This column originally began as a musing on the new Blu-ray edition of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), which let me see previously invisible lines, pores, makeup on the actors’ faces: the ageless film looked old at last. But I was thrown off my subject by the death of Claude Chabrol—or rather, by a certain (to me) striking detail in his necrology. The man known as the French Hitchcock had died at the age of eighty . . . just like Hitchcock. It was madness to be unnerved by this minor tabloidese coincidence, but—we all go a little mad sometimes—it got under my skin. In my private ranking system, Chabrol had occupied the place of Favorite Working Film-maker for a full thirty years. And now, as one after another obituary obliged me to read the words “the French Hitchcock” (often even in French!) I felt a frisson of horror—as if I were learning, along with the news of Chabrol’s death, that he had died from a misnomer. My intervals of rationality did nothing to abate this horror; they merely replaced a superstitious belief that his epithet had murdered him with the positive knowledge that, as an epitaph now, it was robbing his grave.

It cheats him of his due distinction in two opposite ways. First, by suggesting that “Chabrol” is just French for “Hitchcock,” it virtually guarantees incomprehension and disappointment: the spectator who comes to a Chabrol expecting a Hitchcock is sure to find it peculiarly off the mark, and will be that much less likely to identify this “off” quality as a deliberate, defining feature of its style. And second, by commonsensically implying that Hitchcock is not French, it dispenses an important historical fact: the Hitchcock whom we recognize and revere as cinema’s supreme artist was born not in late-Victorian London but in mid-twentieth-century Paris, midwifed by the eager young critics at *Cahiers du cinéma*. It was in 1957, for instance, that two of them, Chabrol and Eric Rohmer, published the world’s first book-length study of Hitchcock. Its claim that he was a major artist and the American period his major phase, its recognition of the fatal encounter and the psychic transference as central fantasies, its injunction that “it is in form that we must look for the depth of the work”—all this became and remains the basic operating equipment for thinking about Hitchcock. Long before anyone dreamed of calling him the French Hitchcock, Chabrol was one of those chiefly responsible for making Hitchcock French.

Yet what disturbed me more deeply than the falsity of Chabrol’s journalistic tag was my old uncomfortable sense of its truth—a sense so sharply revived on his death that it caused me to feel that Hitchcock himself had died a second time. For during the same thirty years (as it happens, the period that had elapsed since Hitchcock’s death in 1980), I was as firmly persuaded that Chabrol was the Other Hitchcock as if I believed in metempsychosis. And if that were my mystic doctrine, it would have found validation in certain curious coincidences (as a Poe narrator might say) that took place in 1969. It was then that Hitchcock, not wishing to return to Paris to location-shoot a new ending for *Topaz*, entrusted the filming of the last shot to . . . Chabrol, whom he only slightly knew. The same year saw both the U.S. release of *Topaz* itself, a disaster that loudly heralded Hitchcock’s artistic decline, and the French premiere of *La Femme infidèle* (*The Unfaithful Wife*), the first film in the great pentalogy of thrillers (the “Hélène cycle”) that got Chabrol known as Hitchcock’s French double.

Perhaps the hand-off was but a convenient working arrangement and perhaps such generational shifts in directors’ reputations are common, even inevitable occurrences. And yet it all suggested to me something stranger—something like one of those weird interspsychic intimacies that Chabrol had identified in Hitchcock’s films and was already wildly reproducing in his own. Was it truly just chance that Hitchcock’s well seemed to be running dry just as Chabrol’s showed early signs of overflowing? Just chance that when Hitchcock no longer seemed artistically viable Chabrol began being called by his name? Just chance that *La Femme infidèle* consolidated
Chabrol’s style around its peculiar way of citing Hitchcock’s? “Of course it was all just chance!” you will rightly retort. But that is only to say, with the hero of Chabrol’s This Man Must Die (also 1969), that “chance is fantastic—and it exists.”

No doubt, it is not simply random accident that defines the relationship between Hitchcock’s films and Chabrol’s—that enables the profuse textual transmigration that, once seen, is unmistakable. But nor can this process be satisfactorily explained as a deliberate project of imitation or homage. After all, he is not the Other Hitchcock who sets out to be. If there was any merit to Gus Van Sant’s 1998 Psycho remake, with its perfidious fidelity to the original’s shot structure, it consisted only in confirming the strength of Hitchcock’s resistance to replication, a resistance so ferocious that it turned arguably the most frightening movie ever made into unquestionably the most boring remake. Of all those innumerable films since 1960 claiming to be “Hitchcockian,” how many are like Hitchcock’s? Or—a better question, to which the answer is nonetheless the same—how many are at all interestingly unlike them? Chabrol alone induced Hitchcock’s stubbornly immovable spirit to pass into a different body of work. He did this, I think, by perfecting an extreme sensitivity to Hitchcock that—precisely as a mere sensitivity, a “thin skin” and nothing more—never acquired the consistency of an emotional attitude or an intellectual program. In contrast to the ephebic devotion of De Palma, this extraordinary responsiveness had nothing intentionally faithful about it, but neither by the same token could it embrace the pointed infidelity of, say, Antonioni’s revisionism. It was ubiquitous but unsystematic; and if the first thing prevented Chabrol from ever not being faithful to Hitchcock, the second—for what would Hitchcock be without system?—meant that he could never not be unfaithful.

When I attempt to inventory the Hitchcock references in La Femme infidèle, I am staggered less by their quantity, though it is remarkably high, than by their disparateness. I find now an object, now a gesture, here a situation or mood, there a shot or framing; one minute I am watching The Lodger (1927), and the next minute Suspicion (1941). I am reminded of the game of Hidden Pictures in which we find the horsehoe, the comb, and the banana, but these never add up to a picture of their own and perhaps even spoil the picture in which they have been discovered. Except that Chabrol never makes a serious attempt to conceal Hitchcock’s pictures in his own. His citations may be sometimes subtle, but they are more often indiscreet to the point of crudeness. When the lighter from Strangers on a Train (1951) turns up in La Femme infidèle, it has been ridiculously supersized, the better to be identified. Often even bragging about how much Hitchcock miscellanea he had packed into a film, Chabrol is remarkably free of any “anxiety of influence” in relation to his great precursor. He lets the Right One in without disguise or disavowal, an influence to flow whither it will. But it would be a mistake to regard such apparent defenselessness as the artistic suicide of a director so weak that he does nothing but the Master’s bidding. Too unruly to be slavish imitation, Chabrol’s Hitchcockianism involves something more like wild abandon. The overproduction of citations is, of course, one sign of this wildness; but another is their underutilization. Clamorous but inarticulate, obvious but obtuse, they forego that momentousness conveyed by directors who keep their Hitchcock allusions under firmer thematic discipline. Think of how consistently De Palma’s Obsession (1976) sustains its parallel with Vertigo (1958), which it follows as obviously, and with as much fascination, as Scottie follows Madeleine; or how precisely Antonioni’s Blow-Up (1966) targets a moment in Rear Window (1954)—when Jeff compares
two photographs of the flower garden and sees what his eye did not—as its object of epistemological reflection. Chabrol's proliferent but less focused citations never stand out importantly as an index of the director's intertextual intelligence; they do little but perform his crazed suggestibility to Hitchcock's power of suggestion. No wonder La Femme infidèle is thrilling: there is perhaps no scarier dimension to intimacy than this excitable state of porousness.

III

A bourgeois wife (Hélène) has taken a lover (Victor); her husband (Charles) discovers this and kills him; though he tries to cover up the crime, he is caught by the police. Stripped to its bare bones, the plot of La Femme infidèle is almost the same as that of Dial M for Murder (1954)—and would be exactly the same had Tony attempted to kill Mark instead of Margot as he originally thought of doing. But one need hardly insist on this hazy point; the film exemplifies its fantastic intimacy with Hitchcock in other, indisputable, and more concrete ways.

Charles, posing as a man of the world who knows and accepts Hélène's affairs, has been paying Victor a visit; but his affable pose eventually breaks down. "You look terrible," Victor remarks; and we see Charles facing a mirror. He is not quite looking at himself—his head is bowed and his eyes are lowered—but a certain tenseness of the ocular muscles suggests that there is something he is determined not to look at but can't help seeing in his mind's eye. He answers Victor, "I know." And suddenly, as if maddened by what his downcast eyes have somehow absorbed, he seizes a statuette on a side table and clobbers Victor with it. We are given only a second to see Victor keeling over before we return to Charles, himself tottering, in front of the mirror again. But now he is facing the camera rather than the mirror, and we have a chance to observe something that the earlier framing had excluded: a matched pair of pictures flanking the mirror—little pictures, pictures of birds. The tininess of these images is no obstacle to those of us whose eyes the lighter has sensitized to Chabrolian rescaling; they are miniatures of the bird pictures hanging outside Marion's bathroom in the Bates Motel.

And lo! Charles begins to clean up the scene of his unplanned crime: he wipes the bloody floor tiles, wraps the corpse neatly in sheets, lugs it to his car. He drives to a swamp, where he watches as the body sinks in the slime; its descent is arrested for a nerve-wracking moment, but at last resumed to completion. Perhaps only initiates will notice that the shot of Charles washing his bloody hands in the sink exactly mirrors the shot of Norman doing the same thing. But everyone will see that, for over twelve minutes, La Femme infidèle has become Psycho. It is as if the bird pictures were a tiny leak that had burst into massive flooding.

For many critics in 1969, the reference seriously flawed a gem; too long, too literal, and too obvious, it seemed a kind of homage gone mad, and Chabrol, in paying it, a French Hitchcock in the most epigonal sense. But the complaint ignores the genuine weirdness of the reference, mad to be sure, but also crucial to understanding Chabrol's process all through the film. For if everyone recognizes the extended Psycho moment, will anyone easily be able to state the point of it here? We know what Norman was doing in the scene from Psycho; it is much less clear what the scene from Psycho is doing in La Femme infidèle. The scene has become enigmatic in the transfer, where it plays out less as a glib reference to Hitchcock than as an unsettling appearance by one, of those weird cameos that always feel like otherworldly visitations. Even when this Appearance begins, it is too compelling in its qualities as cinema to be the inert plagiarism it was accused of being; if you could imagine someone who didn’t recognize it, the sequence would not seem badly done in itself or stylistically out of place. As with Hitchcock's own cameos, it is only if you notice it that the Appearance seems not to belong.

And as the Appearance persists, it becomes still clearer that Hitchcock is not being faithfully copied so much as crazily mirrored. The drive to the swamp, only implied in Psycho, is now realized in a bravura sequence of beautifully fluent cuts and amplified by a traffic accident that befalls Charles en route. How much time will he lose in the formalities? Will the police open his damaged trunk? But for the fact it isn't in Hitchcock, all this would be classic Hitchcock suspense. Charles's digressive drive looks not so much like an original invention as a set of free variations on the source material. The drive itself obviously picks up Marion's from Phoenix, and the accident more finely extrapolates the swerving car whose headlights momentarily shine on Norman as he is leaving the motel room. Even the gratuitous cuts seem possibly left over from the shower scene, as though, not having been used during Victor's murder, they had to be used somewhere else. These variations are of necessity as tentative and tendril-like as the fantastic attachment I am trying to describe. It is in making itself so minutely pervious to Psycho's influence that La Femme infidèle becomes its alternative reality, the Other Psycho.

This Other Psycho finds its most outrageous manifestation near the end of the Appearance. For Charles may not follow Norman to the point of throwing out the car with the corpse: the disappearance of the family Mercedes would be

Top right: This Man Must Die (1969). Production companies: Les Films La Boétie (Paris), Rizzoli Film (Rome).


Crazy mirror

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suspicious. Instead, he must remove the corpse and throw it into the swamp. But the bundle that he takes from the trunk is not quite the same one that he stowed there; it now appears chained to an enormous boulder that presumably will cause it to sink. But the corpse was put in an empty trunk that has never been opened until now. No narrative account can make sense of its mysterious boulder-and-chain. Yet far from being a continuity error—or even as one—this is the film’s assertion of just how far its elaboration of Hitchcock can go. For in this air thick with transference, the bloodied boulder-and-chain is only there to cross-mirror the muddled car-and-pulley at the end of Psycho; as that pairing worked to exhume a body, this one will proceed to bury one. Chabrol seems unable to keep himself from laying on these “touched” touches, as though his susceptibility to Hitchcock accompanied him as constantly as—in the figure the film fantastically literalizes here—a ball-and-chain.

IV

If only by accident of initials, Chabrol’s porosity to Hitchcock conjures up Charles’s porosity to Hélène. Though most readings maintain just the opposite, throughout the film this bon bourgeois has possessed an exorbitant receptivity to the vibrations of his unfaithful-faithful wife. On next to no evidence, he intuits her infidelity from the beginning; on none at all, he senses her complicity in his crime at the end. “I love you,” he tells her in the garden when the police come to take him away; and her reply matches his. “I love you so!” Under the spell of this hypnotically long goodbye, wish-fulfilling, Chabrol seems unable to keep himself from laying on these “touched” touches, as though his susceptibility to Hitchcock accompanied him as constantly as—in the figure the film fantastically literalizes here—a ball-and-chain.

It is of course the famous “Vertigo shot” that has inspired this dolly zoom. How Chabrol must have loved that shot—how he must have loved it like crazy! For while Hitchcock’s famous push-pull takes only a couple of seconds in Vertigo (and hardly longer in Marnie [1964]), this reiteration lasts a whole minute. Its length would dilate it beyond recognition if Chabrol ever played his Hitchcock game on only one board, but he never does: the dilation is another Hitchcock reference, this time to those long tracking shots that stretch out suspense until it breaks in discovery or revelation. Here, though, the suspense—like the love it depicts—is never broken or resolved. In thus expressing Charles’s persistent intimacy with Hélène, the dolly zoom enacts La Femme infidèle’s other intimacy as well. The shot is a kind of paroxysm of that intimacy’s combination of fidelity and free association, repetition and divagation. Small chance that chance alone produced the matching initials: a spectral Hitchcock hovers where the inscrutable Hélène stands and Chabrol’s camera holds the place of Charles’s steady but unhinged gaze.

Under the spell of this hypnotically long goodbye, wishing the film could continue beyond it, I find myself imagining a final reverse shot where Chabrol’s camera returns to Charles. I can hardly say why, but suddenly I see Scottie standing at the edge of the bell tower, looking down to Judy, who lies dead below. And I hear once again his wild outburst when he confuses her with her predecessor: “Oh Madeleine, I loved you so!”