

Greene & Hitchcock: A Marriage Made in Hell? Or, the What-ifs & the Why-nots

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In a letter to his youngest brother Hugh, dated 31 October 1936, Graham Greene wrote: “I had to see Hitchcock the other day about possible work for G.B. [Gaumont-British Picture Corporation]. A silly harmless clown. I shuddered at the things he told me he was doing to Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*.”¹

This is possibly the only-ever recorded actual encounter between two remarkable artists, “poets of English criminality and bad conscience,” as Neil Jordan, the Oscar-winning Irish filmmaker of *Mona Lisa* and *The Crying Game*, would memorably bracket them in his Foreword to the third (and later, fourth) edition of my book, *Travels in Greenland: The Cinema of Graham Greene*.

Despite the piquant prospect in later years of occasional collaborations (of which more later), these would remain entirely unfulfilled, leading Jordan to muse, somewhat mournfully one senses, about that palpable lack of contact between Greene and Hitchcock, whose mutual preoccupations with sex, murder, guilt, and jealousy, as well as their shared Catholicism—one born with, the other acquired—suggests they might have made ideal creative bedfellows.

What was the nature of Greene’s strange miasma about Hitchcock and his work—Jordan again—which seemed so to affect the great author in the majority of his often perceptive, frequently witty, and regularly acerbic film writings across nearly half a century?

The first sustained assault on Hitchcock arrived in Greene’s *The Spectator* review of 15 May 1936 of *The Secret Agent*, not to be confused with Conrad but based instead, if confusingly, on Somerset Maugham’s *Ashenden: Or, The British Agent*, a collection of loosely linked spy stories first published almost a decade earlier: “How unfortunate it is that Hitchcock, a clever director, is allowed to produce and even write his own films, though as a producer he has no sense of continuity and as a writer he has no sense of life. ... His films consist of a series of small ‘amusing’ melodramatic situations. ... Very perfunctorily he builds up to these tricky situations (paying no attention on the way to inconsistencies, loose ends, psychological absurdities) and then drops them; they mean nothing; they lead to nothing.”² His concessionary “clever director” now begins to ring not just ironic but positively hollow. Finally, the critic rails, “nothing is left of [Maugham’s] witty and realistic fiction.”³

Avid followers at the time of Greene’s *Spectator* reviews might have suspected that such a diatribe was always pending about Hitchcock who, at thirty-six, had already forged a formidable reputation with films like *The Lodger*, *Blackmail*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *The 39 Steps*. For even in some earlier reviews of other films and their

¹ *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*, ed. Richard Greene (London: Little, Brown, 2007), 79.

² *The Graham Greene Reader: Mornings in the*

Dark, ed. David Parkinson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 101.

³ *Ibid.*, 162.

filmmakers, Greene couldn't resist sideswipes at Hitchcock. In his mostly damning critique of Jack Raymond's *Come Out of the Pantry*, a New York-set musical comedy about class, we suddenly also learn that "Mr. Hitchcock sometimes indulges in crime or 'low life,' but it is with the 'amused' collector's air of a specialist in sensation."⁴

Just three months later Greene reviewed Pierre Chenal's *Crime et Chatiment*, a Gallic adaptation of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: "The cinema has always been successful at conveying violence, and what a remarkable film will result when our murderer is a really classic one. I have long suspected that a high-class murder is the simple artistic ideal of most film directors, from Mr. Hitchcock upwards."⁵ How that "upwards" wounds. And again, apropos Fritz Lang's *Fury*, here was a film he finally adjudged "great," albeit one he admits he approached initially with trepidation because of the director's propensity for melodrama, though "infinitely more expert than, say, Mr. Hitchcock's."⁶

He was no less sparing three years later when confronted with *Jamaica Inn*, Hitchcock's follow-up to the widely praised *The Lady Vanishes*—which escaped Greene's official gaze—and shortly before the director would decamp to Hollywood and the future triumphs of *Rebecca* onwards and, yes, upwards as the much-trumpeted Master of Suspense. Greene decried this screen version of Daphne du Maurier's colorfully bucolic tale of Cornish wreckers as a "bogus costume piece" in which "there are no surprises—and no suspense: we can see everything that will

happen half an hour away."⁷

Now, it would be remiss not to step back for just a second and return to the subject of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Just what Hitchcock and his screenwriters, no fewer than four of them, had actually done to Conrad's novel was spelled out two months later in Greene's review of the film. However instead—as one might have expected, recalling in particular that letter to his sibling—Greene suddenly and quite dramatically changed tack conceding that, with *Sabotage*, retitled not to confuse it with his previous film, "for the first time he [Hitchcock] has really 'come off.'"⁸

Greene's apparently sudden *volte face*, especially in connection with an adaptation of the author who was an acknowledged influence on Greene's own writing, is all the more surprising given the reviewer's seemingly endless antipathy—before *and* after *Sabotage*—which might also have been interpreted as some kind of odd, inexplicable, and seemingly one-sided personal vendetta. Yet like much of Greene's recall, especially in retrospect, there is often a healthy—or should that be, unhealthy—element of unreliability. So when we read, toward the foot of a *Spectator* review in November 1935 for the American news series *The March of Time*, mention of "Mr. Hitchcock's blameless film of Lord Tweedsmuir's patriotic thriller" *The Thirty-Nine Steps*—Greene was principally comparing contemporary censorship demands—that conclusion contrasted starkly, almost bizarrely, with an altogether different verdict more than thirty-five years on, about the same film:

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

“How inexcusably he spoilt *The Thirty-Nine Steps*,” wrote Greene in his Introduction to *The Pleasure Dome*, a 1972 collection of his film criticism of some 600 films between 1935 and 1940 for both *The Spectator* and the short-lived arts magazine *Night and Day*.

Of course, Hitchcock wasn’t alone as a focus for Greene’s persistent critical disdain. Another was Alexander Korda, the ex-patriate Hungarian, Britain’s emerging movie mogul and czar at Denham, the country’s largest studio, which opened for business in May 1936 a little under a year after starting construction. Throughout that same year Greene poured scorn on Korda’s productions. “The usual Denham mouse” was a regular epithet. Then, just three months after lambasting Korda’s *Rembrandt* in November 1936: “The film is ruined by lack of story and continuity; it has no drive,”⁹ Greene changed tack exhorting of *Fire over England*, a “well-directed and lavish picture ... the best production to come from Denham yet.”¹⁰ The “mouse” has roared at last!

Had something significantly changed for Greene in those intervening months? On the principle he would rather be joined by the writer than be constantly attacked by him, Korda invited Greene to meet him at Denham and suggest some possible scenarios. The same year, Greene’s idea of a thriller set between one and five in the morning had been written (by others), produced and exhibited as a sixty-five-minute Quota Quickie called *The Green Cockatoo*. Greene and Korda would soon become lifelong friends.

While Greene’s past biographers such as Norman Sherry (certainly in his

first volume up to 1939) and Michael Sheldon noted Greene’s early antipathy to the work of Hitchcock, they never really posited any possible ulterior motive. However, Professor Richard Greene, author of *Russian Roulette*, the newest account of Greene’s life and times published in Autumn 2020, offered me this intriguing twist on the tandem tale: “I think that both Hitchcock and Korda began in the same low place in Greene’s estimation. He looked to both for scriptwriting work in late 1936, and found it with Korda, so that relationship evolved. He did not come to an agreement with Hitchcock, so continued to regard him as a ‘silly harmless clown.’”¹¹

Was Greene’s continuing hostility to Hitch—one-sided it must be always reiterated—and emerging partnership with Korda somehow fueled simply by commercial considerations? That it was Korda and not Hitchcock who, in the mid-1930s, had offered the thirty-two-year-old coming novelist (then also father of two young children) access to some crucial supplementary income in addition to freelance film reviewing and journalism. But is that too simplistic and, arguably, overly cynical?

There would be, much later, two further snubs for Hitchcock by Greene when both artists were at the height of their powers. In 1952, not that long after Graham’s (probably) finest screenwriting hours on, first, *The Fallen Idol* and then *The Third Man* in the late-1940s, Hitchcock apparently sought help from Greene to crack his latest Hollywood movie, *I Confess*, a killer thriller based on a chilling true story about the sanctity of the confessional.

According to Mike Hill, who lectured

⁹ Ibid., 157.

¹⁰ Ibid., 181.

¹¹ Email to QF, 2 October 2019.

about Greene and Hitchcock at the 2010 Berkhamsted Festival and again, five years later, at the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, this would have seemed natural Greene territory; but he “turned Hitchcock down, this time on the grounds that he was interested in adapting for the screen only his own stories. But this reason wore a little thin when a few years later Greene adapted Shaw’s *Saint Joan* for film director Otto Preminger.”¹²

Toward the end of that decade, another “what if?” beckoned when it was reported that Hitchcock had submitted a pre-publication bid of £50,000 for *Our Man in Havana*. Money considerations were clearly not the sole issue this time around when Greene refused Hitch the rights, later telling me, “I felt the book just wouldn’t survive his touch.”¹³ As we chatted in his Antibes apartment in 1983, it was clear that for Greene, old habits died hard as far as Hitchcock was concerned, while also conceding he actually did like some of the director’s work, such as *Notorious* (1946), after Hitch went to Hollywood.

Money and, possibly, hubris aside, Mike Hill also offered a rather different and fascinating slant on Greene’s critical hostility toward Hitchcock: “It is that Greene saw (and criticized) in Hitchcock’s films some of the characteristics of his own fiction. This criticism reflects the distinction, adopted by Greene in the 1930s but dropped later, between the novelist’s ‘entertainments’ and his more serious work, his ‘novels.’ ‘Entertainments’ were popular, more commercial, written to make money, not the stuff on which

serious literary reputations were founded. ‘Entertainments’ were thrillers, melodramas, carrying no ‘message,’ stories which would make popular films.”¹⁴ Hill then quotes Greene’s rather tasty two-sentence pitch to Korda for the film that would become *The Green Cockatoo*: “This may not have been Greene’s customary way of developing a story, but it is a striking potential opening to a film, and rather a good example of the kind of ‘ingenious melodramatic situation’ Greene so criticized in Hitchcock. The fact is that Greene’s ‘entertainments’ of the 1930s and 1940s very often demonstrate the very characteristics Greene was critical of in Hitchcock’s films.”¹⁵ Hill firmly believes, and it is a stance difficult to dispute, that Greene’s refusal to work with Hitchcock in the 1950s was predicated by his jaundiced views of the filmmaker in the 1930s, ones he stubbornly refused to abandon thereafter.

But what collaborators they might have made—Greene, a “child of the film age” (Basil Wright), a writer with “a camera eye” (Evelyn Waugh), and Hitchcock, the “Master of Suspense,” the “most complete filmmaker of all” (Francois Truffaut)—two men, just five years apart in age, who not only both endured, separately, legendary memos from producer David O. Selznick, but also each merited, much more significantly, enduring adjectives to describe aspects of their respective creative worlds: “Greeneland” and “Hitchcockian.” In fact, it is difficult now not to think of almost any Greene novels (well, perhaps saving just a handful) let

¹² Mike Hill, lecture on Greene and Hitchcock, 2015.

¹³ Quentin Falk, *Travels in Greeneland: The Cinema of Graham Greene* (Dahlonga: University of North Georgia, 2014), 99.

¹⁴ Mike Hill, lecture on Greene and Hitchcock, 2015.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

alone his entertainments that would not have enjoyed elements of the so-called Hitchcock touch. Mike Hill cites in particular *Stamboul Train*, *A Gun for Sale*, *The Ministry of Fear*, and *Our Man in Havana*, opining of the last, a little mischievously one suspects, “Greene’s refusal may have cost us all dear.”¹⁶

What Greene would probably have regarded as a marriage made in hell might just have turned out to be heaven-sent.

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¹⁶ Ibid.