

# Hitchcock's Story of the London Fog: A Very English Expressionism

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Titles are important. When we think of Hitchcock, we think of short, pungent titles like *Murder!* (1930), *Spellbound* (1945), *Marnie* (1964), *Vertigo* (1958) and, of course, *Psycho* (1960). Not all of his titles were short and snappy. Hitchcock was capable of showing off his knowledge of Shakespeare with such allusive, fragmentary titles as *Rich and Strange* (1931) and *North by Northwest* (1959). None the less, *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1927) is a mouthful by the director's standards. It is also cumbersome, so much so that the sub-title is more often omitted than not. But it is not an afterthought. Nor is it a producer's less than happy inspiration. It draws our attention, as a good title should, to an important part of the film's story. The film is not simply a film about a multiple killer with a fixation for blondes with golden curls; it is also about the London fog, which can conceal and abet transgressive, murderous desires.

I shall argue that the fog and the river Thames, with which it is so closely linked in the film, serve as dense, complex signifiers of pollution and impurity, corruption and tainted desire. In this way the story of the Lodger, who seems to combine elements of both Jack the Ripper and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Allen, 2001), is bound up with the story of the London fog. I shall argue also that the film draws upon the atmospheric associations of a "London particular" or "pea-souper" in order to create dramatic, expressive and aesthetic effects. To make good this claim, I shall discuss how perceptions of London have been much influenced by images and metaphors of fog and concentrate on writings known to Hitchcock, which use fog as a literary device. By means of close textual analysis, I will then show how the film's subjective and expressive nature is enhanced by allusions to this meteorological phenomenon identified with Victorian London.

Although this was only Hitchcock's third film and the first he thought of as peculiarly his own, *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* foreshadows both the "wrong man" theme and the combining of suspense and romance plots that were to prove so characteristic of a lifetime's work. The story of the serial killer is intimately bound up with the blossoming romance between Daisy and the Lodger. There has been much debate about how these stories end and whether, in particular, the film establishes the Lodger's innocence. What is neglected in this debate is the role played by the fog in the film and the significance of the sub-title. I shall argue that by attending to these neglected matters, we can see how the film does unambiguously absolve the Lodger of guilt. I shall begin with how the film's sub-title came to be chosen and what this tells us about the state of the British film industry and visual culture at the time.

## 1. Naturalising German Expressionism

*The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* was made in 1926 and was the first of Hitchcock's films to be shot in England. It was based on a successful novel by Marie Belloc Lowndes

published in 1913. The novel was loosely based on the Jack the Ripper murders and made it clear that the Lodger was unequivocally guilty. In the play *Who is He?* (1915), which drew its inspiration from the novel, the Lodger was shown to be unequivocally innocent. Hitchcock, who had seen the play, originally intended to sustain the Lodger's enigmatic qualities to the very end and send the audience out into a foggy night wondering whether the handsome Lodger was innocent or guilty (Truffaut, 1985: 43-44).

The film's tightly-constructed plot owes much to screenwriter Eliot Stannard, whose work on the film was praised by *Kinematograph Weekly* (23<sup>rd</sup> September, 1926) as "admirable in every respect" (cited in Barr, 1999: 32). It may be summarised thus. The film opens with the murder and discovery of a multiple killer's seventh victim, yet another blonde woman with a trademark note signed by the "Avenger" pinned to her clothing. London is shown as being in the grip of a panic fanned by the media. A rather sinister-looking figure appears out of the fog seeking lodgings by the Embankment, scene of the most recent murder. The landlady, Mrs Bunting, becomes increasingly suspicious of the Lodger and concerned about his growing friendship with her daughter, Daisy. Joe, who is a policeman with designs on Daisy, also becomes suspicious. Eventually, he arrests the Lodger. The Lodger, though handcuffed, is able to make his escape and meets with Daisy a short while later. He explains how (aided by flashbacks) his sister was murdered by the Avenger at her coming-out ball and how he promised his dying mother to avenge her death. Falling foul of a lynch-mob, he is chased to the Embankment and ends up hanging by his shackled hands from the railings, while the mob vents its fury upon him. In the meanwhile, the real killer has been arrested and Joe finally arrives on the scene to release the Lodger. Surviving this ordeal, the Lodger returns home after hospitalisation into the welcoming arms of the faithful Daisy. Together they receive her parents in the empty, palatial splendour of the Lodger's house and the film ends with the couple kissing, this time with full parental approval.

The film might seem to have much going for it. The story had proven appeal, the film's plot was well constructed and its leading man, Ivor Novello, was a matinée idol whose name alone would sell tickets. Despite this, Michael Balcon, head of Gainsborough Pictures, feared it would not receive distribution and would suffer the ignominious fate of Hitchcock's two earlier films and gather dust on a shelf.

The fact that Balcon was so anxious about the film's prospects speaks volumes about the domestic film industry of the day. On the production side, it seems to have been timid and unadventurous. It is not difficult to understand why distributors and exhibitors were so conservative, since they had a very popular and successful product in the form of Hollywood films. Robert Murphy estimated that "between 1922 and 1927 the average number of British films had been only 28" (Murphy, 1984: 143). In fact, 1926 was a particularly bad year for the domestic industry, which managed to produce only 5% of the films shown to the trade that year. It is probable that, owing to the blind and block booking of American films, even fewer British films made it to the screen. It was very difficult, then, for a British filmmaker to make a breakthrough and secure reasonable distribution, and the tendency must have been to play safe.

Not that Hitchcock, even then, was likely to play safe. He had witnessed at first hand, whilst working in Germany on projects in 1924 and 1925, the heights cinema could scale given the resources and the imagination. He had watched Murnau shooting *The Last Laugh* (1924) in the studio next door and observed Fritz Lang at work. "My models were forever after the German filmmakers of 1924 and 1925," he remarked. "They were trying very hard to express

ideas in purely visual terms" (cited in Spoto, 1983: 68). Besides this fundamental belief in the eloquence of silent images, Hitchcock's vocabulary as a filmmaker was greatly enriched by German Expressionism. As Spoto puts it, Hitchcock "absorbed the prevailing images that German culture exploited to express its sense of postwar horror, social unrest, and the emotional dislocation and ubiquitous fear of madness" (Spoto, 1983: 69).

Although Hitchcock was to experience difficulties with the distributor C. M. Woolf in the short term, he gained inestimably from the time spent in Germany. To risk a cliché, it expanded his horizons at a time when British culture was very insular and largely cut off from the various European avant-gardes. Writing of both the visual and literary arts, Wilfred Mellers and Rupert Hildyard observed that:

The war was a fatal blow to the possibility of any significant British participation in the modern art movement that swept Europe between 1900 and 1930. Avant-garde groups that seemed to be burgeoning in Britain between 1910 and 1914 were blasted apart. (Mellers & Hildyard, 1989: 26)

Murnau's guiding principle that a film should tell a story without recourse to a single inter-title is, at bottom, a modernist conceit. It subscribes to the doctrine that each medium has its own unique properties which an artist must respect and diligently cultivate. Since a film was a carefully crafted series of moving images, it was only fit and proper that the images should speak for themselves and not be encumbered by the spoken or printed word. To do otherwise would be to sully the purity of film as film, and bring into question its integrity as a medium.

These ideas were both literally and metaphorically foreign to many in the British film industry. Ivor Montagu recorded in his autobiography how René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924), which was screened by the London Film Society at the New Gallery, was greeted with boos, shouts and the shaking of fists. C. M. Woolf seems to have been particularly suspicious of such un-English innovations. According to Spoto, he had objected to *The Pleasure Garden* (1926) with its odd camera angles, overhead views, sharp contrasts in light and excessive use of shadow on the grounds that "English audiences were not accustomed to them" (cited in Spoto, 1983: 83). Looking back over his long years spent in the industry, Montagu summed up this influential figure thus: "whether by pose or conviction, C. M. Woolf always chose to adopt an aggressive attitude of anti-intellect and anti-art" (Montagu, 1970: 347). Not surprisingly, Woolf was unsympathetic to Balcon's plans for Hitchcock. To save Hitchcock's nascent career, Balcon came up with the sub-title. It was intended to disguise the film's indebtedness to German Expressionism and make it appear an altogether more English affair.

As Peter Ackroyd's biography of London makes abundantly clear, the fog is part of the city's history, character and mythology. Although Tacitus may have mentioned the fog in his account of Caesar's invasion, it is the nineteenth century with which it is enduringly associated, as if the Victorians, those industrious folk, had invented it. Ackroyd observes that "Victorian fog is the world's most famous meteorological phenomenon" and was "everywhere, in Gothic drama and in private correspondence, in scientific reports and in fiction such as *Bleak House* (1852-3)" (Ackroyd, 2001: 432). True to its vaporous, opaque and evanescent nature, the London fog took on different associations in the various discourses circulating in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, it might be associated with crime (concealing and abetting it) or disease and illness (the stench and respiratory problems caused by a choking fog), while on the other hand it might be associated with the immensity and sheer grandeur of what was then the world's greatest city. The darker associations will be

explored below, but it was not these that appealed to Monet who made three trips to London between 1899 and 1901 to paint the fog. "Then, in London, above all what I love is the fog," he wrote, explaining that "it is the fog that gives it its magnificent breadth. Those massive, regular blocks become grandiose within that mysterious cloak' (cited in Ackroyd, 2001: 436). Two of the views of London were painted from the Savoy Hotel, which at the time advertised as one of its tourist attractions a splendid view of the river Thames in fog (Greater London Archaeology Society, 2005). Monet's fascination with Victorian fog was not peculiar to him, for they had "an allure for the French travellers, some considering the fog as England's greatest natural attraction, with a draw comparable to an eruption of Vesuvius" (Greater London Archaeology Society). All of these discourses, then, fed into Hitchcock's film and informed Balcon's shrewd choice of the subtitle: *A Story of the London Fog*.

More specifically, Balcon attempted to draw upon these discourses of tourism, painting, literature and crime thrillers, etc. in order to anglicise German Expressionism and pass off its otherwise stylistic excesses as the optical effects of a good, old-fashioned "London particular." In this way, the *mise-en-scène* that Hitchcock borrowed from German Expressionism could be seen as being narratively rather than artistically motivated. How this worked may be illustrated by a simple example. When the Lodger first appears he seems to have been conjured up by the fog. It swirls about his caped and muffled figure as he stands by the door opened by a disconcerted Mrs Bunting. The busy London thoroughfare has been swallowed up by the fog, only blurred lights emerge indistinctly from the background. The effect of this is to make the tall, caped figure clutching a Gladstone bag all the more singular and sinister-looking. The muffler, which covers the whole of his lower face, makes his dark eyes more prominent, his gaze more piercing. It is a highly theatrical piece of filmmaking owing much to its German exemplars. Nonetheless, the dramatic use of shadow and the sharp contrasts of light can be seen in naturalistic terms as being caused by the fog. So too can the Lodger's choice of heavy cape and muffler, which an English gentleman might conceivably wear on such an inhospitable night.

Although this and many other expressionistic features of the film, including the dramatic lynch-mob scenes, may be attributed to the fog and the tricks it can play on the eye and mind, there is no disguising the highly subjective and stylised nature of the film as a whole. In the example given above, the shots that precede the audience's first glimpse of the Lodger are more disquieting and radical in their technique than an expressionist use of *mise-en-scène*. Even before we are permitted to see the Lodger, the camera entraps us into viewing the world through his eyes, the eyes of a stranger; that is, the eyes of someone who might or might not be a multiple killer. Hitchcock manages this very skilfully. The camera pans in on the door of number 13. As it draws closer, a shadow -- my shadow or yours -- falls across the door, forming a dark, shadowy cross. It is a highly subjective, daring use of the camera and one that cannot be licensed or justified by references to the London fog.

Perhaps Woolf sensed that the film, despite its reassuring sub-title, was a highly subjective, imaginative and innovative piece of filmmaking and therefore deeply suspect. Balcon's ploy failed, and the film was shelved along with its two predecessors. Balcon's next move in this game of chess showed an admirable coolness. Unwilling to be dictated to by his distributor, or write off the considerable investment he had made in Hitchcock, Balcon suggested having the film recut. In a masterly move, Balcon brought in Ivor Montagu. This might have seemed a surprising choice, since at the ripe age of 22, Montagu had even less experience than Hitchcock himself. But as the son of a very distinguished and wealthy banker, he had the necessary credentials to impress Woolf. He would have been acceptable to Hitchcock also, if

anyone would be in such unhappy circumstances, since they were fellow members of the London Film Society established in 1925 and both had a passionate belief in the artistic potential of the new medium.

The full extent of Montagu's revisions to the original cut is not clear. Hitchcock, as was his wont, played down the importance of Montagu's contribution to the film. In conversation with Truffaut much later in life, he said loftily that he agreed "to make about two" changes (Truffaut, 1985: 50-51). These changes, according to Montagu, consisted of a number of re-takes, principally fresh shots of the lynching chase, and a reduction in the number of inter-titles from more than 300 to about 80, with a significant input from the graphic designer McKnight Kauffer (Spoto, 1983: 89). The re-cut film was released in 1927 and was, despite Woolf's misgivings, both a commercial and critical success (Barr, 1999: 43).

Having discussed the significance of the subtitle, I wish to explore in greater depth the part the fog plays in the film's exploration of the world of sensation and subjectivity. I shall begin by making some general remarks about the aesthetics of fog with reference to fictional writings known to Hitchcock.

## **2. The London fog: Opaque Desire**

The London fog exhibits attributes common to its kind. It has the capacity to dematerialise the world of solid objects, to transfigure the commonplace, to evoke the uncanny, to provide dramatic contrasts of light and dark, to suspend spatial-temporal relations, to disorientate and confuse, and to excite the most extreme and intense states of subjectivity. Like the illuminated screen in a darkened cinema the fog's blank opacity may be inscribed with every form of desire, even the most illicit or transgressive.

These attributes were variously evoked in writings by Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Marie Belloc Lowndes. As a London schoolboy, Hitchcock had studied Dicken's *Bleak House* and, according to one of his biographers, it "seems to have engraved itself on Hitchcock's memory" (Spoto, 1983: 28). This is a perceptive remark most amply illustrated by *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*. For Hitchcock, as with Dickens, the city and fog are inextricably linked. We find the following in *Bleak House*:

I asked him whether there was a great fire anywhere? For the streets were so full of dense brown smoke that scarcely anything was to be seen. 'O dear no, miss,' he said. 'This is a London particular.' I had never heard of such a thing. 'A fog, miss,' said the young gentleman. 'O indeed!' said I. (Dickens, 1985: 28)

In a celebrated passage the novel links the London fog with the river Thames:

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city.[...] Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats.[...] Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds. (Dickens, 1985: 1)

The opening of the film makes the same connection. The very first shot is a medium close-up of a screaming woman's face. A murder is taking place. We are shown the dead body lying on the Embankment and can see thin wisps of fog floating in the air above the river. This is not the first but the seventh victim to be struck down by the "Avenger." Yet the film chooses to depict the murder taking place by the banks of the foggy, polluted Thames, identifying it as the site of transgressive desire. With great economy, the opening of the film establishes the connection between river, fog and tainted desires.

Hitchcock was well aware from his early reading of Dickens that fog could be used as a literary device to portray the most intense subjective states. As a schoolboy, he had read *Great Expectations*, which used fog to externalise and dramatise Pip's guilty conscience. In the passage below, Pip is on his way to meet Magwich to give him the pork-pie and drink he has been bullied into stealing:

On every rail and gate, wet lay clammy; and the marsh-mist was so thick, that the wooden finger on the post directing to our village[...]was invisible to me until I was quite close under it. Then as I looked up at it, while it dripped, it seemed to my oppressed conscience like a phantom devoting me to the Hulks.[...] The mist was heavier yet when I got out upon the marshes, so that instead of my running at everything, everything seemed to run at me. This was very disagreeable to a guilty mind. The gates and dykes and banks came bursting at me through the mist, as if they cried as plainly as could be, 'A boy with Somebody-else's pork-pie! Stop him! The cattle came upon me with like suddenness, staring out of their eyes and steaming out of their nostrils. 'Hollo, young thief!' (Dickens, 1953: 27)

The blanketing, muffling, disorientating effects of fog can induce a mild state of solipsism, where the world seems to be a mere extension of the inner self. This heightened state of subjectivity is nicely illustrated by the final line of the passage above, where an ox, with "something of a clerical air," fixes Pip with an "accusatory" look. Pip blurts out that he didn't take the pork-pie for himself. Not at all convinced by this line of argument, the ox "put down his head, blew a cloud of smoke out of his nose, and *vanished* with a kick-up of his hind legs and a flourish of his tail" (Dickens, 1985: 27, my emphasis). The ox might just as well have been a phantom, the projection of a guilty conscience.

Hitchcock uses the fog later on in the film to evoke and dramatise the mindless anger of the mob as they chase the Lodger, whom they believe to be the multiple killer, through the streets of London. The fog acts like a medium transmitting their murderous desires far and wide so that more and more men and women are infected by the madness and are sucked into the chase. These scenes were re-edited by Montagu who was familiar with Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and used rapid intercutting to heighten the sense of frenzy and madness. In this way, montage editing complemented the fog-bound, hallucinatory mise-en-scène. Thus it was that Montagu, who was brought in to placate the staid and conservative Woolf, helped to make the film even more avant-garde and "un-English." It is significant that the Lodger is finally run to ground by the Embankment, the scene of the first depicted murder. He somehow manages to get his handcuffs caught up in the railings he is attempting to climb over and cannot free himself. Suspended between the muddy, polluted Thames and the Embankment, he is forced to endure the fury of the crowd who rain blows down on him. Having so strongly suggested that the Lodger might be a multiple killer who returns like a rat to his natural habitat, the film then performs a volte-face and reassures the viewer that he is

after all a refined, upper-middle class gentleman devoted to the memory of his sister and mother. In teasing the viewer with the possibility that the Lodger is both gentleman and multiple killer, the film draws upon an especially powerful discourse of the period, namely Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

Ackroyd remarks that *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is perhaps "the greatest novel of London fog" and adds that this "fable of changing identities and secret lives takes place within the medium of the city's 'shifting insubstantial mists'" (Ackroyd, 2001: 435). He makes the telling point that "in many respects the city itself is the changeling" (Ackroyd, 2001: 435). This disquieting aspect of the city is brought out in the story's following passage:

It was by this time about nine in the morning, and the first fog of the season. A great chocolate-coloured pall lowered over heaven, but the wind was continually charging and routing these embattled vapours; so that as the cab crawled from street to street, Mr Utterson beheld a marvellous number of degrees and hues of twilight; for here it would be dark like the back-end of evening; and there would be a glow of a rich, lurid brown, like the light of some strange conflagration; and here, for a moment, the fog would be quite broken up, and a haggard shaft of daylight would glance in between the swirling wreaths. (Stevenson, 2006: 24-25)

In a city where "good and evil live side by side, and thrive together, the strange destiny of Dr. Jekyll," Ackroyd observes, "does not seem so incongruous" (Ackroyd, 2001: 435).

In his letter of confession, Dr. Jekyll recorded how, when he beat Sir Danvers Carew to death and was mauling his body "with a transport of glee," he was "struck through the heart by a cold thrill of terror. A mist dispersed; I saw my life to be forfeit" (Stevenson, 2006: 79). It is Hyde, for all that he is a creature of base instincts and ungovernable impulses, who realises the folly of his deed. Dr. Jekyll employs the metaphor of mist again in his metaphysical musings on the nature of man. "I began to perceive more deeply" he writes, "than it has ever yet been stated, the trembling immateriality, the mist-like transience, of this seemingly so solid body in which we walk attired" (Stevenson, 2006: 68). This is to reduce the notion of personal identity in the most radical Humean fashion to something so fragile, so ephemeral that a mere puff of wind might disperse it. To characterise how Hyde is slowly taking possession of Dr. Jekyll, the novel uses the metaphor of fog, which, unlike mist, can have a suffocating, oppressive, *palpable* presence. When Utterson calls upon Mr. Hyde he notes how "the fire burned in the grate; a lamp was set lighted on the chimney shelf, for even in the houses the fog began to lie thickly; and there, close up to the warmth, sat Dr. Jekyll, looking deathly sick" (Stevenson, 2006: 28-29). The chilling presence of the fog in the house gives the lie to Dr. Jekyll's febrile protestations that he is done with Hyde for Hyde has not yet done with him. Here the fog signifies the transgressive, clamorous desires that were latent, if repressed, in Dr. Jekyll and which now begin to rage out of all control.

The fog is used sparingly, if with the utmost effectiveness, in Stevenson's novel. By contrast, Marie Belloc Lowndes makes more than thirty references to the London fog in her novel of a multiple killer who combines elements of both Jack the Ripper and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. In the early and middle parts of the novel the fog almost enjoys the existence of a character in its own right. It is a friend to Mr. Sleuth, who always chooses a foggy night to murder his hapless, drunken, female victims. It allows him to materialise out of the fog to take his victim by surprise only to be swallowed up by it when the deed has been done. The fog does not

merely conceal the murderer, however. A witness at a coroner's hearing stated how he had met a wild-looking man in the vicinity of one of the murders. In reply to his polite remark that it was a very foggy night, the stranger replied "Yes...yes, it is a foggy night, a night fit for the commission of dark and salutary deeds" (Lowdnes, 1913: 110). So the fog is the perfect pretext for such deeds and not simply a convenient means of concealment. To use my earlier image, the fog provides an opaque screen upon which the most perverse and perverted desires may be inscribed.

The main role of the fog in the novel is to symbolise the Buntings' narrow, stifled lives and their inability to communicate their feelings to one another. There are many references to how the fog forces people to stay indoors and refrain from venturing out in the evening, unless obliged to do so. The fog circumscribes and constrains people's lives geographically and socially. It is an excellent symbol, then, for the Buntings' inner lives, which are so tightly bounded by class and economic necessity.

Quite early on Mrs. Bunting comes to fear that her lodger may be connected with the murders. But she cannot acknowledge this fear, since the lodger has come just in the nick of time to save them from destitution. For her class, ex-professional servants, poverty is the worst possible fate and the arrival of Mr. Sleuth has rescued them from a "terrible disaster," from the brink of that "deep pit which divides the secure from the insecure" (Stevenson, 2006: 3). In the end, even the stolid Bunting comes to realise, quite independently, that the lodger is almost certainly the Avenger. Tellingly, he keeps his suspicions to himself. So we have a situation where husband and wife firmly believe that their lodger is a murderer but are unable to confide in one another or share their fears. The fog is a metaphor for this curious, muffling blankness at the very heart of the Buntings' inner lives.

As Mrs. Bunting's suspicions deepen and her health worsens, the fog slowly begins to creep into the house. On one occasion it hangs, balefully, in the hall-way. On another occasion Mrs. Bunting comes down in the morning to find the fog has filled the basement kitchen whose window she had opened after one of the Lodger's secret and "elaborate experiments". These scenes recall how the fog invaded Dr. Jekyll's house. Like Stevenson Marie Belloc Lowdnes uses the fog to signify the presence of evil. But the fog also serves to symbolise Mrs. Bunting's innermost dread, which she does her utmost to conceal even from herself, that the seemingly heaven-sent lodger is none other than the Avenger.

### **3. Picturing the Subjective**

Unlike Belloc Lowdnes, Hitchcock does not encourage us to reflect upon a character's psychological motivation. Instead, he invites us to view the world, however momentarily, first through the eyes of one character then through the eyes of another. It is a world of sensations as filtered through a particular consciousness that we are allowed to experience vicariously. The London fog, then, is used as a device to explore the most intense or unusual kinds of subjectivity as part of this larger project.

Earlier I gave an instance of Hitchcock's subjective use of the camera and how the viewer shares the Lodger's point of view, as the camera tracks in on the door of number 13. In an exemplary piece of analysis, Charles Barr dissects shot-by-shot another scene where the camera can be seen as being used either subjectively or objectively (36-38). The scene in question is the one where the Lodger is quietly creeping out of the house late at night and Mrs. Bunting, who is sleeping alone, hears him and listens attentively and anxiously to his

almost silent progress down the staircase (an expressionist touch) and exit into the foggy night. Barr analyses this scene as being influenced by D. W. Griffith's use of parallel editing. It is possible to interpret the entire sequence as being shot from the landlady's point of view as she pictures in her head what is happening based on clues provided by sounds such as creaking stair-treads and the like. As Barr puts it "the images of him are filtered through, coloured by, her subjectivity" (Barr, 1999: 38). Alternatively, the images can be read as being "supplied by an omniscient narration" (Barr, 1999: 38), i.e., as being quite objective. This passage of filmmaking exemplifies Hitchcock's interest in exploring the subjective but doing so in a way that is not irreconcilable with the objective. Barr puts this well when he remarks how the film exploits the "ambiguity of the film image -- its double status as objective and subjective, as record and fantasy" (Barr, 1999: 38).

One of the most celebrated but least original scenes from the film -- the glass-ceiling shot -- can be similarly interpreted. The Buntings and Joe are talking about the rather "queer" new lodger when they hear him pacing up and down in his room, which sets the chandelier swaying above their heads. All four look up, and the viewer sees, courtesy of the glass ceiling, the Lodger's legs and feet pacing out their rhythm. Hitchcock lifted this idea from René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924) and adapted it to his narrative purposes, while sacrificing that film's outrageous humour and uncompromising avant-gardism.

Although Hitchcock could hardly be labelled an avant-garde filmmaker as such, he was quite prepared to break with established conventions, such as the 180-degree rule, when it suited his purposes. Hitchcock breaks this rule in an experimental but not wholly successful piece of editing, which involves Daisy and the Lodger's first passionate embrace and a long, drawn-out kiss. In what would seem to be an attempt to depict the passage of time, the film repeatedly cuts from the couple upstairs to the Buntings downstairs, who, under the mistaken impression that Daisy has not yet returned home, are eaten up by anxiety. Mr. Bunting frequently consults his pocket-watch, for he fears that the Lodger may be the Avenger and Daisy his next victim. Having planted this thought in the viewer's mind, Hitchcock ratchets up the suspense by the use of extreme close-ups as Ivor Novello seduces and finally kisses Daisy. In one close-up, the position of Novello's head in the frame is abruptly reversed, in a clear contravention of the 180-degree rule.

This would seem deliberate, for Hitchcock is searching for a way, throughout this long sequence, to convey how time itself has slowed down for the anxiety-ridden parents who fear their daughter may never return. It is worth recalling that Hitchcock himself was not, at this point, familiar with Eisenstein's montage editing and its ability to slow down or prolong the passage of time. He was thrown back on his own resources and had to experiment and improvise as best he could to achieve his subjective effects.

What I wish to look at now is how Hitchcock could use the fog to explore the most extreme subjective states, without risking the ire of an audience unaccustomed to avant-garde films. Although that audience may not have been very familiar with contemporary French or German films, it was certainly familiar with discourses about fog, not to mention the phenomenon itself.

In the film, the fog is linked inextricably to the Thames and, as such, is a signifier of moral pollution, transgressive desire and bodily corruption. The film's most dramatic moments are signalled by the presence of the fog and river conjoined. Think of the film's opening and the lynch-mob scenes at the Embankment. When the fog is temporarily absent from the screen, it

is indirectly invoked by references to the Thames, the ultimate source of impurity and polluted desire. The film, then, seems to be directly inspired by *Bleak House*, which, as I mentioned above, implies that the fog is defiled by coming into contact with the Thames.

In addition to direct shots of the Embankment, the film makes more subtle and more frequent allusions to the Thames and, indirectly, the fog. Throughout the film, the ominous sign -- TONIGHT "GOLDEN CURLS" -- flashes up on the screen. This signifier floats in space and is not anchored in the diegetic world. It is possible, however, to read it as an electric sign advertising the delights of a music-hall variety programme, and treat it as a sign that has been *abstracted* from the diegetic world though never *shown* to be part of it. Alternatively, the sign can be read as a warning to the viewer that another murder is about to take place, in which case it would function like an inter-title. Of course, the sign is composed of two elements, for TONIGHT "GOLDEN CURLS" appears at the bottom of the cinema screen where it is inverted, like a reflection cast upon water. This was precisely the effect that Hitchcock was trying to achieve (Truffaut, 1985: 44), its purpose being to remind the viewer of the dark, oily, polluted and befouled river coursing through the heart of the city. This effect can be seen as a naturalistic one, and as such would favour the first interpretation above. It could also be seen as a more direct utterance, which reminds the viewer repeatedly of the connection between transgressive desire (Thames/fog) and the compulsive multiple killings with their sexual overtones.

#### 4. Transgression, ambiguity and the Oedipal

Charles Barr observes that the film poses the question: "Is he [the Lodger] keen on golden curls in the manner of the Avenger, or in the socially acceptable manner of Joe?" (Barr, 1999: 39). He adds, perceptively, that "it's as if he has been *conjured up, out of the London fog*, in order to dramatise the continuity between these two kinds of arousal, and the difficulty of distinguishing between them" (Barr, 1999: 39, my emphasis). It is the very nature of sexual desire, then, that introduces an ambiguous note into the film. It should be remembered that Joe playfully handcuffed Daisy and explicitly linked putting a noose around the Avenger's neck and a ring around Daisy's finger, as if death and sex were themselves connected. Nevertheless, Joe's incipient sadism is not to be confused with the Avenger's compulsive need to kill golden-haired women. In trying to decide where to place the Lodger on this continuum, if such it be, we need to consider whether he remains forever associated with the London fog and its contaminated source.

Barr argues that "the film ...chooses to make the lodger innocent of the murders, and to unite him and Daisy in a happy ending" (Barr, 1999: 41). He claims, in effect, that the Lodger has managed to integrate his sadistic impulses with heterosexual desire in a way that is socially acceptable. Although the Lodger may have a fetish for golden curls he does not harbour incestuous and murderous desires any more than Joe does. For Barr, this film, like so many of Hitchcock's English films, traces an "Oedipal trajectory" through to a successful conclusion (Barr, 1999: 33-34).

The final scene of *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* is of crucial importance to Barr, as well as other commentators. He writes:

As the parents withdraw and the couple embrace, we can see behind them, deep in the shot beyond the window, the same sign, TONIGHT "GOLDEN CURLS," now located for the first time within the film's own space, and

diminished in size. The camera moves in on them, and excludes the sign from the frame. The film has gone from a woman's scream to a woman's happy smile; from a sign with menacing and provocative overtones to a sign that seems, at least for the moment, made safe, and given a new meaning; from a night of murder to the promise of a night of love. (Barr, 1999: 41)

This strikes me as an accurate analysis of the scene and its *authorial* meaning, or more precisely the director's conscious intent. [1] If further argument should be needed, I would draw attention to an earlier scene involving both a game of chess and a far older sporting contest. It is clear that Daisy is winning both games hands down. She has outplayed her male opponent -- a mere "wood-pusher" -- on the board and would seem to be in control of the sexual game being played out, as well. Her advantage in the game of chess is so strong that she is, as the late Bobby Fisher was fond of saying, "murdering" her opponent. The most the Lodger can do is to threaten Daisy that he will eventually get her, an obvious innuendo. Despite this, writers tend to emphasise the moment of menace when Daisy knocks over a piece and stoops to retrieve it and the Lodger, too, bends down, though in his case, to pick up a poker. The cutting is so judicious and the framing so perfect that it seems, for an instant, that the Lodger is about to strike Daisy on the head. Instead, he pokes the fire, in what is another innuendo. What is commonly overlooked is that Daisy has knocked her King over, which is the traditional way of resigning a game. In terms of the sexual game being played out, Daisy is in control of the situation and if the Lodger should, eventually, get her it would be because Daisy has allowed him to do so. The final scene, then, can be interpreted as Daisy getting her man and moving from one social sphere to a much higher one, with her parents' full approval.

In a stimulating article, Richard Allen argues that Hitchcock intentionally made the ending ambiguous. He finds Barr's analysis, which was quoted above, unconvincing. Allen writes:

It seems to me that the meaning of the sign cannot be neutralized so easily. While the containment of the sign in the image and its displacement by the embracing couple anchors its reference to the love making of the Lodger and Daisy, it is not thereby divested of all the connotations that it has accrued during the course of the film. (Allen, 2001: 64)

It is true that the electric sign has retained the more light-hearted connotations attaching to it as a signifier advertising the variety show *Golden Girls*. I would argue, however, that the sign has been stripped of its darker associations. For the first time in the film the electric sign is not accompanied by its sinister doppelgänger, the watery reflection that served to link the multiple killings to transgressive sexual desire via the polluted waters of the Thames and the tainted London fog. It is the doppelgänger, so to speak, and not the electric sign itself that has such menacing associations. As I mentioned earlier, the complex signifier TONIGHT "GOLDEN CURLS" is made up of two components: the electric sign and the sign's reflection. Until the final scene, this complex signifier floated in a space of its own and was not locatable in the diegetic world as such. This allowed the sign to act like an intertitle card that warned the audience of an impending murder. Now that the multiple killer has been safely locked away there is no need for such warnings, and the electric sign, for the first time in the film, is firmly located in the diegetic world and ceases to function as an intertitle. Having been restored to the diegetic world, the sign denotes a site of public entertainment and shared pleasures. It would be wrong to think, therefore, as many commentators have assumed, that when the camera pans in on the couple as they kiss that this is a faltering

attempt to occlude the electric sign together with its haunting associations. Those associations have already been dispelled. What the camera movement does is to link the social world of pleasure and sexuality to the personal world of the Lodger and Daisy. The camera movement, then, completes and brings to a successful conclusion the Lodger's fraught and troubled Oedipal journey.

I have shown by my analysis of the London fog and the film's *mise-en-scène* that Barr's interpretation of the film is sound. The connection between the Lodger and transgressive desire, which the electric sign plus reflection hinted at, has proved to be an artful piece of misdirection on the part of the director.

This view of Hitchcock's intentions has been challenged by Ken Mogg (1992). He argues that Hitchcock defied the studio's wishes and ended the film on a note of studied ambiguity. Mogg lays great store by the fact that Hitchcock was well known for outmaneuvering meddlesome producers and doing things his own way. This is true up to a point, though there are exceptions. In the case of *Rebecca* (1940), for instance, Hitchcock was outmatched by his formidable producer, David O. Selznick. So Hitchcock did not always get his own way even when he was a successful and established director. When he made *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* he was neither successful nor established. Mogg, who seems to treat the young Hitchcock as a fully-fledged auteur, overlooks just how precariously placed he was prior to the release of the film that was to make his reputation. Given that Hitchcock swallowed his pride and agreed to an outsider being brought in to re-cut his film, it is hardly likely that he would have risked a promising career and not changed the ending originally envisaged. In conversation with Truffaut, he made it clear that he had precious little choice in the matter. "In a story of this kind," he remarked:

I might have liked him [the Lodger] to go off in the night, so that we would never know for sure. But with the hero played by a big star, one can't do that. You have to spell it out in big letters: 'He is innocent.' (Truffaut, 1985: 43)

And that is exactly what Hitchcock attempted to do.

It would be a pity if this debate were allowed to overshadow the film's genuinely innovative nature and the boldness of both director and producer. What is remarkable about the film is not that it makes concessions to public taste but rather that it makes so few. To appreciate fully the film's radical experiments in the rendering of subjective experience, we need to take into account how the film draws upon many different discourses about the London fog. These include discourses about the plague, pollution, tourism, the picturesque and the sublime. Such discourses are to be found in places as various as the popular writings of Dickens and Stevenson, the poetry of T. S. Eliot, Sherlock Holmes stories, the paintings of Monet and even nursery rhymes. It would be a great mistake to suppose that the film uses fog as a cheap special effect, or that the sub-title is a mere appendage. To understand the story of the Lodger we must first understand the story of the London fog and its enduring power as the richest of metaphors.

## Notes

[1] I am over-simplifying of course. A film can have many different kinds of meaning and objects of interpretation. Here I concentrate solely on the director's conscious intent or authorial meaning, as it is this kind of meaning that lies at the heart of the debate that is

discussed below. For an illuminating, philosophical discussion of interpretation, see Patrick Colm Hogan (1996) *On Interpretation: Meaning and Inference in Law, Psychoanalysis, and Literature*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

[2] I would like to thank Glyn White, Brian Rosebury and *Scope's* Editor and anonymous readers for their helpful suggestions

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Hitchcock's Story of the London Fog: A Very English Expressionism " Paul Humble. What Happens When Real People Start Getting Cinematic: Laguna Beach and Contemporary TV Aesthetics " Jesse Schlotterbeck. Transience and Imperfect Tense: Brokeback Mountain as Melodrama " Michael Stewart. The Man and His Wings: William A. Wellman and the Making of the First Best Picture by William Wellman Jr. A review by Timothy Shorkey. Back to top. In his book English Hitchcock, Charles Barr suggests that "this sustained collaboration with an experienced scenarist was just what the ambitious young director needed at this stage, enabling him to find and define himself." So determining how much of the plot originated with Stannard and how much with Hitchcock would be difficult. In London, he often attended screenings of the latest Soviet films at the Film Society's cinema on Regent Street. Montagu and Hitchcock got together and agreed on a few modifications: a couple of overdark scenes were reshot and the number of dialogue intertitles drastically reduced.