

## CARRIE RICKEY

*Hitchcock's People, Places, and Things* by John Bruns

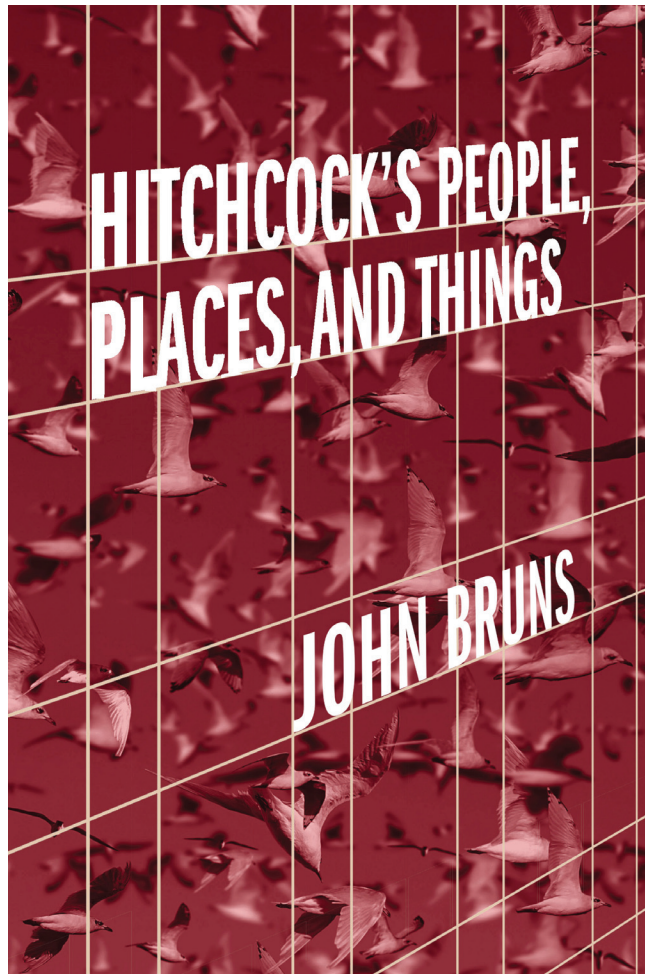
Before reading *Hitchcock's People, Places, and Things*, I assumed that all available ore from the Hitchcock lode had been strip-mined. With everything from the director's cameos to his blondes to the violence in his films—not to mention their intertextuality, metaphysics, and motifs—already assessed, what could be left to extract?

But damned if John Bruns, director of the Film Studies Program at the College of Charleston, hasn't found an untapped vein. His tool (or pickax, to extend the mining metaphor) is the actor-network theory (ANT) developed by French sociologists and philosophers Michel Callon and Bruno Latour.<sup>1</sup> The theory, says Bruns, traces associations “not just of people but equally of places and things” (5). This method enhances the close reading of individual Hitchcock films as well as the filmmaker's oeuvre as a whole. Sometimes, as Bruns jokes early on, it can indeed be a “too-close” reading (5). While the book presumes an intimacy with the director's filmography, I found it useful in approaching even the handful of Hitch silents I have not seen.

Bruns introduces his study as “more [of a] critical field book than monograph” with a goal of discussing how “objects (lighters, keys, bottles of wine, glasses of milk, wedding rings and so on) function as nonhuman agents” in the director's films (7).

The book comprises five chapters, three of which are superb. Each looks at select Hitchcock's films through the lens of a different object or recurring motif. This approach creates a surprising effect akin to looking at a blood sample through a microscope. I was surprised by what I saw, and how it enlarged my understanding of Hitchcock's multilevel storytelling. The lenses and analytical schemes Bruns employs are as follows: crowd scenes, newspapers, the apartment plot, telepathy, and the mystifying manner in which Hitch disorients and reorients the viewer. Yes, telepathy—a chapter heading that made this reviewer initially skeptical of Bruns's entire enterprise.

Before proceeding to fasten these lenses, Bruns quotes a 1965 essay written by the director himself.<sup>2</sup> Screenwriters, he wrote, possessed resources that novelists and dramatists



lacked: “in particular the use of things” that enable a director to tell the story visually (12). “Things,” writes Hitchcock, “are as important as actors to the writer” (13).

One such thing is the crowd. The first sequence in the very first Hitchcock film, *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), is a crowd of chorus girls descending a spiral staircase and beheld by the crowd of an appreciative audience. “Hitchcock portrays crowds as mostly terrifying, unpredictable, and capable of sudden and unspeakable violence” (18), observes Bruns, adding that the filmmaker is both fascinated by and ambivalent about the throngs he depicts. He also notes that the Master of Suspense was drawn to the crowd in order to explore the various ways of looking and being looked at, of “reflecting projecting, distorting and dissimulating” (19).

There are two kinds of crowds in Hitchcock movies, Bruns suggests: “The crowd, one might say, is the thing that *is*,” (19)—as in a seemingly neutral group of humans where one of them is a hired detective. It is also “a thing that

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does”—in the sense that a throng poses an unforeseen threat. As an example of the latter he cites a scene from *Sabotage* (1937) where a delivery boy threads through the crowd in Piccadilly Circus in order to drop off a package that—unbeknownst to him, but known to the audience—contains a bomb.

Like microbes in an organism, the crowd masses, disperses, then regroups. Biological references abound, in fact. Describing the Albert Hall sequence in the original *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), Bruns notes how, “in a shot that suggests something like the ambulatory rhythms of the heart, we see audience members circulate throughout the lobby and into various chambers to their seats” (24). A political assassin is lurking in this crowd, and Jill (Edna Best) knows that, if she tries to prevent him, his conspirators will kill her daughter.

Bruns describes Jill in her seat, nervously looking around the packed auditorium, tears in her eyes, when a reverse-angle point-of-view shot is prompted. As Jill stares at the orchestra, her view of the pit “blurs into white effluvium” (24). With its blurring eyes and blocked perspectives, this sequence crystallizes what Hitchcock does that Bruns obliges the reader to see more clearly: namely, how subjective points of view in Hitchcock are so often occluded. The author provides the corrective lens to see this more sharply.

Not unlike what Fred Astaire does in his musical routines, Hitchcock gives life to inanimate objects. When Astaire dances with a hat rack or a raincoat, these props morph, respectively, into a veritable dance partner and a matador’s muleta. Similarly, Hitchcock endows crowds with emotional and physical characteristics. In his films a crowd can be an angry obstacle to be overcome or a welcoming mass in which to achieve anonymity. Among the many nonhuman agents in a film, as orchestrated by the Master of Suspense, the crowd acquires the emotional range of a human being.

In this opening chapter on the crowd, Bruns convincingly establishes how “[t]he repertoire of actors in Hitchcock’s films includes not just Cary Grant, Grace Kelly, Ingrid Bergman, and Jimmy Stewart, but also the newspapers and house keys, the train compartments and women’s purses, the chickens and the eggs, the dogs and the birds” (44). Bruns thus transitions into his next aperture: reading Hitchcock through the lens of the newspaper. Not unlike cinematic storytelling, newspaper stories “give to the physically dislocated and radically separate events they depict the illusion of order, coherence and simultaneity” (45). One of the ways newspapers are employed in Hitchworld is as a front for what William Rothman called the director’s “murderous gaze,” a harbinger of violence and death.

Consider *Rear Window* (1954), when James Stewart looks through his binoculars into Raymond Burr’s apartment, only to see the latter wrap a large saw and a knife in the morning broadsheet. The newspaper’s shape-shifting makes it a useful tool for Hitchcock: roll it up as an improvised telescope—as a stranger does at the racetrack when he spies on the eponymous *Marnie* (1964)—and you can look at others undetected. In the movies, in general, you can almost always spot the spy as the one reading the paper; such is the case with FBI agent Leo G. Carroll, who whispers to Cary Grant from behind a newspaper in *North by Northwest* (1959).

Bruns notes, “The newspaper plays multiple roles in the modern, urban crowd—as a thing to be read, a thing both probed and probing” (53), as well as a thing to be destroyed by those whose crimes it reports. In a lively discussion of *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)—the filmmaker’s favorite, as well as this reviewer’s—Bruns details how the local daily goes through many origami-like transformations in the hands of Joseph Cotten, the “Merry Widow” murderer.

Bruns’s poetic exegesis of a particular scene reveals why it is so unsettling. In this scene, Cotten uses the newspaper that contains a dispatch incriminating his character, removing it and improvising a whimsical structure that portends what a danger he is to his sister’s household. The *Santa Rosa Republican* carries news of World War II and also that of a murder victim, “T.S.”—a morsel of information that connects Cotten with the owner of a monogrammed ring he has given to one of his nieces (Teresa Wright). On Cotten’s first night at the house, he folds the newspaper into a house for the younger of his nieces (Edna May Wonacott). His real aim, however, is to surreptitiously tear out the news item; in so doing, he rips out the house’s door, a sinister move symbolizing that his sister’s home is open and vulnerable to his crimes.

The book’s third chapter involves Hitchcock’s use of the “apartment plot” as a means to both locate and dislocate his characters and audiences. The fourth, “Lost and Found in Hitchcock,” addresses how he coheres the geography in his films. While they are both interesting subjects, these chapters are neither as bold nor as focused as what precedes and follows them. Most of chapter 3 concerns “The Case of Mr. Pelham,” a 1955 episode of the director’s TV series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. In it, the eponymous Pelham (Tom Ewell) suspects that someone is impersonating him and attempts to outmaneuver the imposter.

Throughout the 1950s, the double was a theme that seemed to preoccupy the director’s work, particularly in *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *Vertigo* (1958), and *North by Northwest*. Using the device of the double to look at “The Case of Mr. Pelham” yields insights for understanding how modern

urbanity is reflected in film. Whatever its infelicities, this chapter rewards the reader with the discovery that even seemingly generic paintings and sculpture in a Hitchcock scene are carefully chosen. And Bruns includes a Hitchcock quote, for which I am most grateful: “One of television’s greatest contributions is that it has brought murder back into the homes, where it belongs” (69).

“Lost and Found in Hitchcock,” the book’s fourth chapter, explores geography in *I Confess* (1952), set in Quebec City, and *The Birds* (1963), set in Bodega Bay. More specifically, it unpacks the peculiarly Hitchcockian sense of “knowing *exactly* where we are while feeling a profound sense of detachment and dislocation” (87), a combination that ramps up psychic and spatial distress in both films. Here Bruns makes the argument about the geography of Hitchcock films that he earlier made about crowds and newspapers: namely, that it is a tool employed by the filmmaker to misdirect and redirect both the film’s characters its audiences. Perhaps because Bruns takes such a dramatically deep dive into what are perhaps Hitchcock’s shallowest works, the energy he expends in this chapter seems disproportionate to the few insights it yields.

And then there is chapter 5, “Our Old Friend Telepathy.” As Bruns begins: “By telepathy, I mean more broadly something like occult communication” (115), pointing to an almost exclusively female realm. This prompts the reader to recall Hitchcock’s many clairvoyants, such as Teresa Wright in *Shadow of a Doubt* and Barbara Harris in *Family Plot* (1976), to whom he adds Ingrid Bergman in *Notorious* (1945), Janet Leigh in *Psycho* (1960), and Tippi Hedren in *The Birds*. Since Bruns also maintains that “one of the deepest ambivalences to be found in the work of Alfred Hitchcock is his mutual (and not mutually exclusive) antipathy and sympathy for his female characters” (115), it’s startling to reconsider these Hitchcock women as resorting to an invisible power for their own self-protection.

In later films such as *Frenzy* (1972), where the director was no longer constrained by the Motion Picture Production Code, there was ample evidence of a deep misogyny in his films: a chilling satisfaction in watching a man strangle women to death, silencing chatterboxes by pulling his necktie tight around their throats.

Through especially sharp analyses of both *Shadow of a Doubt* (again) and *Notorious*, Bruns proves the usefulness of actor-network theory as a tool for going deeper into a film. In *Shadow*, Teresa Wright’s character, named for her Uncle Charlie (Cotten), believes that she has summoned him telepathically as a diversion from the boredom of Santa Rosa. But he is not her telepathic partner, Bruns argues. That distinction belongs to Wright’s younger sister (Wonacott), who, as Bruns

deliciously illustrates, speaks in coded language to her older sister, alerting her to danger and reminding her that the library has a copy of the daily newspaper where she can read the article that their uncle sneakily tore out of the family copy.

*Notorious* purveys one of the most masochistic romances in all of Hitchcock (along with the 1956 remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*). Ingrid Bergman is a party girl conscripted by CIA agent Cary Grant and relocated to Rio to spy on Claude Rains, a Nazi who is hoarding uranium. She is in love with Grant, her control, who encourages her to marry Rains in order to get information while he simultaneously mocks her for her easy virtue. Grant has her in a double bind; he is making her choose between doing her job well and failing him, or failing her job and being faithful to him. I’ve long thought that the movie’s bitter joke was that the Fascist Rains was a democrat in love, and democrat Grant was authoritarian in his affections.

Bruno considers Bergman’s insights into Grant to be telepathic: “You’re afraid you’ll fall in love with me,” she tells Grant. She senses what he’s afraid to admit, and which he will finally act upon in the film’s penultimate scene. Bruns asks, “What[,] after all, is the Hitchcock female a heroine of? She is a heroine of her own story, of course, and she uses her resourcefulness to avoid, as best she can, ending up as compost” (160). Who knew so many Hitchcock women had premonitions of their own death and relied on the uncanny to prevent that outcome?

Bruno’s “field study” has the effect of making old narratives seem like new. Just imagine what effect the wider application of the actor-network theory might have on film studies.

CARRIE RICKEY is film critic emerita of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. She reviews movies for Truthdig.com and writes for the *Forward* and the *New York Times*. She is the recipient of the Los Angeles Press Club’s 2018 Southern California Journalism Award for Commentary on TV/Film and of a regional Emmy (Mid-Atlantic Division) for Best Documentary for *Before Hollywood: Philadelphia and the Birth of the Movies* (2018).

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## OLIVER GAYCKEN

### ***Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* by James Leo Cahill**

Jean Painlevé figures as an intriguing footnote to the histories of French cinema and surrealism, acknowledged for a few films but rarely accorded more than a passing mention. James