

DICKENS AND HITCHCOCK

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Five or six years ago, when *Movie* was in its heyday, comparisons between the cinema and literature might have been regarded as a kind of blacklegging, a sell-out to those who valued only those films which had some sort of literary content. Loyalties to the cinema had to be one hundred per cent or nothing. Before that time, to compare the work of a director of thrillers with that of a great English novelist (and especially to imply that it might be of comparable *value*) would have been considered by the few people who were interested in both to be, at best, eccentric. (Before that again, back in the twenties when Dickens's reputation had suffered in the Stracheyan attack on all things Victorian, it might just have been possible, if anyone at all who read Dickens had heard of Hitchcock.) Now, the work of the *Movie* critics and others, if it has not won the war, has established a solid front. The fortress mentality, almost inevitable in the past, is not so necessary now. The base having been established, we can make excursions.

In fact, we are positively invited to do so by Peter Wollen in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*:¹

'We need comparisons with authors in the other arts: Ford with Fenimore Cooper, for example, or Hawks with Faulkner.' And his is the right emphasis; not that we try to raise Hitchcock by comparing him with Dickens, but that we can understand the cinema better if, sure of our commitment to it, we can establish contact with the other arts. Of these, the novel seems to me to offer the most profitable line of enquiry. I take it that the cinema is essentially a narrative art² – or at least, has been so far. Documentaries and all kinds of experimental films have existed from the beginning, but no one can say they have constituted the mainstream or that anything but a fraction of the cinema's greatest achievements have been in those fields. And so with the novel. *Ulysses* may have broadened people's ideas about what a story might be, but there is little evidence at the moment that anything but a small minority of determinedly experimental novelists

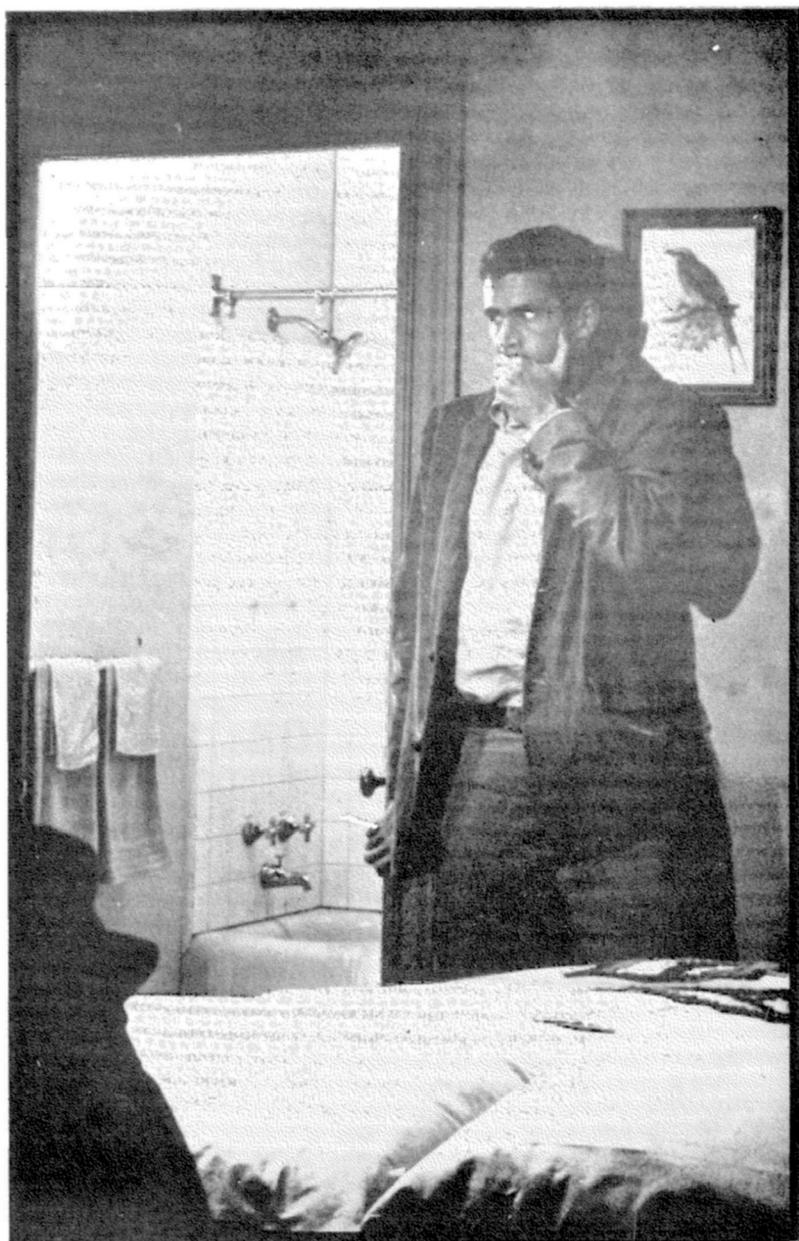
are abandoning narrative. This may happen, but I prefer to leave prophecy to those who would welcome such a change more than I.

There are two main reasons, once a novelist is decided on, for choosing Dickens. He and Hitchcock compare both as artists and as cultural phenomena. I hope to show that to some extent, too, the kind of artists they are arises out of the circumstances in which they work.

To argue that a writer's work may be affected by the conditions he works in has not been a popular occupation with literary critics in England and America. Of course there have been exceptions, but generally it has been held that sociology and aesthetics do not mix. In film criticism such purism hasn't so far been common. This is partly, perhaps, because it hasn't yet become an academic study, so making necessary a definition of criticism which rigidly excludes the approaches of other disciplines.* And no doubt the hostility of many to anything that smacks of Marxism has something to do with it. but most obviously, the cinema is nearer to being an industry than any other art and so non-aesthetic factors cannot be entirely ignored. Even the auteur theory, which holds generally that the auteur is responsible for what appears on the screen, often gratefully resorts to explaining the failure of a film by a chosen director as the result of his being forced by his contract to tackle an uncongenial subject or the film's having been re-edited by the producer against the director's wishes. And looking from such particular localized factors to the wider economic and social circumstances, films, unlike, say, poetry, cannot continue to be produced unless they make money, unless in some way they reflect what large numbers of people want to see. Literary criticism has paid some attention, though not much, to the relation between literature and the social structure, and scarcely any so far to the non-artistic factors surrounding the genesis of a particular work. All too often literature has been regarded as the creation of an artist working in the confines of his study; or, if his social situation has been treated, it has been done so in a vague and abstract kind of way.

For various reasons with the study of the cinema this sort of attitude has been slow to form and fortunately the position with Dickens is similar. We know quite a lot from his notes and plans about the processes of creation of his novels. And, in another direction, a great deal of work has been done in recovering in detail the social background to his work – what workhouses were like in *Oliver Twist's*

*Until recently film criticism has been at the comparatively primitive stage of having to prove that there was something worth criticizing at all. The auteur theory largely serves to perform this essential preliminary; the judgments that follow after it don't, often, depend on any theory at all. But no doubt they increasingly will.



Psycho: Murder in a lonely spot

time and so forth. Dickens's novels are very 'impure', his involvement with the fabric of Victorian life is so great that it is difficult (though it has been managed) to treat his work as autonomous, not requiring in the reader any knowledge of its setting.

However, I don't intend to make an exhaustive study of the way Dickens and Hitchcock transmute social reality into fiction or of how their work is in part the product of a social structure or of the economic forces operating in the film and publishing industry. Firstly, this would require a book. Secondly, much of the information required on Hitchcock is not immediately accessible. And thirdly, I may as well declare now that it is difficult for someone under thirty and living outside London to have the familiarity with Hitchcock's work that this would require. I've seen under a third of his total output. What I want to do is to suggest some connections which further work might pursue.

In dealing with them as cultural phenomena, I shall be concerned only with factors which, while external to the work itself, have some bearings on it. I'm not sure, for example, that their shared enthusiasm for practical jokes is any more relevant than the differences in their physique (Dickens was small and wiry). The major point to be made is that in a period when the artist has been supposed to be alienated from society, both achieved enormous commercial success. And, what is equally important, there is no evidence that either ever felt that anything in the way of artistic integrity had to be sacrificed for it. Both seem to have been quite happy to go on doing what they enjoyed doing, without any feeling that they should have been producing something more 'serious' or intellectually respectable. Dickens had had a great deal of trouble with his publishers and they had a great deal of trouble with him. There were endless arguments over money, contracts and copyrights as Dickens sought to achieve the maximum of artistic freedom and the greatest possible financial security. Similarly Hitchcock found it necessary to become his own producer in order to gain full control of his work. But he has never used this power to depart from the kind of film he had previously made. Another way of putting this would be to say that Hitchcock's own taste has coincided with that of the audience he has built up for himself. He seems to have felt no urge to move in other directions, towards, say, a more personal kind of expression, in the way that Antonioni or Fellini have, for example.

But, one might object, the same is true of many Hollywood directors; and this is so. I am using Hitchcock here as one example among many of how Hollywood disproves the facile theory that great art can only expect a minority audience. One could equally well take Ford or Hawks. Hitchcock though is a particularly good example for

two reasons. Firstly, his films form more of a unity than those of any comparable figure. Very early in his career (with *The Lodger* in 1926) he found what he was best suited to doing. Since that date all his successful films have been in the suspense thriller genre. He has gone outside this only rarely (*Waltzes from Vienna*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*) and has, by his own admission and by his own high standards, failed. No other director has worked so well and so consistently in one genre. In this he compares directly with Dickens, who similarly discovered early on (also, in fact, at the age of 26) that special combination of humour, pathos and mystery ('Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait') which typifies all his writings. The proportion of each may change, but basically the mixture remained the same.

Two contrasting examples will help to explain what I mean. George Eliot, whose first novel *Adam Bede* was a financial and critical success, went on to produce *The Mill on the Floss* in a similar mould. But in her third novel, *Romola*, she tried something quite different; a thoroughly researched account of life in fifteenth-century Florence. I don't want to suggest that she thought her stories of English rural life weren't 'important' enough; but the way in which the book was conceived demonstrates how, in this case, a wrong idea of what seriousness and importance were led to an artistic disaster. Her latest biographer writes:

'George Eliot undertook her second Italian journey with "grave purposes", she told Blackwood. To write convincingly about fifteenth-century Florence she needed more detailed knowledge than she had gathered during her two weeks there in 1860. She intended to return and immerse herself in the history and atmosphere of Florence, hoping that a story would grow around the events of Savonarola's life.'³ Dickens never departed from his methods in this way and never felt dissatisfied with them. When he did write historical novels, the historical material doesn't get in the way of the story and one doesn't feel that he started with an intellectual idea and then searched round for a story to fit it. Even *Hard Times* is no exception. The documentation doesn't swamp the plot and characters.

Hitchcock's films can be contrasted with that of a number of British directors who began by showing some degree of talent and who have subsequently lost their way. I am thinking of people like Karel Reisz, Clive Donner, Bryan Forbes, Tony Richardson. In each case, I think one can argue, their ambition led them to attempt something more 'significant', as though they were not satisfied that their earlier work was important enough. I don't mean, obviously, that a director should not develop or that he should stick to one genre, or to a genre at all. But with these directors development took the form of rejecting

their early work as being of a kind which was too limiting to their talents. With all of them there is this sense that they had to find a 'big' subject. In this respect, Hitchcock is the best example of a director who has chosen to make, basically, the same kind of film and who, through his own artistic development in it, has expanded the suspense-thriller genre, rather than believing that he has outgrown it. Again, the same is true of Hawks or Ford; but neither has been as single-minded in his devotion to one genre to such an extent that it could be said, as it could of Hitchcock, that he virtually invented it and almost single-handedly explored the full range of which it is capable.

The second reason why Dickens and Hitchcock make a specially good pair to compare as cultural phenomena is that both are showmen. This is more than a resemblance in personality; it extends into the whole question of the supposed opposition between art and commercial success. Neither are the least bit chary of presenting themselves as public figures. Dickens twice made what were in effect publicity tours of America. Naturally he wanted to see the country. But he didn't mind the country seeing him. The tours were marked by a series of celebrity appearances at soirées, dinners and the like. When people cut off locks of his hair as souvenirs he protested a little but there is no doubt that generally he enjoyed it. Later in his life he began a series of public readings from his books. The performances excited him so much that they became a danger to his health. But he wouldn't stop and they undoubtedly contributed to his comparatively early death. Forster, his friend and first biographer, objected to the readings, not so much on the grounds of their effect on Dickens's health, but because he thought they were undignified: 'It was a substitution of lower for higher aims; a change to commonplace from more elevated pursuits; and it had so much of the character of a public exhibition for money as to raise, in the question of respect for his calling as a writer, a question also of respect for himself as a gentleman.'⁴

In a very similar way, Hitchcock has been involved in the process of building up his name to the extent where it frequently takes precedence over those of the stars of his films. So, in an advertisement in *Movie No. 4* for the re-release of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* Hitchcock's name appears three times, James Stewart's once.* Hitchcock's habit of appearing in his own films, of substituting a filmed introduction by himself for the usual kind of trailer (*Psycho*), and his endorsement of a television series mostly directed by others, all reveal no trace of that fastidious avoidance of vulgar showmanship

*It doesn't give the appearance of being especially designed for *Movie* cognoscenti; Hawks's name, in an advertisement for *Hatari* in *Movie No. 4* is given nothing like the same prominence.

which the great artist is supposed to practise. This kind of public exploitation of their artistic personality does indeed mark Dickens and Hitchcock off from other artists, popular or otherwise. But it is of a piece with their whole attitude to their work, in which seriousness is not equated with pomposity. Both desire a large audience and both seem to have felt the need for some sort of personal contact with it, more direct than usually possible for a novelist or film director. That they made a great deal of money seems to be a cause for rejoicing rather than for the distaste shown by Forster. No one can accuse them of working just for the money or maintain that their personal showmanship had a detrimental effect on their work. (True, Ruskin accused Dickens of killing Little Nell 'for the market, as a butcher kills a lamb'.⁵ But one has only to read Dickens's own account of his feelings at the time of writing to be sure that the charge is unjust.)

There is one last point to be made about Dickens and Hitchcock as examples of popular and commercially successful artists, and it is one that leads naturally to an examination of the work itself. Neither of them could be called an intellectual. Hitchcock has this to say about his reading:

'I don't read novels or any fiction. I would say that my reading consists of contemporary biographies and books on travel. I can't read fiction because if I did I would instinctively be asking myself, 'Will this make a movie or not?' I'm not interested in literary style, except perhaps when I read Somerset Maugham, whom I admire for the simplicity of his style.'⁶

Perhaps a taste for Somerset Maugham doesn't necessarily disqualify one as an intellectual, but it's certainly true that Hitchcock prefers to discuss his work in terms of technique rather than content. When Truffaut tries to pin him down to an analysis of the aesthetics of documentary with reference to *The Wrong Man*, Hitchcock's reply is, 'It seems to me that you want me to work for the art-houses.'⁷ If he does talk about the ideas of his films it is in very simplistic terms. *Lifeboat*, for example, is for its director a straightforward parable about the need for the democracies to unite against Nazism. And when Truffaut suggests that *Rear Window* is not a pessimistic film, but one which is compassionate about human weakness, Hitchcock's reply is just, 'definitely'. He won't be drawn any further. According to Robin Wood, this is a sign of modesty.⁸ Perhaps it is; but I think one gets a very strong impression that Hitchcock couldn't talk about his films in this way even if he wanted to. Of course, Wood is right to say that this should not affect the audience's appreciation of the work. Yet it does indicate the kind of artist Hitchcock is; he works intuitively, the power of his films coming from some region of his

mind inaccessible to his conscious mind, though capable of being controlled and directed by it.

Dickens, too, has little of interest to say about the themes of his work. One can search his letters for a long time without coming across anything on what he thinks his books are about, over and beyond being an exposure of some particular social evil he has discovered. His friends were actors, lawyers and novelists; but with the exception of Carlyle he didn't know any of the major writers or thinkers of his time very well. Carlyle, in fact, was slightly contemptuous of Dickens's own ideas:

'He thinks men ought to be buttered up, and the world made soft and accommodating for them, and all sorts of fellows have turkey for their Christmas dinner.'⁹

Nor are the characters of Dickens or Hitchcock intellectuals, as they usually are in the films of, say, Bergman. But again there is no reason why they should be.

The significance of a film or a novel does not depend on whether or not its characters are in the habit of discussing 'life'; nor even on their having a high degree of self-awareness. It's only what the audience is aware of that counts.

But Dickens and Hitchcock do have interesting things to say about their work, things which provide a key to their achievement. They are much taken up with the problem of realism. The prefaces Dickens wrote to his novels are often occupied with defending himself against those who questioned his representation of the facts. The preface to *Bleak House*, where Dickens insists that his theory of spontaneous combustion is scientifically true, is an example of the absurd lengths to which he would go. In his more lucid moments, though, he recognizes that he is not a realist in any literal sense:

'It does not seem to me to be enough to say of any description that it is the exact truth. The exact truth must be there; but the merit or art in the narrator, is the manner of stating the truth. As to which thing in literature, it always seems to me that there is a world to be done. And in these times, when the tendency is to be frightfully literal and catalogue-like – to make the thing, in short, a sort of sum in reduction that any miserable creature can do in that way – I have an idea (really founded on the love of what I profess) that the very holding of popular literature through a kind of popular dark age, may depend on such fanciful treatment.'¹⁰

The connection Dickens makes between his kind of art and a popular audience I shall come to in a moment. But first it's interesting to see in Hitchcock an exactly comparable attitude to realism.

He delights in telling us how true-to-life his films are. He is proud of the authenticity of *The Wrong Man*¹¹ and of how when filming *The Birds* there was an attack like the ones in the film.¹² But he rejects absolute fidelity to real life:

‘There’s quite a difference, you see, between the creation of a film and the making of a documentary. In the documentary the basic material has been created by God, whereas in the fiction film the director is the god; he must create life. And in the process of creation, there are lots of feelings, forms of expression, and viewpoints that have to be juxtaposed. We should have total freedom to do what we like, just so long as it’s not dull’.¹³



The Birds: a director’s total freedom to ‘create life’

Both of them, then, demand freedom from the obligation to be realistic in a literal sense. They wish to get at the truth by other means, and are very much aware that an artist who creates for a wide public must entertain. To these ends they employ a form of art which relies strongly on the plot – in other words, suspense. The interest of the story does not arise solely from the plot, clearly, if by this we mean the solution of the mystery or the resolution of the conflict. Who after all can remember exactly the dénouement of *Little Dorrit*? Hitchcock talks of the MacGuffin, the secret plans or formula which everyone chases after, but which is quite unimportant in itself. Nevertheless, physical action is an essential part of their

work. If Robin Wood's book has a fault, it is that he concentrates too much on Hitchcock's treatment of his characters. I do not say that there is not great subtlety and complexity in this treatment. But is this what we primarily carry away from the film? Or is it something else? In Wood's description Hitchcock begins to sound a little like a cinematic Henry James – not surprisingly, if he is to be ranged alongside the novelists of *The Great Tradition*. It is notable that Leavis is unable to admit Dickens to a place in the pantheon; and quite rightly, for he is a different kind of novelist. Where Leavis seems mistaken to those of us who rate Dickens more highly than he does is in his assumption that there is only one kind of novel worthy of serious consideration. Leavis compares Dickens with Conrad:

"This co-presence of obvious influence with assimilation suggests that Dickens may have counted for more in Conrad's mature art than seems at first probable: it suggests that Dickens may have encouraged the development in Conrad's art of that energy of vision and registration in which they are akin. ("When people say that Dickens exaggerates," says Santayana, "it seems to me that they can have no eyes and no ears. They probably have only *notions* of what things and people are; they accept them conventionally at their diplomatic value".) We may reasonably, too, in the same way see some Dickensian influence in Conrad's use of melodrama, or what would have been melodrama in Dickens; for in Conrad the end is a total significance of a profoundly serious kind.

"The reason for not including Dickens in the line of great novelists is implicit in this last phrase. The kind of greatness in question has been sufficiently defined. That Dickens was a great genius and is permanently among the classics is certain. But the genius was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than this description implies. Praising him magnificently in a very fine critique, Santayana, in concluding, says: "In every English-speaking home, in the four quarters of the globe, parents and children would do well to read Dickens aloud of a winter's evening." This note is right and significant. The adult mind doesn't as a rule find in Dickens a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness."¹⁴

There is an opposition here I find totally unacceptable; that between 'entertainment' (which is apparently comparable with genius) and 'seriousness'. In his section on *North By North-West* Robin Wood argues convincingly against just such an opposition:

'A film, whether light entertainment or not, is either a work of art or it is nothing.'¹⁵

Yet Leavis on Dickens sounds very like that kind of criticism of

Hitchcock which Wood's book is designed to refute – that Hitchcock is a 'master' but not a serious artist. And it seems to me that the best way to combat such attacks is to question the assumptions which are being offered, rather than to attempt to fit Hitchcock into the tradition.* A way of doing this is to see them both as creators of melodrama. Leavis asserts that in Conrad Dickensian melodrama, which is bad, becomes transformed into something better.† The assumption is that melodrama is necessarily an inferior form of art. The remainder of my argument rests on the belief that this is not so.

There appear to be three main reasons why melodrama has been considered unworthy of serious consideration: it is dismissed as popular, and therefore crude; and not true-to-life. We may recall that for Dickens the survival of popular art depended on 'fanciful treatment'. To élitist-minded critics (and I don't think Leavis is entirely innocent of élitism) such survival may not appear worth fighting for. For those who take the cinema seriously because (among other things) it is the only great art form which does reach a large audience, there is an absolutely vital obligation to show that melodrama is a form capable of realizing the fullest potential of genius, while being at the same time a form which appeals to everyone. For good or bad, a very large proportion of films past and present are melodramas of one kind or another.

It has flourished usually in periods when an art form has been shared by both upper and lower classes or when the form has been deserted by the rich and the educated. It contributed greatly to the vitality of the Elizabethan theatre. Shakespeare himself was not above it, as in *Richard the Third*, for example. *Hamlet* is marked by strong traces of it. It really came into its own on the nineteenth-century stage, and when the cinema arrived it simply transferred itself lock, stock and barrel to the new medium. I don't claim that *Richard the Third* is a better play than *King Lear* or that the *Ticket-of-Leave Man* is an undisputed classic, or that *Fantomas* is the film of the silent era. But none of these is beneath contempt; and I think that they show that the derogatory sense of the word melodrama is not the only one. When we come to Dickens and Hitchcock we are dealing with work in which the genius of the creator is manifested not in spite of its possibilities but through them.

*If Alan Lovell (*Screen* No. 2) wants to attack Robin Wood (and the desire to attack really does seem more evident than his having a serious alternative to propose), then he would surely do better to question Wood's judgments about what art should be than to argue for an abstention from judgment. (You can't describe without judging – not in criticism, anyway.) Thus, it seems to me that Penn fits in perfectly with Wood's criteria, Hitchcock less so, and Hawks scarcely at all.

†According to Leavis, Conrad's most Dickensian novel is *The Secret Agent*, which was filmed by Hitchcock as *Sabotage*; as I haven't seen the film, I'm unable to pursue this fascinating lead.

That melodrama is not true-to-life is undeniable. To begin with, in real life people are not, as they are in melodrama, wholly good or wholly bad. But psychological realism is not the only virtue. What melodrama does is to schematize the opposition of good and evil so that the struggle between them occurs not within one individual, as it might in a realistic novel, but is exteriorized into a battle between different characters. It is thus a highly stylized form. The basic structure is nevertheless bold and simple, and this serves to release and embody forces of great power. Channels into the subconscious are opened. It is intimately related to those other popular and despised forms, the ghost story and the horror film. Hitchcock has given his name to a number of books of ghost stories, and made at least one film which contains as much horror as suspense (*Psycho*). Dickens wrote a lot of ghost stories, though after *Pickwick Papers* he usually kept them out of his novels. The latter, however, do have strongly horrific elements. They are full of characters so weird and deformed they could be classified as monsters – Quilp, Squeers, Uriah Heep, Krook, Orlick. Without going any deeper into the psychology and mythology of all this, it is clear that there is in Dickens and Hitchcock a strong impulse towards the irrational. Their problem as artists is to control it, to shape it, so that the irrationality is contained within a structure that makes sense of it (if that is not a contradiction!) There's a striking resemblance between the two that is relevant here: Hitchcock admits to an obsession with tidiness:

'I'm full of fears and I do my best to avoid difficulties and any kind of complications. I like everything around me to be as clear as crystal and completely calm. I don't want clouds overhead. I get a feeling of peace from a well-organized desk. When I take a bath, I put everything neatly back in place. You wouldn't even know I'd been in the bathroom.'¹⁶

Forster, Dickens's closest friend, said this of him:

'Perhaps there never was a man who changed places so much and habits so little. He was always methodical and regular . . . he would generally preface his morning work (such was his love of order in everything around him) by seeing that all was in its place in the several rooms, visiting also the dogs, stables and kitchen garden.'¹⁷ The intricate plotting of Dickens's novels and Hitchcock's films, then, is a way of imposing order on the fears, obsessions and fantasies that creative activity releases. The basic structure of the work is simple, but the detail is fitted together with loving care. Because these fantasies are controlled, they become intelligible and meaningful to a wider audience, not simply the record of a personal inner life. The powerful effect of the initial conception is not crude, because of

the high degree of sophistication, which transforms such elemental stuff into not a Jamesian web spun out of endlessly refined analysis of character, but into melodrama raised to the level of greatness.

I wish to end with some points of comparison between *Great Expectations* and *North by North-West*. Both works are constructed round the story of a man leading a comfortable life who is drawn, at first unwillingly, into a conflict between good and evil. He is forced to risk his life to save someone who, it seems, has merely used him for their own purposes, but whom he comes to love. The essential structure is indisputably melodramatic. The villains are totally evil and their malignancy is scarcely motivated at all. We don't know why James Mason is working for a foreign power or how he feels about it, just as Orlick and Bentley Drummle hate Pip with a malice which exceeds beyond all bounds any reasons they may have for doing so. The job of the artist here is not to make the villains understandable in psychological terms but to make them convincing, through the intensity with which they are portrayed. The means used, of course, vary according to the medium; in the novel the evil of Orlick is communicated by such things as his name (always suggestive in Dickens), his appearance (he is ugly and slouches like an animal), his physical strength, and the uncanny way in which he acts as a kind of extension of Pip's own repressed wish to revenge himself on Mrs Joe (Orlick strikes her with the file Pip had stolen for Magwitch). In *North by North-West* it's a combination of acting (and casting) – James Mason as the 'smiling, damned villain', and his henchmen, one sinister and effeminate, the other dumb and brutal, make up a neatly varied assortment of types – and of choice of camera movements and so on (of the simple but powerful effect of the low-angle shot of Martin Landau crushing Cary Grant's hand as he clings from the cliff-face.)

It's the sheer force with which Dickens and Hitchcock portray evil and danger, and the skill with which they maintain suspense, which ensure their popularity. To dismiss this as crude or unrealistic can only be done by a sensibility so refined as to be ultimately deadening. It's easy, too, to admire the skill and feel the force of their work and yet to damn it with the faint praise of 'clever'. But I believe that you don't feel 'how clever' when you are watching *Psycho*, but 'how terrifying'. The smug, distancing judgment comes afterwards, when you remember what the 'educated' reaction to that sort of thing is.

There is more to the achievement than this, though. For, without diminishing the force of the melodrama, Dickens and Hitchcock use the simple structure to build up other levels of meaning. For example,

the situation is complicated by having a hero who is both reluctant and not wholly admirable. Pip and Roger Thornhill are apparently nice, likeable people. But as Robin Wood has shown, there is something slick and self-satisfied about Thornhill.¹⁸ So with Pip; we have been encouraged to identify with him (as one usually does with a first-person narrator). When he becomes a gentleman he turns into a snob who believes he is entitled to his new position while remaining uninvolved in the dubious activities which have got him there. Dickens and Hitchcock both use the audience's natural tendency to identify with the hero (in the film we identify with Roger Thornhill because he is Cary Grant) to question the audience's own smugness, their sense that everything is 'all right'. Eventually the audience is rewarded with a happy ending, as in all melodramas. To those who think this is sentimental, it may be said that where you have a struggle, not so much between individuals as between the forces of good and evil, a happy ending stands for a faith in the power of goodness. To some this may itself be sentimental, but the victory of evil could only represent total despair or easy cynicism. And, of course, happy endings in Dickens and Hitchcock are by no means glib – see, for example, *Little Dorrit* and *The Birds*. Villainy and danger are defeated, but not until the heroes and the audience have examined the true nature of themselves and made a commitment to an active and positive stand against them. The satisfaction has to be earned. It's this that distinguishes good melodrama from bad, where the audience's desires are gratified cheaply.

Another complication is added in the attitude to the law in both works. Hitchcock tells of a traumatic experience in his childhood:

'I must have been about four or five years old. My father sent me to the police station with a note. The superintendent read it and locked me in a cell for five or ten minutes, saying, "This is what we do to naughty boys."¹⁹ 'As a result', says Hitchcock, 'it must be said to my credit that I never wanted to be a policeman.'²⁰

Dickens also had an early experience of prison; when he was a child his father was arrested for debt. Though Dickens himself didn't actually live in the prison with the rest of the family, a fear and hatred of prisons and the law marked him for the rest of his life. In *Great Expectations* the lawyer Jaggers is a sinister figure who makes Pip feel guilty even though he has not committed any crime; some of the dirt associated with the law has rubbed off on to him:

'I consumed the whole time in thinking how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime; that, in my childhood out on our lonely marshes on a winter evening I should have first encountered it; that, it should have reappeared on two occasions, starting out like a stain that was faded but not gone;

that it should in this new way pervade my fortune and advancement. While my mind was thus engaged, I thought of the beautiful young Estella, proud and refined, coming towards me, and I thought with absolute abhorrence of the contrast between the jail and her.²¹

Both Hitchcock and Dickens use their own personal feelings about the law to prevent the audience from assuming an identity between the forces of law and the forces of good. A conventional melodrama might have taken the form of a simple battle between the police and the villains. In these two works, the heroes, and the audience, are led to make a *personal* commitment. The law is cynical, concerned with its own ends. So the triumph of good must depend on the determination and virtue of the hero. Pip's awakening comes when he finds that the two people he loves are both victims of the law's injustice; and his salvation is the result of his realization that his love for Magwitch is greater than his horror at the convict's past. His own guilt, then, is redeemed by his feeling for one whom the law has marked with guilt.

The situation in *North by North-West* is not, obviously, identical; although in each work the heroine marries (in effect) the villain, Eve and Estella are different characters. One prostitutes herself from patriotic motives, the other because her emotional life has been stifled by her upbringing. Yet even here there is a resemblance. There is an implied critique of a system that can demand such sacrifice; and Eve too has been emotionally crippled: by 'men like you', she tells Cary Grant.

It is also possible to say of the hero of *North by North-West* that though apparently innocent he is drawn into a web of intrigue and crime in which he experiences what it is like to be hunted. And by the end his experiences have changed him; the heartlessness he was guilty of has been replaced by a love for and proper regard of others.

Leaving aside his treatment of guilt and crime, which clearly has overtones beyond a merely particular and individual situation, it might be thought that, unlike Dickens, Hitchcock has little interest in society. His films have usually been interpreted as statements about individual psychology having universal application but no very specific social reference. I don't think this view survives a close examination – in fact, Hitchcock's films reflect the time, the place and the society in which they were made more than most. We have already seen what Robin Wood has said about the economical yet pointed critique of the advertising man. Related to this but operating on a more symbolic level there is a movement in the film away from what he calls 'the apparently aimless and chaotic bustle and movement'²² of New York out into the country. It is in the country that the



The Trouble with Harry: Death intrudes – in a light-hearted way

most terrifying and violent things happen, such as the sequence with the crop-dusting plane. It is as though the characters are attempting to escape to some rural haven, into which they are pursued by evil. Eden is desecrated – not that it ever exists in the film itself. It's already been destroyed when the hero arrives. Such a movement occurs in many of the later films. In *The Trouble with Harry* a kind of

rural paradise does exist for death to intrude into (though of course in a light-hearted way). In *Psycho* Janet Leigh attempts to escape from the city, but her success is rewarded by murder in a lonely spot miles from anywhere. The attacks of the birds in Hitchcock's next film, the killing of Gromek in *Torn Curtain*, conform to this pattern.

There is a similar pattern in Dickens's later novels. In *Great Expectations* London is a place of dirt and fear but it is in the country that Pip has his most frightening experiences, the encounter with Magwitch in the graveyard and his capture by Orlick out on the marshes. In *Our Mutual Friend* Eugene Wrayburn is almost killed by being thrown into a canal while on a trip out of London, and the murder of Edwin Drood takes place in the apparently calm and sleepy backwaters of a cathedral town. The films and the novels are bound up with the experience of the later stages of industrialism in Britain and America. The initial trek into the city becomes a desperate flight away from it.

One shouldn't end a discussion of Dickens and Hitchcock without a word on their humour. Typically, it has an undercurrent of barely suppressed violence and menace. There is anyway a thin dividing line between melodrama and farce, as between tragedy and comedy. Dickens sometimes topples over it, Hitchcock, I think, never (certainly in his mature work). Dickens remarked that *Great Expectations* was founded on 'a grotesque tragi-comic conception',²³ which could apply perfectly to *North by North-West*. The detail of their humour is akin, too. When Thornhill is going down in a lift with the two men who are chasing him, his mother remarks to them, 'You gentlemen aren't *really* trying to kill my son, are you?' and everyone dissolves into laughter. The threat contained in the situation is for the moment, at any rate, released by amusement. When Pip visits Newgate, his fear of prison gives way, at moments, to a comic vision of Wemmick as a gardener and the prisoners as plants which he tends with loving care.²⁴ In each case a frightening situation becomes ridiculous when viewed from another angle. Tension is released, only to tighten up again later – and even in the release of laughter you aren't allowed to forget the danger. Both artists play on their audience in this way, just as they capitalize on its expectations and desires in their use of melodrama. Their popularity comes not only from the use of a popular form, but arises out of their ability to exploit it as a means of expressing their vision of life. It is a vision which draws richly on the fantasies of the subconscious yet which does not indulge them, which takes a bleak view of modern society, though frequently relaxes into black humour. Truffaut says that Hitchcock belongs 'among such artists of anxiety as Kafka, Dostoyevsky and Poe'.²⁵ Dickens should be in that list.

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