



10-1-2012

## Hitchcock and the Scapegoat: Violence and Victimization in *The Wrong Man*

David Humbert

*Laurentian University*, [dhumbert@laurentian.ca](mailto:dhumbert@laurentian.ca)

---

### Recommended Citation

Humbert, David (2012) "Hitchcock and the Scapegoat: Violence and Victimization in *The Wrong Man*," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol16/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

# Hitchcock and the Scapegoat: Violence and Victimization in *The Wrong Man*

## **Abstract**

Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* tells the story of Emmanuel Balestrero, arrested for a crime committed by his physical double. This paper examines the theme of the scapegoat in the film and argues that it portrays in miniature what theorist René Girard has described as a mimetic crisis. While the plight of the central character is usually portrayed as a product of blind chance, it is instead due to the mimetic fears, desires, and vanities of the members of society that accuse him. The fate of Balestrero reveals the operation of a specific kind of scapegoat mechanism that has its roots in mimetic desire.

## **Keywords**

Hitchcock, Girard, Mimetic Desire, Doubles, Scapegoating

## **Author Notes**

Dr. David Humbert is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Thorneloe College of Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. Specializing in religion and modern culture, his published work includes articles on Kierkegaard, René Girard, Freud, and Alfred Hitchcock. He is currently working on a book that examines the themes of violence, desire, and the scapegoat in the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock.

The title of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1957) identifies one of the principal recurrent themes in Hitchcock's oeuvre: the theme of the wrongly accused or the innocent victim. The film was not a box office success and critical reception was mixed, drawing reverential appreciation from French reviewers and bland indifference from American critics. There were diverse reactions to Hitchcock's unfamiliar use of documentary realism to portray the real-life story of Emmanuel Balestrero, wrongly accused and arrested for a crime. Jean-Luc Godard, then a reviewer for *Cahiers du Cinema*, was enthusiastic, arguing that the film's documentary character in no way diminished its dramatic impact. *The Wrong Man*, he suggested, is the "most fantastic of adventures because we are watching the most perfect, the most exemplary of documentaries."<sup>1</sup> A.H. Weiler of the *New York Times*, however, was condescending: "Frighteningly authentic, the story generates only a modicum of drama."<sup>2</sup> Confusing the matter further is Hitchcock's own problematic attitude to the film, expressed in an interview with Francois Truffaut when he suggested that Truffaut "file *The Wrong Man* among the indifferent Hitchcocks."<sup>3</sup> Never indifferent to popular success or failure, Hitchcock fatally underestimated the film. If one considers the themes it raises and how the film generates both suspense and insight into plight of the innocent victim, it remains a film of enormous profundity and every bit as horrific as his more popular creations.

*The Wrong Man* is one of a series of Hitchcock's films in which a crime is attributed to an individual either by mischance or by what could be described as contagion, or "transference." One of the ground-breaking books of Hitchcock criticism, Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol's *Hitchcock*, argued that exchange or "transference of guilt" is not only a persistent theme but a touchstone of the director's outlook and

aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> A recent study by John Orr, *Hitchcock and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cinema*, has reaffirmed the value of this interpretation. As Orr suggests, the “wrong man” theme recalls elements of René Girard’s scapegoat theory.<sup>5</sup> Though Hitchcock has stated that the “innocent victim” is one of his most cherished themes, Girard has only rarely been employed to explain its significance. Slavoj Žižek has suggested that *The Wrong Man* “epitomizes the Hitchcockian vision of a cruel, unfathomable and self-willed God who sadistically plays with human destinies.”<sup>6</sup> If one examines the film from the point of view of Girard’s theory of the scapegoat, however, the plight of Manny Balestrero is only inadequately understood as a confrontation between a solitary individual and an absent God. Hitchcock’s theological perspective is not reducible to a Jansenist emphasis on the vertical dimension, but focuses instead on the horizontal: the ambient and potentially homicidal delusions of human desiring. Hitchcock is far more interested in revealing a fallen humanity that arbitrarily persecutes and victimizes than an arbitrary God. What *The Wrong Man* reveals is not divine abandonment, but the horizontal operations of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism it engenders.

### **Girard on the Scapegoat and Mimetic Desire**

Girard’s theory of the scapegoat is a theory of the origins of sacrifice. It suggests that historical collective murders stand at the inception of primitive ritual sacrifice. Myths and rituals both disguise and memorialize these traumatic, violent origins.<sup>7</sup> A central concept in Girard’s thought is that of contagion. Both contagious transfer and the mythic distortion of collective murder are illustrated in Girard’s analysis of the figure of

Oedipus. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus is revealed to be the cause of a deadly plague in the city of Thebes. He is said by an oracle to pose a danger to the city because he is polluted with the blood-guilt of parricide and incest. Girard has argued that Oedipus plays the role of a scapegoat, a blameless victim, who carries the stain, not of original guilt, but of original violence. Guilt is assigned to him in the myth and in the tragedy as a means of disguising not only his innocence but the violent collective murder that lies in the background of the myth.<sup>8</sup> Oedipus's mysterious affliction has its root in the transference of the evils afflicting a community. The blame assigned to Oedipus reflects the blame assigned to the victim of violent persecution.

The attribution of crime and evil to an innocent victim, of course, is neither arbitrary nor motiveless, according to Girard, but is a response to real social danger. In the "collective murder" that is alleged to stand at the origin of rituals of transference, the immediate cause is a breakdown of social ordering, an "undifferentiation" provoked by plague, war, famine, or some other social disaster. In this situation, each becomes the enemy of all: brother against brother, poor against rich, neighbor against neighbor. Each becomes the double and the rival of the other. In a situation of spiralling violence, in which each resorts to retribution to achieve what is rightfully his or hers, the scapegoat enters as a safety valve. The violence that threatens to envelop the community, the war of all against all, is transformed into a war against one. With the death of the scapegoat, the cycle of violence is brought to an end.

That scapegoating occurs is not a matter of dispute. There are plentiful examples in every society and historical period in which groups or individuals were assigned monstrous acts or intentions that made them the objects of persecution. Witches were

burned in the false belief that their magical powers were the cause of death, crop failure, or other misfortunes. Romans accused Christians of acts such as cannibalism to justify their persecution. The crimes attributed to Jews during the Middle Ages and later – of poisoning wells and making pacts with the devil – were as deadly in their consequences as the charges were fanciful. In his account of the origin of sacrifice, Girard draws a parallel between these historical cases of persecution and the collective murders that he believes are at the root of religion. Since it is not possible to observe the historical genesis of ritual sacrifice except by inference, the evidence for Girard's conclusions is necessarily indirect. Innumerable myths closely associated with ritual practice are violent in nature and involve killing or dismemberment that resembles and sometimes duplicates a collective murder. But many do not, at least not overtly. Girard argues that this is precisely the point. The horror of undifferentiation and social collapse, the extremity of a war of all against all, and the murder of an innocent are difficult to acknowledge. Human beings tend to flee the vision of unlimited violence. It is the role of myth and ritual to disguise the reality of violence. In the process, the reality of the victim recedes and the criminality and monstrosity attributed to the victim is transformed and imbued, in time, with sanctity. After all, the violent killing celebrated by the sacrifice actually did bring peace by generating the protective order of prohibition and ritual, suggesting that the power of the victim was all too real. By his death, the victim performs a near miracle by restoring a binding unanimity among the perpetrators. The elimination of the scapegoat renders a double service – the quelling of violence in the community and the forgetting of its own violence:

The mechanism of the surrogate victim is redemptive twice over: by promoting unanimity it quells violence on all fronts, and by preventing an outbreak of bloodshed within the community it keeps the truth about men from becoming known. The mechanism transposes this truth to the realm of the divine, in the form of an inscrutable god.<sup>9</sup>

The victim embodies all the ambiguity of the word *sacer*, which suggests both malefic and beneficent qualities of pollution and holiness. Religion, ritual, and the gods themselves emerge from a circuitous process of violent genesis in which violence is turned on violence and then excluded from the community by the establishment of taboo, prohibition, and ritual. Religion provides shelter from violence but also disguises its origins.

Shifting to the scene of modernity, what remains disguised in sacrificial religion has become all too clear. Persecution and the condemnation of innocents are openly acknowledged as social problems. The rise of scientific rationalism has assured that the belief in magical causation, responsible for much persecution in the past, has been abolished -- in many societies the horror of vengeance and false accusation has been mitigated by the establishment of rules of evidence, law courts, and rational procedures of investigation. But if Girard is correct, the processes of mimetic contagion that overwhelm reason and give rise to persecution have only been contained and not destroyed. Rivalrous desires, mutually incited fears, and mimetic escalation thrive even in a highly rationalized society for the very reason that society has abolished the rituals, prohibitions, and taboos that once controlled their release. If violence and victimization are difficult to acknowledge in societies that take refuge in myth and ritual, they are perhaps equally hard to acknowledge in advanced societies in which it is assumed that such passions have been overcome. Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* is remarkable for its

subtle evocation of the social desires and institutional violence that lead to scapegoating even in the context of modern life. The uniqueness of the link he discerns between violence and mimesis is revealed when his films are considered in the light of Girardian theory.

### **Mimesis and Retribution in *The Wrong Man***

*The Wrong Man* tells the story of the arbitrary arrest and confinement of Manny Balestrero, who is misidentified as the robber of an insurance company office as well as several other stores. The film is based on a true story, the real-life case of Christopher Emmanuel Balestrero. As portrayed in the film, the effects on Balestrero are catastrophic. As a result of the arrest, his wife loses her sanity, a plot turn that would seem unnecessarily melodramatic except for the fact that it actually happened. This film is one of many directed by Hitchcock that involve someone who is falsely accused, for example, *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Saboteur* (1942), *I Confess* (1953), and *Strangers on a Train* (1951). The film that Hitchcock considers his first, *The Lodger* (1927), even features a scene in which a man who is falsely believed to be a killer is nearly lynched by an angry crowd. At the end of *I Confess*, a priest who is thought to be guilty by the assembled citizens of Quebec City is also nearly attacked by them. The motif of false accusation and victimization, not to mention scapegoating, is always either present or on the horizon of Hitchcock's plots. In *The Wrong Man*, he confronts the phenomenon of scapegoating and the plight of the scapegoat not at the periphery but at the centre of the film.

Rene Girard's observations are apposite here. Though Manny Balestrero seems a victim of chance and the mechanical and essentially impersonal procedures of police investigation and the court system, Hitchcock's film suggests that Balestrero is also, and perhaps primarily, the victim of the violent and vengeful desires of others. It reveals how human beings sometimes respond to chance and misfortune by scapegoating; he shows this mechanism at work not in aboriginal but in modern culture, in which the court system has long modified and contained the potentially volatile eruption of unending retribution.

Hitchcock's shot selection and camera placement emphasize the subjective experience of Balestrero himself, whose point of view becomes the central axis of the film. Just as, according to Girard, the Biblical perspective provoked awareness of the plight of the victim of sacrifice, Hitchcock does the same cinematically for the innocent victim. By placing the viewer in the vantage point of the victim, the audience is invited to share the terror of Balestrero as he suffers interrogation, incarceration, and, ultimately, vindication. But Balestrero is not the only a victim of chance; he is the victim of a peculiar form of institutional violence, a legal and judicial process that authorizes the violent disruption of his private life. On the one hand, it is an intervention that is set in motion by existential suspicions and fears of his fellow citizens. On the other hand, the violence to which it gives rise is neither mob nor personal violence, but the rationalized, legitimate, and socially approved violence of the constabulary and the courts.

The legal theoretician Robert Cover has argued that the decisions and judgments of courts and judges cannot be abstracted from the threat of violence that they entail. The decisions of a magistrate set in motion a procedure by which force is applied to the

human object of those judgments: to arrest, apply financial penalties, incarcerate, disarm, and otherwise limit his or her rights. The rational procedures of the court disguise the fact that the threat of pain and death stands in the background of its authority:

The act of sentencing a convicted defendant is among [the] most routine of acts performed by judges. Yet it is immensely revealing of the way in which interpretation is distinctively shaped by violence. First, examine the event from the perspective of the defendant. The defendant's world is threatened. But he sits, usually quietly, as if engaged in a civil discourse. If convicted, the defendant customarily walks – escorted – to prolonged confinement, usually without significant disturbance to the civil appearance of the event. It is, of course, grotesque to assume that the civil façade is “voluntary” except in the sense that it represents the defendant's autonomous recognition of the overwhelming violence ranged against him, and of the hopelessness of resistance or outcry.<sup>10</sup>

As Girard has also argued, the court is not just a rational mechanism but a practical and social authority that stands in the place of traditional vengeance or arbitrary retribution. For this reason, like the pronouncements of the judge, it still retains an aura of the sacred. Girard insists that the judicial system bears the marks of its violent origins: “Like sacrifice,” he states in *Violence and the Sacred*, “the judicial system both reveals and conceals its resemblance to vengeance.”<sup>11</sup> One needs look no further than *The Wrong Man* to find the visual and narrative correlates of both Cover's and Girard's claims. The film shows without equivocation that “the experience of the prisoner is, from the outset, an experience of being violently dominated, and it is colored from the beginning by the fear of being violently treated.”<sup>12</sup>

The roots of retribution, both legal and personal, are suggested in an important sequence in which Balestero first visits the insurance office that has been robbed. He is in the office to inquire if he can borrow on his insurance policy to pay the dental bills for his wife. This scene addresses a decisive question: What led not one but a group of witnesses

to repeatedly misidentify an innocent man as the culprit in a crime? Of course, one reason is that Balestrero physically resembles the real robber. But as we discover at the end of the film, the resemblance is not close enough to be the sole reason. It is reasonable to assume that the bank-workers fear a repeat robbery and the violation it involves. In their reaction to the presence of Balestrero and their discussion about his identity, fear is clearly etched on their faces. We see how an emotion like fear escalates and how it leaps contagiously from one person to the next. Obvious, too, is the equally contagious desire, with the encouragement of others, to take action and to find a culprit. The fear the women feel toward the robber is balanced by the potential triumph of finding and capturing him. Hitchcock renders this contagious fear and the complementary desire for retribution in a subtle series of shots.

At first, Balestrero is seen by a teller through the grating of her booth.



From her look alone it is clear that she recognizes him in some way and fears him. This initial “look” sets off a chain reaction of desires that find the culprit in Balestrero. When she reports the possible presence of the robber, she turns and informs one of her co-workers, who looks, again anxiously, over the shoulder of the first teller.



Her anxiety is dwarfed, however, by that of a third woman in the office, who was on duty as a teller when the company was robbed. The tight framing of these three, when the third teller refuses to look out of sheer terror, emphasizes how the desire for retribution is beginning to coalesce out of the fears that they share.



The framing emphasizes that their desires are not autonomous, but that they are sharing fear and desire: the fear of violation and the desire for retribution. When exposed to danger, there is an “autonomous” and natural desire to victimize in return, but the escalation of this desire to victimize is a product of contagion and imitation. What Hitchcock conveys here in this brief but carefully designed sequence is precisely this complex relationship between natural and acquired desire, or between desire and mimesis. A shot like the one above suggests the doubling of the women – two of them face each other in profile, hair swept back off their faces, the striped design of each of their v-neck dresses echoing the other.

The emphasis that Hitchcock places on the “look” or the glance should be evident from this sequence. It is the “exchange” of looks by which, according to Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer, guilt and evil is relayed among characters.<sup>13</sup> Girard has pointed out the significant role that the myth of the “evil eye” has played in aboriginal cultures,

particularly those in which lynching is of central importance.<sup>14</sup> The evil eye, he asserts, is a stereotypical accusation made of those who are selected for persecution, as in the case of a witch who is blamed for destroying a crop. In his own characteristic use of the “look,” however, Hitchcock highlights a different aspect of the scapegoat problem. The evil stare may refer not to the fantasized power of the victim to cause harm and that legitimates violent persecution, but to the very real victimizing glances of the persecutors themselves, eager for a victim through whom to channel their mimetically incited violence. In Hitchcock’s scenario, it is not the evil eye of Manny Balestrero that is accented but the suspicious and murderous stares of his accusers.

Girard has suggested the possibility that Greek myths, like the one that recounts the destruction of Pentheus in Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, the Dionysian *diasparagmos*, are founded on the dim memories of real events of collective murder. For example, the hundred eyes of the “hundred-eyed Argos” of Greek myth suggest those of an enraged crowd in the grip of a sacrificial crisis, frenzied by the lust for retribution and drawn to select a victim on whom to vent the violence that its members might otherwise exercise on one other. At first this example might seem implausible. Io is the object of Zeus’s lust and has been turned into a cow as a disguise to conceal her from Hera. In some versions of the myth, the monster merely acts as a sentinel over Io for the jealous Hera and does not inflict violence. But Argos does his job at the behest of Hera, who is consumed with hatred for her rival. In his version of the myth, Aeschylus describes the gadfly as the “ghost of earth-born Argos” who was killed by Hermes.<sup>15</sup> The wrath of Hera extends through Argos to the gadfly, to Io. Argos, “whose anger knew no limits,” looks for Io’s traces everywhere, while after his death the gadfly pursues and persecutes her across the

earth like “a god-sent scourge.” The “hundred-eyed” stare of the monster operates not only as a passive surveillance but the disguised, or “repressed,” agent of transference, contagious guilt, and persecution. Like the many-eyed stares of the members of a vengeful crowd, the “evil eyes” of Argos invest their victim Io with guilt but also, in the form of the gadfly, subject her to heartless persecution.<sup>16</sup>

Provided the resulting frenzy is severe enough, a crowd in the grip of a sacrificial crisis may contain the victim’s relatives, even his or her parents, who have lost their senses and no longer recognize their own family member. The central horror of *The Bacchae*, of course, is that Pentheus’ mother Agave is one of the crowd that tears him apart. The monstrosity of Argos, like that of the gadfly, is a disguised memory of a social plague of vengeance and undifferentiation in which society implodes and each becomes the enemy double of the other. Seen in this light, the Argos myth becomes a potent image of undifferentiation because it loses the remoteness of the fairy tale: it is composed of elements drawn from history and not from fantasy alone.

### **Persecution and the Double**

In *The Wrong Man*, the scene in the insurance office is not enough on its own to suggest that Hitchcock is aware of the scapegoat mechanism, or that he is re-enacting a modern version of a Dionysian *diasparagmos*. But it does suggest his awareness of the potential for atavistic violence and victimization, not to mention the deep potential for social disorder even in the humdrum confines of an office, and this by a process of imitation and contagion. The young women in the insurance office become a microcosm of society,

the fears of social anarchy of which are aroused by unsolved crime or even by personal injury, and which is anxious to find the culprit to recover its equilibrium. In response to this fear, the young women in the office identify the “wrong man” and the police are dispatched. Out of duty or pressure from the public or their superiors, they, too, seem compelled to misidentify the culprit. Corroboration of this claim is found in the sequence in which Balestrero is arrested by two policemen.

Police appear very early on in the film. The first time we see them is when Balestrero, the night before his visit to the insurance office, leaves work for home.



Framing Balestrero between two officers is a standard foreshadowing of the fateful forces that will soon impinge on him. More importantly, though, it is the first instance of the visual and narrative doubling that is integral to the structure of the film. In the first place, Balestrero is in trouble because a physical double has robbed some stores. The film is

riddled with scenes that are either repeated twice or contain characters that are twinned. Balestrero has two sons that compete for his attention. He and his wife have a disconcerting encounter with two girls when they are looking for someone who will provide Balestrero with an alibi. Two detectives appear early in the film to arrest Balestrero and subject him to harsh interrogation. The sequence of the arrest itself emphasizes the symmetry between the two detectives. The construction and editing of this sequence confirms the pervasive and deliberate structure of doubling in the film.<sup>17</sup>

In the scene in which Balestrero is apprehended, he is led towards the police car by the two detectives, who grip him tightly by the arms on either side. When he enters the car he sits between them, and Hitchcock evokes a claustrophobic and tense atmosphere with a series of isomorphic point-of-view shots from Balestrero's perspective. Balestrero looks to one side and then the other to see the twinned profiles of his persecutors.



In the front of the car is a driver whose persecutory stare is framed by the rear-view mirror.



The sequence of shots, showing the profiles of both detectives that flank Balestrero on either side in the car, reveals a strict symmetry between the two officers. They are visual twins. In the geometrical centre of Balestrero's forward-looking gaze we see the persecutory stare from the driver, which echoes the stares of workers in the insurance office. The determination of the officers to find Balestrero guilty is expressed further in casual banter in the car, during which they suggest that Balestrero is living a "high life" in the club where he works or that he may have gambling debts that might have driven him to steal, even though none of this is true. Their interrogation of Balestrero in the precinct is shot in a way that emphasizes their collusion; an exchange of looks underlines their mimetic and reciprocal incitement to victimize Balestrero and to find him guilty.



His fate is sealed when his difference from the real criminal is erased by a casual mistake on his part. He is asked to reproduce the wording of the note the robber wrote for the insurance teller and he makes the same spelling mistake. The detectives are exultant.

The detectives' attribution of minor vices to Balestrero bears some resemblance to the standard accusations made of the scapegoat. Balestrero is not accused of incest or parricide, but the officers' determination to ascribe anti-social and prurient tendencies to Balestrero is in similar territory. The fear of crime and the pressure to find a perpetrator is the modern version of the sacrificial crisis, which all too often engenders false convictions, public outcry for punishment, and wrongful incarceration on the slimmest of evidence.

It has been noted by many critics that Hitchcock demonstrates in his narratives a consistent fear of the collapse of human order and an awareness of its fragility in the face of irrational forces.<sup>18</sup> It has not been sufficiently emphasized, however, that the root of

that fear is undifferentiation. The structural and thematic doubles in a variety of films, and especially *The Wrong Man*, are the signs of that same undifferentiation in myth and literature that Girard subjects to such penetrating analysis. The dread of undifferentiation is everywhere in Hitchcock's narratives, especially in his repeated use of the theme of the double. At the same time that *The Wrong Man* was in the script development stage, Hitchcock himself directed an episode of his television series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, which was a thinly veiled re-working of Dostoyevsky's short novel, *The Double*. In this episode, a mild-mannered office worker finds his life is turned upside down when a double begins to impersonate him, do his job more efficiently, and even impress his friends and his own servant. When the double is successful in replacing him entirely, it is clear that undifferentiation is the origin of his demise. The same applies to Manny Balestrero. Balestrero is undone by a casual mistake that leads others to conclude his undifference from the robber. Both, in the eyes of society, become cyphers. In *The Wrong Man*, however, this crisis of undifferentiation is not only an individual, psychological crisis but a social one as well.

### **Violence and the Burden of Guilt**

When Balestrero is released on bail from temporary incarceration in prison, the crisis of undifferentiation breaks out anew in the relationship between Balestrero and his wife Rose. A harmonious and happy family is now shattered as Rose suffers a breakdown. A kind of hostility erupts in Rose that destroys the bond of trust between them. The crisis begins when their hopes for a vindicating alibi are crushed: two crucial witnesses of

Balestrero's whereabouts on the night of the crime turn out to be dead. When they have a subsequent meeting with the lawyer, Rose shows signs of hopelessness and mental instability. But the extent of her breakdown is only evident when Balestrero returns home one night from work and finds what is described in the unpublished script as "a strange tableau."<sup>19</sup> Rose sits in her chair, her bed neatly made at a time of the night when normally she would be fast asleep. What follows is an exchange between the two that shows the extent of her paranoia and feelings of persecution. At first she begins by blaming herself for her troubles. But the feelings of guilt quickly metamorphose into aggression when she misinterprets Balestrero's suggestion to have their children stay with their grandparents as an attack upon herself. Her status as mother is in question, and her once trusted husband now seems suspect. Her despair at being the arbitrary object of persecution now rebounds on her love for her husband. She imitates his accusers, adopts their desire to victimize, and now says to him that he indeed might be guilty. She is infected inwardly by that same crisis of undifferentiation that has engulfed both Balestrero and his accusers. In this intimate scene between a hitherto trusting couple that escalates from suspicion to outright attack, Rose's accusations culminate in a blow that she delivers with a hairbrush to Balestrero's head. It glances off a bedroom mirror and Hitchcock offers a powerful representation of disintegration and undifferentiation in the image of Balestrero in the cracked mirror.



But this shot also suggests the full reach of the war of all against all in which even family members are swept up in the cycle of retribution, where none is innocent, and a scapegoat

is randomly chosen. Rose's lashing out against Balestrero is not remote from the response of the women in the insurance office, but its final and fatal echo in the internal lives of both Rose and Balestrero.

It is tempting here to attribute to Rose, as does the script, a "persecution mania"<sup>20</sup> that bears no relation to reality. But this is to miss the point of the film's shift of perspective from Balestrero to Rose. Rose's apprehension of the situation of lurking dangers everywhere is not entirely unrealistic. Most people live with the belief that the detectives repeatedly state to Balestrero: an innocent man has nothing to fear. Rose discovers through experience that this is far from true. She realizes not only this rather unsettling fact but also that many others are eager to assist in one's downfall. Regardless of justice, one can be chosen at random for persecution. The personal guilt she feels, out of all proportion to her real responsibility, is the inner psychic reflection of that unlimited irrational violence she sees in the eyes of her persecutors. It is this vision of the infinitude of violence and victimization that destabilizes her. When Balestrero observes that she doesn't seem to care about his plight anymore, Rose replies: "Don't you see that it doesn't do any good to care? No matter what you do they've got it fixed so it goes against you. It doesn't matter how innocent you are or how hard you try – they'll find you guilty!" While Rose seems to speak "in a way that is quite unrelated to ordinary life and its circumstances,"<sup>21</sup> she is in fact giving a very exact description of the extraordinary situation of a sacrificial crisis that issues in the selection of a scapegoat. It is, moreover, told from the perspective of the victim of that crisis, who looks about her and sees not a single person to defend her from the mob.

In the grip of this paranoid but exact vision but without the intellectual or moral resources to confront it, it is not surprising that Rose turns the aggression of the crowd upon herself in the form of guilt, and then towards her husband. The avalanche of hatred she perceives from the world around her is now turned on him: “How do I know you’re not guilty? You could be, you could be!” Not only does she begin to blame him for their victimization because he borrowed money, but she also visualizes their complete destruction at the hands of their persecutors: “They spoiled your alibi! They’ll fix it somehow so they can smash us! And they will! They’ll smash us down!” The vision of metaphysical violence for Rose is so compelling that, like Agave in *The Bacchae*, she is no longer able to recognize or respond to her own kin. The cycle of retribution has been internalized. She carries the stain of violence in the lacerations suffered by her own psyche.

### **Concluding *The Wrong Man***

Hitchcock’s use of the point of view perspective in this and other films is rooted in his determination to place the viewer in the role of the victim. He repeats cinematically what Girard has suggested is the historical contribution of Christianity itself: that it brought to consciousness the perspective of the victim of persecution and revealed its sources in the scapegoat mechanism. It is perhaps no coincidence that the doctrine and iconography of Catholicism often surfaces in his films, which for the most part can be described as secular suspense dramas. In the conclusion of the film, frustrated by his bad luck, Balestrero is shown facing an image of Christ and silently praying. What follows is a

transition from a closeup on Balestrero's face to a street scene in which the real robber appears, his face emerging from Balestrero's in a lap dissolve.



This dissolve occurs just before Balestrero's double, the real criminal, is caught committing another crime. Because of a lucky arrest, Balestrero's "difference," his true identity, together with his connection with the social order, is restored. Ironically, this is announced with a dissolve that plays upon his prior confusion with the double. Though Balestrero is obviously relieved at the turn of events, his later encounter with Rose in the asylum in which she has been placed reminds him that the scars of the incident still remain. Balestrero's difference is restored, but not Rose's sanity. Rose remains dully unresponsive even in the face of Balestrero's acquittal. The film was originally supposed to end with Balestrero's exit from the home where Rose was to have remained, but was amended during production when it was revealed that the real Rose had been released from treatment.<sup>22</sup> The new ending---a written denouement, Hollywood style, announces the eventual recovery of Rose---feels tacked on and unpersuasive. The prior scenes of Rose's painful psychological withdrawal from her husband leave the strongest impression on the viewer, as if the role of scourge that is taken by the court in the first part of the film has now devolved upon Rose.

*The Wrong Man* distills the essence of violence and traces it to the sacred. Where it is most powerful, in the sequences that follow Balestrero through interrogation, arraignment, and imprisonment, it shows with searing economy that "the experience of the prisoner is, from the outset, an experience of being violently dominated, and it is colored from the beginning by the fear of being violently treated."<sup>23</sup> What Hitchcock portrays here is the victim at his most exposed, when he stands trembling and helpless before a force that is irresistible. Both Balestrero's and Rose's experiences duplicate the plight of the scapegoat before a mob, which Girard claims stands at the violent origin of

both ritual and, by descent, the court system. What was present at the birth of the sacred in the establishment of ritual sacrifice is still present in the scandalous failures of justice when an innocent man is falsely accused. Hitchcock's recourse to Catholic iconography in the film is natural considering it reflects the suffering shared by Christ and Emmanuel Balestrero, two men who are falsely accused.

Mimetic theory explains the shift in the narrative from Balestrero to his wife Rose, which some critics have judged problematic. This is not a narrative failure, but a very significant case in which Hitchcock, in shaping the narrative with his screenwriter, has determined to follow out both the social and personal dimensions of the scapegoat mechanism. His knowledge of this mechanism is not theoretical, but springs from the instincts of an artist who keenly perceives the inner workings of the human passions and depicts them intuitively. Hitchcock's cinema suggests the same origins of human culture that Girard outlines in the following quotation:

There is a unity that underlies not only all mythologies and rituals but the whole of human culture, and this unity of unities depends upon a single mechanism, continually functioning because perpetually misunderstood – the mechanism that assures the community's spontaneous and unanimous outburst of opposition to the surrogate victim.<sup>24</sup>

In acknowledging the pervasive presence of this mechanism in human culture, Girard also asserts the historical uniqueness of the insight into the victim mechanism that is afforded by the Biblical perspective. The victimization of Manny Balestrero is comparable to the victimization of Christ or the misfortunes of Job, and arguably would fail to resonate with an audience that did not already share the cultural experience of archetypal Biblical images of the scapegoat. After all, these images fertilized the entire Western tradition of art and literature, not just the cinema of Hitchcock. Furthermore,

those who would argue that the influence of the Catholic tradition on Hitchcock's work is limited perhaps do not fully appreciate the importance of the innocent victim in his cinema, which is reflected in his stylistics as much as in his choice of subject matter. Hitchcock's wizardry with point-of-view perspective, down to the travelling POV shot that is his trademark, cannot be separated from a moral perspective that concerns itself radically with victimization. The outwardly secular masterpieces of horror, *Psycho* and *The Birds*, are unthinkable without that perspective and the stylistics that Hitchcock refined to express it.

If Chabrol and Rohmer misconceived Hitchcock as a Jansenist Catholic, it was because they misconstrued, or did not realize, the full significance of the transfer of guilt or of exchange. As John Orr has observed, "exchange" is the "substance," the only substance, of his cinematic form."<sup>25</sup> The focus in Hitchcock's work is not the incomprehensible vertical abandonment of the individual by a hidden God, but the quite comprehensible (if sometimes misconstrued) horizontal dereliction worked by the desires, the contagious violence of other human beings. Hitchcock does not just point the finger at Balestrero's persecutors, however, but also at Balestrero's silent co-operation with them. The propositions of fate are always met by the responses and stances of the human self. The recommendation from Balestrero's mother that he must pray, and his decision to do so before the picture of Christ, precede the chance discovery of the true culprit in the robberies. Hitchcock seems to suggest that Balestrero is just as responsible as his accusers to react to chance and fate, but also that virtue comes about by an exchange, in this case with his mother. By his action Balestrero breaks the chain of mimetic contagion and refuses the despairing response that has consumed the mind of his

wife. It is indeed human error, the failure to resist flawed but contagious human desire that works injustice and subjects the innocent to suffering and dereliction. The courage to resist the tide may indeed come from a source that must be supernatural if it is to be effective. But on this Hitchcock remains resolutely silent.

If both good and evil, or sin, come about by exchange, it stands somewhat at odds with the modern emphasis on the unique individual who struggles alone with his conscience. It seems to suggest the integral, mutually dependent relationship of self and other. Both sin and virtue have their origin in the inevitable fact that desire, both for good and for evil, is contagious. Hitchcock's suggestion of the instability of social order, mounting with disturbing inevitability in the series of films that culminates in the avian apocalypse of *The Birds*, is tempered with the conviction that our relation to others is never completely severed or futile. But it is leavened by dangers that lurk in the malleability of desire and the subjection of our wills to processes that are more than individual. In this he remains not just an entertainer, but a Catholic realist.

1. Jean-Luc Godard, "Review of *The Wrong Man*," in *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard*, ed. Jean Narboni et al (New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1986), 49.
2. A.H. Weiler, rev. of *The Wrong Man*, *The New York Times* (24 Dec. 1956).
3. Truffaut, Francois, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 243. For further background on Hitchcock's intentions for and opinions on the film, see Patrick McGilligan, *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light* (New York: Harpercollins, 2003), 531-45.
4. Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer, *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films*, trans. Stanley Hochman (New York, N.Y.: F. Ungar, 1979).
5. John Orr, *Hitchcock and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cinema* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2005). Orr is one of the few to make this connection between Girard and Hitchcock (39-40) but his discussion of the issue is all too brief. For examples of how Girard can be used to interpret Hitchcock and other film-makers see David Humbert, "Desire and Monstrosity in the Disaster Film: Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture*, 17 (2010), 87-104; and Vaughn Roberts, "Too Much is Not Enough: Paul Verhoeven, Rene Girard, and Femme (Fa)Tale," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 15: 2 (2000): 233-45. See, also, the following review of Orr's book by David Sterritt: "Hitchcock,

Hume, and the Matrix of Modern Cinema,” *Film-Philosophy* 11.3 (December, 2007): 238-46; available online: <http://www.film-philosophy.com/index.php/f-p/article/view/143/103>.

6. Slavoj Žižek, “In His Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large,” *The Symptom: Theory, Poetry, Fiction and Contemporary Art* 4 (Spring 2003). Available on-line: <http://www.lacan.com/boldgazef.htm>.

7. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1979), 92.

8. Girard, *Violence*, 68-88.

9. Girard, *Violence*, 276.

10. Robert M. Cover, “Violence and the Word,” *Yale Law Journal* 95 (1986), 1607.

11. Girard, *Violence*, 22.

12. Cover, “Violence,” 1608.

13. By way of example, Chabrol and Rohmer speak of the confrontation of Balestrero with his double, the true culprit in the robberies that have been committed: “the looks exchanged between the man falsely accused [Balestrero] and the man who is really guilty, looks by means of which – as though they were transmission wires – the ‘exchange’ takes place as the former passes his guilt to another” (Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, 151).

14. René Girard, in collaboration with J.-M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. S. Bann and M. Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 116-17.

15. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. David Grene, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1942), line 567.

16. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, lines 679-85. It is also significant that, when Io makes her first appearance before Prometheus, she mentions not the one hundred eyes but the “ten thousand eyes” of Argos (570). Of course, this mistake may illustrate her state of frenzy and fear from the gadfly’s sting; perhaps it is the verbal expression of a paranoid hallucination. But if the myth is indeed flexible on this point, it could also further bolster the claim that a historical scene of collective violence and victimization is lurking behind the myth, thinly disguised. The scene breaks through in the form of the paranoid vision of Io. From the point of view of the victim, the apparent number of eyes of even a small, enraged crowd may indeed, in the fear of the moment, swell to thousands.

17. For examples of narrative doubling in the film, see Godard, *Godard on Godard*, 53: “Each crucial scene in *The Wrong Man* has in effect its respondent, its ‘double,’ that justifies it on the narrative level while at the same time ‘redoubling’ its intensity on the dramatic level. Rose’s burst of laughter echoes that of the little girls who now live in the apartment belonging to one of the missing witnesses. The domestic scene where she hits Balestrero is the double – the negative – of the one at the beginning of the film in which she jokingly expresses mild doubts about the probability of being happy in this world.”

18. Robin Wood, in his ideological reading of *Shadow of a Doubt*, detects “skepticism and nihilism” behind Hitchcock’s portrayal of the small-town family in the film. He discerns in this and other elements in the film “the whole Hitchcockian sense of life at the mercy of terrible, unpredictable forces that have to be kept down” (see *Hitchcock’s Films Revisited* [New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2002], 298-99). Wood, unfortunately, is limited in his interpretation by a doctrinaire Freudianism that traces all conflicts in Hitchcock’s films back to the primordially sexual; the essence of Hitchcock’s view is, for Wood, “that ordered life depends on the rigorous and *unnatural* [italics Wood’s] suppression of a powerfully seductive underworld of desire” (Wood, *Hitchcock’s Films*, 94). Freud’s hostility to religion and skepticism about

civilization are here uneasily blended with Wood's Hitchcock. Since Wood himself finds true authenticity in polymorphous instinctual liberation rather than in the nuclear family, he falsely assumes that such views are present in Hitchcock's work. For more on the limitations of Freudian theory in accounting for violence see David Humbert, "René Girard and Philip Rieff on the Mystique of Transgression," *Society* 48.3 (2011): 242-46.

19. Anderson, Maxwell and Angus MacPhail, *The Wrong Man*, unpublished script (1956), 124. Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library.

20. Anderson and MacPhail, *The Wrong Man*, 125.

21. Anderson and MacPhail, *The Wrong Man*, 125.

22. See Bill Krohn, *Hitchcock at Work* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 180.

23. Cover, "Violence," 1608.

24. Girard, *Violence*, 299-300.

25. Orr, *Hitchcock*, 41.

### References

Aeschylus. "Prometheus Bound." Trans. David Grene. *The Complete Greek Tragedies, Vol. I*. Eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942. 310-51.

Anderson, Maxwell and Angus MacPhail. *The Wrong Man*. Unpublished script, 1956. Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library.

Cover, Robert M. "Violence and the Word." *Yale Law Journal* 95 (1986): 1601-25.

Girard, René, in collaboration with J.-M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. Transl. Stephan Bann and M. Metteer. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.

---. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1979.

Godard, Jean-Luc. *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard*. Eds. Jean Narboni and Tom Milne. New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1986.

Humbert, David. "Desire and Monstrosity in the Disaster Film: Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture* 17 (2010): 87-104.

---. "René Girard and Philip Rieff on the Mystique of Transgression," *Society* 48. 3 (2011): 242-46.

*I Confess*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock. 1953. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004. DVD.

Krohn, Bill. *Hitchcock at Work*. London: Phaidon Press, 2000.

*The Lodger*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock. 1927. Los Angeles, CA: MGM, 2008, DVD.

McGilligan, Patrick. *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light*. New York: Harpercollins, 2003.

Orr, John. *Hitchcock and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cinema*. New York: Wallflower Press, 2005.

Roberts, Vaughn. "Too Much is Not Enough: Paul Verhoeven, Rene Girard, and Femme (Fa)Tale." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15. 2 (2000): 233-45.

Truffaut, Francois, with the collaboration of Helen G. Scott. *Hitchcock*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984.

Wood, Robin. *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2002.

*The Wrong Man*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock. 1957. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004. DVD.

Žižek, Slavoj. "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large." *The Symptom: Theory, Poetry, Fiction and Contemporary Art* 4 (2003). Available on-line: <http://www.lacan.com/boldgazef.htm>.