

Lecture 10 - Shadow of a Doubt

I. Hitchcock's themes (continued)

- The double
- Comedy
- Moral ambiguity
- Film clip: *Strangers on a Train* (1951)

II. *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)

- Context: WWII, Hitchcock in exile
- Against Capra
- The opening: behind any door or window...
- An American town
- An American family
- Two Charlies: rhyming shots
- Subplot: murder as diversion
- The ending: ambiguity

Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

Film viewing tonight:

Hitchcock, Alfred. *Shadow of a Doubt*. 1943.

- The severe rationality of Hitchcock's methods as a director.
 - His story boards were astonishingly detailed, including camera angle and every available detail, all finished before he got on the set.
 - By the time he got on the set, he seemed almost bored, because he had everything so planned out.
 - Sometimes it might seem like directors who let the process of filming be more of an improvisational discovery can release more of a freedom, but Hitchcock's planned filming was a real discovery
- The Double Man
 - There are very often a lot of doubles in Hitchcock's films
 - In the film we're watching tonight, the two main characters are both named Charlie, and it's not an accident.
 - *Strangers on a Train* – a man gets on a train and meets a famous tennis player – they become grotesque doubles as the plot of murder unfolds
 - Hitchcock's vision of irrationality and danger, where evil can erupt at any moment.
 - Clip from *Shadow of a Doubt*: shown without sound, watch the way that the tracking shot reverses the position of young Charlie and Uncle Charlie.

- The disorder and turbulence of the world suddenly turn into larger mechanisms of evil in Hitchcock's films, such as in *The Birds*, where nature is suddenly out to get people.
- Clip, from the climax of *Strangers on a Train*. The children's carousel becomes a place of evil.
 - Note the mixture of comedy and terror
 - The mordant skepticism about the value of policemen in times of emergency
 - Hitchcock wasn't a political radical, but in his films the forces of order are often stupefied in the face of real chaos and evil
- Montaigne – “we are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe, we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn.”
 - What Hitchcock himself condemns, he cannot rid himself of, and comes up again and again in his films.
- *Shadow of a Doubt*
 - This film is more austere than a lot of the rest of his work
 - Hitchcock's English films have a kind of British parochialism to them, which some people felt would not translate well to American film.
 - *Rebecca*, the first film that Hitchcock made in the U.S., was Hitchcock's least Hitchcockian film – he was giving into the standards of Hollywood, trying to show that he could fit in in American film.
 - By the time he made *Shadow of a Doubt*, this was still going on, but Hitchcock was also allowing himself to be more himself.
 - An American Town
 - An American Family
 - The young children are greedy, silly, and misbehaving
 - The parents are also subjected to a kind of skepticism and mockery
 - The mother is an airhead
 - The father is a weak, gentle, essentially sexless character
 - Young Charlie is bored, idolizing her Uncle Charlie
 - Uncle Charlie himself is not a nice guy – he's a serial murderer using the family as a place to hide out.
 - Hitchcock is gifted at making the audience complicit in the evil that they watch
 - The camera becomes a voyeur or a peeping tom, and you participate in this.
 - One might say that *Rear Window* is about voyeurism, and the ability of people to watch forbidden things that they shouldn't see.
 - Note the apparently harmless conversation early on with relatively airheaded characters discussing the perfect murder, totally unaware that there is a real murderer in their midst. They read murder mysteries the way that we watch Hitchcock movies
 - Young Charlie has a whole vision of the face of the exotic, but what she finds is the face of the murderer. And she identifies with him.

- These plot issues are reflected in technical decisions that Hitchcock makes again and again.
 - Rhyming scenes
 - The two scenes with the Charlies lying on a bed.
 - He uses these sorts of scenes as sorts of reenactments of each other.
- The Ending: Moral Ambiguity
 - The use of doubles
 - This ending is characteristically Hitchcockian.
 - The movie seems outwardly to comply with the audience's expectations of a murder mystery:
 - Evil seems to be vanquished
 - The heroine isn't entirely defeated, she survives,
 - She has a love interest
 - And yet there's a terrible ambiguity, because all of this is never acknowledged
 - The family doesn't know what has happened.
 - Note the scene at the bar, with the terrifying speech that Uncle Charlie gives to young Charlie
 - An incredibly overt expression of despair, coming out of the mouth of the most fascinating character, whom she has idolized.
 - Evil resides at the heart of the American family and the heart of the American town. It's not something external to you and me, it *is* you and me.
 - This sort of ambiguity occurs also in *Psycho* it's common in Hitchcock's films
 - Also in the end of *The Birds*. There's a moment of calm as the characters seem to have escaped, but the film ends with a shot of the birds regathering, not on an isolated island, but on the mainland.
 - Hitchcock often seems on the surface to satisfy the expectation for a happy ending, but really he leaves you with a terrifying ambiguity.

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