

Document Citation

Title	The strange case of Alfred Hitchcock -- excerpt
Author(s)	Raymond Durnat
Source	<i>MIT Press</i>
Date	1974
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The woman alone, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1936

Sabotage

None the less, the movement, through *Secret Agent*, to a certain grimness, is accomplished in the profoundest film of Hitchcock's thriller period, and perhaps of his career: *Sabotage*. This is *Secret Agent*, from the other side of the fence. And since it is England's enemy who incurs remorse, the portrayal of moral tragedy can be almost untrammelled by caution. Appropriately enough, the film is based on a novel of Joseph Conrad's bearing the title of Hitchcock's previous film. Oscar Homolka plays the manager of a London fleapit, a foreigner, who is prevailed upon by his compatriots to plant terrorist bombs which will shatter the capital city's morale. His first attempt, on a power station, merely blacks out the West End; newspaper headlines proclaim, 'London Laughs'. The agents warn their man: 'London must not laugh again tonight.'

The theme illustrates a characteristic melodramatic process which Hitchcock uses more sharply than most. Just as *The Man Who Knew Too Much* harks back to the siege of the anarchists in Sidney Street before 1914, so do the bombs of *Sabotage*, and the events to which Conrad's novel refers. On the other hand, Oscar Homolka's heavily Germanic style suggests the Nazi Fifth Column. And newspaper strategists were already discussing the effect of aerial bombing on civilian morale, relatively light, by subsequent standards, bombings of London by German Zeppelins and Gothas having given some grounds for predictions of panic. Meanwhile, experts were talking of Air Raid Precautions and anti-bomber blackouts. Thus the film catches a dreamlike overlap between memories of the anarchists, depositing bombs, and the blackouts and terrors which were later to materialise in the blitz. A sequence in *Things To Come*, made in the same year as Hitchcock's film, makes an interesting comparison with it.

The film followed rapidly on the heels of *Secret Agent*, and it is interesting to speculate whether it was under way before Hitchcock had decided, from the earlier film's relatively disappointing reception, that plots must not be too negative or too cruel. For this is both. Its central protagonist is not only a negative hero but a negative villain, and the killing of the innocent gentleman is exceeded by the killing of an innocent boy. The plot's cruelty is unmatched until *Psycho*, and,

perhaps, even by *Psycho* (and one can see why so often Hitchcock films have their strongest scenes in the middle. They are strong because they are outrageous. The audience is then desperate to see a moral order re-established. The climaxes have their strength, and a grim satisfaction, but not that moral shock, for they reassert order). Although Verloc (Homolka) is reluctant to kill innocent civilians, his countrymen are adamant, and he gives the bomb to his wife's young brother to deliver. The boy stops to watch the Lord Mayor's Show, and the bus on which he's riding is delayed by traffic. The bomb kills him, and everybody aboard the bus, including the jokey conductor who good-naturedly let him on. When his wife (Sylvia Sidney) discovers the truth, she, blindly, kills him, as he almost wills her to. Then she wants to give herself up; but the detectives don't understand her, and the evidence is destroyed.

'Oh, that was a big error,' says Hitchcock, penitently. 'The bomb should never have gone off . . .' He explains his miscalculation to Bogdanovich in slightly heartless terms: 'If you build an audience up to that point, the explosion becomes strangely anticlimactic. You work the audience up to such a degree that they need the relief.' To Truffaut he offers the contradictory explanation: 'The boy was involved in a situation that got him too much sympathy from the audience, so that when the bomb exploded and he was killed, the public was resentful.' Both considerations are valid, which is why the normal procedure would have been to spare the boy and substitute some perhaps more spectacular but less painful catastrophe. Again, it can be argued that the boy, in himself, is too sympathetic, too innocent, to be an easily bearable victim; he showed every characteristic of the good luck person who was likely to be miraculously spared. (A Hollywood rule of thumb is that victims have to be, in some way, victim types. Not so clearly that they're quite obviously for it, for in that case a substantial sector of the audience would be quite likely to withdraw its sympathies from him altogether, even assuming that they had first agreed to identify with him; yet clearly enough for the audience not to have pinned its main expectation on to their living. A hero, can, of course, die, so long as his death asserts something, and even fail and die, so long as his attempt asserts something, and he can be inadequate, sin, fail and die, so long as his sin has a certain liberating scandal about it; in this case his guilt will forewarn us that he must die, and help us to adjust our hopes accordingly. In the case of secondary characters, there's a marked tendency for them to telegraph their victim status—maybe they're rather nervous, or subtly pathetic, or none too attrac-

tive. If one bears all these points in mind, it's impossible to avoid spotting the loser in any Hollywood movie—alas.) Hitchcock, in *Sabotage*, has hit us as hard as in *Psycho*—for we identified with that cheery kid—and in this case the victim isn't even mildly guilty and the murder isn't even sex fun and a bus-load of innocents go with him. Hitchcock is very repentant; yet the spirit behind that tragic outrage, permeating the film, enables it to sustain comparison with a film which in other respects also resembles it (immigrants in London, bombs, families), that boldest and least typical of Ealing films, Thorold Dickinson's *Secret People*.

A later sequence offers images, worthy of Bergman at his best, whereby show business becomes eerie, unnatural, perhaps even diabolical, in its competition with reality. Distraught with grief at her young brother's death, the wife hurries through her husband's cinema. Delayed for a few seconds, she finds herself watching the Walt Disney cartoon—and she begins to smile. In this extraordinary yet absolutely plausible disjunction of the stream of consciousness, which does more than find a topical pretext for traditional hysterics, Hitchcock anticipates that sense of city existence—and of the mass media's so-called 'global village'—as an onslaught on the integrity of the individual, and on the continuity of his emotional consciousness, which a quarter of a century later was to determine the distraction-cluttered styles of Alain Resnais's *Muriel* and of Dick Lester's *Petulia*. The stream-of-consciousness reaches its internal antithesis, its point of paroxysm and protest.

Sabotage is consistently what *Secret Agent* is intermittently, a Greeneian film. The masochistic pet-shop owner disguises his explosives as tomato ketchup, while commenting portentously, on his daughter's illegitimate child: 'She is her cross, and she must bear it.' The remark is all the more meanly puritanical for the mother's bitterness and for the little girl's fresh, pert way; we glimpse the impending and relentless inculcation of shame which will crush her, as she will be meant to, for the vicarious sin of being alive; a transference, not of guilt, but of punishment, that is to say, an injustice—the notion of the world's injustice being one which rarely enters the remarkable morality of Fathers Rohmer and Chabrol (but they were young at the time, as were we all). The details of inter-war London types and life dovetail impeccably with a suspense structure sufficiently unconventional to take on a metaphysical overtone which is a subtler development of the canine telepathy in *Secret Agent*.

Says one of the two detectives: 'Funny—Mrs. Verloc must be

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psychic. She said—"He's dead!" ' And his less perceptive companion retorts, 'You don't need second sight to see that, man!' 'But', the other muses, 'she said it before . . . or was it after? I can't remember . . .' Injured in the final explosion, a bandage is being wound round his head, and we think of Mr. Memory, of a kind of stealthy, yet benign madness, of the dislocation, at last, of the due process of law and order, a dislocation which, as in *Blackmail*, is a blessing.

Nor is the boy's death merely an accident; or rather, the accident is a trick of fate; the arbitrary expresses the implacable, the uncaring, and should warn us not to impute the final sparing of Mrs. Verloc to the intervention of a higher order (or of what sin is the boy guilty that she, a murderess, is not?). Verloc terrorises ordinary people; his wife and her brother are ordinary people; he destroys one, provokes a retaliatory violence in the other; achieves nothing.

Sabotage, atmospheric in detail, ruthless in plot, achieves a hallucinatory quality matching, in its own way, that of Lang's *Fury* and Welles's *The Lady From Shanghai* (which it anticipates by having a furtive conversation in an aquarium). Again though it's not difficult to see how a dedicated moralist (a Graham Greene) might have given the moral tensions several further twists of the screw. The illegitimacy theme suggests certain possibilities in the way of changing Mrs. Verloc's little brother into Mrs. Verloc's illegitimate son, by a callous, sly and brutal, or priggish and thin-lipped, Briton, such that we feel, with her, how much gratitude, indeed love, she owes to the genuinely kindly Verloc.

One must remember, of course the Anglo-Saxon censor's stranglehold on the cinema's largely theoretical freedom of speech. The parallelism between German disorder and the Fascist threats abroad resulted in the usual ironies of censorship. Fritz Lang's contemporary *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* was banned in New York, of all places, as tending to encourage 'crime, chaos and the overthrow of civilisation'. And while the English censor let Mrs. Verloc's crime through (relenting, it seems, on his usual adherence to the Hays Code) one may well doubt whether he would have been so forgiving had Mrs. Verloc been guilty of something much more serious than that significantly favourite movie crime, murder-cum-manslaughter-cum-self-defence-cum-hysterically-mistaken-self-defence.