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WHY A HITCHCOCK DRINKS ITS COFFEE BLACK

In an interview with *bon appétit* magazine, Mel Brooks recalls an evening dining with Alfred Hitchcock before the release of *High Anxiety* (1977) at one of the latter's favorite restaurants, Chasen's on Beverly Boulevard:¹

He ordered a shrimp cocktail to begin, with cocktail sauce. And a sirloin steak, which was at least two inches thick. And a baked potato crammed full of chives and sour cream. And then he ordered a separate plate of asparagus with hollandaise sauce. And some sliced tomato on lettuce and there was some kind of blue cheese dressing on that ... And for dessert he had, I don't know two bowls of vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce, with strawberry or something on top. What a meal. And this is all true. You won't believe this ... So he finished and he took out a kind of ostrich-covered wallet, and in it there were three cigars or four cigars, and I'm sure it was a Cuban cigar. He took it out and he took out a little guillotine from his pocket, which he always kept, and he clipped the tip of the cigar. And he put it in his mouth and he paused. He paused. I figured he'd take out a lighter. He paused, he paused, he paused. He took the cigar out of his mouth, put it back in the case, and put it back in his pocket. "Oh George." Headwaiter ran over, and he said, "George, I'm really peckish tonight. Do it again. ... He had a big belly, and he ate it all. And he didn't have the dessert. He just finished the main course. He got the tomato and the Roquefort cheese dressing and everything, and then he lit the cigar. And I said, "Don't you want some cream on the side, or some milk on the side?" And he said, "No, no, no, I gotta watch the calories."...[R]eally a great joke. [Laughing] You know, he had black coffee. Watch the calories; watch him tower up like a goyishe, like nobody else in the world.²

Mel Brooks's narration—its richness of detail, attentiveness to Hitchcock's timing and fine use of that signifier of suspense, the cigar—lends to their encounter a cinematic quality, as if the scene had been directed with a refined sense for the impression the 'goodness' of his appetite would make, not only on his companion, but posterity as such. The gorging, the flabbergast, and the punchline. The joke here turns on understating the all too visible excess, situating "Hitchcock" within

the hole marked by the performative negation, “No, No, No...” and embodied in the blackness of his coffee.

“Wit is only wit,” Lacan mentions in passing, “because it is close enough to our existence to cancel it with laughter.”³ And laughter here cancels any semblance of congruity to the creature before our eyes. The signifier’s incision renders any consistent sense that image might have null. “Logic is dull,” Hitchcock frequently reiterated, taking aim at his critics that he dismissed as the “plausabilists.” It proceeds too consistently, intolerant of the incongruities Hitchcock worked so hard to plan.⁴

No stranger to making a spectacle of himself, Hitchcock carefully managed his public persona, the production more than authentication of his signature, treating his projected image as an extension of his cinematic art, always mucking about with the idea of his corpus and the relation its swelling mass would bear to his person. There was more than a bit of a Dandy in Hitchcock, to allude to Thomas Elsaesser’s fine essay, and his films are littered with *dandy-esque* rogues and elegant villains. One of the chief aims of the dandy is to render the *humanity* in the human unrecognizable. To this purpose, Hitchcock put his corpulence to good work.⁵ “[L]ike the exorbitant ingestion of meanings by the image,” Tom Cohen suggests, it is “always a signifier to be exploited—whether rendering the figure unthreatening and neutered, perhaps infantile, or signalling formality in excess.”⁶ In this case, it is a void to be stuffed.

Hitchcock once told Robert Boyle, a close friend and set designer of such films as *Shadow of a Doubt* and *The Birds*: “I have all the feelings of everyone encased in an armour of fat.”⁷ As armour, his suit of flesh deflects blows, but as fat it absorbs them. Feelings for Hitchcock are the effect of perturbations of a surface that does not just reflect, but is stained by its contact, as a mirror by the oil that leaks from the human pore. Feelings are as dirty as they are artificial: the result of a certain amplification of a stain. Just as melodrama, for Hitchcock, is in service of understatement, feeling is in service of registering the “cut” that is the vehicle of the cinematic idea. The image that does not react to the cut, that understates it, is most faithful to the null presence of the idea. The cut operates less perhaps like a blade than a tooth, akin to a biting remark that the image like the flesh must ingest.

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The principle of Hitchcock’s eating follows closely the cinematic principle that he lays out in the essay, “Why I Make Melodramas.”⁸ “I use melodrama,” Hitchcock writes, “because I have a tremendous desire for understatement in film-making.”⁹ Defining the “melodramatic film” as “one based on a series of sensational incidents,” he claims that it is “the backbone and lifeblood of cinema.”¹⁰ However, the melodramatic is not any less real for being sensational, just as the understated is not more real for being less theatrical. As Hitchcock puts it: “A woman may receive the news of her husband’s death by throwing up her arms and screaming, or she may sit quite still and say nothing. The first is melodramatic. But it may well hap-

pen in real life.”¹¹ Striving for what he terms an “ultra-realism,” his cinema assumes the contradictory form of the sensationalization of the understated, arriving at a form of melodrama that is *less* fictional than reality. Rather than assuming the opposition between reality and fiction, he displaces the distinction itself. Since audience’s perception of reality has been shaped irreparably by a “habit of drama,” as he puts it, “[r]ealism, faithfully represented,” does not appear as such, seems “unreal,” because “[t]his habit causes the audience to prefer on the screen things that are outside their own, real-life experience.”¹² By sensationalizing “the strange anomalies of real life”—often dismissed as “wildly improbable” and “grotesquely unreal” though filched directly from the newspaper—he maintains at once “the entertainment demands of the screen” for “colorful action” without simply feeding their “habit of drama.” He entertains contrawise: not by making time pass, but, let us say, by filling the void. Ultra-realism is thus more real than reality’s lack of reality, since it includes the void that reality excludes. This is Hitchcock’s formula for his break with a representational conception of cognition and thus cinema. Understatement internalizes the thing it excludes: sensation. It does so by sensationalizing lack, making the void scintillatingly present.

To fill a void is not simply to add something, like cream to coffee, but to mark out its emptiness, making a place for absence, and this is what allows Hitchcock to liken the construction of the cinematic phantasm, as he does in *Psycho*, to the taxidermist’s macabre art. The taxidermist fills the void for the sole purpose of displaying a kill, mounting its vacancy, maintaining its look while vacating its gaze. Such a practitioner must first gut the beast before treating its hide and filling it with cheap materials. As Norman says, “It’s cheap, really. You know, needles, thread, sawdust. [Today it would be Styrofoam.] The chemicals are the only thing that cost anything.”¹³ Taxidermy like cinema, Hitchcock suggests, preserves the look of the void.

The vacancy of the eye is what Hitchcock captures through the metonymic slide from shower head, to the eye, to the drain that follows the murder of Marion (Janet Leigh) in the infamous shower sequence in *Psycho*. Any crass attempt to reinstate metaphor—life going down the drain, etc.—results in mere cliché, which cannot sustain the formal relentlessness of the metonymic chain that associates these things by their voided shape. Reduced to their capacity to stand in the null place of a vacant subject—vacated by a virtuoso series of “cuts”—they do not become metaphors for Marion’s loss of life, but emblems of insignificance, separated from their own meanings through their circumstantial association. He does not make something from nothing, but *some thing* of not.

Absence makes an impression, like the imprint left by Mrs. Bates on her bed, the poison illuminating the glass of milk carried by Johnnie Aysgarth (Cary Grant) in *Suspicion*, the smoke ring blown by Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotton) in *A Shadow of a Doubt*, the stain on the glass that Brandon wants to keep for the museum in *Rope*, the crop duster that is dusting a cropless field in *North by Northwest*, or Hitchcock’s black coffee. Absence *takes* place, hollowing out the signification of that which appears like the empty vessel of the “O” that stands for nothing of Roger O. Thorn-

hill's name and whose matchbook bares the initials ROT: the "O" being mighty coffin like.

Treating an absent presence as an all too present absence is perhaps Hitchcock's most central operation: one which Mel Brooks parodies in *High Anxiety* by making it shatteringly literal. Shooting a dinner scene at "The Psycho-Neurotic Institute for the Very, Very Nervous" from outside a large window, the camera slowly zooms in crashing, rather than passing, through the window, drawing the shocked attention of the dining analysts, Brooks included. The process of filmic enunciation here crudely intrudes on the enunciated like a fumbling voyeur. Far from positioning the director as a figure who holds all the spades, or a master manipulator who plays the audience "like a giant organ," Brooks allegorizes his own relation to the viewer as a goofball always ready to lay the banana peel. If the joke hits the mark, it is because Hitchcock, of course, would never resort to such clumsy measures. His approach being decidedly understated.

If he understates his relation to the viewer, this is not, however, because he takes himself and the cinema so much more seriously. Although he would take the joke in stride, Hitchcock's problem is neither concerned with calling the fictional, diegetic space of the film into question, by including in the space of the picture that which is purportedly excluded: the beyond of the frame or the physical "reality" of the camera, the set, etc.. Nor does Hitchcock, despite opinion, simply *personify* the camera's presence.¹⁴ It may indeed be a certain decoy of authorial presence, like the cameo, but the question remains: what kind of presence? Hitchcock's notorious (and doubtless overstated) claim that "actors are cattle" provides a clue. Rather than humanizing the camera, by assigning an authorial role or making it a character, it is a question of dehumanizing the actor with its mobile presence, stripping him or her of "character," some reputed interiority that they could appeal to. When Ingrid Bergman had trouble 'motivating' a scene, he would simply tell her to "fake it," doing the trick.¹⁵ If the camera's passivity acts in their place, it is because their roles are only animated by a series of "cuts." All images await the cutting that hollows them out: making them at once self-contained and yet insufficient unto themselves.¹⁶ The inhuman, artificial cinematic gaze snatches away the interiority of 'character' by way of its irreducible exteriority and it is the cut implied by its animation that positions the subject in the very place of its absence: always between the image like a gap tooth. Inside by being irreducibly outside: on its masticated plane.

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Hitchcock conceives of cinema as vast network of the relations that determine the course of ingestion. As he tells Truffaut:

I'd like to try to do an anthology on food, showing its arrival in the city, its distribution, the selling, buying by the people, the cooking, the various ways in which its consumed. What happens to it in various hotels; how it's fixed

up and absorbed. And, gradually, the end of the film would show the sewers, and the garbage being dumped out into the ocean. So there's a cycle, beginning with the gleaming fresh vegetables and ending with the mess that's poured into the sewers. Thematically, the cycle would show what people do to good things. Your theme might almost be the rottenness of humanity.¹⁷

It is neither the beginning nor the end, nor the vast system of exchange that focusses Hitchcock's attention, but the chewing, the incessant chewing, that moment that already implies corruption, but is not yet wholly identified with the mess that flows into the sewer. This is the moment in which the teeth bite down on the image, positioning it in relation to those that are absent, broken down and tasted, prepared for ingestion. The average public, Hitchcock stresses, have little clue as to this process of "cutting," as little clue as awareness of the piping that carries the human mess through the walls and under the streets. A film must ingest the cuts that position its many seams, creating that phantom of interiority—a meaning or a message—that Hitchcock treats corrosively, insisting rather on the absolute exteriority of that which unfolds upon the screen.¹⁸ Hitchcock liked to quote Sam Goldwyn: "Messages are for Western Union."¹⁹ The message that Hitchcock sends cannot be telegraphed, since it would be composed of the stops between words: like Uncle Charlie's (played by Joseph Cotton) strange message from *A Shadow of a Doubt* in which he articulates the "stops" between the message: "Lonesome for you all. Stop. I'm coming out to stay with you a while. Stop. Will arrive Thursday and try and stop me. Will wire exact time later. Love to all and a kiss to little Charlie from her Uncle Charlie." It is this "between" that Hitchcock aims to show: the arrested image, so to speak, with all its bite marks.

The cinematic moving picture is cut up, or better chewed, masticated, only then swallowed in a gulp. Herbert Coleman recalled that Hitchcock "always said he hated the idea of swallowing food or drink, and in fact everything seemed to be taken in one huge gulp."²⁰ But he certainly chewed it, so to be more precise, the image is chewed in order to be tasted, absorbed by the tongue and palette and only subsequently swallowed, sent on its unmerry way. Only Cohen, to my knowledge, grasps the full extent to which in Hitchcock the eye is "metonymically transcoded as site of mastication, ingestion, the lips as eyelids, teeth as shredders, where the white skeleton protrudes."²¹

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Did I mention that Hitchcock loved his food? He once said that he would be happy to die eating. A gourmand, he even had meals on occasion flown in from Paris and his wine cellar was worth a small fortune. However, he was not fond of the toilet, even lifting his legs if he sensed a presence while in a public stall. Not surprising for one for whom eating was more conceptual than nutritional. Hitchcock liked to astonish, even shock, but only rarely disgust. His efforts were never aimed at simply tearing the fronts off houses to reveal the sty within. His feats of eating

were not the performance of a pig at the trough. Their ambition was to destroy the organic, or at least transform it into that empty vessel we call art, converting fat into chainmail.

In the episode that Mel Brooks recounts, Hitchcock's hunger per se is not at issue, but the manner in which it is put on display, cued by the repetition—"Oh George ... Do it again"—as if it was not a meal but a scene to be replayed. The repetition of the meal situates him in relation to his appetite and it is this relation that becomes the kernel of this joke. Rather than simply sharing a meal with the master, Mel Brooks is treated to the spectacle of watching him eat. The meal's wanton excess, which serves no purpose, certainly no caloric function, other than Hitchcock's drive to transform the "health" of his appetite into something as fiendishly funny as it is *ugly*—to allude to the voice of Norman Bates's mother.²²

This transformation is indubitably the source of the hilarity of Hitchcock's understatement: "No, no, no, I gotta watch the calories," as if health was a concern. An excess of calories is certainly at stake, contributing as they no doubt do to the girth of his physical presence, but their consumption here serves to lay stress to a certain *formality in excess*. Like the birds that Norman Bates stuffs—his hobby that is "more than a hobby," since "a hobby is supposed to pass the time," as he puts it, "not fill it"—Hitchcock's stuffing of his belly establishes the true enormity of his *peckishness*. He certainly does not eat like Marion Crane, which is to say, like a bird, unless we are to admit Norman's correction: "the expression 'eats like a bird,'" he stutters, "is really a fal-fal-falsity. Because birds really eat a tremendous lot." The *mise en scène* of Hitchcock's joke, his own stuffing, serves the function, like the chemicals of the taxidermist trade, of the fixation of his form.

This form, always stuffed into the same blue suit, is fixed by means of the understatement that announces a sudden concern with how all those calories will make him appear. But appearance was the concern all along: not a concern with the size of his belly, but with making the stomach appear as a bottomless pit, a hollow to be stuffed. By not just eating a hell of a lot, but repeating the meal, Hitchcock causes the quality of his appetite to change sign (from health to ugliness). A transformation that happens through his exhaustive capacity to put it away: "He had a big belly, and he ate it all." *Gorging* himself he assumes the artifice of his hunger through its hyperbole. The natural becomes unnatural, the real surreal, the stomach a void, not through an assumed opposition between the artificial and the natural, fiction and reality, but through a process of exhaustive ingestion, oversaturation, or exaggeration. The moment of restraint, the punctuations of wit, assigns the limit to the indulgence, making a recognizable form unrecognizable, marking the transformation, not by highlighting the excess but by positioning it in the place of its absence.

What was a stomach becomes a void to be stuffed. Not one meal or two meals, but a meal repeated, making the person who must absorb all those calories into a Hitchcock. No small achievement, it is a matter of applying the right stress, a matter of timing. Hitchcock goes to great lengths here, interestingly, to not place the accent

on excess. When Brooks attempts to get in on the joke, he does the opposite, emphasizing Hitchcock's overindulgence: "you've been so excessive, why stop there, why not add some milk or cream to your coffee." Hitchcock's joking rejoinder is a corrective that returns to the logic of understatement (No, no, no...), insisting on the necessity of restraint (I gotta watch the calories). Does the image that Hitchcock here forms depend on exceeding expectation or laconically disappointing it? It does both: it exceeds in order to disappoint. But the moment of disappoint is first, since the excess is staged for the display of this lack. Hitchcock has his cake, so to speak, and eats it to, but the stress clearly falls to the thing less given. Dessert, the second time round, is left out. It is as if Hitchcock is subtly saying, do not be distracted by the quantity, the matter of addition, not the amount that is put away; it is not the stretching of the belly, but the hollowing out of the gut. Repetition is repetition only if it adds nothing, the stress falling to the less given. And this is the power of understatement; it adds nothing and thereby positions the singularity of its act incongruously. It is repetition that here shifts the frame from one more to the less that is more.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Hitchcock had repeated this performance, this half-gag, before. But as his biographer, Donald Spoto, remarks, he did not make a habit of it, preferring not to make a public display of his affections. Donald Spoto recounts:

America was famous for steak and ice cream, Hitchcock told Smith, and so he had enjoyed plenty of both since his arrival. He admitted ordering vanilla ice cream for breakfast with a dash of brandy poured over it, and he said his luncheon and dinner so far had not varied: a double-thick steak at each meal. Smith thought Hitchcock was exaggerating, but when everyone ordered coffee at the end of the meal, Hitchcock showed the newsman by ordering a second steak to follow his dessert of an ice-cream parfait. The second steak he followed with still another serving of ice cream, and when Hitchcock summoned the waiter, the diners thought at last he would be leaving. But moments later the 21 Club hummed with the gossip: Alfred Hitchcock had ordered a third steak, and with it, so as not delay his companions, his third helping of ice cream.

At last he seemed to finish, with a gulp of strong tea. "Lord!" Hitchcock said with a great sigh as he fingered the teacup. Smith thought he was commenting on the gargantuan meal. Instead, Hitchcock reflected aloud on the china cup, his mind perhaps bending back to his perverse habit of throwing teacups over his shoulder in the London studios. "How I'd love to shatter this cup. Fling it on the floor. Smash it in a million pieces. I can't explain it, but breaking things makes me feel fine."

But the director restrained himself, and Smith turned the conversation to Hitchcock's appetite. With a final swallow of brandy, Hitchcock remarked with uncharacteristic honesty: "I find contentment from food. It's a mental process rather than a physical. There is as much anticipation in confronting

good food as there is in going on a holiday, or seeing a good show. There are two kinds of eating—eating to sustain and eating for pleasure. I eat for pleasure.”²³

Gilles Deleuze credits Hitchcock with introducing the “mental image” into cinema.²⁴ Yet, one should also credit him with introducing it into the act of eating. This is not simply to suggest that Hitchcock here eats with an eye to the newsman and the discourse he will produce. Whether his aims are to astonish or frustrate, making his dining companions into prisoners of his appetite, they are repeated with an eye to the tooth of inscription. It is not simply his image, but its signification that is at stake. If the jaw drops when these episodes are repeated, it is to transform this linguistic instrument into a sagging hole. Such an impression cannot be made without the repetition of the act, of taking one bite after another. It is not what is eaten, or its metabolizing, but the act of eating, that sanctioned destruction, that turns the body into a screen of chainmail.

When Hitchcock utters “Lord!,” setting up an expected reference, and then fingers his teacup, shattering the expectation that he would comment on the meal, this shattering stands in the place of the desire to destroy the object in his hands, figuring the teacups devastation: the evidence hanging, as if suspended, before the anxious gaze of Lydia Brenner in *The Birds*. And he does in fact destroy something; he destroys the form that one had of a Hitchcock. He hollows out the gaze as if pecking out the form that the eye could seize upon.

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Hitchcock jokes wittily that the style of his films results from a form of “self-plagiarism,” each film cannibalizing the last. His style emerges from this process of incorporation. This becomes most evident perhaps in *Rope*: the film that put the form of a Hitchcock film most in question by eliminating montage in the strict sense altogether. But in doing so, he also pushes the relation between the eye and the mouth to its furthest extreme: identifying the camera, not with the eye, but the mouth, a mobile jaw that eats whatever is put before it. “[U]ntil *Rope* came along,” he writes, “I had been unable to give full rein to my notion that a camera could photograph one complete reel at a time, gobbling up 11 pages of dialogue on each shot, devouring action like a giant steam shovel.”²⁵ Perhaps his most experimental film, it also wears its allegorical dimension on its sleeve, but it makes of the sleeve a mere hollow where arms are kept.

An elaborate pun on real and reel, the film consists of nine cuts, each determined by the length of a single canister of film. The end of each reel, rather than being left to dangle, dare I say, is ingeniously concealed by a “featureless frame,” to borrow Peter Wollen’s apt description, that allows for the camera’s reloading.²⁶ A truly colossal feat of technique and planning, involving, “a kind of intricate ballet for moving camera, furniture and performers,” the film’s artifice lies in the seamlessness of the camera’s and the story’s movement enabling for the time of the film’s

“real” projection to coincide with the time that elapses within the fictional space of the film. “I wanted to do a picture with no time lapses—a picture in which the camera never stops.”²⁷ As the camera eats up dialogue and ploughs through space, it causes an incessant upheaval which only the most rigorous imposition of order can disguise. The floor was covered with “tiny numbers” indicating spots that the camera man had to hit at a given point of dialogue, a choreography that required that everything be “wild” as Hitchcock termed it, movable in principle. This literal displacement concealed from view makes possible the mapping in turn of the figurative displacement prompted by the absent place of David Kentley whose dead body is the film’s MacGuffin.

The film “centers” around David, a schoolmate of Brandon and Phillip, who strangle him at the start of the second reel. Hitchcock cues his murder with his scream, which is heard but concealed from view by the curtains of the apartment window. Abruptly “cut out,” the scream’s absence is timed to coincide with the only visible cut in the film in which the camera jumps from the exterior to the interior of Brandon’s Manhattan apartment, focusing on the rope’s silencing of Kentley’s scream. Separating the seen and the heard, we are left to linger on the gasping mouth of David that no longer emits a sound. Without a voice, the mouth becomes a mere hole that is promptly stuffed into a chest. Appearing only to be promptly dispatched, David is a kind of any corpse whatever, “as good or as bad as any other,” as Brandon says: “The David’s of this world merely occupy space which is why he was the perfect victim for the perfect murder.” And this is precisely what David will do for the remainder of the film: occupy space. Hidden in what Brandon will refer to as a “cassone,” his absent presence will be the motor for the dark and macabre humor that drives the film.

A kind of practical joke taken to an absolute limit, David’s murder is a purely gratuitous act staged for the pleasure of observing how their company, David’s father in particular, will react to his absence. An experiment to test their capacity for detachment, their ability to register the queries of their guests as to David’s absence without flinching, or showing any emotion at all. It is a test in understatement, of not reacting even though one’s suit of fat is being bombarded with sensations. Brandon especially does everything within his power to intensify the pressure of the situation by actively presenting David’s absence. As good a film as any about the withdrawal of being,²⁸ the film is less concerned with the concealment of a crime, than playing with the manner of its revelation. The film’s drama is created not through the crime’s revelation, nor by any need to confess, but by the strange manner in which David’s absent place (the cassone) is incessantly presented. David’s absent place is constantly put on display: not literally, of course, but figuratively, allowing him even, for instance, to become identified with the chicken served up and subsequently swallowed by all the guests. All the guests except Phillip, that is, who refuses to eat chicken, because, as he blurts out, he is not a “chicken strangler.” It is his truly bizarre insistence that he does not strangle chickens, even though it was well known that he had rung the necks of more than a few, that leads to the

association of David, *strangled* by Phillip, with the chicken being eaten. And all the while this playful dialogue is being “gobbled” up by the camera.

The film abounds in such figurative play on David’s literal absence, just as the film itself is a literal play on the figurative absence of the cut. Form and content seamlessly stitched, the film’s efforts to hide Brandon’s and Phillip’s efforts to commit a perfect crime, figures the cinematic means of staging it. Hitchcock’s “desire,” as William Rothman suggests, to have his own technical mastery recognized, mirrors the character’s paradoxical aim of having their own criminal audacity acknowledged: “the crux of *Rope*’s secret is that it allows the film to be a perfect counterpart to the murder at the heart of its narrative.”²⁹ Absence figured and absence made literal is the real subject of the film.

And true to form, Hitchcock uses his cameo to complicate this relation between the figurative and the literal. He does not appear in person so to speak, but only as a sign of himself. Yet, this reflexivity which tempts one to align Brandon’s facile Nietzscheanism with Hitchcock is in fact undermined with his cameo. Positioning ‘himself,’ as a sign to be read in the background, we glimpse his trademarked profile as a neon outline blinking in the Manhattan skyline, just as the party is breaking up. Its appearance coincides with the statement off screen, “I’m sure the old boy will turn up somehow,” referring of course to David, but signalling Hitchcock and the spectator’s long overdue search for a “sign” of his presence. He meets this search head on and all too literally: by making the sign of his presence the presence of a sign. If signs are only signs insofar as they refer, this sign refers not only to his absent presence, but the absence of his person. Referring then to his present absence, a sign of a sign, the status of his cameo aligns him with that other signifying absence, David Kentley. And the first literal clue, that is not a suspicion figured, is David’s hat that Rupert tries to put on as he leaves only to find that it does not fit. Looking at the hollow of its form he sees the printed initials DK. Far from a signifier of mastery—Hitchcock is no Brandonian—he aligns himself with the hollow that DK occupies, that signifier of absence, that is presented to us as if the camera had “cut” to a close-up of its presence. As Hitchcock tells Truffaut, he overcomes the deficit of a lack of montage through the camera’s ability to move in to a scene: a requirement that demanded the invention of a new lens that would allow for such range.³⁰ Hitchcock’s sign that blinks on and off, literalizing its figurative play with presence and absence, does not refer us to his person, but the chubby profile of an “adrenal type.”

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“A New York doctor once told me that I’m an adrenal type. That apparently means that I am all body and only vestigial legs. But since I’m neither a mile runner nor a dancer and my present interest in my body is almost altogether from the waist up, that didn’t bother me much.”³¹



The things that made Hitchcock the happiest, according to his own ledger, were eating, drinking, and sleeping:

I sleep like a newborn babe. I drink like a fish, have you seen what a red face I have? And I eat like a pig. Even if it does make me look more and more like a porker myself. Some days ago, walking along in New York, I saw myself reflected in the window, and before I recognized myself, I let out a yell of fright. Then I called to my wife, "Who's that porker on two legs?" I didn't want to believe it when she replied, "It's you dear."³²

After likening himself to an infant and a fish, he misrecognizes himself as a pig with two trotters, leaving the punctuation of dry wit to Alma. If Hitchcock appears to himself at times to be a porker, it is wit that assures him otherwise, positioning him as a queer old bird, an odd duck, more chicken than cock, but certainly no ham, as he insists responding to a critic who described his cameo performance as such in *Stage Fright* where he can be spied as a passerby ogling the behind of his lead, Eve Gill, played by Jane Wyman.

In *Stage Fright* I have been told that my performance is quite juicy. I have been told this with a certain air of tolerance, implying that I have now achieved the maximum limits of directorial ham in the movie sandwich.

It just isn't true. There may have been a "MacGuffin" in my film appearance, but not a ham. My motives have always been more devious, or, if you prefer a more devious word, sinister. I have wormed my way into my own pictures as a spy. A director should see how the other half lives. I manage that by shifting to the front side of the camera and letting my company shoot me, so I can see what it is like to be shot by my own company.³³

If the MacGuffin is that infamous apparatus for trapping that which is not, that which does not exist, like the mythical Scottish lion of the highlands; its presence marks an absence filled by the narrative, but this "filling" is a filling out of its void that serves to displace the film's *raison d'être* into those atomized particles that comprise the dissipated substance of cinema as such.³⁴ By referring his cameos to this utterly ridiculous creature, a MacGuffin, Hitchcock defines himself as:

Hitchcock \`hich,käk\`: a rotund bird which only appears human. Occasionally it lets itself be spotted obsessively preening the irreparable falsity of this image by pecking on the pounds.

Such a definition reminds us that Hitchcock may stuff himself to his heart's content, but his coffee must remain black. All the better to understate the void's presence, filling it with the deformity of his presence. The cock of his double-chin that refers us to the letters of his name reminds us that he is less pig than bird. And as Lydia Brenner worries in *The Birds*, it is a problem when the chickens won't eat.

The bird has pride of place in Hitchcock's bestiary: from the shot in *Young and Innocent* from a seagull's point of view, *Sabotage's* use of the bird store as a front for the bomb-maker, the artificial wing flaps whose disturbing resonance is fabricated by the trautionium in *The Birds*, to the crow perched on the branch of Hitchcock's lit cigar. The bird in Hitchcock is a friend of the void and just as he imagined a film entitled "Bartholomew the Strangler," he likely could have conceived of a "Francis the Hangman." A signifier of suspense, the bird is a creature of the void.

It is not the void that scares a Hitchcock, but its absence. Hitchcock had a singular horror of eggs:

I'm frightened of eggs, worse than frightened; they revolt me. That white round thing without any holes, and when you break it, inside there's that yellow thing, round, without any holes... Brr! Have you ever seen anything more revolting than an egg yolk breaking and spilling its yellow liquid? Blood is jolly, red. But egg yolk is yellow, revolting. I've never tasted it.³⁵

Yolk is too runny, too shapeless, for a Hitchcock, and unable to register the beak of an incisor. And it is the bite of wit, to return to Lacan's remark, that situates the subject that enunciates it in the place of its absence.

Notes

1. Hitchcock was one of a handful of figures who had their own booth at the restaurant. Hitchcock dined there, religiously, on Thursdays. Chasen's played a key role in Hitchcock's "ritual of manners" as Thomas Elsaesser puts it: "Affecting a superstitious nature, a fear of crossing the street or driving a car was part of the same public gesture [of always staying at the same hotel or always dining at Chasen's]: 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." Elsaesser, "The Dandy in Hitchcock," *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays*, ed. Richard Allen and S. Ishii-Gonzalès (London: BFI Publishing, 1999) 3-14, 5.
2. "Mel Brooks on Omelettes, Coffee, and the Inimitable Appetite of Alfred Hitchcock," Interview with Mel Brooks, *Bon Appetite Magazine On-line*, May 17th 2013. <https://www.bonappetit.com/people/celebrities/article/mel-brooks-on-omelettes-coffee-and-the-inimitable-appetite-of-alfred-hitchcock>
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1988) 234.
4. François Truffaut speaks of the "planned incongruity" of the famous scene with the crop duster in *North by Northwest*, in Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 256.
5. Recall his clever cameo in *Lifeboat*. Placing himself into the boat as model for a newspaper advertisement for "Reduco," "The Sensational New OBESITY SLAYER," Hitchcock sinisterly establishes with tongue in cheek the relation between his own struggle with weight loss and the all too serious diegetic reality facing his boat of castaways. *Lifeboat*—a film

about weight loss?—yes, indeed, for one who approaches life as such a joke. “40,000 dollars is a joke to me, the whole world is a joke to me,” Uncle Charlie hurls at the priggishness of the bank manager in *A Shadow of a Doubt*. And 40,000 dollars is the sum that Marion Crane steals from her employer, in *Psycho*, ending up ultimately in the trunk of her car at the bottom of the bog. As a side note, Thomas Leitch, commenting on the role of Hitchcock as ‘celebrity auteur,’ mentions how Hitchcock did not merely lend his name, but his “unmistakable image to the projects of others in order to fatten their market.” Leitch, “The Outer Circle: Hitchcock on Television” in *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays*, 59.

6. Tom Cohen, *Hitchcock’s Cryptonymies: Vol. II War Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 18.
7. As quoted by Peter Ackroyd, *Alfred Hitchcock: A Brief Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).
8. In *The Dark Side of Genius*, Donald Spoto describes the episode in the chapter addressing the years 1937-39. Hitchcock’s essay appears in 1939.
9. Alfred Hitchcock, “Why I Make Melodramas” in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock, Vol. 2*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015) 77.
10. “Why I Make Melodramas” in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock, Vol. 2*, 77.
11. “Why I Make Melodramas” in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock, Vol. 2*, 76.
12. “Why I Make Melodramas” in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock, Vol. 2*, 77.
13. As William Rothman notes, “This is a joking comment about the link between Norman’s stuffing things and Hitchcock’s acts of filming” *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982) 280.
14. William Rothman writes, for example, “In Hitchcock’s films, the figure of the author is an important—perhaps the most important—character. One cannot even accurately relate the story of a Hitchcock film without taking into account the author, or his instrument, the camera.” “Some Thoughts on Hitchcock’s Authorship,” in *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays*, 30.
15. Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Ca Capo Press, 1983) 275-276.
16. Gilles Deleuze formulates this well when he writes, “Each image in its frame, by its frame, must exhibit a mental relation” *Cinema I: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 201.
17. Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 320.
18. George Toles formulates this nicely: “Hitchcock’s style is predicated on the belief that the surface of a screened image is absolute. It never yields to anything ‘within.’ The only interior it has is supplied by the mind of the spectator.” “If Thine Eye Offend Thee...: Psycho and the Art of Infection” in *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays*, 164.
19. “Surviving: An Interview with John Russell Taylor” in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews, Vol. I*, Ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 60.
20. As quoted by Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Ca Capo Press, 1983) 382.

21. Tom Cohen, *Hitchcock's Cryptonomies, Volume I. Secret Agents* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 62.
22. I am alluding to Norman's first 'conversation' with his mother, in *Psycho*, in which she says, "Go on, go tell her that she'll not be appeasing her ugly appetite with *my* food or my son. Or do *I* have to tell her because you don't have the guts."
23. As quoted by Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius*, 170-171.
24. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement Image*, 200-205. Deleuze's analysis of Hitchcock is correct to link the problem of relation to a "process of weaving," but errs in attributing Hitchcock's destitution of the "whole" to a tragic orientation. As this essay hopes to establish, it is rather a ruthlessly comic dimension that motivates him. In response to a question of why he only made thrillers, Hitchcock once remarked to the contrary that all of his films were in fact comedies. The truth of this claim cannot be assessed without grasping the relation it bears to the operation of putting one's tongue in one's cheek.
25. Alfred Hitchcock, "My Most Exciting Picture" in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock, Vol. I*, 275.
26. Peter Wollen, "Rope: Three Hypotheses" in *Hitchcock: Centenary Essays*, 78.
27. Alfred Hitchcock, "My Most Exciting Picture," in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock, Vol. I*, 275.
28. For the relevance of Hitchcock to the question of being, see Mladen Dolar, "Being and MacGuffin," *Crisis & Critique* 4.1 (2017): 83-101.
29. *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze*, 247.
30. "When I look back, I realize that it was quite nonsensical because I was breaking with my own theories on the importance of cutting and montage for the visual narration of the story. On the other hand, this film was, in a sense, pre-cut. The mobility of the camera and the movement of the players closely followed my usual cutting practice. In other words, I maintained the rule of varying the size of the image in relation to its emotional weight within a given episode" (Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 180).
31. Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius*, 385.
32. Oriana Fallaci, "Hitchcock: Mr. Chastity" in *The Egotists: Sixteen Surprising Interviews*, trans. Pamela Swinglehurst (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1963) 239-56.
33. Alfred Hitchcock, "Master of Suspense: Being a Self-Analysis by Alfred Hitchcock" in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, vol. 1, 122.
34. In Hitchcock's first film, *The Lodger: A Story about the London Fog*, the colon itself hints at the operation his cinema will repeatedly negotiate. Nominally a melodrama concerning the enigmatic identity of the lodger, the film in fact tells the story of the London fog. The figure is displaced by that which places it: the fog that marks the "Avenger's" present absence. The fog presents the void's presence that avenges itself on all attempts to assign it a determinate place and meaning within the narrative, which would make it the mere functionary of an attempt to pass the time. But the fog does not pass, it remains, it fills the void by marking the place of a vacant figure.
35. Fallaci, "Hitchcock: Mr. Chastity."