

Two aspects of *The Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock* by Raymond Durnat are of special interest to *Screen* readers. The first is Durnat's reading strategies in respect of the films, the second, Hitchcock's significance within the British pre-war cinema, a topic which is embedded in the text at various points.

Durnat's critical style, his reading method, depends upon an extremely extensive knowledge of film history and a speculative turn of mind. As he suggests, 'a film is like an iceberg; one-tenth of it exists on the screen, the other nine-tenths in the spectators' minds'. The films are treated as triggers to the imagination and his reading is frequently pushed towards the 'delirium of interpretation' – his own phrase – in which the free and often riotous play of the imagination governs. The ambiguities of the visual image, the polysemic character of film, are recognised and problematic features of cine-signification, but we might argue that Durnat exploits these features rather than recognising them as problems. Indeed, his reading strategy depends, for much of the time, on the fertility of his imagination rather than the fertility of the images. It is this 'impressionistic' trajectory that leads him, at times, to abandon the film he is actually writing about in favour of his own reworking of the plot as when he offers a new version of *Champagne* (1928) to bring it into line with today's sensibilities. This tendency culminates in his remarks on *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), Hitchcock's first feature:

It would be interesting to exclude the inferior material, re-edit the realistic moments into a sort of kernel film, and see the result; perhaps when the cassette revolution eventually transpires critics and others will be able to offer their variations on a theme.'

It is this tendency towards speculative interpretation that makes it difficult to regard Durnat's procedures as reading at all. It also makes any confrontation of his interpretation with alternative readings a rather pointless exercise in which reference to the film-text itself could only supply one-tenth of the evidence.

There is, however, another aspect of speculative criticism in which Durnat's imaginative play is constrained by his detailed knowledge of film history. During his discussion of Hitchcock's version of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, he notes the various affinities between this film and the developing Hollywood gangster film and offers the following speculation:

'A few years later and Hitchcock or BIP might have been tempted to open out the play in such a way as to give it something in common with the gangster film, in which, at this point, immigrant-class families and mothers did loom large.'

This kind of speculation, this mixture of knowledge and insight, which suggests potential areas of study, is found throughout the

text, always remaining undeveloped and often, unfortunately, swamped by the next flow of creative interpretation. At a number of points in the book, in fact, the insights have a subversive potential, questioning some of the central postulates of the thesis. For example, one of the major central assumptions, as I have mentioned before, is that of authorship. The films are treated as creations of Hitchcock, though Durgnat does acknowledge that there are a number of difficulties in the simplistic formulations of the 'theory'. Thus he writes:

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'Extreme *auteur* theory . . . has taught us a great deal, and among the things it should have taught us is the extent to which a man's art may be inspired by the irresolvable, insurmountable, and inescapable contradictions and incoherences between contradictory instinctual drives, social aims and value systems.'

It remains unclear as to why 'extreme *auteur* theory' should have taught us that contradiction and inconsistency occur in the cinema, but nevertheless it does seem that here Durgnat is grappling with the notion that 'a man's art' concerns a struggle with signs and sign-systems which may continually evade the supposed controlling intention or will of the 'artist'. *Auteurist* criticism, though recognising this, is likely to conclude that such inconsistency results in part from the volatility of the director's psychic undergrowth, and, in part, from a failure of genius, vision or talent. In those terms, the debate is about the director/*auteur*'s management of his consciousness, and not about managing the problems of signification in the cinema. The latter orientation would depend upon recognising that the work of the film-maker uses materials (images/sounds) which are already charged with a multiplicity of meanings which can be underlined (remarked), or effectively suppressed by the film-maker, and by a great many other factors. Accordingly, film-makers succeed or fail depending upon their knowledge of signs and meaning in the cinema rather than their 'genius' or 'talent' or whatever.

The second aspect of the book concerns the British cinema in general, and the role of Hitchcock within that cinema. There is a general conception that Hitchcock is the most important director to emerge from the British film industry, an industry that has not, despite its often ambitious organisational structure, produced a satisfying cinema. As Truffaut remarks in his interviews with Hitchcock, there is 'a certain incompatibility between the terms "cinema" and "Britain"'. The notion continues that Hitchcock's genius or talent enabled him to transcend the general mediocrity of the British cinema and, to confirm this, he was swept off to Hollywood in the late 1930's by David Selznick where he has been an enormously successful commercial film director. Hitchcock is, therefore, a kind of artistic aberration in terms of his native cinema, an American director designate during the twenties and thirties,

the exception to prove the rule that the British commercial film industry has failed, producing neither good popular art (like Hollywood) nor sophisticated 'art' cinema (like France and Italy). Durnat's book contains a number of interesting remarks which taken together and explored in detail could offer perspectives on the British cinema, and even begin the mammoth task of understanding that cinema, of penetrating the assumptions which lie behind its critical rejection. A rejection, incidentally, which Durnat himself may be exempted from given the number of times he has written on the subject.

Hitchcock entered the film industry in 1920 during times of crisis. During World War One, the American film industry had moved into a dominating position in the European market and British producers like Pearson and Hepworth, who had been working since the earliest days of the industry, were faltering in the changed conditions, while younger men like Michael Balcon and Harry Bruce Woolfe were entering the industry with new ideas about film production. As Rachel Low says:

'The trouble with the older companies was that, faced with the difficulties in getting capital or a wide market, they allowed themselves to think that films financed cheaply on a pre-war scale could survive in the post-war world. The higher cost of the films coming over from America meant, in fact, a completely different style of production' (*History of the British Film 1918-29*, Allen & Unwin).

In addition to this industrial ferment, the 1920's saw an interest in the cinema being cultivated by the educated, by the intelligentsia who, previously, had displayed a contempt for the medium. Now these two aspects of British film culture in the 1920's, the industrial/commercial and the artistic, provide interesting and illuminating parameters for a consideration of Hitchcock's work. Firstly, we can align his work to the general artistic developments in the European 'art' cinema of the 1920's, the kind of cinema in which British intellectuals were taking an interest. As Durnat observes, 'within the ultra-professional Hitchcock there is always an avant-gardist never quite struggling to get out,' and indeed we may point to three aspects of his silent work which correlate with cinematic practice elsewhere. Firstly, a number of passages from his films which are extremely similar to the avant-garde film experiments being made in France at this time (eg *Downhill*, 1927), secondly, the marked influence of German Expressionism in films like *The Lodger*, 1926 (reflecting his experiences in the UFA studios in Munich where he made his first two films for Balcon), and thirdly, his preference for 'pure cinema' which he defines in terms of montage, and which reflects the influence of Eisenstein and Pudovkin. Yet, despite this, in the mid-1920's Hitchcock went to work for the burgeoning John Maxwell empire, British International

Pictures, the most professionalised of British film companies, the most business-orientated. The most interesting parts of the book are in the opening chapters where Durnat is attempting to situate this artist/intellectual in the context of the industry, and to comprehend the films in terms of this context. He also attempts to survey the various critical responses to Hitchcock in relation to these groupings, in relation to the production history of the films. He notes three 'British Hitchcocks', thus countering the conventional notion of Hitchcock as simply a director of 'picaresque comedy thrillers'. In addition to the better known films like *The Thirty-nine Steps* which were made mainly for Balcon while he was Director of Production for Gaumont British during the 1930's, Durnat isolates Hitchcock's romantic subjects (from his first Gainsborough period, 1925-27) and a number of literary and dramatic adaptations which characterise his time at British International Pictures, 1927-32. During this latter period, Hitchcock was able 'to cast a wry and inquisitive eye over various facets of the British scene', and by doing so to attract the attention of John Grierson who regarded Hitchcock as 'the best director, the slickest craftsman, the sharpest observer and the finest master of detail in all England,' and even went so far as to suggest that, in 1930, 'the future of the British cinema rests very much in Hitchcock's hands'. It may seem strange to hear the father of documentary lauding the master of suspense but, in fact, numerous passages from Hitchcock's work in the 1920's prefigure the documentary films of the 1930's. For example, the openings from *The Lodger* (1926), *The Manxman* (1928) and *Blackmail* (1929) could be documentaries of the newspaper industry, the fishing industry and the police force respectively. As Durnat says, 'Hitchcock's creative shifts and turns bear some relationship to these producer periods,' but he does not probe the implications of the remark. The distinction between Hitchcock's work for Balcon and his work for John Maxwell, though complicated by certain films like *Blackmail* which would fit more easily into his Balcon work but was made for Maxwell, is tenable as a rough schema, and could be the basis for an extensive examination of the British film industry of the 1920's and 30's. Durnat, however, does not seem interested in the significance of many of the questions he suggests in throwaway remarks which bear upon broad film production issues. For example, when he writes parenthetically of Asquith, 'What Asquith might have done in the way of Hitchcockery and more had Balcon not neglected him during those critical years.' Or, concerning matters of technique and technology as in the following passage about *Juno and the Paycock*:

'Juno seems particularly lacking in dollyshots, and tends to restrict any depth in groupings to long shot, which suggests problems with sound equipment and shallow-focus lenses analogous to those

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Like much of Durgnat's writing, this book is studded with underdeveloped insights, with random condensed comments on numerous aspects of film history, theory and criticism, though these are, at times, all but submerged by his imaginative and often eccentric readings of the individual films. Perhaps one ought to adapt Durgnat's proposed strategy for *The Pleasure Garden* which I quoted earlier, and exclude the inferior material, re-edit the interesting moments into a sort of kernel book, and see the result.

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