

## The Dandy in Hitchcock

Not only every generation, but every critic appropriates his or her own “Alfred Hitchcock,” fashioned in the mirror of the pleasures or uncanny moments one derives from his films.<sup>1</sup> Most scholars have arrived at *their* Hitchcock by paying scrupulous attention to the work, the individual films, as is quite proper—the more so, since Hitchcock the man was an exceptionally private person. And yet, most are aware of the paradox that this private person also cultivated an exceptionally public persona quite apart, or so it seems, from his work. From very early on in his career he was a star, he knew he was a star, and he dramatized himself as a star.<sup>2</sup>

The question occupying me in this chapter is whether in this most self-reflexive of cinematic oeuvres we do not find a “portrait of the artist.” Not, of course, of the historical individual—that can be left to the biographers—but of the type of creative being, bridging and maybe even reconciling the rift that in the past, before he became a classic, so often appeared in Hitchcock criticism: between the entertainer and the “serious artist.” Rather than take the usual route of polarizing the two terms, I want to make my tentative answer hinge upon what I consider to be the enigma of Hitchcock’s Englishness.

In the critical literature, there is no shortage of coherent images of Hitchcock. No need for me to present them in detail: the Catholic and Jansenist, the artist of the occult forces of light and darkness, the master-technician, the supreme showman and so on. In Britain, the crucial period of reevaluation in the 1960s created two Hitchcocks: one in the pages of *Sight & Sound*, characterized by either disdainful or regretful dismissal of the American Hitchcock. The foil for it was a preference, nostalgically tinged, for the craftsman-stylist with an eye for typically English realism or social satire. The second was Robin Wood’s Hitchcock, who was polemically opposed to *Sight & Sound*. Robin Wood’s Hitchcock emerged not only as a very serious artist, but one who in his American films had a consistent theme, almost a humanist concern: the therapeutic formation of the couple and the family.<sup>3</sup> Such a notion of Hitchcock the moralist was already anticipated and rejected by Lindsay Anderson when he wrote in 1949:

Hitchcock has never been a *serious* director. His films are interesting neither for their ideas nor for their characters. None of his early melodramas can be said to carry a message, and when one does appear, as in *FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT*, it is banal in the extreme. . . . In the same way, Hitchcock’s characterisation has never achieved—or aimed at—anything more than surface verisimilitude.<sup>4</sup>

Peter Wollen might be said to have developed *his* Hitchcock in opposition to both of these English constructs, apparently leaning more towards seeing him as a director who subverts the morality, the politics and the realism of his sources, in order to exhibit their narrative and structural mechanisms. “For Hitchcock it is not the problem of loyalty or allegiance which is uppermost, but the mechanisms of spying and pursuit in themselves.”<sup>5</sup> But these mechanisms, as Wollen wisely adds, “have their own psychological significance. In the end we discover that to be a master-technician in the cinema is to speak a rhetoric which is none other than the rhetoric of the unconscious.”<sup>6</sup> Since then, almost all the major readings of Hitchcock have followed and explored this path—often with spectacular success. The very force and cogency of this success, notably through Raymond Bellour’s work, strongly persuading us to accept a definition of the American cinema and of classical narrative remade in the image of Hitchcock—makes me, perversely, want to look for a more limited, historical, more English and more “ideological” Hitchcock.

I take my cue from a few casual remarks by Raymond Durgnat, who has commented on Hitchcock’s affinities with Symbolism and Decadence. Durgnat writes:

Since the cinema is traditionally associated with the lower social grades, a man who delights in perfectly wrought film form is likely to find himself referred to as a master craftsman, and the full sense of his involvement with aesthetics is missed. . . . Hitchcock is as lordly as any Symbolist of *l’art pour l’art*. . . . A craftsman whose craft is aesthetics and who takes a deep pleasure in practising it as meticulously as Hitchcock does, is an aesthete.

And Durgnat points to a spiritual affinity with Oscar Wilde, calling Hitchcock “an epicure of suspense and terror” whose films bring to mind “titles of the Decadence: *Le Jardin des Supplices*, *Les Fleurs du Mal*.”<sup>7</sup> It is this cultural sensibility and aesthetic temperament that I want to investigate a little further.

Is Hitchcock an aesthete in his work, and as Durgnat implies, was he a dandy in life? Let me remind you of some typical attitudes that are supposed to make a dandy. A dandy is preoccupied above all, with style. A dandy makes a cult of clothes and manners. A dandy has an infinite capacity to astound and surprise. A dandy is given to a form of wit which seems to his contemporaries mere cynicism. A dandy must be negative: neither believing in the world of men—virility, sports—nor in the world of women—the earthy, the life-giving, the intuitive, the natural and flowing. A dandy prefers fantasy and beauty over maturity and responsibility, he pursues perfection to the point of perversity. He is, to quote an authoritative study: “A man dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste . . . , free of all human commitments that conflict with taste: passion, moralities, ambitions, politics or occupations.”<sup>8</sup> And he despises everything that is vulgar, common, associated with commerce and a mass-public.

Now, granted, it is difficult to recognize in this description the familiar and portly figure, dressed in sober business suits; Catholic, devoted husband and father, the son of a grocer; the quiet, private upholder of domestic virtues par excellence. It is difficult if not incongruous to discern in the familiar silhouette the traits of a Baudelaire, or Oscar Wilde, or Proust, or Dhiagilev. Neither does there seem to be any connection, either directly or indirectly, with the British Pre-Raphaelites, or the Bloomsbury Group. None of the gregariousness, none of the in-group rituals, but also little of the elitism or the anti-democratic exclusivity of the European aesthetic coteries in literature or the performing arts.

But let us look a little further: sartorial dandyism, the cult of clothes. True, Hitchcock wore sober business suits, but he *always* wore them, in every climate, in his office, on the set, in the Californian summer, in the Swiss Alps or in Marrakesh. As John Russell Taylor remarks:

When he was filming he would turn up punctiliously at the Studio every day disguised as an English businessman in the invariable dark suit, white shirt and restrained dark tie. In the 1930s the fact of wearing a suit and tie, even in the suffocating heat of a Los Angeles summer,

was not so bizarre as it has since become, but in a world where many of the film-makers affected fancy-dress—De Mille's riding breeches, Sternberg's tropical tea-planter outfit—Hitch's was the fanciest of them all by being the least suitable and probable.<sup>9</sup>

Quite plainly, Hitchcock was applying a most rigorous public gesture: the dandyism of sobriety.

The ritual of manners. It already annoyed Lindsay Anderson that Hitchcock, when he came to London, stayed at a luxury hotel. It smacked to him of Bel Air snobbery, contempt and a vulgar display of *money*. The point, however, was that Hitchcock *always* stayed at the *same* hotel, in the same suite at Claridges, just as at home, he always had dinner at Chasen's. Affecting a superstitious nature, a fear of crossing the street or driving a car was part of the same public gesture: to make out of the contingencies of existence an absolute and demanding ritual, and thereby to exercise perfect and total control, almost as if to make life his own creation. It is a choice not so different from, say, Ronald Firbank's, a notable dandy of the 1920s, who, after moving to another part of London, decided to retain his gardener, but insisted that the gardener should walk, in a green baize apron and carrying a watering can, from his lodgings along Piccadilly and Regent Street to Firbank's new home in Chelsea.

Hitchcock's daily rituals, which he made known to everyone, are not only a rich man's indulgence of his own convenience, they touch one of the dandy's main philosophical tenets: to make no concessions to Nature, at whatever price. Hitchcock's life, which has been seen as that of "a straightforward middle-class Englishman who happens to be an artistic genius,"<sup>10</sup> seems in its particular accentuation, its imperviousness to both change and time more problematic, more enigmatic than merely the attempt to cling to the values of his native country, out of season, as it were. Nor is it simply the mask of a man whose painful shyness makes him adopt a role that everyone recognizes and therefore dismisses: for that, his work is too much obsessed with domination—of who controls whom by the power of the gaze, of fascination and its objects. More pertinent, then, is the suggestion that Hitchcock's life-style was a determined protest, the triumph of artifice over accident, a kind of daily victory over chance, in the name of a spirituality dedicating itself to making life imitate art. The revolt against Nature, of course, is one of the strongest traditions of European aestheticism and dandyism—from Baudelaire's *Paradis Artificiels*, via Huysman's *A Rebours*, to Oscar Wilde's *The Truth of Masks* and *The Decay of Lying*. From the latter comes the most well known defense of Hitchcock's use of back-projection, process-shots and studio-sets:

The more we study art, the less we care for nature. What art really reveals to us is nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition. Nature has good intentions, of course, but as Aristotle once said, she cannot carry them out. When I look at a landscape I cannot help seeing all its defects. It is fortunate for us, however, that nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have no art at all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach nature her proper place.<sup>11</sup>

Hitchcock fully responded to Wilde's challenge when famously he said: "My films are not slices of life. They're slices of cake."<sup>12</sup>

As in his work, so in his life, Hitchcock excelled in turning a cliché inside out. Everyone is agreed that Hitchcock was a professional, an addict to work. Yet, part of the image of a dandy is that he disdains work. Hitchcock was able to cultivate both images simultaneously: that of perfection, and of effortless ease. A film is finished before it is begun: creation takes place elsewhere, in another scene, not in the process of filming. No commentator leaves out the description of Hitchcock on the set, sitting in his director's chair, appearing languid, his mind on something else, or simply looking bored. He made a point of never looking through the camera lens. "It would be as though I distrusted the cameraman and he was a liar. . . . I don't rush the same evening to see 'Has it come out?' That

would be like going to the local camera shop to see the snaps and make sure that nobody had moved.”<sup>13</sup>

This immobility is another important clue: the true work of the dandy is to expend all his effort on creating about his person the impression of utter stasis. One recalls the Sphinx-like profile he presented as his trademark, and in later life, his public appearance was designed to accentuate the statuesqueness of his massive body. Disarmingly, he turned himself into his own monument, aware of his own immortality. Of course, he carried it lightly, like the wax effigy with which he let himself be photographed and which, deep-frozen, appeared amongst his wife’s groceries in the refrigerator. In a typical inversion of a Romantic motif—that of the Double—Hitchcock rehearsed his own death and lent it the semblance of life.

If his working methods show a disdain for improvisation, his films stand and fall by the degree to which they exhibit the intricacies of their design. While one can interpret this as a need for order, for control (and the domination of recalcitrant material is clearly part of the filmmaker’s ambition to possess the world and fix it through the gaze), it is equally the case that in the quality and patterning of the scripts, Hitchcock manifested a most exuberant freedom and playfulness, a love of ornament, of which the much-vaunted realistic touches seem only the most obvious manifestations. Artifice, in Hitchcock, controls the shape of the films’ dramatic structure, based as it is on always seeking out contrasts, counterpoints, ironies and reversals, thereby also appealing to a powerfully *intellectual* sense of abstract form.

In this regard, Hitchcock is a filmmaker’s director, and one wonders whether the persuasiveness of a Proppian or Lévi-Strauss-inspired analysis of Hitchcock’s plots stems in no small measure from the “musical” or contrapuntal temperament typical of an aesthete’s sensibility, at least as much as from the archetypal, mythological nature of the communication set in motion by the cinema generally, considered as mass-art narrative. Paradoxically, this draws attention to a certain modernism in Hitchcock, which has to do with forcing as sharply as possible the line where the sensuous, the concrete quality of film appears as a disguise for the mechanical, the abstract, and *its* sensuality. Gavin Lambert has remarked that “many scenes and details from his movies could be titled like surrealist paintings: Human Being Caged by Bird, Cigarette Extinguished in Fried Egg, and . . . Young Man Dressed as his Dead Mother.”<sup>14</sup> Rather than relating this aspect of Hitchcock to an approximation of dream-like states, an argument can be made that sees him as a filmmaker of ideas, in much the same way as Duchamp was a painter of ideas, and with rather a similar cult of the sterile, of the degradation inherent in matter, as the essence of male desire and its manifestations in art.

If this seems rather fanciful, something like it has nonetheless been implicitly recognized before. Hitchcock’s critics, for instance, have often been offended by what appeared to be his obsession with “effects,” his purely external manipulation of fear, suspense and the audience’s emotions—which he played, according to the well-known dictum, like other people play the piano. What, negatively, have been described as “gimmicks,” tricks, are at the same time signs of a will towards abstraction, and a part of a modernist’s conceptualization of the artist’s material. One of the “gimmicks” that Hitchcock’s realist critics objected to, for instance, was the scene in *THE 39 STEPS* (1939), when the woman’s scream, upon discovering the body, is in effect substituted by the whistle of a train entering a tunnel. Or in a similar register, the electronic simulation of bird-cries and wing-beating in *THE BIRDS* (1963), the use of a violin at an abnormally high pitch in *PSYCHO* (1960), the look of surprise on the face of the real Mr Townsend in *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* (1959) which turns out to be due not to the photo that Cary Grant is holding out to him but to the knife in his back. Hitchcock’s imagination seizes on occasions, emotions, at that point where within the human element the mechanical becomes visible, undoing thereby the anthropomorphism that the cinema so deceptively simulates.<sup>15</sup> One remembers the scene as described to Truffaut, that was to have gone into *NORTH BY NORTHWEST*: a discussion between the hero and a foreman as they walk along a Detroit car assembly line. We see

a brand-new car being put together, and when it's finally completed and rolls off the end of the line, a man's body pops out. Not only does the mechanical here produce the human, it produces it *ex nihilo*, so to speak, and what it produces is a corpse. The scene has a special status in never having been filmed, and yet many times told: it is in itself a parable of cinema, the making of a Hitchcock film.

The principle at work here is that of negativity, where the human is bounded everywhere and contained by the mechanical, by death and by absence: all metaphors of the cinema at work in defying Nature. It can perhaps be best exemplified by repeating Hitchcock's own version of the *MacGuffin*:

The word MacGuffin comes from a story about two men in an English train, and one says to the other: "What's that package on the baggage rack over your head?" "Oh", he says, "that's a MacGuffin". The first one says, "well, what's a MacGuffin?" "It's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands". So the other one says, "but there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands!" And he answers, "then that's no MacGuffin".<sup>16</sup>

We know that the MacGuffin is the red herring, the thing the characters make much of, but which for the story is irrelevant, and for the audience no more than a bait. But looked at from another aspect, Hitchcock's story of the MacGuffin is the very epitome of a narrative process, the process of negation, of cancelling something out, what in the language of Derrida one might call an "erasure." Phrased by Hitchcock as a kind of pseudo-definition, the anecdote confirms, in a most theoretical way, Hitchcock's profound grasp of what he usually puts in rather simpler terms, like "I'm interested not so much in the stories I tell as in the means of telling them."<sup>17</sup> The MacGuffin, considered as a structure, turns on a contradiction: "that's a MacGuffin"/ "that's not a MacGuffin." And it does so by operating a switch of identity and transferring the terms' denotation. The MacGuffin is, in Hitchcock's pure cinema, the "pure signifier," to which no signified corresponds. Without stretching the point, one might speak here of the logic of transference itself, of the dynamic of substitution and erasure. In a film like *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN* (1951), this logic can be observed in its most abstract form at the same time as it is firmly embedded in the narrative itself. As critics have remarked, the "theme" of transference of guilt, the exchange of crime, the doppelgänger-motif is actually realized in terms of a series of verbal and visual puns, centered on the notion of crossing, crossing over, double-crossing, criss-crossing: visually, the film opens with feet crossing the frame diagonally, then the shape of a double cross formed by the railway tracks, and finally, the crossing of legs, where the two protagonists accidentally meet. On the verbal level, you have the play on the moral implication of crossing someone, running across someone, being cross with someone and double-crossing someone: all in all, a remarkable case of "inner speech," as it was defined by the Russian Formalists in the 1920s. Not to mention, the crossed tennis rackets on Guy's cigarette lighter, or the audience going cross-eyed during the vital tennis match. This is presumably why the film does not end with Bruno's death on the merry-go-round: by repeating the opening scene in the train, and the opening line, "Say, aren't you Guy Haines?" the film seems to cancel itself by establishing the diagrammatic abstraction in a kind of double mirror, where the mathematical figures of the double (parallel) and the diagonal cross emerge as the true obsession of the film. As Hitchcock said to Truffaut: "isn't it a fascinating design? One could study it forever."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, an early film, like *NUMBER SEVENTEEN* (1932), much underrated by critics looking for realist touches, is entirely constructed around transfer, switch and substitution in an abstract cancellation of the signified, reminiscent of that other master of pure cinema, Fritz Lang.

This "conceptual" quality of Hitchcock's imagination, which one might, with perhaps too slight an emphasis on its many implications, describe as a love of paradox, is worth noting, because the issue of Hitchcock's morality has so often been debated. If for Rohmer and Chabrol the

master-theme is the transference of guilt, if Robin Wood found his therapeutic theme in the moral ambiguities of choices opening up at every turn, if we can find Lévi-Straussian antinomies and binary oppositions generating and traversing every text, if the secret of Hitchcock's enunciative process is a principle of alternation, we are clearly dealing with something which in its structural dimension considerably undercuts a specific moral impulse that is supposed to inform the work. Rather, it is the insistence on form itself that constitutes an essential part of Hitchcock's morality.<sup>19</sup>

One evident implication, surely, is that Hitchcock's art is the art of surface, intimately connected with the notion of effect on the one hand, and with the sensibility of the dandy on the other. One might phrase it as itself a paradox: Hitchcock cultivates surface as the true profundity of the cinema, and it would be shallow indeed to call him the moralist of appearance. There is in his films a complete devotion to surface, which should not be mistaken for a mere interest in technique, and it might be more appropriate to say that technique is only the very inadequate name applied to a cinema dedicated to the rule of contiguity and metonymy. Whether it's the accidental brush of feet in *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*, the crossed trajectories in a hotel lobby of *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* ("Paging Mr Kaplan") or the converging paths when Karen Black appears suddenly out of nowhere and forces Bruce Dern to stop in *FAMILY PLOT* (1976)—in every instance, the narrative is generated out of a veritable "splicing together": the fortuitous encounter of the unlikely with the improbable. The somewhat facile generalization that in Hitchcock evil does not lurk *behind* a door but is there, in broad daylight, and comes out of a blue sky, might be rephrased by saying that montage, in Hitchcock (as in Eisenstein) is the very sign of a categorical refusal to give the cinematic image any kind of transcendental value. And it seems entirely appropriate that film scholars, digging deeper in his films, should discover structures that reveal an ever greater simplicity, where the elements become more mathematical, more musical, more schematic. It is therefore one of the incidental virtues of Raymond Bellour's work that it emphatically brings us back to the surface in Hitchcock, where what we need to know can be grasped by an attention to segmentation, the interplay that arises from the precision with which the filmmaker controls, for instance, the size of the shot, the direction of the gaze and the motility of the camera.<sup>20</sup>

By outlining some of Hitchcock's particular characteristics as a filmmaker of surface and contiguity, I am suggesting that the chance encounter, the collision of apparently unrelated destinies, as in *NORTH BY NORTHWEST*, or *PSYCHO*, or *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*, leads us not necessarily into the realm of moral and metaphysical essences, but also constitutes a denial of essence, an aesthetic delight in what, from a different vantage-point, is always a catastrophe: identity as merely the violent suppression of random gestures and exchanges. In Hitchcock, action always takes precedence over character, which is why his narratives offer themselves for structural or morphological analysis.<sup>21</sup>

Such partiality for the contiguous is an important clue to Hitchcock's humor, and more specifically, his irrepressible penchant for playing the practical joker, the perpetrator of countless hoaxes: I shall not attempt to recall here the stories, anecdotes and legends, kept in circulation not least by Hitchcock himself, whose point invariably seems to be to confound a certain naive literalness with lessons in "lateral thinking." There is the story of Hitchcock serving blue food at dinner, because one of his guests had, on a previous occasion, made a crack about the master's devotion to "cordon bleu" cooking. It would be worthwhile to study in detail the principles underlying Hitchcock's wit, his verbal playfulness, his penchant for epigrams: it relates closely to the predominance of paradox and dramatic irony in his plots, and the principle of erasure through double transfer which I briefly analyzed as the structure of the *MacGuffin*. To give an example of Hitchcock's verbal dandyism, let me cite an anecdote that James Stewart liked to tell about work on the set:

Hitchcock actually has very little regard for the spoken word. . . . He pays no attention to the actual words—he's done all that, finished all that months before. He's an absolute villain to

script girls and people that have to follow the lines. So when the script girl says to him, “Mr Hitchcock, Mr Stewart didn’t say anything like what’s in the script”, he’d say, “It sounded alright; *grammatically* it was alright.”<sup>22</sup>

The need to startle and to baffle an audience is of course part of any showman’s artistic make-up. But the practical joker displays a particularly violent ambiguity: he attracts and holds an audience, in order to distance himself the more definitely from any community with it. He recalls, in this guise, Baudelaire’s *saltimbanque*—the mountebank, the circus artist, the jester of modernist literature and painting—often a figure of pathos, as he stands apart from the crowd, yet bears the burden of their amusement. To the unconscious disloyalty of the audience corresponds the practical joker’s betrayal of his victim’s trust. We find, especially in Hitchcock’s British films, a number of references to this ambiguous figure: the portrait of the jester, for instance, which plays such an important role in *BLACKMAIL* (1929), or the murderers in the 1930 *MURDER!* (playing a circus acrobat) and the 1937 *YOUNG AND INNOCENT* (disguised as a blackface minstrel), both of whom one hesitates to call villains, precisely because the pathos of their costume underlines their separateness and isolation from people enjoying each other’s company. Separateness, distance, is the hallmark of the public persona which Hitchcock also created for himself with his television appearances. Not only did he stand apart, there was the manner in which he “presented” the TV shows, quite different from the personal appearances in the films: the host’s presentations of *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* displayed the more grotesque, clownish, aesthetically aggressive sides of his showmanship, letting these find expression and form in grand-guignol images of himself with a bloody hatchet buried in his bald pate, or carrying his own head under his arm.

The *saltimbanque*, on the face of it, seems to have little in common with the dandy, especially since we do find quite a number of dandies among the villains in Hitchcock’s films. From Ivor Novello in *THE LODGER* (1926), Peter Lorre in *THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH* (1934), Robert Walker in *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*, down to James Mason in *NORTH BY NORTHWEST*, Hitchcock’s villains are often either sharp dressers or aristocratic aesthetes, often made “sinister” by stereotypically homosexual traits or hints of sexual perversion.<sup>23</sup> Yet some of Hitchcock’s *heroes* are also practical jokers and even aristocratic rogues: Robert Donat in *THE 39 STEPS*, Cary Grant in the 1941 *SUSPICION* (and the 1955 *TO CATCH A THIEF*), not to mention Melanie Daniels who in *THE BIRDS* is introduced as a practical joker.<sup>24</sup>

The sensibility I am trying to sketch for understanding the Hitchcock persona, then, is clearly a composite one: a combination of the aesthete, the rogue and the mountebank. At the same time, it is precisely this somewhat unlikely combination that makes Hitchcock’s dandyism specifically English and historically definable. For these attitudes can be seen to occupy, in the literary and artistic culture of the 1920s and 1930s, one side of a dialectic which opposes the values of Victorian and Edwardian public life—social responsibility, maturity, moral and artistic seriousness—with the values of a generation that was in rebellion against identifying art exclusively with seriousness, an attitude it considered philistine, suffocating and inartistic. Instead, it affected and cultivated, out of an equally serious commitment to art, a mode of irresponsibility, playfulness, unseriousness and sexual ambiguity that combined the stance of the Oscar Wilde dandy with a more aggressive brand of schoolboy humor and a wilful immaturity. Reacting to the “consensus humanism” of Edwardian England, because they saw in the cultural forms of seriousness and responsibility an ideology of power and social hierarchy digging itself in, after the debacle of the First World War, the dandies of the 1920s and 1930s, according to a popular study of the period, “shared a sense of humour, a humour developed to abnormal intensity, so that it takes over the psychic and social functions usually performed by the erotic or idealistic aspects of personality.”<sup>25</sup>

This seems a pertinent observation also in relation to Hitchcock: if, however remotely, he belongs to this side of the cultural divide, then it may be possible to see his irony, his verbal wit, the apparent

unseriousness and showmanship both in his persona and as it manifests itself in the structure and material of his films, as itself part of a more coherent project—that of a refusal, a rejection, a protest against a specifically English concept of maturity, dominant in the culture in which he grew up. We could then say, without merely stating a paradox, that Hitchcock’s cultivated unseriousness has behind it the force of a moral stance. In any direct sense, Hitchcock is not a social critic: his morality resides in the complexity of his dandyism and what it entails ideologically. That it is a morality mediated by a culturally specific gesture of refusal makes the reading of his films in the manner of Robin Wood so problematic, because the values that Wood asserts in Hitchcock (maturity, moral growth, the therapeutic theme) are precisely the values upheld by the inheritors of the Grand Tradition against which the dandy in Hitchcock is in revolt. On the other hand, a purely formal or structural reading of Hitchcock tends to ignore the extent to which Hitchcock’s anti-humanism, his cult of artifice and surface are the result of a moral and historical *parti pris*. That Hitchcock chose the dandy side of the British cultural character—a choice greatly facilitated by his move to Hollywood—shows another irony; for in Hollywood, the *dandy* turned into the *saltimbanque*: he chose a disguise that remarkably looked like it belonged to the other party—that of philistine Victorianism.

It does not seem entirely by chance, then, that one finds most of the English dandies from the 1930s but also after, choosing to live a kind of double life: both inside and outside the British Establishment. Many of the writers and artists among them moved into voluntary exile—California, France, Italy. Some of them deliberately betrayed their social class: W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender siding with the cause of the international proletariat, Oswald Mosley founding the British Fascist Party. Others, in apparently secure and even higher places, chose to betray their country. For among the dandies of the 1930s are Guy Burgess, George Blake, Donald Maclean and Anthony Blunt: all at various times spies or agents for the Soviet Union.

This peculiar complexion of the British dandy may well induce us to look once more at the preponderance of the spy, the traitor, the agent and the double agent in Hitchcock’s work. In the image of the saboteur, the secret agent, the man who knew too much, the foreign correspondent, there is always in Hitchcock an emphasis on disguise and *mise-en-scène*. Now, a popular entertainer knows that spy stories will always find their public: but few filmmakers have given the thrill of playing double agent quite as consummate an embodiment in film after film as Hitchcock. One may well ask whether the man who in his public persona chose to “disguise” himself as a dandy and jester did not put into these thrilling villains a little piece of his own creative self, giving us a portrait of the artist not just as *metteur-en-scène*, but as the man who knew too much. Or, putting it slightly differently, the role Hitchcock, throughout his long years in California, pleased himself to perform was not, as many believed, that of unofficial ambassador. Instead, he was the secret agent of an Englishness more devious for being dead-pan, in a medium that happily knows loyalty and pays allegiance not to King and Country, but to the customer as King: His/Her Majesty the spectator. However, this loyalty, too, must not be taken altogether at face value. Hitchcock’s films—splitting our gaze and dividing our attention, transferring our identity and switching our allegiance—teach us the subtlest and most beguiling form of treason: recognizing in the other a part of ourselves. Putting our ordinary selves under erasure, the dandy in Hitchcock makes us rediscover the morality of artifice. To quote the old saying “with such friends, who needs enemies”: Rule Britannia—Cool Britannia: with such Traitors, who needs Royalists. . . ?