

The Universe as Metacinema

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Ernie, do you realize what we are doing in this picture? The audience is like a giant organ that you and I are playing. At one moment we play this note and get this reaction, and then we play that chord and they react that way. And someday we won't even have to make a movie—there'll be electrodes implanted in their brains, and we'll just press different buttons and they'll go "oooh" and "aaah" and we'll frighten them, and make them laugh. Won't that be wonderful?

(Alfred Hitchcock on the set of North by Northwest¹)

Hitchcock's fantasy about directly entering people's brains seemed very futuristic and absurd in the fifties when he expressed these words to his scriptwriter Ernest Lehman. However, a few decades later, scientific and cinematographic technology has improved to such an extent that Hitchcock's joke seems to be not so far-fetched anymore. In Douglas Trumbull's *Brainstorm* (1983) and Katherine Bigelow's film *Strange Days* (1995) direct recording and playing of brainwaves is possible. Of course these films belong to the genre of science fiction, and the actual possibilities of such techniques are not as refined as they portray. But I am not interested in the exact state of affairs that might be represented in these films. Rather, I am challenged by the implications for the relationship between human beings (subjects), images and the world – and for the underlying image of thought that Hitchcock's words express, both in respect of his own work, and in respect of developments in contemporary cinema and contemporary audiovisual culture. What if we do not consider Hitchcock's words as merely a never-to-be-fulfilled fantasy of having effects on people without representations, bypassing the eyes of the spectators and reaching them directly via the brain, as the psychoanalytic model of thought

does? What if we consider him to be a visionary, anticipating contemporary scientific and cinematographic preoccupations, as would a rhizomatic model of thinking, according to which the brain is literally the screen? Would Hitchcock's fantasy then not be a very Bergsonian statement about the immanence of body, brain and images? For, as Deleuze argues in *The Movement-Image*, Bergson was 'startlingly ahead of his time: it is the universe as cinema in itself, a metacinema.'² After all, Hitchcock's wish seems to entail a revolutionary conception of images that are not representations of something else, but exist in themselves. In *The Time-Image* Deleuze attributes to Hitchcock explicitly anticipatory insights in respect of the nature of images in contemporary society. When he discusses the developments of the image (cinematographic or 'real') he argues: 'Hitchcock's premonition will come true: a camera-consciousness which would no longer be defined by the movements it is able to follow or make, but by the mental connections it is able to enter into.'³

However, if Hitchcock is not only a visionary and the first of the modern filmmakers, but is indeed also the ultimate classic director, who completes the classic action-images, his fantasy would after all be a symptomatic fantasy.⁴ In any case his work is a very rich source for tracking down some of the assumptions of the different images of thought that are presupposed by a classic psychoanalytic and a rhizomatic view of the subject, the world and cinema. In order to bring to the surface some of these presuppositions and implications, I will first give a comparative reading of Hitchcock's universe, concentrating on the concept of the subject that is defined by desire. Then I will focus on the status of cinema and the cinematographic apparatus by looking at *Rear Window* and especially two other metafilms: Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) and *Strange Days*. Although *Strange Days* has a lot in common with Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), it has more often been compared to *Peeping Tom*. Both *Peeping Tom* and *Strange Days* deal with the (darker) implications of our cinematographic voyeurism. Nevertheless I will argue that in comparing *Strange Days* to *Peeping Tom* one misses some essential differences between the two films, especially the way in which a new kind of camera consciousness has entered our perception, our experience of the world and ourselves. I will therefore return to Hitchcock, especially to *Vertigo*, and look at the ambiguous status of this film: at once a classical picture of an obsessive love affair (a movement-image) and a very modern film about the confusing experience of time and virtuality (a time-image) that anticipates *Strange Days*. Contemporary cinema, for which *Strange Days* is paradigmatic, demonstrates that both Bergson's futuristic insights and Hitchcock's premonition have indeed come true: we now live in a metacinematic universe that calls for an immanent conception of audiovisuality, and in which a new camera consciousness has entered our perception. In this chapter I will explore various implications and effects of

the 'universe as metacinema' and the new camera consciousness by considering *Peeping Tom*, *Strange Days* and Hitchcock's universe as philosophical pamphlets.

Hitchcock's Universe: Žižek and Deleuze

Representations of Guilty Subjects or a Logic of Relations

I will begin this exploration by looking again at Hitchcock's work using both the Lacanian ideas of Slavoj Žižek and the Bergsonian film theory of Deleuze. In this comparative way I will try to relate Hitchcock's films both to the psychoanalytic model of the eye and to the rhizomatic model of the brain. This will allow me to specify a few of the main differences and similarities between the two models of thought. My aim is not to judge one model over the other. Rather I will try to find out what the different models make possible or impossible to see, think and feel. I will concentrate in this section on the idea of the subject and its relation to images and to the world.

A few remarks about Hitchcock made by Žižek and Deleuze make their respective (presup)positions very clear. First of all, both Žižek and Deleuze refer to Rohmer and Chabrol's study on Hitchcock's work.⁵ Both recognize the importance of that study and refer to the Catholic interpretation that Rohmer and Chabrol give of the Master's films. But here is the first big difference: Žižek sees Hitchcock's 'Catholicism' as an even more profoundly religious form of Jansenism. According to Žižek, both in Jansenism and in Hitchcock all human subjects are sinful, and for that reason their salvation cannot depend on themselves as persons; it can only come from an outside, from God, who has decided in advance who will be saved and who will be damned.⁶ Deleuze, on the other hand, precisely rejects the Catholic (and by implication Jansenist) dimension of Rohmer and Chabrol's analysis: there is no need to make Hitchcock a Catholic metaphysician, argues Deleuze. On the contrary, Hitchcock has a very sound conception of theoretical and practical relations, which have nothing to do with a guilty subject or a terrible and impossible God.⁷

A second point raised by both Žižek and Deleuze is Hitchcock's own metaphor of 'tapestry'. Žižek sees this in connection with the impossible Gaze, again the God's Eye view that has caught the subject on the screen in its web of predestination. This subject on-screen (the character) represents the subject off-screen (the spectator). The spectator can identify with the character's eye/look and at the same time feel his guilt and fear of the Gaze of God or the Real, as Žižek calls this impossible entity; the spectator can never identify with the Gaze of God.⁸ So, according to Žižek, the cinema

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