

HITCHCOCK'S QUEER DOUBLES¹

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*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightening to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—
(Emily Dickinson)*

Abstract

The “double” is a well-known Hitchcockian motif. Widely reviewed under a psychoanalytical perspective, the issue of the double still presents other important challenges and this article aims at discussing the queer doubles in Hitchcock's

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films as “falsifiers” who are opposed to non-queer doubles that emphasise narrative coherence and legibility. In films such as *Rebeca*, *Rope*, *Vertigo*, *The Birds*, *Psycho*, and *Frenzy*, a double condenses impulses that are well described by Lee Edelman: “the violent undoing of meaning, the loss of identity and coherence, the unnatural access to *jouissance*” (132). These doubles release the *powers of the false* as they complicate the return to an “order”. Therefore, we could argue that such characters are closer to being Deleuzian *simulacra* than psychoanalytical *doppelgängers*.

Keywords: Alfred Hitchcock; Doubles; Queer; Powers of the False

The “double” is a well-known Hitchcockian motif: it appears as the “wrong man” unjustly accused of a crime, as the overbearing memory of a dead loved one, or as characters who mirror each other, either in looks or in actions. The double could be provisionally described, along the lines defined by Noel Carroll, when discussing the horror movie, as the multiplication of a character or group of characters, where the resulting “other” usually represents an aspect of the self that is concealed or repressed by the character who has been “doubled” (166-167). Widely reviewed under a psychoanalytical perspective, the issue of the double still presents other important challenges. In films such as *Rebeca*, *Rope*, *Vertigo*, and *Psycho*, a double condenses impulses that are akin to Lee Edelman’s discussion about the queer: “the violent undoing of meaning, the loss of identity and coherence, the unnatural access to *jouissance*” (132). Hitchcock’s queer doubles disturb how the films affect us by working at a molecular level, that is, as an “excessive, destabilizing intensity responsive to its own forces and capacities” (Elena del Rio 9), thus contesting sexual and narrative normativity. These doubles release the *powers of the false* as they complicate the return to an “order”. In the aforementioned films, truth lies naked and its queer body of lies problematise narrative- and subjective-coherence.

We must start by pointing out that this article is a diversion from our current research interests. For some time we have been studying Latin American and Brazilian cinema. Writing about Hitchcock is, indeed, a diversion from those more recent topics. However, writing about Hitchcock is also a diversion, something that diverts the mind from tedious concerns: it is an amusing, albeit complex, challenge. For us, it resembles a battle of wits—how can we resist the temptation of responding in kind to his ironical and often contemptuous take on life? However, in the name of academic decorum, one must refrain from sardonicism and sarcasm and try to maintain a modicum of composure. Hitchcock's queer worldview is to be described and dissected, not mimicked. But, of course, looks are deceiving and deep inside, underneath the garments of manners and modesty, lurks a drive, a coiled force, still indecisive whether to kiss or to slap the smirk out of the director's face.

“That what we call ‘Hitchcock’ involves a project beyond the parameters of film studies, a textual intervention that challenges an entire signifying order or political state, in which all matter of marking or associations address issues of memory and how identity and violence is inscribed” (294), Tom Cohen reminds us. This is one way to queer Hitchie, by doing violence to his films; after all, as Marie-José Mondzain puts it, the visible affects us inasmuch as it is related to the power of desire and impels us to find the means to love and to hate (17). Queering Hitchcock means, first of all, acknowledging this power and the multifarious ways to manage it. Mondzain explains that a critique of the images is founded on the political management of passions created by the images (38) which should aim to avoid the violent fusion of individuals in a Whole. We intend, thus, to bring to light some of Hitchcock's queer doubles as a way to create some

kind of alterity that can prevent us from merging into a totalitarian community where the image is but one.

Clint Burnham playfully describes at least five “Hitchcocks” discussed in current theories:

there is HitchCOCK (feminist critiques), HITCHcock (the de Lauretis sort of deconstruction), HITCHCOCK (Wood’s or Rothmanesque auterism), hitchcock (Modleski’s ambiguous use of him), Hitchcock (Jameson, the H stading as well, of course, for History), and hitchcocK (Zizek, where the last K will signal his gleeful use of Kafka and Hitchcock as neither mass culture nor high art. (201)

Burnham’s graphic summary of the ways Hitchcock has remained a constant presence in critical thought is not meant to be exhaustive. If anything, it reveals the complexities at stake when dealing with the British director’s films. If we were to give a more comprehensive graphic rendition of the ways we can approach Hitchcock, it should look like this:



Slightly out of focus, backwards and upside-down, vertiginous, incomplete, out of bounds, queer.

In the first scenes of *The Lodger*, while a witness describes the murderer (“Tall he was—and his face all wrapped up”) one of the

men in the crowd surrounding her pulls up his coat to hide his face, mocking the woman's agitated behavior. She then sees his reflection on the metallic surface of the food cart. The distorted image is frighteningly similar to the murderer's face. This would be a metaphor for more traditional definitions of doubles: they might resemble a distorted reflection of the "real" character. But such perspective entails a binary composition, a defined line that differentiates a "good" and a "bad" half. When doubles are queered something else happens, other compositions are possible. Queer, as defined by Teresa de Lauretis, "[...] is a space not just nonhomogeneous but more precisely heterotopic: it is the space of a transit, a displacement, a passage and transformation" (2011: 246). And queer doubles create twice the trouble. Not so much a distorted version of an "other", the queer double indicates a displacement of this otherness.

Hitchcock's world is, indeed, a queer one. On the one hand, there is control and repression—we can think of a number of examples: Mrs Denvers' stiff posture is a black monolith of repressed sexual energy; everywhere (more notably in *Spellbound*, *Psycho* and *Marnie*) doctors pretend to know the intricacies of the human mind and waste no time in educating the audience about the perils of stray desires; and then there are the closed spaces and the confessional. On the other hand, we have excess and leftovers—dead bodies remain unburied, burdening the living with their unrelenting materiality, sometimes men (and women) know too much, ask too many questions, look too alike another person; and then there is food, plenty of food, cinematic cornucopia.

We can say that Hitchcock's queer world dramatizes the struggle between molar and molecular structures. We believe that the interaction between these poles, the tension that is created between the properties of matter and of particles, as discussed by Gilles

Deleuze and Felix Guattari, can be very productive. According to the French philosophers, the same elements present in fluxes, strata and assemblies can arrange themselves into molar or molecular modes. The molar order is one where objects, subjects, representations and reference systems are stratified. Conversely, molecular order comprises fluxes and becomings, transitions and intensities. In *A Thousand Plateaus* they say:

On the one hand, multiplicities that are extensive, divisible, and molar; unifiable, totalizable, organizable; conscious or preconscious—and on the other hand, libidinal, unconscious, molecular, intensive multiplicities composed of particles that do not divide without changing in nature, and distances that do not vary without entering another multiplicity and that constantly construct and dismantle themselves in the course of their communications, as they cross over into each other at, beyond, or before a certain threshold. (33)

Therefore, the molar mode, the mode of being and the production of the same, is concerned with reaching an equilibrium. The molecular mode, the mode of becoming, is focused on becoming-other rather than the same. Whereas molar structures operate in an “either/or logic”—thus asserting an invariable self-identity—molecular structures claim for a “both/and” standpoint that poses a problem to identity. We can, indeed, associate molar modes with “major” positions such as being male, white, rational, heterosexual; the molecular modes would be that which poses a problem to the coagulated, rigid “majority”.

It is important to note that the two series are distinguishable but not separable. They coexist, cut across and prolong each other. For Deleuze and Guattari, molecular movements would mean nothing if they did not go through molar organizations and reassembled their

binary distributions. Queers, as expected, would be a “minority”, a molecular arrangement with the potential to disturb molarity. A minority that does work in the logic of identity, but is undefinable, provisional, open. The queer is not here yet. The queer is always coming or, rather, is yet to come. Delayed gratification.

In *Rebecca* we have a very interesting double queering. The title character, an adulterous woman, remains unburied in Mrs Denvers’ and Jack’s memory. She is kept alive by their recounting of her life, language working as a kind of embalming. But, more importantly, it is in their gestures and in the objects that Rebecca—and desire—lives on. When Mrs Denver shows Rebecca’s room to the new Mrs de Winter what we have is a pagan temple, a profane cathedral where lights are bright, in stark contrast with the gloom in the other rooms. Lying on the bed is the pillowcase embroidered by Mrs Denvers. That is an intimate object, a token of unwavering affection. Inside the pillowcase, Rebecca’s nightgown. More intimacy. More touching. Judith Anderson’s adroit performance evokes a presence through the handling of fur and fabric; it is almost as if Rebecca’s body was there, being caressed by the ever obsequious Denvers.

But then Rebecca is doubled by the new Mrs de Winter, who is, indeed, a pacifying double. With her mellow ways she amalgamates and “domesticates” the disperse sexual energy that haunts Manderley. The young bride is there to restitute order to a house impregnated with morbid sexuality. And the molar structures (police, doctors) are there to restitute truth to memories blurred by obsessions. Rebecca, with her carefully articulated web of lies, and all the memories fabricated from the rearrangement of objects and gestures, creates a different world where the living and the dead coexist.

If in *Rebecca* we have Mrs Denvers as the high priestess of the temple, in *Rope* there is Brendon, a keen orchestrator,

commanding movements, meetings and misunderstandings. Confined to an upper-class apartment, Hitchcock's camera moves on a horizontal axis and reframing often works as a cut, giving us details of objects, food, faces, but, mainly, of hands. Although there is no "visible" editing in *Rope*, the images of hands are bracketed by reframing. And it is important to notice that these are specific hands, they belong to the queer couple/double. They strangle a man, they break glasses and get cut, they play with a rope, they light cigarettes, pour champagne, carry books. They are also far from being everyday hands, even when they are executing everyday tasks such as serving a plate. They are hands that are always carrying out a self-conscious performance.

The film's long take requires a choreography that often groups three or more characters together. This choreography does not concern Bazinian realism. Bazin valued the long take as a return to the origins of filmmaking while depth of field allowed actions to take place in different sections or different planes of the frame simultaneously. The long take would also give the spectator, according to Bazin, the freedom to direct his/her own control over the viewing process and to make their own synthesis of that viewing process. Together they maintain the ambiguity of that space—the existential ambiguity present all around in life. The long take in *Rope* opposes its own theatricality to that of the theatre and of "reality". It is the stretching out of the two queer characters' staging of their own version of the world.

This world, of course, is to be contained by the powers that be, also known as James Stewart's Rupert Cadell. Cadell's logic eventually breaks the perfect crime down, but there is a small revenge enacted by the queer world against molarity and morality. Cadell's moralizing speech at the end is demoralized by lighting. Green and red lights are flashing, and instead of adding to the seriousness of the scene, they

make it seem like a funfair, a cabaret. The excess in those lights tones down our heterosexual male lecturer's tract on social responsibility.

Another noteworthy example of staging can be found in *Vertigo*. Nothing seems to be "real" in this world of pretense. Madeleine is introduced to us through her fascination with a dead woman. We see her dispensing attention and energy in an obsession that is totally "unnatural". She then becomes a ghost and the simulation of a simulation, as Scottie makes Judy dress up as Madeleine. He has Judy pretending to be a person that never really existed. We never know the "real" Madeleine. We only know this simulated woman, not too different from an "android", a "replicant", made by men in the likelihood of woman.

Madeleine, this *simulacrum*, queers the narrative with her morbid fascination for Carlotta. But also with her calculated, automaton-like demeanor, seemingly aloof about everything else. Light creates a glow in her close-ups, giving her an ethereal appearance. Madeleine is that: an image. No psychological motivation is enough to explain the powers of her affects. Judy and her ordinariness, her history and geography (country girl from Kansas trying her luck on the West Coast), pale in comparison to Madeleine's promise of a world without "origins".

Maurice Blanchot encourages us to ask: does the reflection not always appear more refined than the object reflected? Isn't the image the ideal expression of the object, its presence liberated from existence? Isn't the image form without matter? And isn't the task of artists, who are exiled in the illusory realm of images, to idealize beings—to elevate them to their disembodied resemblance? (255)

Finally, there is, of course, Norman Bates, über-queer, our favorite cinematic pervert. Or should we say there is Mrs Bates inhabiting her son's body. Or, maybe, a third possibility, a shifting

desire that traverses the film and assumes many form. It takes the form of two sweaty bodies in a hot Phoenix afternoon. It passes on to the lonely taxidermist that runs a motel in the middle of nowhere. It is transfigured into an old woman's embalmed cadaver. It goes through the eye into the sinking hole, and back again to the eye that keeps on watching us.

So, yes, Norman doubles his mother. But this is only one of the many forms that desire adopts. It shifts and its flux can only be contained by the end of film, where medical and psychoanalytical jargon works to present an explanation for it. Molarity tries to unify this dispersion into a single cause. Molarity and morality.

Desire extrapolates the screen. We become Norman's doubles, Marion's doubles. After having seen *Psycho* repeatedly, it still resonates in us, not because we do not know what is going to happen. That kind of cognitive titillation may have taken place in the first viewing. But if the film still affects us it is because desire is always shifting in it, therefore, shifting in us. We then become Hitchcock's queer doubles.

We would like to end by going back to the provisional definition of double given in the beginning. A double as something that has been "repressed". We believe that Hitchcock's queer double suggests a different perspective. The double is not the "repressed", the queer energy as something to be contained. The queer double is not a "negative" reproduction of a character. If anything, it carries a similarity that is utterly productive. Brian Massumi, when discussing deleuzian *simulacra* states that

Resemblance is a beginning masking the advent of whole new vital dimension. This even applies to mimicry in nature. An insect that mimics a leaf does so not to meld with the vegetable state of its surrounding milieu, but to reenter the higher realm of predatory animal warfare on a new footing. Mimicry, according

to Lacan, is camouflage. It constitutes a war zone. There is a power inherent in the false: the positive power of ruse, the power to gain a strategic advantage by masking one's life force.

The doubling, then, introduces a difference that disturbs the order. The queer double channels desires in unexpected directions and liberates the image—until it is recoiled in molar structures and then freed again, in a never ending motion. That's is why the queer is so fascinating. Unless it is being overcast by the politics of sexual identity, as David L. Eng reminds us. He says that

the term [queer] has become increasingly unmoored from its theoretical potentials and possibilities. Instead, it has come to demarcate more narrowly pragmatic gay and lesbian identity politics, the economic interests of neoliberalism and whiteness, and liberal political norms of inclusion—including access to marriage, custody, inheritance, and service in the military. Today “queer” and “rights” as well as “queer” and “marriage” no longer strike us as paradoxical in terms of antithetical prepositions (xi).

Perhaps that is why we should always go back to the arts, this great laboratory where we can experiment the pains and perils, marvels and wonders of a queerer world.

Note

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