François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Touchstone, 1983), 139.