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Doubting Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*

Like most people, I learned early in my cultural education that the name Alfred Hitchcock represents virtuosity in the art of film, kind of like Picasso for painting or Beethoven to classical music. Hitchcock pioneered the psychological thriller. His films entertain in the tradition of Hollywood with suspense and plot twists, but also offer ample room for academic analysis in their Freudian subtexts. As the exemplary Hollywood auteur, Hitchcock's style is adored by the masses as well as film buffs and intellectuals. He belongs with the Truffauts and Kurosawas as the few icons of world cinema who have virtually no detractors to their genius. It's just too bad I had never seen any of his films, not until recently, at least, and only for this class. I even consider myself somewhat of a film buff. The mildly embarrassing run ended when I finally rented *Shadow of a Doubt*, the film many consider Hitchcock's greatest American masterpiece (he originated from Britain), and also the director's favorite among his own work. As the credits rolled, I reflected carefully on the genius I had just witnessed, and my conclusion was final — I did not like it. The plot was boring and the characters were strange. I didn't feel any of the suspense and was unimpressed by the stuffy symbolism. What did I miss? Was Hitchcock's genius beyond me? Had I not the proper training to appreciate his great work? Puzzled by all the acclaim and by my own reaction, I fumbled through as many reviews as I could find. Unfortunately, none shed any light on why the film is so treasured, except that it just is. The audience is entitled to their own opinions, but in this case I felt insecure. My reaction seemed

awkward against the chorus of plaudits, as if I committed treason by disagreeing with the consensus passed on by generations of critics.

In the process of attempting to justify myself, I discovered the molding of artistic taste resembles in many ways the power games described by Robin Lakoff in “The Grooves of Academe.” To formulate an informed opinion on someone as revered as Hitchcock, one has to navigate through the writings of critics, intellectuals, or as Lakoff calls them, the elders of academia. I was pressured to learn their language, to understand it, so I can utter something that may not be immediately dismissed as unlearned. I noticed critics often repeat each other, right down to the same one or two pieces of “analysis” of the film’s genius – “it was suspenseful,” or “the camera angles mimicked the characters’ gaze.” More established and academic critics occasionally diverge from popular opinion, perhaps adding a few sentences on the morality of the film, or noting some common but unimportant misconception. Nonetheless, every review simply assumes the film’s genius would be plain as day. This conformity is reminiscent of the stifling, crude, and highly disciplined hierarchy of university faculty Lakoff encountered. Similarly, the methods with which professors, as described by Lakoff, disseminate knowledge to the various levels of university students, from undergraduate to graduate, from a conservative, one-sided practice to a collaborative one, applies on a smaller scale to my own experience of trying to find a voice for my reaction to *Shadow of a Doubt* – that the honing of artistic taste is actually a deceptively complex and rule-laden endeavor.

In “The Grooves of Academe,” Robin Lakoff examines and pokes fun at the highly institutionalized and structured ways communication functions at all levels of the university. Beginning with horizontal communication between faculty members and colleagues, linguistic academics use jargon to delineate their field of knowledge. “Within disciplines, we develop

special languages,” Lakoff writes, “like any linguistic code, these play two roles. Towards the outside world, they are elitist: we know, you cannot understand, you may not enter. But for insiders they are a secret handshake” (Lakoff 148). The way academic jargon encrypts knowledge is as basic and primitive in purpose as the codes linguists like Lakoff study. The esoteric quality of an academic paper wards off outsiders, or the layman, and also legitimizes in some ways the knowledge it protects, as if to say by being difficult to understand, the knowledge here is advanced and worthy of such protection. Lakoff explains further: “The idea is, if more than three people can understand it, it can’t be worth much...It’s not that there’s no need to be intelligible. It’s that there is a need not to be. Our power, our authority, is intertwined with our ability to maintain secrets even as we seem to dispense them. We write and speak, but we do not communicate. That is our art” (146). Communicating in an academic setting presupposes an exercise of power by the speaker. Making things difficult to understand establishes the speaker’s dominance. My rejection by Hitchcock’s cult made me want to join it more. I longed to learn the secret that was *Shadow of a Doubt*’s appeal, and felt as if it was hidden from me deliberately. In one of Lakoff’s anecdotes, her faculty colleagues refused to create a course to teach their students the inner workings of graduate school. Those in charge saw the unspoken rules students must learn to become successful, which range from how to get articles published to how to write abstracts in an acceptable way, as rites of passage everyone must participate in. To grasp these secrets is part of a ritual where only upon its completion may students ascend to the same order as their professors both in status and experience. The esoteric prose of academic discourse is not restricted to peer-reviewed journals, but practiced throughout the university itself. The students’ initiation helps to maintain the institutional hierarchy, so the senior members will always know more and have experienced more. In all cases, knowledge must be *earned*.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* tells the story of an impromptu visit by a mysterious man, Charlie Oakley, to his sister's family in a small Californian town, much to the delight of his niece who adores and is named after her Uncle Charlie. What starts out as a family reunion gradually turns sinister as the younger Charlie discovers her uncle's real reason for visiting – to evade a federal manhunt for a series of murders he committed back on the east coast. Her innocence shattered, the younger Charlie struggles with turning her uncle in to the detectives who have tracked him down. She eventually demands Uncle Charlie leave town, which he does, but only after attempting to injure and intimidate the younger Charlie. While boarding his train home, Uncle Charlie tries to throw his niece overboard. The younger Charlie ultimately fends off her uncle after in a climatic struggle, and kills him in the process.

The most comprehensive one sentence summary of *Shadow of a Doubt* calls the film “an excellent thriller, a Hitchcockian Pandora's Box and an allegory for maturation, and an examination of marrying the sinister with the banal, the young with the old, fantasy and reality, and awareness and ignorance” (hal0000). Every critic I encountered wrote of Hitchcock's use of camera angles, the film's juxtaposition of lighting, and visual objects as motifs to convey subtext. The devices point to various psychoanalytic interpretations. Uncle Charlie's corruptive influence is contrasted with the portrayal of perfect small-town American life. He is the dark presence underneath the facade. The younger Charlie at first falls in love with her uncle as the Oedipal child, before her infatuation transforms into anger and disappointment upon discovering his murderous nature. She ends up accepting the courtship of the detective, which redirects her youthful desires, and coincides with the death of her uncle and the younger Charlie's maturation to adulthood.

The renowned Hitchcockian suspense of *Shadow of a Doubt*, while not entirely lost on me, was in some ways muted given I grew up in an era where Hitchcock has been studied and copied to death. I appreciated the acting by the two leads, especially Teresa Wright as the younger Charlie, who evolved from an innocent and bubbly romantic into a more worldly incarnation, all with great conviction. So then, without an appreciation for Hitchcock's stylistic innovations, I am only left with the story, which undoubtedly deserving of deeper interpretation, also struck me as ordinary, predictable, and boring. Like the layman to Lakoff's academics, I wondered if an appreciation of the film has to be earned rather than simply felt. I can accept that as someone who merely watches a lot of movies in leisure, and not always with a critical eye, and certainly not academically, there would be intricacies I overlooked. What I am surprised by is even after those finer details of plot and style are supposedly explained to me, I am still not converted. No critic I read was able to communicate the secret knowledge of *why* the film is great. They summarize the film and then tack on the same analysis, but that doesn't explain why it's a masterpiece as opposed to merely a good film or even a bad one. Only the more established reviewers from reputable sources wrote anything at all aside from the obvious themes and styles, and about the film's morality. The New York Times reviewer Bosley Crowther described *Shadow of a Doubt* as "anti-social" (Crowther), conveying perhaps how the theme of evil residing close to us encourages a guardedness towards interacting with the unknown. All other critics repeated each other without exception. Some referenced David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* as a film similar in theme. The analysis of plot, characters, and motifs are the same throughout all the reviews, as if only the critics with reputations dared to propose an original perspective on a film so studied and revered. It could be that the critics also didn't understand the mystique of *Shadow*

*of a Doubt*, but in order to climb up the rankings, and endure the ritualistic hardships of film journalism, they had to pretend they understood until they held enough sway to dissent.

In vertical communication within a university, Lakoff describes a rigid structure in how students are taught, which applies to my own instance of trying to form an educated opinion. To start, “Neophytes must learn both correct surface form and matters of style and content. They must, first and most obviously, learn how to juggle the technical terminology of their field” (Lakoff 157). Undergraduates are taught in large classes, because “it is improbable that any student has much to contribute to knowledge” (157). Later on in more advanced courses, students move into smaller classes and are encouraged to participate. The student-teacher power imbalance equalizes, “the more abstractly you understand, the more you can see knowledge in general not as a set of facts someone provides for you, but as ways of relating facts that you figure out on your own” (157). Thus, “the university is a force for conservatism at its lower levels, where it encourages blind acquiescence and regimentation, but becomes subversive later on, when students are encouraged to learn how to learn” (157). Applied to film criticism, those starting at the bottom must learn the language of their field; for film it may mean understanding the difference between a dolly shot and a pan. They are also not encouraged to diverge from the accepted discourse, hence perhaps why the reviewers all repeated each other. The established critics earned the right and the knowledge to have an individual voice, but even so, most of them seem to have nothing new to say.

I agree that to judge a work of art, one must first understand its technical aspects; although to a non-artist, the understanding can only go so far. Once the audience has acquired enough experience and knowledge, which must initially be through “blind acquiescence and regimentation” because they don’t know any better, they may venture and form individual, and

now learned, opinions. Respecting this process means obeying the rite of passage that guards the secrets to good taste. I would like to think I've watched enough movies to understand the symbolism and style of *Shadow of a Doubt*, especially when explained through reviews. In addition, the prose of film critics is generally written for the public and is nowhere near as unintelligible as the linguistic papers Lakoff describes. But what does it mean when after having seen the film and read the criticism; I still disagreed with the consensus opinion? Maybe by repeating the same things over and over, critics have forgotten why *they* liked the film instead of what everyone else thought. If a work of art is truly extraordinary, it should at the very least allow a multitude of perspectives, and in a few cases live on as inexhaustible sources of analysis for generations and generations of students to learn from in classrooms. But even if some critics do see the film differently, they might withhold their views for fear of being ostracized because they would be disobeying the ritualistic stages of learning Lakoff writes of. Art is often created without constraint, but the state of art criticism is hierarchical and bureaucratic. To make an aesthetic judgment is by default an intellectualized act. The feelings we get from watching a movie or listening to music are instinctual and non-rational. But to place a value on those feelings requires a conscious and often unnatural calculation. In Lakoff's stages of learning, when a student is taught to blindly adhere to rules and regimentation, he is made to dispense with his initial opinions that are unorthodox and unorganized. In art criticism, those reactions which are instinctual are then trained, refined, infused with thought, expressed through prose, and judged like the works themselves. In this process, one has to fight to preserve the individual voice. The most difficult task is not in intellectualizing but remembering the feelings that came before. The choice is inherent in the composition of taste as well. When should I believe the critics and when should I listen to myself? Too much of the former makes the student a pedant,

and the critic a sheep. Too much of the latter is simply arrogant. There is also the decision of who to trust and what to believe. I have to trust that my reactions to Hitchcock are not entirely unjustified, but also keep an open mind to what I might have missed.

When watching *Shadow of a Doubt*, I didn't feel the suspense or find its thematic contrasts striking. In some cases, I recognized the intricacies critics later analyzed, but that didn't change my verdict. I believe whether someone likes or dislikes a film is rarely because of well-spelt-out reasons, e.g. *Shadow of a Doubt* is complex and visually innovative, hence I like it. Those reasons may be provided retroactively when the initial reaction is dissected, but not when it's made. Often there are outside forces that try to influence the audience's judgment, such as reviews or a favorite actor or subject matter. But those forces should be carefully filtered to avoid drowning out one's true judgment. A strong, refined, and original voice is created by balancing all of the forces that mold taste, from the outside and from within. The process is inevitably unconscious. I can try to like something, but I can't force myself to like it. I can see why others like *Shadow of a Doubt*, but those reasons could not convince me to do the same.



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