Hitchcock’s Hidden Pictures

Perhaps you read too much. —Guy to Bruno in *Strangers on a Train*

1. Hidden Pictures

First, from *Strangers on a Train*, something obvious, literally obstructing the way. The eponymous train is coming into Metcalf; Guy Haines is about to get off, and, though it’s early in the film, he’s bearing considerable narrative momentum with his valise and tennis rackets. At Metcalf, he’s supposed to meet his hateful wife Miriam about a divorce that would allow him to marry the more personable Ann Morton, but he has also just met Bruno Antony, a stranger on the train, who has broached a less civilized plan; Bruno will murder Miriam if, in an undetectable

The stimulus for writing this essay came from a conversation I had many years ago with Suzanne Daly. I also wish to thank Jonathan Larner-Lewis and Ramsey McGlazer for their more recent assistance.
(because unmotivated) swap of killings, Guy will murder Bruno’s tyrannical father. We are already savoring the delicious conviction that the psychopathic alternative will be the one to grip the rails. But now, all of a sudden, a man comes onto the station platform proposing to board the train at the same narrow door where Guy stands ready to leave it; and the man’s corpulence, not to mention a large contrabass that he is brandishing like a second paunch, magnifies the impediment. Yet between Guy and this stranger, not the slightest contact. Nimbly slithering around the fat man as if tracing the invisible but firm line of a cordon sanitaire, Guy makes sure to prevent any brush of the sort that has just made him so unexpectedly intimate with Bruno. Indeed, as he waves his valise in the air to avoid grazing the fat man’s fat instrument, his rather theatrical courtesy seems less a sign of good manners than the subtle expression of an aversion. After he has detrained, moreover, the camera is neither so polite nor so subtle. Instead of following Guy on the narrative business, it mercilessly lingers on the fat man as he proceeds to hoist his bass and then himself up the stairs onto the train, the low angle of the shot emphasizing the mighty labor of his haunch.

Humiliated by both Guy’s polite disregard and the camera’s cruel observation, this surreal fatso is of course Alfred Hitchcock, the director of Strangers on a Train. I have been describing what is known as his appearance in the film. Every Hitchcock thriller stages such a moment, when, as Richard Allen puts it, “the flesh-and-blood director himself” enters the image, cutting a passing figure onscreen; but the Strangers appearance is exemplary because you can’t miss it.1 No sooner does Hitchcock come forward onto the platform than every theatrical audience all over the world emits the pleased purrs, the complacent chuckles of its recognition; the communal gloating is as definitive of the cameo as is Hitchcock’s own flesh and blood.2 Even so, it remains a somewhat puzzling response. To judge by our swollen heads, one would suppose that Hitchcock had been trying to escape our attention rather than call it to a convention of his own devising. One would also suppose that many people in the audience, less clever than ourselves, fail to notice his appearance, even though (barring infants and aliens) such ignorant spectators are hard to come by. This appearance is no secret, no obscure reference for an elite; mass

2. Thomas M. Leitch argues that “it is the audience’s desire for pleasure . . . that gives the cameos their point.” His claim seems to be true as far as it goes, by which I mean—and will be showing—that this Hitchcock game goes further than notions of “pleasure” and “point” take us (Thomas M. Leitch, Find the Director and Other Hitchcock Games [Athens, Ga., 1991], p. 5).

D. A. Miller is John F. Hotchkis Professor at the University of California, Berkeley. His recent publications include Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style (2003) and a study of Federico Fellini’s 8½ (2008).
culture spectators, we read only what has been made legible for that purpose. And yet we all feel as pleased as a child who has just discovered a hidden picture, and as knowing as the cinephile who is watching Alain Resnais’s *Last Year at Marienbad* and smiles to himself when he detects Hitchcock hovering in mid-air among the hotel guests.

For though everyone in the theater may be familiar with Hitchcock’s identity, this familiarity is not shared by anyone on screen. It is in relation to these ignorant “persons of the fiction” that our feelings of superiority have been instigated and feel justified. As whom, after all, does Hitchcock appear in his films? Certainly, he never appears as anyone other than Hitchcock; he is never a character who bears another name or even anonymously exercises the slightest narrative function. As Anthony Shaffer put it, “he would be himself, but he wouldn’t be anybody else”; and, accordingly, we do not say, “there is a bassist played by Alfred Hitchcock,” but “there is Alfred Hitchcock carrying a bass.” Yet though the fiction never identifies its author as someone else, neither does it ever come to acknowledge him as *Hitchcock*. Guy Haines, for instance, is utterly—and, to us, amazingly—oblivious to the fact he has just crossed paths with a film director as famous for his image as for the films regularly signed by that image. This is the self-contradiction intrinsic to the appearance; the fat man is nobody but Hitchcock, and yet Hitchcock is nobody but a fat man.

His fictional nonrecognition is absolute, universal. It is not just that he is unsightly among the beautiful people or anonymous and shabby among the rich and famous. With no part to play, no narrative pertinence, he lacks social being altogether; and absent such relational traction, his embodiment has no more existential grounding than a ghost. (That is what Resnais lets us understand in *Marienbad’s* faux appearance, where the obese Hitchcock is shown defying gravity.) Paradoxically, Hitchcock’s appearance in his films dramatizes his *invisibility* to their world; he arrives on screen only to confirm this social death, and having done
that, like a person who “knows when he is not wanted,” he disappears to trouble us no more. That is why our own recognition of Hitchcock inevitably means patronizing him. Like gods, we seem to be giving him the only life he will ever know; like parents, we bestow on him the primal recognition that he seems able to get in no other way and from no other source. “Yes,” our complacent notice says to the fat man, “Your appearance to the contrary, you are truly Hitchcock the filmmaker. We love you for being him, and perhaps even more, for your self-abasing dependency on us to see you are him.”

Let me now bring forward another specimen of obviousness that comes even earlier in *Strangers*: the chance encounter between Guy and Bruno that gets the story going. If Hitchcock’s appearance offered the obviousness of an obstruction, of something in the way of the story, this accident waiting to happen—justly regarded as one of Hitchcock’s most absorbing visual narrations—offers the obviousness of the way itself, of the narrative path that our attention is being directed to follow. The film famously begins by crosscutting between two men’s shoes: a pied pair walking leftward and a plain pair walking to the right. The alternation accelerates, with suitable musical punctuation, and we expect it to culminate in a toe-on collision. Instead, it resolves in a shot that shows the men’s shoes striding in the same direction, through the ticket gate and onto the train platform. But we are not disappointed, only further teased; the title has foretold an encounter between strangers “on a train,” and it is this train that both pairs of shoes are now going to board and whose departure is implied in the next shot, a low, forward tracking shot along the rails. Unsurprisingly, the alternation resumes inside the train, and this time it reaches its promised end. The pied shoes again move left until their owner, still invisible, sits down and crosses his legs; the plain shoes move right until their owner, also still unseen, follows suit. But, in the process, his shoe kicks the other’s across the aisle.

This is the moment we’ve been engrossed in waiting for, and now the camera, as if it too had been kicked, shoots up from its low position on the floor and finally shows us something besides footwear: a brightly lit train car whose occupants, having sprouted heads and torsos, are busy talking, drinking, and playing cards. It is as if those touching shoes were the contact for an electric current that had turned everything on, including the narrative engine. For we immediately recognize the two men in the foreground as the film’s stars and protagonists; and they waste no time striking up a conversation—“Aren’t you Guy Haines? I’m Bruno, Bruno Antony”—chockful of exposition and suggested developments. Out of the womb of suspense, narrative is at last unmistakably delivered, healthy and full of beans; and, after our drawn-out wait, we are the more pleassurably intrigued. The film is laying track.

We are unlikely, therefore, to pay attention to a small detail that emerges at the very moment when the suddenly upraised camera gives Guy
and Bruno their first full registration. This is a book that Guy is holding, his train reading; on its back cover is the face of—Alfred Hitchcock, who is thus visible, if not actually seen, eight minutes before what we commonly take as his appearance. There is no doubt about it; we get several more views of this book—the front as well as back cover, the spine, too—and though no one has ever noticed it I did not find it impossible to identify. It is Alfred Hitchcock’s Fireside Book of Suspense, a 1947 collection of mystery

3. In print, I mean. But on celluloid, there is room to wonder. The first scene of François Ozon’s Swimming Pool (2003) alludes to the opening conversation in Strangers, and seems to reflect on the two Hitchcock appearances (the hidden celebrity photograph, the unrecognized passerby) that frame it on either end. The detective novelist Sarah Morton is accosted by a fellow tube rider who, while reading one of her books, has identified her from the author photo:

“Yes, excuse me, but aren’t you Sarah Morton? It is you. I recognize you. Look, I’m reading your latest novel. I love it. I’m a big fan of Inspector Dorwell. I’ve read all your books—”

“You must have mistaken me for someone else. I’m not the person you think I am. Excuse me.” (leaves the train)

In an obvious sense, the reprise is a reversal. Morton is recognized as an author, though she doesn’t want to be; and if, as one can’t help thinking, Hitchcock would like to be recognized as an author, and not just a fat man, he has made this almost impossible. But both authors are bent on affirming, against the common perception of them, an unknown self and a secret writing.
stories that Hitchcock edited, annotated, and prefaced with an essay called “The Quality of Suspense.”

Let me note in passing that on discovering this book I was seized with a desire to possess it. It was as if the discovery would not be verified nor my satisfaction in it be complete unless the thing in the film were also a thing

Figure 4. The Fireside Book of Suspense (front cover)
close to hand in my own home. Once I had got the book, though, the care with which I scrutinized the jacket (which I was surprised to observe was red, not gray as the black-and-white film stock had rendered it) was more than matched by the care with which I handled the book itself, so much more that it almost seemed I was afraid to touch it. I soon felt a need to
insulate it; I put the book in a clear plastic zippered case, the case in an archival box, and the box in the empty drawer of a locked cabinet where, I told myself, this precious deposit would never get bruised against other books, or faded in the sunlight, or stolen by—but here I got bewildered, for who would possibly steal such a thing, a treasure whose value I was the only one to recognize? Though I had purchased the *Fireside Book* to hold and examine whenever I pleased, somehow what finally pleased me most was putting it away, out of sight and out of reach.

But I am jumping the rails. I return to the fact that Hitchcock makes not one but two appearances at the beginning of *Strangers*—or, rather, to the fact that this fact is precisely what *doesn’t* appear. Everyone thinks of the obvious or manifest appearance as being the only one and pays no attention to the hidden or latent appearance at all. In one respect, of course, both the manifest and the latent appearance do the same thing; they sign the film as the work of “Hitchcock.” But they sign it with opposite implications. The manifest appearance—of “the flesh-and-blood director himself”—presumes that Guy doesn’t know who Hitchcock is or what he looks like, while the latent appearance—in the author photo—implies that Guy is so fully appreciative of the Hitchcock brand—the name, the face, the suspense for which these are synonyms—that, to while away the tedium of train travel, he has chosen a book marketed on just that basis. And instead of complimenting our ability to recognize Hitchcock where no one else can, the hidden picture, when we do see it, is bound to irk us. For whether we owe this finding to our own (repeated, retarded, rewound) viewings or to someone else’s information—perhaps, for most of you, my own—it is always a discovery of what we have missed, what we have been set up to miss. We’d thought we were patronizing Hitchcock when all along it was he who was patronizing us; in smugly discerning him, we were only being his dupes. He is not the person we imagined, or, rather, that person is not the author we overlooked. Naively, we were content to find Hitchcock in the flesh when we should have been looking for his image on *film*, in that “still” which is the author photograph. And now that we can no longer take the same pride in recognizing *Hitchcock*, we are no longer able to take the same pleasure in his film for recognizing *us* in our competence to read it right.⁴

“You’ll ruin everything with your neat little touches,” says Philip to

---

⁴ This puts us in an intimate connection with Guy’s plight. The famous tennis player is so used to being recognized that when Bruno says, “Aren’t you Guy Haines?” he need answer only with a fatuously benevolent smile. But all smiles stop together when he loses his alibi because—in an amazing reversal of his habitual good fortune—the drunken Professor Collins *doesn’t know who he is*, and so doesn’t remember meeting him on the train, and so can’t give him an
Brandon in Rope, and the hidden picture here, neat as a pin and almost as hard to find as one, seems to be just such a damaging touch; it mucks up the logic of the manifest appearance and spoils the seigneurial pleasure, shared and sure, we take in it. This is a signature that, like Sam Marlowe’s on his paintings in The Trouble with Harry, is “not supposed to be readable” even if we end up being able to read it; and to confront its intended opacity, secrecy, or nonsense must radically disturb the straightforwardness of the film’s art, along with the comfortable viewing practices we bring to it. Something thickens with this touch, and it’s not the plot, which now begins racing forward like a train; it’s the style, which, if we are to attend to it at all, must put the plot on pause, literally and otherwise.

But who would welcome such a violent application of the brakes? For if Hitchcock possesses the only great cinematic style with popular appeal, it enjoys this appeal on the basis of its beautiful clarity—the easy, immediate, and unbroken intelligibility of its purposes and means. As he tells us often enough, his trademark suspense depends on sharing information with the viewer, and his camera is as directive as a teacher’s pointer; it would designate everything noteworthy to the story and only that. There never seems to be any money in letting our attention wander elsewhere on the blackboard. (During the most suspenseful sequence in Strangers, the camera is placed inside a gutter, where Guy’s lighter has fallen onto a ledge; if you are sufficiently dégagé to look at anything here but Bruno’s groping hand and the lighter it would grasp, you may be pardoned for thinking that nothing goes down a city sewer but a few dead leaves.) For all its brilliant withholding techniques, the style seems to harbor no deep secrets. As Andrew Sarris once put the point, “Hitchcock can be devious, but he is never dishonest”; we always feel we know what he is doing and why. Such is the compact that the cameo has proved a winsome device for making explicit; it is the quasi-heraldic emblem of a style that would be—like itself—obvious, consistent, unmistakable. It anchors a game we derive considerable pleasure both from playing and from knowing how to play.

That is why the hidden picture, tampering with the readability of this emblem, making it a question or problem, has such power to unsettle; with this neat little touch, Hitchcock’s whole style seems momentarily to cloud over, to surrender its classic functionality to an enigmatic density. In the alibi. Like Hitchcock in the appearance, or like Bruno who must wear his name on a tie clip, Guy is made to inhabit the abject condition of nonrecognition.

manifest appearance, the story obligingly halts for recognition of Hitchcock as its author then resumes its now-certified course. But in the hidden appearance the narrative juggernaut leaves us no leisure for such recognition; its commanding progress almost ensures that Hitchcock’s claim to authorship—in itself perfectly obvious—will be lost on us. And this effective incompatibility between narrative cognition and authorial recognition suggests that the authorship we are being asked to recognize is not the same thing as—and may even be at cross-purposes with—the authorship of a narrative. Look closely at the author photo, and you will see Hitchcock holding his lips between his thumb and forefinger; the secret image embeds an emblem of secrecy itself.

To shift our self-congratulation, then, from the manifest to the latent appearance, as though, having now identified it, we could once again feel sophisticated and clever, would be to miss the implication of its latency, which is that the film might be hiding other objects, other “Hitchcocks,” that are likewise visible but not apparent. Two other neat little touches may be observed in this connection. The first is that Guy’s book is not the only book to be found on the train; Bruno rests his shoes on another, a paperback presumably his own, as he reclines on the compartment banquette. All we see of its cover are three differently sized lines of type, and all that
FIGURE 7. Suspense Stories
can be distinctly read is the word suspense in the second and largest of these. But we’ve been given enough to know that the book is a kind of companion volume to the Fireside Book, a twinning that turns its author into Hitchcock by another name. Or at least it would if we weren’t in fact Hitchcock under his own name. On the hunch that this too was one of Hitchcock’s anthologies, I found a paperback that bore a perfect typographic correspondence to the one lying under Bruno’s heel: Suspense Stories, collected by Alfred Hitchcock, a Dell Mapbook (no. 367) published in 1950, the year before Strangers. (This too I bought, and all the rest.) The volume offers not only another Hitchcock signature but also another iteration of the theme of the double that incessantly patterns the film’s story and images. With the whole film in mind, one might see Guy and Bruno as having chosen the Book of Hitchcock in an almost existentialist sense, though the good Guy, in his bad faith, never gets around to reading it, while the bad Bruno, said to “read too much,” is good enough to do Guy’s dirty work. The point would be obvious if viewers were allowed to get a good look at either book, and it is obvious anyway in the perfectly lucid formulations we find elsewhere in the film (as when Guy says, “I could strangle her,” and the film cuts to a shot of Bruno’s large hands). There is something, then, curiously beside the point here; if we see the hidden book, we must also perceive a sort of hiding for hiding’s sake. For we can’t think we’ve found a hidden meaning, or at least not a meaningfully hidden meaning, since we see more or less the same meaning elsewhere in plain view; we have merely found a hidden picture, whose concealment has no rationale. And compared to the briefly seen Fireside Book, the partly seen Dell Mapbook has been so much further concealed that a successful attempt to identify it can no longer even seem particularly sharp-eyed; it must seem at once hugely pedantic and a tiny bit mad, the recondite fruit of a close reader whose attention has been diverted from the main line. For the film takes no responsibility for the game it has seduced us into playing; as a rule, Hitchcock’s version of hidden pictures does not provide us with a list.

And things do not go more smoothly when it does. For the second neat little touch is that Hitchcock has made another “flesh-and-blood” appearance in Strangers in addition to the one on the platform. In Hitchcock at Work, Bill Krohn reports the following:

After returning from location shooting in the East, the director told a Warners publicist that he had already made a very brief appearance as a librarian in the scene where Bruno accosts Guy and Ann at the Mellon Gallery. “It’s such a small bit,” he added, “I’m just likely to do another one before the film is finished.” Rightly described as “small,”
Hitchcock’s first appearance [first in the order of filming, not the film] survives as an out-of-focus rear projection behind Bruno at the Mellon lasting about a second, in which the director is nonetheless recognizable if you know to look for him.\(^6\)

“Recognizable if you know to look for him.” You may find the phrase, as I did, a portal down the rabbit hole. For I still couldn’t recognize Hitchcock even when, thanks to Krohn’s source—Hitchcock himself—I did “know to look for him.” As I watched and rewatched the scene, its periphery seemed to be swarming with stout middle-aged men, any one of whom might have been him. I put them all under close inspection, like the police in North by Northwest hauling aside every porter in Union Station in hopes of finding Cary Grant, but equally in vain. Then, through a sudden accidental shift in perspective, no doubt caused by the sheer strain of the Morellian attention I was according their blurred features and indistinct waistlines, I happened to observe the odd movement with which one of these men walked on and off the scene. It was different from the blandly purposive pacing of the others. Emerging from behind a pillar, the man seemed to be walking sideways, even backwards; and no sooner did he appear than, changing course and gait, he returned whence he came. One glimpsed him from the back only, and his sudden retreat came just in time to keep it that way, perhaps in order to do so. Or had he in fact sneaked a look at us before abruptly turning around? In either case, it was as though he were playing, or showing himself playing, at hide and seek. What further proof did I require? Here was Hitchcock beyond a doubt! And under the impact of this revelation, Krohn’s exasperating locution—“recognizable if you know to look”—now spoke only the plain truth; for once you find a hidden picture, it seems always to have been there staring you in the face.

And yet the more I thought about it, the figure did not seem to be behind Bruno; it was in front of Bruno, in fact, right in his range of vision. Had Krohn—had I—got it right? Doubt seized me again; I watched the scene another time. But now I was struck by a man in black, seen over Guy’s shoulder, but also emerging from behind a pillar, who walks quickly off-screen. At the moment he does so, Guy looks nervously to the side, a synchrony suggesting that Guy may have seen him out of the corner of his eye or (Hitchcock characters often seem to possess such organs) with eyes in the back of his head. The man is filmed in profile, and his dark clothing combines with the lighting to make him a virtual shadow picture, an effect that evokes the self-silhouetting that Hitchcock delighted in and would

soon trademark on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Which, then, was the genuine Hitchcock—the one in silhouette or the one playing peekaboo? Or was there a third possibility I had not yet made out . . .?

I recalled—I relived—the demoralized state I had often known as a child in playing hidden pictures. The game distressed me by what I experienced as a never-ending *embarras du choix*. First, every bulbous oblong discernible in the foliage, clouds, or mountain ridges would look to me like the hidden spoon; though the list unambiguously stated that there was only one, I seemed to see a hundred. Then, having at last decided on a winner and awarded it the honor of being colored in with my red crayon, I discovered that the other spoon nominees did not recede into the background from which I had conditionally isolated them but continued demanding my attention just as aggressively as they had done before. They *still* looked suspiciously like spoons, or—since that was now supposed to be impossible—like something else in hiding I hadn’t identified. And so with the other hidden objects on the list: my eventual identifications, instead of removing my initial confusion, only made it less real, more hallucinatory. Hence, finally, when I was done finding everything, the original tableau—the “big picture” with its strong motivic unity—wasn’t simply pockmarked with irrelevant spoons, paperclips, and catcher’s mitts; it had dissolved into an infinite tracery of possible hiding places for objects that I had not discovered and could not be sure even existed. As a result, the game never felt over, especially—and most creepily—when it was supposed to be.

But again I digress, unless all this may offer a way of thinking about the unnerving force that the Hitchcock appearance acquires as it moves among “obvious,” “secret,” and “undecidable” modes. It is, after all, a quite common experience in watching Hitchcock to suspect his presence in *every* man—and even in certain women—over a certain age and weight. Not only are there many such suspects in the films, but they also tend to exhibit certain formal features of the classic Hitchcock appearance: they obtrude into the frame from the side or look straight at the camera, defying narrative purpose. *Strangers*, in spite or because of the obviousness of the platform appearance, seems especially rich in what might be called Hitchcock appearances without Hitchcock, and the structural similarities

7. Only a few months ago, for example, the blogosphere was percolating with conjecture that Hitchcock had made an appearance in drag in *North by Northwest*. Closer attention reveals that the lady in question is not Hitchcock, but Jesslyn Fax, the actress who plays the sculptress in *Rear Window*. And yet the pointed gratuitousness of the camera’s focus on her unites with her own direct look at us to give the moment the structure of a Hitchcock appearance.

8. One of many examples: as the train is pulling into Metcalf, a bulky man may be observed
between the phony Hitchcocks and the real one ensure that, no matter how many times we see the film, it will always be affirming that Hitchcock is one man and many men; that he appears but once and is on the verge of appearing all the time; that we will certainly find him and may just miss him.

Another way to find Hitchcock in his films, of course, is to identify one or more of his characters as an author surrogate—a stratagem that has enjoyed a tenacious hold on Hitchcock criticism from Robin Wood and William Rothman forward. Up to a point, finding the surrogate carries on the game enjoined by the cameo convention, but it is also an attempt to put an end to what is frustrating about the game by refusing its mere formalism and harnessing its identificatory imperative to useful thematic service. For if we identify Hitchcock as the supernumerary walking backwards in the Mellon Gallery, nothing in particular need follow from the fact; indeed, it would be hard to make anything follow from this discovery that was commensurate with its inconsequence. But if we find Hitchcock embodied in, say, Bruno (the evil mastermind), or Guy (the cynical arriviste), or even Barbara Morton (Ann’s sister, the connoisseur of murder mysteries played by Hitchcock’s own daughter Patricia), then the floodgates of meaning are opened to irrigate everyone’s glibbest discourse; in being identified with a character, even partially, Hitchcock becomes comprehensible as character, with motives and a mission, sympathies and a heart of darkness. Under the aegis of the cameo, we seek Hitchcock as part of a formal observance whose emptiness, sooner or later, afflicts us with hermeneutic tristesse; in the name of the surrogate, by contrast, we not only find Hitchcock but also, having done so, we find out what he means. Replete with sense, with import, the surrogate compensates for the cameo, which is empty of any meaning extrinsic to the sheer game of looking for it.9

Why, then, you may ask, would anyone engage in the abstruse and

9. Even with the surrogate, moreover, a similar problem may be shown to arise. Like the cameo, the surrogate is never unambiguously singular, and it too enjoys an essentially doubtful distribution. In Strangers, for instance, one critic will maintain that Hitchcock is Bruno, while another, equally persuasive, will contend that Hitchcock is the anonymous passerby who causes Bruno to drop his lighter. And once you start considering the many such claims, along with the prospects that may be suggested by your own ingenuity, you will find your list of surrogates expanding to become virtually coterminous with the entire character-field. Whereupon the notion of a surrogate will have lost its utility and meaning together: to find Hitchcock everywhere is no better than not finding “him” at all.
absurd game of hidden pictures, whose recessiveness ensures its invisibility to most viewers and threatens to brand the others with its own marginality? But it is not my claim that Hitchcock’s hidden pictures are worthy of our attention; they must seem all the more perverse and trivial for covering in such elaborate secrecy what can be—and elsewhere is—presented openly. They degrade our attention even in the quasi-chemical sense of breaking it down; identifying them encourages a pointillist indifference to the overall picture in which they are hidden, a jokey dismissal of the film’s more obvious, important, and attention-sustaining themes. And as I have already indicated, “pleasure” is not a very apt name for the affect these hidden pictures induce in one who is seriously—that is to say, naively—open to looking for them. But if there is no reason why anyone should engage in this game, there is a reason why some people do, and why everyone could, and that is its undeniable persistence throughout Hitchcock’s work. Sooner or later, in one form or another, it is impossible not to stumble on evidence of this secret style that, once we suspect its existence, threatens to spoil the style famous for having no secrets.

2. Charades

It is tempting to regard the author metaphor that the *Fireside Book* smuggles into *Strangers* as a genial prophecy of the French auteurism that would make Hitchcock its hero only a few years later. But in the work of the critics writing for *Cahiers du Cinéma* during the late 1950s, the metaphor functioned very differently. On the one hand, the term *auteur* served to ennable directors with a preeminently literary prestige, equating them not with composers or painters but with the authors of poems, plays, novels: texts. On the other hand, nothing made a director less eligible to bear this literary title than symptoms of literature in his work. François Truffaut excoriated “scenarists’” films where the *metteur en scène* was merely, as he witheringly put it, “the gentleman who adds the pictures” to literate adaptations.10 And prompted by the same animus, Eric Rohmer went so far as to condemn Roberto Rossellini himself “for having given too much to the literary objects he admires and for having sacrificed a bit of the tradition of Gance and Eisenstein to the false gods of Caldwell.”11 A true auteur’s vision of the world could only be expressed through a mastery of tracking shots, depth of field, montage, and other strictly cinematic techniques. This auteur was comparable to an author, as fully in control of his material; but he

was never like him in having a literary orientation or in understanding cinema on the model of the written word. Because English imported the trope, we can distinguish the (film) auteur from the (book) author, but for the Cahiers critics who originated it, auteur remained a perfect figure of speech; you could only be called one if you weren’t one.

In Strangers, however, the author metaphor is wholly literal and unabashedly literary. It is as the author of an actual book that the director advances his claim to be an equivalently authoritative artist in film.\textsuperscript{12} In contrast to the Cahiers critics who made him the auteur par excellence—in contrast, too, to his own later pronouncements to them regarding “pure cinema”—Hitchcock here suggests that his cinematic art may be seen as deriving from a book. Indeed, his paper-thin head shot precedes his fuller and rounder incarnation on the platform almost as if he had stepped off his own back cover, and with him, no less fantastically, the Hitchcock suspense thriller that Guy was proposing to enjoy in firesidelike comfort and safety had also come off the page to envelop the hero in its trammels. One is weirdly reminded of that classic opening of adaptations where we see the words of the source novel’s first page fading into the film’s first scene, as if come to life.

But what words, you might object, when Hitchcock’s book is mainly represented by a photo in which the author, clasping his lips, designates an inviolable muteness? Yet, though one can hardly verbalize the virtually blank secret being kept here, one can hardly but verbalize the gestural code for keeping it: “mum’s the word,” “my lips are sealed,” “silent as the grave,” and so on. Theatrically emphatic, the mime announces a charade, a riddling gesture or tableau covertly determined by a verbal expression that it is asking us to supply. In its sheer ostentation, let it stand as an emblem—the only sort of emblem we are likely to get—of the game of charades that is played unannounced in Hitchcock and whose secret riddles are posed in secret, hidden under narrative camouflage until someone, accidentally falling into the game, simultaneously sees and solves one.

On the day—or rather night—of my own initiation, it was too late to

\textsuperscript{12} Is it worthwhile indulging the quibble that, strictly speaking, Hitchcock is not the author of this anthology, but only its compiler? Given that the front cover bears the title “Alfred Hitchcock’s Book of Suspense” (like “Alfred Hitchcock’s Strangers on a Train” in the credits); that the back cover features Hitchcock’s picture in the author’s place; and that the inside contents are framed by his preface, the distinction seems to entail no difference. And yet it may also have the merit of glancing at a certain “anthologizing” tendency in the film’s own handling of suspense. As is well known, Hitchcock conceived Strangers as a return to form after the back-to-back failures of Under Capricorn and Stage Fright. Under pressure to offer not a new invention but an inventory of old ones, he structured this comeback as a succession of set pieces, a virtual digest of suspense effects and devices.
watch *Strangers* “responsibly”; only half awake, I began to half dream over the film, following the train of whatever associations crisscrossed my mind. Far be it from me to demean this semiunconscious mode of viewing; it is sometimes responsible for our closest—most intimate and most precise—readings of a work’s details; but as, most of the time, it produces entirely unusable irrelevancies, I have never chosen to adopt it. Anyway, in this woolgathering state, I happened to be struck by Hitchcock’s contra-bass and remembered how frequently his appearance in other films also makes him out to be musical. This recurring motif seemed to enjoy a particular pertinence in *Strangers*; when Guy bypasses Hitchcock, he is on the way to Miller’s Music Store, where Miriam works. According to the writing on its front windows, the store sells records, radios, and musical instruments, and amid the grand piano, clarinet, accordion, banjo, guitar, and drums visible on the premises a bass would not be out of place. My irresistible thought: since Hitchcock gets on the train that Guy has just left, might not he also have left the music store where Guy is just about to go? They are, after all, pictured as *crossing paths*, and if we are allowed to think of Hitchcock as joining Bruno, who we already know is a fan, we may also imagine him as having just parted from Miriam, who we soon learn is fond of music. None of this, I knew, had any narrative reality; it was sheer connotative filigree.

I was further struck—indeed felt almost personally hailed—by the cast album of *Carousel* hanging conspicuously in Miller’s window, which linked the music store to my old passion for Broadway musicals and linked both to the film’s own merry-go-round. And there, in fact, Miriam’s Hitchcockian affinity with music was reaffirmed. “Hey, let’s sing, come on!” she enjoined her two beaux as all three boarded this carousel and broke into “The Band Played On” as they might have performed a chorus of “June Is Bustin’ out All Over” or “A Real Nice Clambake.” Even Bruno, already in pursuit, couldn’t resist joining in from his horse behind them—nor could I, in a similarly low voice, watching it all from my couch. His stalking no doubt threw a shadow over Miriam’s laughing rendition of “the poor girl would shake with alarm,” but it did not affect my rising piano-bar spirits. I knew it was a false alarm: Miriam would not shake when she was strangled, but fall in a swoon, as if Bruno were romantically embracing her.

But then the singing was done, and Miriam was insisting on a boat ride

---

13. In *Spellbound*, he carries a violin case, in *The Paradine Case* a covered cello, in *Vertigo* a horn case. *Rear Window* puts his appearance in a musician’s apartment; and *Topaz* scores it to the theme song from *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. It is as if his direction were being imaged as a performing art, the rendering of a preexisting score.
through the Tunnel of Love; the carousel music had changed to “Baby Face.” Whether I regretted that the impromptu sing-along had ended, or was still obeying Bosswoman Miriam’s earlier directive, or had otherwise determined, on this strange train of associations, to be an actual passenger, I now began mouthing the words to the new song, which I knew quite well:

*Baby face*

I’m up in heaven when I’m in your fond embrace
I didn’t need a shove
’Cause I just fell in love
With the cutest baby face!

But just as I sang to myself, “I didn’t need a shove,” the boatman on screen took up a long pole and—*gave Bruno’s boat a shove with it.* I did not believe my eyes. The man was no longer simply helping Bruno debark, as he had done on all my numerous previous viewings of *Strangers*; now, he was also literalizing the words of the song, words that, never heard in the film and only supplied by my memory, had nonetheless secretly shaped his gesture. And with my recognition of this fact, the image itself altered, doubled into the old familiar host-image that had just vanished and the fantastic new charade-image that had now taken its place. For even though the new image was identical to the old, it did not *look* like it. I had just found another kind of hidden picture; or, rather, as I had done no searching, it had found me. And this picture was far weirder than if the prophesy of “the poor girl would shake with alarm” had been realized with an image of Miriam trembling; for that image would have simply illustrated the words that had foreshadowed it.14 Here, the boatman was literalizing words that were never meant to be taken literally. The song’s “I didn’t need a shove” does not envision rough physical pushing; it is, we might say, just an expression.

I fell into my discovery by accident, but like all accidents this one had no sooner befallen me than it acquired the fatedness of a thing waiting to happen. The coincidence of word and image—the whole concatenation of associations—all seemed far too exact not to have been designed by Hitchcock, planted there like a land mine to lie inert and invisible until either it self-destructed with the last surviving copy of *Strangers on a Train* or someone should trip over it and explode it into visibility—someone who bore the name Miller, knew the lyrics to “Baby Face,” had fallen into a daze, or enjoyed some other nonce qualification. But designed, planted for what

14. “*The Band Played On*” is in fact being replayed during her romantic strangulation, as if to underline this failed, now ironic correspondence.
purpose? The charade’s solution (“need a shove”) adds absolutely nothing to our understanding of the story. What interpreter would stoop to decide whether queer Bruno does need a shove into the heterosexual tunnel of love—or, in his compulsively “driven” state of mind, he doesn’t? But even if the point were less idle than it is, no possible thematic utility could mitigate the shock of the charade’s sudden visibility as such.

For it is not just that the charade is blindingly apparent where its existence had been unsuspected. Its sudden prominence also triggers the narrative’s simultaneous waning. The fictional world is immediately flattened into a pretext for constructing a trivial if amusing picture puzzle; and though the picture puzzle is necessarily telling us something, it is emphatically not telling the story that has been engaging us. Though composed of moving images that are all justified by this story, the charade sets into legibility as a motionless tableau with its own independent raison d’être; thus self-bracketed, it stems the narrative flow, suspending suspense itself.

What’s more, a disturbance inheres in the sheer form of the charade as the visual literalization of a verbal figure. Unlike a simple illustration, in which word and image are understood to correspond, the riddling nature of a charade depends on their incommensurability; and once a charade has been solved image and expression alike lose their spontaneously given obviousness. The image, at first banal, now looks eerily disassociated, a literalization that has failed to catch the sense of the expression it materializes, while, in the light of this materialization, the expression, which we knew perfectly well how to use, now also feels dislocated from its meaning, like any figure we think about too literally. Although a charade can be neither constructed nor deciphered without a certain often considerable wit, its end effect is to make image and expression seem idiotic—two equally nonsensical moments in a comedy of misrepresentation. Again, for what purpose would Hitchcock introduce a charade here? Would its only point be, saboteur-like, to set off this tiny explosion of pointlessness in a film that is otherwise shoved along by its highly efficient plot mechanisms?

Or to set off, in our now altered state, a whole string of such absurd explosions, occurring not just in a backwater, around a minor plot notation, but at major narrative junctures, on the train itself? Call to mind again the juncture of all such junctures in the film, the seed encounter between Pied Shoes and Plain Shoes. After being teased and toyed with, we eventually grasped that the contact between them would occur once, following Pied Shoes’s example, Plain Shoes had crossed his legs. In that same moment—also the moment to which the secret appearance of Hitchcock as charade-player has been timed—we might now also grasp, gasping and gaping with the knowledge, that our suspense has just come to coincide
with a literalization of one of suspense’s hoariest figures: we actually are “waiting for the other shoe to drop”! And, likewise, it now becomes almost impossible to bear the suspense of Bruno groping for his lighter, or of Guy grabbing the poles while grappled by Bruno on the merry-go-round, without having a mental picturization—I borrow the term from Norman Bates—of how “gripping” all this is meant to be. We further see, among other nonsense literalizations, that the shot along the rails offers us a tracking shot of tracks; that the shots of the tennis game punningly correspond to the shots in the game; that the popcorn machine, the Ferris wheel, and the merry-go-round are all wonderland resizings of cameras, reels, and projectors. These may not all be equally persuasive examples of Hitchcock’s pictionary; just as the hidden pictures range from obvious to secret to speculative, so the charades are now incontrovertible, now merely likely, now, like the author photo that emblematizes them, abidingly enigmatic. Strangers is riddled with such riddles, what Alice, in her own wonderland, aptly thinks of as “out-of-the-way things”; once you find the rabbit hole, it’s unbelievable what’s down there!

3. Touch Tag

But can any of it be brought back above ground? The question is all the more germane now that my objective account of the hidden pictures has mutated into a subjective experience of them and my critical essay into a fantastic tale à la Poe. In order that this doubleness may at least be better understood, let me say a few last words about the practice that has determined it. This is the practice of what I’ll call Too Close Reading.

As the name implies, Too Close Reading would be a late, deviant form of the close reading pursued in literary criticism after the Second World War. It deserves to be called too close on several accounts. It has abandoned the sense of overall proportion that gave the New Criticism its Attic shape and has dispensed with the even-handed stance that was once its fair attitude. Too Close Reading no longer aims at offering a “reading,” that interpretation of “the work as a whole” which was close reading’s rationale and telos. Instead, it is drawn to details that, while undeniably intricate, are not noticeably important—little particulars that, though demonstrably meant, never strike us as deeply meaningful. Nor is Too Close Reading concerned with pinning down the meaning or import that eludes us;

---

“close, but no cigar” is its very watchword. Unlike classic close reading, it does not “illuminate” the text, but only brings out its shadowy and even shady quality. If it is good for anything, then, Too Close Reading is good for measuring a text’s drive to futility, a perverse force that is, in Hitchcock’s case, considerable. The effort of what I’ve called his secret style is to create—discreetly, for the true initiates—an alternative universe in which the celebrated storytelling, suspense, and entertainment of the manifest style all get derailed.

“For the true initiates”? There remains, therefore, to observe one last aspect of Too Close Reading, namely, that, whether eagerly like Bruno or merely tractably like Guy, it acquiesces in an undue intimacy. The practitioner of Too Close Reading is never as lonesome as he might appear, nor his findings as singular; he is always partnered with an author-text to which he can’t help getting, in this relational sense as well, inordinately close. It is through consenting to this undue intimacy, with its blurred boundaries and invaded spaces, that Too Close Reading acquires its weird psychic density. This is also why, when the author-text is Hitchcock, it is well-suited to register another curious hidden truth about his cinema: it comes too close, closer than, as cinema, it should.

Hitchcock’s manifest appearance in Strangers on a Train, for instance, does not simply realize our well-trained desire to see Hitchcock; it also, more monstrously, issues a fantasmatc invitation to touch him. The invitation is broached in the very taboo against touching him that determines Guy’s politely channeled repulsion; and it is continued in the sheer aggression with which the camera proceeds to put Hitchcock’s fat ass “in our face”: a taunting dare to kiss it. In the latent appearance, moreover, the prohibition on touching Hitchcock has been lifted ante factum; at the
moment we first see Guy, he is laying an oblivious finger on the Untouchable’s cheek. And he must have put it there just before he crosses his legs, so that his pedal contact with Bruno, which literally kicks off the entire story, would be itself a jerk reflex, the extension and downward displacement of his digital fondling of Hitchcock. It is as if Guy had touched Hitchcock and were now being strangely bound to him under pressure of the idiom “hand and foot.” Conversely, Bruno’s overfamiliarity would be merely carrying on from the intimacy already established in this double first touch—a touch that his own remarkably large hands and feet, as they pound and trample Guy on the carousel, may be considered a last means of returning. Recall the Too Close Reader’s desire to handle, if not the actual Hitchcock, the actual Hitchcock book; how quickly he found himself putting it away, sensing that his too-closeness to Hitchcock had found its obscene truth in Hitchcock’s too-closeness to him. The dream of touching Hitchcock—of probing his secret parts—had become indistinguishable from the nightmare of being touched by him, of being likewise deeply probed.
English used to have a word for this horror: *thrilling*; it meant penetrating or piercing.

Even at the obvious narrative level, of course, the touch typically implies violence and violation; Guy kicks and slugs, Bruno throttles and stomps, and Barbara herself, vigorously brushing off the face powder she has spilled on Detective Hennessy’s trousers, comes ominously near his crotch. Even lighter and presumably more loving forms of touch carry a hint of trauma. When Ann runs up to kiss him, Guy calls her a “brazen woman” and redoes the kiss with himself in control; and having just had his hands manicured by his mother, Bruno compulsively nuzzles her hands, as if to bargain for a truce. But all such represented touches are not too close for our comfort as spectators; as befits the aesthetic *enjoyment* of fear, we observe them from a safe place.  

It is in the too close proximity to Hitchcock’s secret style, however, that one appreciates its ambition to abolish that safe place, to turn the touch from something the film embodies to something the film performs on the bodies watching the film. I am indifferent to whether Bruno needs his prodding or not; but I am intensely “thrilled” by the prodding the charade gives me whether I need, want, or like it. No doubt, to call this overintimizing effect a touch is to employ a figure of speech; but it is one that Hitchcock liked to use himself, and, as with other figures of speech once they enter his cinema, it doesn’t stay buried in the grave of dead metaphors. In *Strangers*, for instance, his touch comes alive not only in the finger-to-lip pose he strikes in the photograph but again in the contrabass he carries onto the train; both appearances literalize touch as the sign, the means, and the end of his art.

Charade-wise, though, these literalizations of touch are secreted. If the photograph can just be glimpsed, the bass, with its pluckable strings, cannot be seen at all; visible is only the canvas case that hides its haptic powers. Hitchcock’s supremely visual cinema seems to be similarly shrouding, within its seemingly distanced visuality as cinema, a more basic aspiration to literal, actual touching. Notoriously, the director imagined a day when his audience would be implanted with electrodes, and he could jolt them into fright or mirth, just as he chose, merely by touching different buttons. As Lee Edelman has recognized, this fantasy feels less like a “futuristic anticipation” on Hitchcock’s part than “an actual understanding,” in lurid form, of what his cinema already does. And the trope of electrification is

not much different from that implied in *Strangers* of playing the audience like a musical instrument; Hitchcock was led to broach the former precisely in the course of talking about the audience as “a giant organ.” But more remarkable than their common sadism is the fact that both tropes entirely eliminate visual mediation. It is as though, however elaborate and indeed indispensable, such mediation were felt to be *standing in the way* of the more basic project of touching, which it could at best, therefore, express obliquely—in certain peripheral and barely perceptible details that only one holding the object too close had a chance of catching. At a cost, to be sure. For the touch that precipitates the story in *Strangers on a Train* is nothing next to the film’s own more intimate touches, as they pierce through the too thin skin of the too close spectator. Thanks to their secret reach, Hitchcock’s hidden pictures—by which I finally mean Hitchcock’s hidden *motion* pictures—get under this skin, and deep in the heart, like nothing else in cinema. Does that mean I am in love with Hitchcock? I only know that I am hopelessly attached.