

Conrad and Hitchcock: *The Secret Agent* Inspires *Sabotage*

Discussions of films adapted from literary works usually stay within a fairly limited context: how well, or how faithfully, has the filmmaker succeeded in rendering the plot and theme of the original novel, play or story? Asking such a question assumes that the interest of the filmmaker is to be faithful to his source, that he respects the formal integrity of the literary property involved. Usually, if the novel or play is a distinguished work of literature, this is a reasonable assumption: there would not be much point in filming Tolstoy's *War and Peace* only to leave out the characters of Pierre and Natasha while changing the setting and time to the American Civil War. A director can — as King Vidor did — omit some eighty per cent or more of the novel and still be, in some sense or other, "faithful" to Tolstoy. The main outline, the atmosphere, the major characters, and the central thematic concerns remain. This is one kind of adaptation, valid enough on its own terms. But what if the filmmaker has little or no interest in being faithful to his source? Can we still speak of "adaptation" in any meaningful way if the film bears only a vague resemblance to the original? How faithful does an adaptation have to be to be still termed an adaptation? Most of us would agree that as long as a film reflects the thematic texture of its original, adherence to the plot (narrowly conceived) doesn't really matter. And even if, as in the case of Shakespeare's plays, language is at the heart of the work's meaning, it is possible for critics to speak of a film like Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* as a "faithful" adaptation of *Macbeth*, although the film bears virtually no linguistic relationship to the play. We encounter greater difficulties when a film seems to have only tenuous connection to *any* of the major elements — plot, theme, verbal texture — of the original literary work. Yet many, if not most, films "based on" some literary property are (or appear to be) precisely of this nature, and any theory of adaptation is incomplete if it does not take this kind of loose transference into consideration.

If we look at the credits of one important director, Alfred Hitchcock, we learn that nearly all of his films are (or claim to be) adaptations. Only a few, however, are based on "important" novels or plays. *Sabotage*, derived from Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, stands out as a notable exception to the general rule. In the long and fascinating interview conducted by François Truffaut, Hitchcock explains why he would never make a film based on a "classic" like *Crime and Punishment*:

Well, I shall never do that, precisely because *Crime and Punishment* is somebody else's achievement. There's been a lot of talk about the way in which Hollywood directors distort literary masterpieces. I'll have no part of that! What I do is to read a story only once, and if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema.¹

As we will see, Hitchcock's comment is somewhat disingenuous, but his central assertion is confirmed by the evidence of the films. Hitchcock's favorite writer would seem to be Daphne du Maurier, whose works have had popular success but only slight claim to literary excellence. Not surprisingly, du Maurier is best known as a modern practitioner of the Gothic novel. Three of Hitchcock's films — *Jamaica Inn*, *Rebecca* and *The Birds* — are based on or loosely inspired by du Maurier materials. Among Hitchcock's sources we also find such writers as Eden Philpotts, Clemence Dane, Jefferson Farjeon, Ethel Lina White, Francis Iles, Patrick Hamilton, Selwyn Jepson, Cornell Woolrich, John Trevor Story, Robert Bloch, and others ranging from the very obscure to the mildly competent. There are, however, some deviations from this pattern. Early in his career, Hitchcock filmed plays by Noel Coward (*Easy Virtue*), Sean O'Casey (*Juno and the Paycock*), and John Galsworthy (*The Skin Game*). He adapted Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden* as *The Secret Agent* (1936) and turned to Conrad the same year.² *Lifeboat* (1943) originated in a story by John Steinbeck. The evidence clearly shows, however, that Hitchcock's most distinguished and best-known films were *not* based on important literary works. Even in those cases where Hitchcock has turned to significant writers, he has often chosen their lesser productions. Stanley Kauffmann's rule of thumb for adaptations would seem to apply to Hitchcock's career:

If we exclude trash, then the farther down the scale from greatness towards competence that our original novel lies, the more likely it is to be successfully adapted for the screen; for it is less likely to be dependent on its original form for its effect.³

But what happens when Hitchcock does choose to film a more or less accepted work of literature? This question can perhaps be answered by considering *Sabotage*, his film of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Conrad is probably the most important writer who served as a source for Hitchcock, although *The Secret Agent* is not as well-known as *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*. In what follows, I wish to consider the relationship between Conrad's book and Hitchcock's film while at the same time taking note of the implications this one example of transference from novel to film might have for the whole question of cinematic adaptation.

Perhaps the first thing to note is that Hitchcock has treated Conrad's novel in much the same way he treats any literary property that comes into his hands. He exhibits very little in the way of "respect" for his source. Rohmer and Chabrol have claimed that Hitchcock adapted *The Secret Agent* "with enough fidelity to prevent a cry of treason, but with sufficient freedom to make it everywhere apparent that Hitchcock has remained faithful to his own

¹ François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 49.

² Since he had already used the title *The Secret Agent* for the Maugham film, Hitchcock had to change Conrad's title: hence *Sabotage*, which should not be mistaken for Hitchcock's *Saboteur* (1942). *Sabotage* (to further confuse the matter) was released in the United States under the inappropriate title of *A Woman Alone*.

³ Stanley Kauffmann, "Several Sons, Several Lovers," *The New Republic*, 143 (29 August 1960), 21.

temperament."⁴ The second part of this statement is more convincing than the first; a Conrad enthusiast might be excused for feeling that *Sabotage* betrays its source on a rather fundamental level. In the process of transference, the plot of the novel is truncated, most of the characters either eliminated or altered beyond recognition, and the motivations of those remaining often considerably altered. All that remains of the fascinating character Michaelis, for instance, is the rotundity of Peter Bull, the actor who (presumably) is meant to portray him. The time has been updated from the 1880's to the 1930's, and the anarchists and socialists have all become foreign agents. Verloc's motivation and character are left extremely hazy in *Sabotage*, whereas they are matters of great interest in *The Secret Agent*. His occupation, too, has been altered from a vendor of mildly pornographic wares to the manager of a movie theater. The general milieu of Hitchcock's film is not so clearly "low-life" as is the world of Conrad's novel. And at least one very important character has been added: Ted, the young Scotland Yard detective whose problem of moral choice is central to Hitchcock's thematic concerns.

Why, we may ask, did Hitchcock choose *The Secret Agent* as the basis for a film? Some of the reasons are obvious enough. Many of Hitchcock's favorite themes and situations are at least implicit in the novel: the banality of evil, the transference or assumption of guilt, the unease inherent in all relationships between men and women, the close affinity between the policeman and the criminal. And, of course, we have the set pieces: a young boy killed in a bomb explosion, a man stabbed by his wife with a carving knife, foreign intrigue, and so forth. Beyond this, we may sense another reason: *The Secret Agent's* milieu of lower and lower middle-class London is a world that Hitchcock makes his own in many of his English films of the nineteen-thirties. In the words of Penelope Gilliat:

The fine-grained moments in the best of these films are very local and entirely recognizable: they are about Londoners of the working class between the wars, intimate, quick-witted, looting interludes of fun, scared of losing their jobs, and pursued by some uncomprehended Nemesis that may well, for all they know, be something as ignoble as fear of the boss.⁵

The sense and feel of London, of a particular place and time, is strongly realized in *Sabotage* and, though not as grim, owes much to Conrad's own vision in *The Secret Agent*.

But Hitchcock, as might be expected, quickly imposes his own interests and temperament on Conrad's suggestive edifice. The use of a cinema house as the film's primary location, for example, not only allows for several episodes that show us Londoners "looting interludes of fun" but also gives Hitchcock the opportunity to develop brilliantly the metaphoric possibilities inherent in such a setting. As in the novel, Verloc's living quarters are connected to and immediately behind his place of business; his secretive activities go on, quite literally, behind the scenes. At one point in the film, the policeman Ted is taken by Mrs. Verloc's brother Stevie to the back of the screen while a film is being

⁴ Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol, *Hitchcock* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1957), p. 53 [my translation]. It should be noted that Conrad turned *The Secret Agent* into a play in the early 1920's; though it stays very close to the novel (or perhaps because of this), the drama was unsuccessful. I can see no evidence that the makers of *Sabotage* consulted the play.

⁵ Penelope Gilliat, "The London Hitch," *The New Yorker*, 47 (11 September 1971), 92.

projected in the theater. Directly behind the screen is the wall that separates the theater from the living area and on this wall is a small window through which Ted observes a meeting between Verloc and his disreputable acquaintances. We are aware of the movie theater's presence throughout the film, particularly when the background music from the film on the screen punctuates the action in the "real" world of Hitchcock's film. And Stevie is carrying a film — a two-reeler entitled *Bartholomew the Strangler* — along with the parcel which contains the bomb that will destroy him. After the explosion, all that remains to connect the deaths of Stevie and a bus load full of people to Verloc is a piece of the film can with the title still readable (in the novel, Stevie's address had been sewn into his coat). The movie theater setting reinforces the theme — implicit in Conrad — of the contrast between a tawdry, dull, everyday existence and the possibilities for imaginative relief through an exciting dream world. Furthermore, as in a Shakespearean play-within-a-play, the comparative crudity of the filmic world within *Sabotage* adds to the immediate credibility of the primary fiction that is Hitchcock's film.

Apart from borrowing much of *The Secret Agent's* atmosphere and plot, Hitchcock, while ignoring some of Conrad's most significant episodes, often chooses a small detail from the novel and turns it into an important element of *Sabotage*. It is interesting to note, for example, that Conrad's one reference to "a fruiterer's stall at the corner"⁶ of the street where Verloc's shop is located becomes, in the film, a major point of attention: Ted observes the comings and goings at Verloc's cinema disguised as a grocer's assistant at a stall next door. It may even be possible to see Conrad's view of London as "a cruel devourer of the world's light" where "there was darkness enough to bury five million lives" (p. xii) as the source for Hitchcock's remarkably economical opening sequence depicting the bright lights of a London evening being extinguished by the machinations of the saboteur. A more convincing example of Hitchcock's ability to assimilate and transform even a seemingly minor detail can be seen in his utilization of one of Conrad's metaphors. As a character in *The Secret Agent* leaves his office, we are told that his "descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had been run off. A murky, gloomy dampness enveloped him" (p. 147). This telling image, which contributes to Conrad's recurring vision of London as moist, dark and slimy, serves Hitchcock as the inspiration for a visual joke as well as providing him with the setting for an important scene in the film. Early in *Sabotage*, Verloc meets with his mysterious employer in an aquarium at the zoo. The conversation between the two men, in the course of which Verloc is ordered to commit a terrorist bombing, is filmed with the camera trained on their backs while they pretend to watch the fish and turtles in huge tanks in front of them. After Verloc's boss leaves, Verloc takes a last look at one of the fish tanks which suddenly changes before his eyes into the image of a busy London square. A moment later the buildings, streets and cars seem to dissolve or melt, exactly as if someone had pulled out the fish tank's plug. The visual joke doesn't altogether work — it seems, perhaps, a bit too ludicrous — but it is effective in bringing to life Conrad's view of London as well as indicating the guilty apprehension and fear that now will dominate Verloc. Hitchcock's

⁶ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1907; rpt. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1965), p. 150. Subsequent references are cited in my text.

reworking of such a slight hint surely indicates that the question of adaptation is more complex than often realized. And we see here precisely what Hitchcock means when he tells us that his imagination is primarily visual.

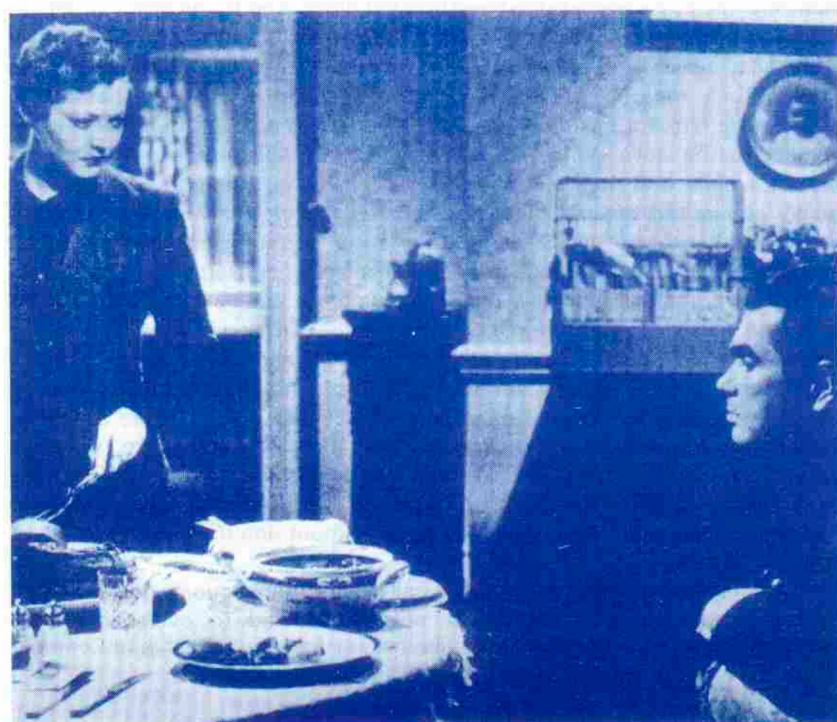
In the process of adapting *The Secret Agent*, Hitchcock sometimes shifts the thematic value or emotional impact of an episode or character to a new direction without necessarily altering the basic outline of Conrad's original design. In one crucial instance, Hitchcock has dramatized in a continuous sequence an event that Conrad only reveals little by little: the death of Mrs. Verloc's brother Stevie. This is perhaps the most "hitchcockian" scene in the film, a classic example of suspense as the director himself defines it in the Truffaut interview. The filmmakers have even increased the carnage — if not the horror — of the original by having the explosion take place on a crowded bus. The death of Stevie is crucial to the film's meaning, but Hitchcock was criticized at the time for allowing it to happen. His response is odd:

I made a serious mistake in having the little boy carry the bomb. A character who unknowingly carries a bomb around as if it were an ordinary package is bound to work up a great suspense in the audience. The boy was involved in a situation that got him too much sympathy from the audience, so that when the bomb exploded and he was killed, the public was resentful. The way to handle it would have been for Homolka [Verloc] to kill the boy deliberately, but without showing that on the screen, and then for the wife to avenge her young brother by killing Homolka.⁷

But this ignores an important point: without experiencing the brutal death of Stevie, it would not be possible for the audience to retain sympathy with Mrs. Verloc when she (semi-accidentally) kills her husband and gets away scot-free. The boy's death is anything but gratuitous, and Hitchcock is careful to build up sympathy and even affection for him (in Conrad, our response is somewhat mixed both because Stevie is mentally retarded and because the novel's ironic tone precludes close involvement with any of the characters). Early in the film, for example, we see Stevie watching over the family dinner cooking on the stove. As he removes a hot dish from the burner, he accidentally breaks a plate and then hides the broken pieces in a drawer. The scene is mildly comic, but beyond that it establishes the typicality of Mrs. Verloc's young brother. Later on, Stevie and his sister are shown building a model sailboat together while engaging in affectionate conversation. The same sailboat is prominently in view on the mantelpiece and next to Verloc's head when he tells his wife about the circumstances of Stevie's death. We are frequently told, in the novel, of the close (indeed, disturbingly intense) relationship between Winnie Verloc and her brother, but this information does not convey the same kind of emotional impact that we are made to feel in Hitchcock's few scenes. Hitchcock has used Conrad, but he has created a different mood in so doing, a mood that fits his purpose as Conrad's tone fits his. In short, Conrad's treatment of Stevie inspired Hitchcock's version, giving him the starting point from which to build, without determining the shape of the final conception.

The foregoing emphasis on the parallels and connections between *The Secret Agent* and *Sabotage* must not be allowed to overshadow our awareness that much of Hitchcock's film has no direct relationship to Conrad's

⁷ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, p. 76.



Top: Desmond Tester, Oscar Homolka, and the bomb. Bottom: Sylvia Sidney serving up the fateful dinner.

novel. But even when he departs from his source, Hitchcock often invents a scene which has the effect of emphasizing a thematic strain present to some degree in Conrad. The masterful scene where Ted, Stevie and Mrs. Verloc⁸ go to Simpsons for lunch — a scene with no original in the novel — is a good case in point. It serves several functions in the film. First, it reinforces the sympathetic attitude we are meant to have towards Stevie. More importantly, however, the scene establishes a "counter-family" to the Verloc family as it actually is. The group Ted-Stevie-Mrs. Verloc presents a strong visual alternative to Mr. Verloc-Stevie-Mrs. Verloc. Mrs. Verloc's mixed feelings for her husband are clearly established in the dialogue. Ted, at one point, refers to the Verlocs, in a slightly jocular tone, as "just one happy little family." Mrs. Verloc, who had been smiling and laughing up to this point, sadly looks down at the table and quietly repeats Ted's phrase. "Mr. Verloc is very kind to Stevie," she remarks at another point. "And that means a lot to Stevie's sister," Ted responds. "That means everything," she answers quietly. What gives this scene much of its meaning is Hitchcock's use of family meals as a symbol for domesticity throughout the film. The first time we see Stevie, he is helping to prepare dinner. Later, the family is about to eat just as Ted bursts upon the scene. And the final meal, which ends in Verloc's death, refers back to the others: we see Mr. Verloc, Mrs. Verloc and an empty chair for Stevie. The trio is gone forever, but we are allowed to assume, by the film's end, that Mrs. Verloc and Ted will someday reconstitute the family as it was that day at Simpsons.

None of this is present in *The Secret Agent*. Indeed, Ted (or elements of him) only appears vaguely in the characters of Chief Inspector Heat and, more obviously, the revolutionary Ossipon, whose feelings for Mrs. Verloc are of an altogether different nature from Ted's. And yet Conrad, like Hitchcock, explores the complex domestic drama of a man and woman unnaturally bound to each other by nothing more than flimsy, insubstantial illusions that quickly disintegrate under the pressure of reality. The denouement, for Conrad, is inevitably catastrophic, resulting in the deaths of the three principal characters. Hitchcock, for his part, manages a seemingly conventional "happy ending" from much the same premises, but the built-in irony of such a pat outcome remains an important discordant note in our final response to the film.

Although much of *Sabotage* is either original with the filmmakers or based on only incidental details in *The Secret Agent*, several important scenes in the film follow equally important scenes in the novel. Mr. Verloc's death by carving knife, to choose what is perhaps the most famous episode in *Sabotage*, owes much to Conrad who, however, presents it in a very different manner.⁹ The death of Verloc posed several problems to Hitchcock, one of which — probably the dominant one — he later discussed himself:

You see [he tells Truffaut], to maintain the public's sympathy for Sylvia Sidney, her husband's death had to be accidental. And to bring this off, it was

⁸ Although several Hitchcock filmographies refer to the character played by Sylvia Sidney as "Silvia Verloc" she is not, in fact, ever given a first name in the film itself. In the novel, her name is Winnie.

⁹ The murder of Verloc has been analyzed as a good example of Conrad's "cinematic technique" by Paul Kirschner, "Conrad and the Film," *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*, 11 (Summer 1957), 343-353. Kirschner, however, makes no mention of *Sabotage*.

absolutely essential that the audience identify itself with Sylvia Sidney. Here, we weren't trying to frighten anyone; we had to make the viewer feel like killing a man, and that's a good deal tougher.¹⁰

The other main problem is of greater aesthetic interest, for it involves the very nature of the film medium. In the novel, the stabbing of Verloc culminates a long, subtle sequence during which Conrad reveals to us the nuances and complexities of thought of both husband and wife. We understand how Verloc, in his defensive and ineffectual attempt to exculpate himself from responsibility for his brother-in-law's death, inexorably advances towards his own; everything he says to his wife accelerates rather than retards the inevitable moment. We can share the tension of the situation because Conrad takes us into Mrs. Verloc's mind and shows us her reaction to her husband's feeble excuses and explanations. Finally, Verloc makes the last, fatal error: he offers his wife a sexual invitation, at which point she methodically advances to where Verloc is sitting, picking up the knife along the way, and easily plunges the weapon in his breast.

Hitchcock works the scene quite differently and nicely solves both problems, the first of which we might term "moral" and the second "aesthetic." Since he cannot tell us what is going on in Mrs. Verloc's mind directly, he must find a convincing indirect method. In Hitchcock's words:

The wrong way to go about this scene would have been to have the heroine convey her inner feelings to the audience by her facial expression. I'm against that. In real life, people's faces don't reveal what they think or feel. As a film director I must try to convey this woman's frame of mind to the audience by purely cinematic means.¹¹

What Hitchcock does is create a brilliantly edited sequence, cutting frequently between shots of Sylvia Sidney's face, her hands carving a roast, her brother's empty chair, and her husband's expectant expression. The scene builds to a crescendo as Verloc, growing aware of what may be going on in his wife's mind, advances on her and seemingly plunges himself onto her extended knife. Murder or accident? The answer is not clear-cut, and I don't think Hitchcock meant it to be. This sequence contains enough ambiguity to please the censors and moralists, as well as those who delight in ambiguity for its own sake. If we look at the scene in context, however, some of the ambiguity disappears. For Hitchcock precedes the stabbing with a scene that does not appear in the novel, a scene that culminates the film's "movie" metaphor.

The scene in question comes immediately after Verloc tells his wife how and why Stevie was killed. In his attempt to soothe his wife, Verloc mentions the possibility that they might "have a kid of [their] own," a suggestion that sends Mrs. Verloc out of the room. She wanders out into the aisle of the theater, her back to the screen. In the audience, children are laughing gleefully. Mrs. Verloc pauses momentarily in the aisle, looking first at the children and then at the screen. A smile, involuntary and extremely moving, comes over her

¹⁰ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, pp. 77-80.

¹¹ Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, p. 80. Hitchcock discusses this scene in some detail in his essay on "Direction" written in 1937 and recently reprinted in *Focus on Hitchcock*, ed. Albert J. LaValley (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 32-39. See also William Thomaier's brief discussion of *Sabotage* in "Conrad on the Screen," *Films in Review*, 21 (December 1970), 615-616.

face and she sits down and watches the film, a Walt Disney cartoon entitled "Who Killed Cock Robin." On screen, we see an animated bird imitating Mae West. Hitchcock cuts to Mrs. Verloc, laughing in spite of herself from extreme nervous tension. Then the tone of the cartoon changes as a bird with bow and arrow shoots a robin and the soundtrack breaks out into a hauntingly sung version of "Who Killed Cock Robin." Mrs. Verloc suddenly stops laughing as a fearful and disturbed expression passes over her face. With incredible subtlety and ingenuity, Hitchcock establishes both Mrs. Verloc's inability to forget, even momentarily, the fate of her brother, and her responsiveness to a murderous suggestion: conceptually, it is a short step from an arrow to a carving knife. Without a word of dialogue, Hitchcock tells us exactly what Mrs. Verloc is thinking as she returns to serve up the fateful dinner. This is a truly brilliant sequence.

Hitchcock's treatment of the death of Verloc and of Mrs. Verloc's character throughout the film allows him to alter Conrad's ending: in *The Secret Agent*, Mrs. Verloc commits suicide; in *Sabotage*, she goes off with the handsome young policeman, Ted. But, oddly enough, Hitchcock's ending supports one of Conrad's major themes: the idea that, as one of Conrad's characters puts it, "the terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket" (p. 69). The emphasis in *Sabotage* is clearly not on Ted's similarity to Verloc as such, but rather on our (as audience) willingness to accept the notion of a policeman sacrificing his own concept of law and morality for the sake of the woman he loves. Conrad's statement is relatively unambiguous — he means it; Hitchcock's is less forceful and more ambiguous. The film's ending reveals other complexities as well: we know (or think we know) that Mrs. Verloc is not *really* guilty of murder, for we saw what happened. Ted, on the other hand, has no such knowledge; for all he knows, the woman he loves (on very slight acquaintance) is a cold-blooded murderess. Nevertheless, he decides to throw his lot in with hers. Thus Hitchcock has it both ways; Mrs. Verloc is innocent, but Ted is guilty (or is it the other way around?). In the end, Ted and Mrs. Verloc disappear into the London crowd, into Conrad's "mass of mankind mighty in its numbers" (pp. 81-82). A bit earlier, as they had walked away from Verloc's theater, a sign reading "Repent ye and believe" was borne by them. The assumption, of course, is that — innocent or guilty — Mrs. Verloc will repent, and so will Ted. This ending, we feel, is "right." All along, we realize, Mrs. Verloc had been living in a world of illusion, the illusion that Verloc is "a good man," that Stevie is well taken care of, that the marriage was a worthwhile sacrifice. When the movie theater explodes, thereby obliterating Verloc (and all traces of his manner of dying), the dream world crumbles, leaving Mrs. Verloc free to pursue a new life presumably without illusions.

The ending of *Sabotage* can be upbeat partly because Hitchcock, unlike Conrad, only lightly touches upon some of the broad social dimensions of terrorism. *The Secret Agent* develops political, and even philosophical, ideas that Hitchcock either disregards or transmutes into specific dramatic situations. For an obvious illustration of Hitchcock's procedure, we need only look at his handling of the character known as "the Professor," perhaps Conrad's most original and chilling contribution to the spy-intrigue novel. Actually, the Professor is hardly a character at all; he might rather be called a force, or the personification of an idea. The absolute anarchist, he is a man possessed with an *idée fixe*: to invent a perfect detonator. His whole being has become absorbed into this one ambition; he has no life outside of it. The Professor's symbolic oppo-

sition to Chief Inspector Heat, an almost equally abstract personification of the police mentality, forms a central theme in Conrad's novel. But the pattern (as well as the length) of Hitchcock's film does not allow for such a strong subplot. Inspector Heat, as I have noted earlier, blends, and hence disappears, into the new character, Ted. The Professor remains, but he is nearly unrecognizable. A pet-shop owner with a grown daughter and a (probably) illegitimate grandchild, he has become a large, somewhat fruity and slightly grotesque character who keeps both his explosives and his granddaughter's toys in a cupboard (Conrad's Professor lives in a single room "remarkable for having an extremely large cupboard") and who tells exasperated customers that they need only whistle to make their birds sing ("me whistle," one irate woman tells him, "p'rhaps you'd like me to sit in the cage and 'im do the 'ousework"). Aside from contributing a mildly Dickensian comic interlude to *Sabotage*, the Professor and his family also serve a genuine thematic function by exemplifying yet another unsatisfactory middle-class domestic arrangement which parallels the Verloc family. Instead of drawing attention away from the main plot (as Conrad's Professor in a sense does), Hitchcock's Professor reinforces our awareness that the conventional externals of bourgeois family life indeed cover a multitude of sins.

In spite of differences in tone, plot, characters, and incidents, Conrad and Hitchcock end up making nearly parallel statements. Both novel and film create a lower middle-class milieu where what appears to be tawdriness, laziness and stupidity are in fact the external manifestations of genuine evil. Innocence, where it exists at all, can only be the province of the very young or the mentally deficient. Both works reveal a claustrophobic world of limited options and stunted emotions. Raymond Durnat observes that the world of *Sabotage* has much in common with the novels of Graham Greene.¹² This is true enough. But then, *The Secret Agent* is, by anticipation, Conrad's most "Graham Greenish" novel.¹³ The atmosphere, physical and moral, of such novels as *The Ministry of Fear* and *The Confidential Agent* imbues both works. We are left, finally, with Winnie Verloc's conviction, several times alluded to by Conrad, that life does not bear much looking into; many of Hitchcock's cinematic characters (here and elsewhere) would no doubt agree.

My discussion of *The Secret Agent* and *Sabotage*, though by no means exhaustive, should demonstrate in part that even a brief analysis of a cinematic adaptation necessarily takes us beyond the broad elements of theme and plot and focuses attention on the subtler nuances of specific, and sometimes incidental, detail. The relationship between Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Hitchcock's *Sabotage* is a complex one; so complex, in fact, that it becomes difficult to credit Hitchcock's statement, quoted earlier, that he only reads his source once and then forgets about it. Admittedly, a devoted reader of Conrad whose major concern is to see how "faithfully" the film reflects the novel must be disappointed with *Sabotage*. But if the two works are approached with a neutral attitude and with an appreciation for the integrity of both novels and films, the exercise of comparing the two is extremely satisfying; each enriches the other. Our experience of reading Conrad is just as altered by having seen

¹² Raymond Durnat, *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1974), p. 139.

¹³ The similarity between *The Secret Agent* and some of Greene's novels has often been noted. See Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 221-22; 224.

Sabotage as our experience of *Sabotage* is heightened by familiarity with the novel.

Kauffmann's formula must be qualified. The key issue becomes, not the original form of the basic material, but rather the degree to which the filmmaker is willing to allow his own creative instincts free play to the point of ignoring and even perverting his literary source when it suits his purpose. "If one must have adaptations," Wilfrid Sheed recently wrote in a review of *Cabaret*, "complete disregard for the originals is the safest rule."¹⁴ The impetus behind such a comment is understandable. What makes most film adaptations of classics unsatisfactory is the director's failure to make us forget that he is adapting a classic. The more the film seems to aim at faithful reproduction, the more its basic unfaithfulness becomes an issue in the viewer's mind. The answer, however, need not be total disregard for the original source. Rather, as Hitchcock's example shows us, an intelligent and creative director may, while ignoring such matters as plot, characters, and even theme, find in his source inspiration of various kinds that will influence his own creation in unexpected and extremely fruitful ways.

Michael A. Anderegg
University of North Dakota

¹⁴ Wilfrid Sheed, "I Am a Cabaret," *The New York Review of Books*, 18 (23 March 1972), 17.



Oscar Homolka and Sylvia Sydney in *Sabotage*.