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BOOK REVIEW

SEX BOMB THE BOOK

In(ter)sectal Wars of Reinscription in Hitchcock's Cryptonymies

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Tom Cohen, Hitchcock's Cryptonymies: Volume I. Secret Agents

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Tom Cohen, Hitchcock's Cryptonymies: Volume II. War Machines

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That rumbling you hear? It's the sound of the universal reading room crashing down in a epoch-shattering "gran mal d'archive," taking along with it the whole of the "tele-technic principles, auratic habits, prehistorial and Enlightenment epistemes" that, according to Tom Cohen, constitute the aesthetic as a biopolitical program.[1] Dropping all pretense of being "mere play," the aesthetic over the past century has increasingly revealed itself as what Cohen regards as the arche-site of our sensory programming—the pre-cognitive motherboard onto which the technologies of our perception and memory are hard-coded and where, accordingly, the very concepts of agency and the human itself are pre-defined. It is hard to imagine a clearer accounting of the aesthetic's ideological and political potential. It ought not to surprise, then, that it is at this faculty three of the most powerful thinkers of the twentieth century—Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man—have, in different ways, trained their theoretical arsenal. The spectral presences of each of these anti-aestheticians can readily be felt behind Cohen's ravaging of the traditional categories of mimetic humanism, as he continues his deconstruction of the aesthetic programs lurking behind such terms as "aura," "nature," "earth," "sun," "memory," "personification," "anthropomorphism," "home," "identity," "the state," the "non-human other," "family," "time," and "sexuality" that

[1] Tom Cohen, "Climate Change in the Aesthetic State (a Memory (Dis)Order), *Parallax* 10.3 (2004): 83-98. Hereafter, Climate Change.

he began with *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* and *Ideology and Inscription: "Cultural Studies" after Benjamin, de Man, and Bakhtin.*[2]

In his latest offering, the two-volume set, *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies (Secret Agents and War Machines*), Cohen's target is ironically modest: in Cohen's sights is nothing less than the aesthetic state itself, which he describes in shorthand as the "regime of the Book." Hitchcock, by Cohen's own admission, serves him as a sort of "Rosetta stone" for re-inspecting the event of cinema, one whose re-citation of the image—the key site of mimetic identification—will decisively transform and alter the anthropomorphic horizon we have inherited from the literary era. Privileged figure of Romantic transcendence and saturated with the quasi-religious concept of "aura," the image unexpectedly finds itself in Cohen's destructions the locus of a battle over reading, comprising a "pan-graphematic and performative site in which forces of legibility compete to access contesting pasts and alternative temporal configurations" (Climate Change, 87). The image, arch figure of aesthetic ideology, will find itself the unwitting agent of what Cohen, following Benjamin, calls cinematic "de-auraticization."

Hitchcock's Cryptonymies thus offers an implicit response to a call we have been hearing for while now in a variety of circles for a "return to the imaginary"—the register in Lacanian psychoanalysis linked to the senses (among which the visual holds a special place), narcissism and identification. As a result of the imaginary subject's constitutive tendency toward miscognition (of the Other and itself) through which it engages its destructive relations of rivalry and aggression, the imaginary is most often regarded as the infantile bad boy of the three psychic registers (imaginary, symbolic, real) whose mis-identifications, according to the standard psychoanalytic narrative of the subject's ethical trajectory, require overcoming by symbolic recognition. Nevertheless, there is a growing feeling—which the number of recent books concerned with beauty and affect (especially love) suggest is not just confined to Lacanian circles—that more focused attention needs to be paid to this imaginary sphere, and precisely for the reasons that Cohen cogently remarks above.[3] For to the extent that the imaginary is the original register in which the ego constitutes itself as a narcissistic subject, on top of which all other subsequent identifications are built, it is the Ur-site of the subject's cognitive and, as I will suggest later, sexual programming. It is in the imaginary—or to go back to Cohen's term, the aesthetic—after all, that we learn to make "wholes" out of the bundle of sensory impressions that constitute us in Lacan's famous mirror stage. One might be justified,

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[2] Tom Cohen, *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Cohen, *Ideology and Inscription: "Cultural Studies" after Benjamin, de Man, and Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[3] See for example, Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the Death of the Subject* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001) and Marc de Kesel,'s forthcoming *Ethics and Eros: A Close Reading of Lacan's Seminar VII* (Albany: SUNY Press).

then, in claiming that the interests of the imaginary are precisely those of classical aesthetics, namely, a concern with the delineation of outlines or, *form*.

Considering what is at stake—nothing less than the constitution of our world as representation—Cohen's figure of war to describe the contest taking place over the image must be taken, I believe, completely literally. This is a war waged not only at the level of epistemology, that is, over the cognitive and sensory ordering that has given us our habitual Platonic models of light, subjectality, reason, sight. It is simultaneously a war *within* the image itself to the extent that this battle will be reflexively doubled, re-folded into Hitchcock's narratives in the shape of a counter-logic that assaults the "home state's regimes of identification" (Secret Agents, 239) from the inside. Throughout *Secret Agents*, Cohen tracks an assortment of villains who, like Hitchcock, employ the traditional metaphorics of light against itself, this time as a medium of Benjaminian "shock." "At different sites," Cohen notes, "Hitchcock will identify his cinematic assault with a nuclear blast, a boy's futuristic raygun, a mock worship of asolarity" (Climate Change, 89).

At the beginning of his first volume, Cohen helpfully provides a "user's guide" of these "secret agents," embodiments of a counter-aesthetic program that surreptitiously perforates the edges of our anthropomorphic horizon. Here, along with black cats, cartoon birds, silver wrapped chocolate bonbons, buttons, rotating black suns, eggs, small persistently underfoot dogs, one finds an entry on "teeth," which he glosses in typically deadpan fashion: "the eye metonymically transcoded as site of masticulation, ingestion, the lips as eyelids, teeth as shredders, where the white skeleton protrudes" (Secret Agents, 62). Or again, "fire": "Empedoclean inversion: the nonidentity of the spectral cinematic subject emerges from the ashes of an incineration of lights" (Secret Agents, 55). Or yet again "legs, steps": "couriers of signification, including the phonetic or graphematic mark, footsteps without feet" (Secret Agents, 56).

In addition, as if behind or beyond (to use a contested term for Cohen) each such "zoomorphemic" figure, Cohen detects the presence of even stranger visual objects—letters and marking systems that seem to serve as each creature's conceptual wire-frame. While of necessity a "secret agent" occupies (at least temporarily) a place within the mimetic regime, albeit always as the disturbing and destructive "other" of a Platonic binarism, Cohen discovers in Hitchcock an alternative representational system that supplies what I propose to call the "laws" on which his corporealized traces subsist: the letters, bar slashes, relay systems, writing, reading, telepathic and telegraphic communication structures that Cohen unveils as operating a hidden, alternative graphic and/or phonetic system in each of the films he discusses. Hence the entries in the user's guide on reading ("almost always women. Almost always interrupted," Secret Agents, 61), on the letter X ("an operative chi- or chiasmus isolating the systemic exchange of binary values, including referents," Secret Agents, 63), on the phrase "sounds like" ("alerts to phenomenatic relays and structure of dialogue or sound, of its role in networks of punning connectives and scriptive

agencies," Secret Agents, 62)—not to mention his entire, indeed stupendous cogitation on the numbers 1 and 3, the letters M, A, R, and C, A, the triangle, and so on. Although each volume's umbrella title "Cryptonymies" seems intended to reference the entirety of Hitchcock's underhand signifying system, these "citational" or metalinguistic markers clearly most mesmerize Cohen as they dodge prescriptive meaning and weave alternate histories, temporalities, perceptual and cognitive systems out of the twisted bars and letteral rubble thrown up by their animatic double-agents' bombs.

Here, at the border of the aesthetic state, in the badlands "beyond roads and transit" (Climate Change, 97) where all our habitual technologies of perception and cognition are cast into the smithying Empedoclean fire, Cohen declares war. It is a declaration that I sincerely hope will put decisive end to the lingering question of whether deconstruction is or can be "political," for long before 9/11 Cohen has been reporting word from the front-lines of "coming wars of reinscription": successions of cognitive guerilla skirmishes that are to decide what constitutes "time [. . .] representation, mnemonic management, experience, gender, perception" (Secret Agents, 244) in the aftermath of the nuclear "event" he calls Hitchcockian cinema. As Cohen's terminology implies—he frequently describes it as a "prefigural" (Secret Agents, 82), or, in a nod to Benjamin, "prehistorial," "aterra" (War Machines, 137) or "atopos" (War Machines, 89)—this (non-)site of reinscription will be no round-table gathering in some Habermasian-declared Green Zone—as if hostilities could momentarily cease while we formulate a new constitution that meets the barest minimum of the demands of the multiple warring parties, as we fracture into smaller and smaller political units, each claiming our unique individual traditional "rights." As Cohen's term "war" cannot fail to make us keenly aware, any "political" institutions that might emerge from the Hitchcockian cinematic asault must be the spoils of a victory, a wresting away of perceptual and cognitive territory from the Other by *force*. For Cohen, at least, has never lost sight of the original "scandalon" of the Law and the founding act of violence on which its power rests: to Cohen, all police are mafia, all banks brothels. One recalls Paul de Man's arresting statement, which never seems far from Cohen's mind: "history [. . .] is the emergence of a language of power out of a language of cognition," which the author of *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies* seems to gloss thus: history (understood as the programming "technologies" of perception and understanding) falls to the last man standing once every traditional cognitive and sensory framework has been pulverized by the collapse of the regime of "the Book."[4] The event that triggered this—the assassin's bullet that brought down the administration of our "universal reading room"—is cinema, *Hitchcock*.

Despite my pacifist tendencies, I feel prompted to pick up Cohen's gauntlet, since one cannot count on others to fight one's own battles. Here is the claim I propose to stake on a plot of Cohen's strange new (a)territory: the coming wars he speaks of are sex

[4] Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed and intro. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 133.

wars. Or, more accurately, the war of reinscription is sexuation. Clearly this will require some unpacking.

One might begin by performing a sort of "diagnostics" of Cohen's reading practice, to which the title of the volumes, *Hitchcock's Cryptonomies*, already points the way. Put simply, Cohen reads paranoiacally. He discovers hidden signifiers, trans-coded meanings, the presence of yet-undetonated linguistic bombs in the folds of the Hitchcockian landscape. Referencing one another across Hitchcock's oeuvre, these "cryptonyms" generate a secret language or "citational network," as Cohen calls it, whose ultimate signified comes to be located in a central "figure," Hitchcock, whose cameo famously appears in each film. As he thereby re-marks the border separating film and life, fiction and reality, "Hitchcock" parabasitically dismantles the enframing four corners of our representational home, to reconstitute them in other shapes and forms, most notably, for Cohen, into the letter H of Hitchcock himself that Cohen detects criss-crossing the director's oeuvre. H, for example, in the first letter of many of the characters' names: Huntley, Haverstock, Henriette, Harry, Henry, Harriet, H.H., Hugheson (Secret Agents, 55). H, more subliminally, repeated in the inevitable shots of train tracks (the train itself always being a "cinematic topos" says Cohen, Secret Agents, 63). H, finally, arriving at its most stripped-down form in what Cohen, following William Rothman, calls the "bar series": a pattern of vertical slashes that turns up without fail in all of Hitchcock's films: in the form of banisters and spiked fences, for example, or in rows of trees or a fabric's design, or again in the bars of a musical score (Secret Agents, xvi). For Rothman, who is credited as having been the first to identify it, the bar series must be regarded as Hitchcock's "signature."

Once one becomes alert to this citational pattern it is hard to avoid, as Cohen finds. Whenever it appears, it alerts one to the presence of a ghostly Other haunting the crytonymist's strangely pregnant universe, an Other we ordinarily fail to sense but which Cohen, more acute to slight glitches in the matrix, unerringly draws into our line of vision. What enables Cohen to detect these "cryptonymic" clues is a strangely lazy kind of eye that lingers uncomprehendingly on bare outlines and forms. Where one ordinarily "sees" say, a tree with Norman Bates beside it (in the famous still image from *Psycho* that Cohen examines in the fifth chapter of *War Machines*), Cohen discovers the letter J, an umbrella, a fish-hook or, ominously in the case of another tree on the horizon, a mushroom cloud. The way Cohen views Hitchcock, in other words, is with what de Man would call "material" vision: a "way of seeing" that momentarily suspends cognitive categories—or rather *precedes* them—to view the world "as poets do."

This expression is of course the famous phrase that de Man, in his essay "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," filches from Kant while developing his own enigmatic notion of "aesthetic vision." Here, first, is the passage from Kant's *Critique of Judgment* that de Man cites in this essay:

> If, then, we call the sight of the starry heaven sublime, we must not place at the foundation of judgment concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings

> and regard the bright points, with which we see the space above us filled, as their suns moving in circles purposively fixed with reference to them; but we must regard it, just as we see it [. . .] as a distant, all-embracing vault [. . .]. Only under such a representation can we range that sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgment ascribes to this object. And in the same way, if we are to call the sight of the ocean sublime, we must not think of it as we ordinarily do, as implying all kinds of knowledge (that are not contained in immediate intuition). [. . .]. To find the ocean nevertheless sublime we must regard it as poets do, merely by what the eye reveals—if it is at rest, as a clear mirror of water only bounded by the heavens; if it is stormy, as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything" (Aesthetic Ideology, 80).

De Man comments on Kant thus:

> The predominant perception, in the Kant passage, is that of the heavens and the ocean as an architectonic construct. [. . .]. [In Kant's passage] the sky does not appear in it as associated in any way with shelter. It is not the construct under which, in Heidegger's terms, we can dwell. In a lesser-known passage from the *Logic* Kant speaks of "a wild man who, from a distance, sees a house of which he does not know the use. He certainly observes the same object as does another, who knows it to be definitely built and arranged to serve as a dwelling for human beings. Yet in formal terms this knowledge of the selfsame object differs in both cases. For the first it is mere intuition [*blosse Anschauung*], for the other both intuition and concept." The poet who sees the heaven as a vault is clearly like the savage [. . .]. He does not see prior to dwelling, but merely sees. (Aesthetic Ideology, 81)

De Man concludes that "the critique of the aesthetic ends up, in Kant, in a formal materialism that runs counter to all values and characteristics associated with aesthetic experience, including the aesthetic experience of the beautiful and the sublime as described by Kant and Hegel themselves." *Blosse Anschuung*, "mere intuition," as de Man reads Kant, amounts to a vision that "to the same extent that [it] is purely material, devoid of any reflexive or intellectual complication, it is also purely formal, devoid of semantic depth and reducible to the formal mathematization or geometricization of pure optics" (Aesthetic Ideology, 83).

Permit me then an initial observation: Cohen's cryptonymic eye is a scanner that "takes in" sensory data from a pre-cognitive position analogous to Kantian aesthetic vision in de Man's account. But, different from the machine-like figures that habitually close out de Man's and de Man-inspired symphonies of illegibility (bizarre Kleistian robotic dancers, stuttering Hegelian automatons, Kantian "flat, third-person" worlds etc.), the chief feature of Cohen's roving, almost Whitmanesque eyeball is that it is "alive," albeit in a most disconcerting kind of way. For, as a second observation, one might say that Cohen's is a perceptual apparatus that, at the same time as it atomizes conventional representational schemas—our usual, Platonic, anthrocentric "frames" for thought—is also engaged in a sort of recombinant therapy.

For this eye not only "kills" what both de Man and Lacan in their in differing yet isomorphic ways have taught us has been dead all along, namely, the solar, anthropomorphic, sheltering "house" of symbolic representation. In the bare rattling playgrounds of a symbolic stripped of all imaginary lures and feints—stripped, that is, of all the fleshly cladding that the word "beauty" or the "aesthetic" has traditionally encompassed—Cohen discovers a yet more disturbing form of "life" radiating out in fractal patterns to infect what is left of the planet. Hearing the "matter" in deconstruction's much vaunted "materiality," Cohen uncovers a bizarre prehistorial parallel world where, stripped of their butterfly wings of symbolic meanings, signifiers regress beyond every silken form of imaginary cocooning and begin to crawl, caterpillar-like, across the screen in an uncanny letteral animation.

The closest conceptual equivalent I can think of is Lacan's myth of the lamella in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the mobile lip or rim of the drive that slithers revenant-like in advance or behind any symbolically-defined form.[5] In Cohen's case, this lip or rim, this cut that is neither dead nor alive (because it is too much alive) is nothing but language itself or, perhaps more accurately, the archaic stuff or building blocks of language: the pre-figural, pre-letteral shapes and sounds that gather under the most embracing use of the term "inscription." Like the Cheshire cat's gashed smile, these free-floating recombinant signifiers appear, vanish and re-emerge as impossible spectral forms whose eerie, bio-inorganic "life" precedes all corporealized clothing or (aesthetic-ideological) "phenomenalization."

Accordingly, this provides a convenient landing-point to examine Cohen's critique of Slavoj Žižek's reading of Hitchcock which only at the most superficial level concerns the old complaint of Žižek's own paranoiac compulsion to "find" Lacan, *avant la lettre*, anywhere he looks. Rather, for Cohen, Žižek's real failure lies in overlooking or, in the cryptonymist's stronger words, "evading" any allusion to language whatsoever (Secret Agents, 46). When Cohen locates this uncanny vitality in the form of language itself—in the "heart" of the symbolic, to momentarily lapse back into organic metaphors—he is thus clearly trying to distance himself (if a little too rapidly to my mind) from any easy comparison one might make between his cryptonymic or, if I may risk a pun (since he certainly would), impossible or "koanic" vision and the Lacanian real—or at least Žižek's particular brand of it.

Briefly, Cohen's main problem with Žižek (admittedly a fairly early Žižek) lies in certain of the latter's formulations regarding something that lies "beyond" the reach of the symbolic. Cohen notes how Žižek "assumes that any evocation of linguistic elements leads only to the metonymic chains of the symbolic," and he observes how the psychoanalytic theorist "is determined to demonstrate that he, or 'Lacan' is 'beyond the wall of language'" (Secret Agents, 46). Žižek is thus, for this reason, incurably idealist to Cohen's mind—a reproach that encompasses in shorthand the usual deconstructive criticism of Lacanian psychoanalysis, (that is, that the phallus is

[5] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977) 187.

a transcendental or "theological" category).[6] But what differentiates Cohen from the majority of his deconstructive cohorts, all of whom share the same scrupulous refusal to grant anything "beyond" or outside linguistic structures, is precisely the "life" Cohen discovers in language's purely formal properties themselves—the strange, hidden, coded linguistic forms and significations that surreptitiously assemble alternative representational frameworks under the nose of the Law itself. In place of the still disquieting but by now somewhat familiar robotic figures who, stripped of their reassuring imaginary masks, populate the post-de Manian landscape, the symbolic left by Cohen's reading event is inhabited by an as-yet unthinkable biolinguistic-technicity that virally attacks and infects every attempt at boundary definition, including and most especially the dividing line between "life" and "death."

My earlier description of what I was calling Cohen's "paranoia" thus requires further nuance in light of his critique of Žižek. Although there is a demonstrably formal pattern to the cryptonymic citational network Cohen detects that clusters around the central node of Hitchcock's signature (in its imaginary guise, the cameo; in its symbolic form, the bar slash series), such a signature is about as far away as one can get from conventional notions of the auteur director for which Hitchcock, within a certain vein of film criticism, has traditionally stood. Despite his ground-breaking discovery of the bar series, Rothman, for example, inevitably lapses back into the imaginary trap of trying to give mimetic content to this purely formal marking system, Cohen says, when he interprets it as "associated with sexual fear and the specific threat of loss or control or breakdown," attempting in this way, as Cohen puts it "to pile up another auteurist coup" (Secret Agents, xvii). Offering a considerably more unsettling vision, Cohen describes this formal pattern as something that precedes "the coalescence of perception, image or sound, or even letter" (Secret Agents, xvii), while in its imaginary guise as the cameo, Hitchcock's signature "marks the disarticulation of the mimetic protocol by the very logic that should uphold its program" (Secret Agents, 243). To the extent that the H signature marks purely "a point of repetition," it cannot be enlisted in the service of a mimetic humanism revolving around a solar metaphorics of light, home, earth, time, identity, memory and so on. It cannot, in other words, be the signing of an imaginary counter-part of the viewing subject—albeit bigger, cleverer, more powerful, etc.—who surreptitiously pulls the strings behind the curtains, proffering intentional clues concealed in chocolate bonbons for the most astute of his audience to decode at their leisure. Cryptonymy, in Cohen's usage, in other words, is not a psychosis.

[6] Cohen comments how "In surpassing metonymy en route to the real or 'the Thing,' Žižek unwittingly returns to metaphor, much as in superseding the signifier he invokes a 'sign' that contains in itself the 'answer of the real.' In moving 'beyond' one form of signifying practice he only moves to another, and triggers regressions to suspect or precritical figures: metaphor, or what might translate his use of 'sign,' symbol" (War Machines, 177). Cohen also notes how as soon as "the problem of material signs" returns in Žižek, they generate a crisis of reading that produce symptomatic "sinthomes" which, while intended to break with "a merely intersubjective model," end up inverting and perpetuating its "theological model." See War Machines, 175-78.

Cryptonymic "paranoia" is something entirely different whose distance from psychotic paranoia can be summed up in this way: to the extent that the psychotic is haunted by an Other whose malevolent traces she detects in the most seemingly innocent of scenes, it is always a complete Other who pre-exists the psychotic subject (even as it assumes new shapes and guises to try to trap the canny psychotic). In cryptonymic paranoia, on the other hand, the Other is definitively incomplete. It is, accordingly, the Other's *lack* the cryptonymist seeks out, pressing as he does against the weak spots in the Other's structural foundations, tapping for hidden passages between seemingly solid symbolic walls in which to plant his pulverizing bombs.

Hence although both psychotics and cryptonymists operate in some sense on the outskirts of the Law, their psychic structures (and hence strategems of "political" resistance) are completely different. To use Lacanian terms now to pick up some speed, insofar as the psychotic "forecloses" the master signifier—the phallus, the cut of castration, the original marker of difference—she inhabits a purely imaginary world. The symbolic, with its life-sustaining metaphor is out of bounds for her such that every signifier immediately—that is to say, unmediatedly—points back to a small other, the inevitable persecuting figure with whom she engages in a life or death struggle for mastery. With the cryptonymist, however, it is not a question of foreclosing the cut of the phallic signifier but, rather, of creating new shapes out of the representational fabric that his unbuttoning of our habitual symbolic quilting points has worked loose. The two volumes of *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies* formalize this two-pronged strategy rather neatly: first, *Secret Agents*—the uncovering of the hidden meanings, codes, secret messages that will blow up the official regime of the Book. Then, *War Machines*: the war that ensues over who will control the symbolic reconstruction (as well as its imaginary/aesthetic re-upholstering) and, in the process, determine the coming definition of "history."

Let us take a closer look at one such "cryptonymic" reading, the eighth chapter from *Secret Agents,* on Hitchcock's *Sabotage,* where the territory contested is precisely the future of words, letters, reading and where the warring parties are none other than literature (in the classical allegorical form of the British seventeenth century poet Edmund Spenser referenced in Detective Ted Spenser's name) and cinema (the Bijou theater in whose anterooms the anarchist Verloc plots his terrorist assault on London). But if one imagines this a merely formal or aesthetic contest between two competing and soon to be obsolete media, I must warn in advance that the ultimate stakes of this war will be nothing less than the constitution of "the human" and, more generally, of "life" itself.

The *Sabotage* plot, in both senses of the word, revolves around a conspiracy to blow up Picadilly Circus, named several times in the film as "the center of the world." Instigated by a "certain foreign power," the terrorist act is to be carried out by Carl Verloc (Oskar Homolka) who exploits a movie theater as a front for his terrorist plans. Verloc is married to "Mrs V" (Sylvia Sydney) whose principal romantic interest in him seems to be the fact that he is kind to and looks after her little brother Stevie.

Stevie himself is a bumbling preteen who, in what would be an unthinkable move in the logic of ordinary representational narrative (that is, the narrative logic of "the Book") is blown up by the bomb Verloc has him carry into London. Hovering at the fringes of this strangely inert and desexualized family is the Detective Ted Spenser who tries to inveigle his way into Mrs V's affections by posing as a neighborly greengrocer in an attempt to get closer to and hopefully to interfere with Verloc's terrorist plans.

Cohen does not find it difficult to see in *Sabotage* an allegory of Hitchcock's filmmaking practice of the time. Released in 1936, at the end of the filmmaker's "British period," *Sabotage* is found to reflect a certain impasse or deadlock confronting the director who, like Verloc's first attempt at causing a politically disruptive event that opens the movie, generates merely entertainment out of his cinematic "bombs." People simply laugh when the lights go out in Verloc/Hitchock's initial filmic act(s) of sabotage. To hit effectively at the state will require more overt, "sturdier" acts of terror if one is to keep ahead of the official regime's seemingly infinite ability to enfold and colonize potentially revolutionary activity back into its existing armature by deeming it mere play, "aesthetic."

Hitchcock's solution to this impasse, as Cohen notes, is simply to speed up, to accelerate. In *Sabotage*, we are given a film that begins with an ending (a blackout), a "family" that has been cut off in advance from any reproductive promise, a female love interest whose asexual screen presence in her sailor boy outfit compromises in advance all of Ted's attempts to fold her allegorically into conventional romantic narratives. Failing the anticipated love story, we have what might otherwise be an alternative narrative interest in the boy Stevie but he is, as I said, astonishingly blown up. As Cohen puts it, in *Sabotage* Hitchcock "suspends 'suspense'" itself (Secret Agents, 149), that is, he suspends the temporal dimension of narrative that traditionally powers the representational engine in the regime of the Book.

Hence time, according to Cohen, is one of the key figures that Hitchcock attacks in this film with his cinematic "time-bombs." The other is nothing less than definition itself, whether of the meaning of "sabotage" or "act" or, meta-reflexively, the definition of definition. The film's opening titles of the dictionary entry on "sabotage" bring this "problem of semantics" to center stage:

> (Mech. shoe or armature of pile, boring-rod, &c. Hence sa-boted (-od_ a [[F. cf. satae shoe, stym. Dub]
>
> Sa-botage, sa-bo-tarj. Willful destruction of buildings or machinery with the object or alarming a group of persons or inspiring public uneasiness.
>
> Sa-bre (-er), n. & v.t. Cavalry sword with a curved blade (the s., military . . .

To raise the question of definition in this way is to launch an assault on words and their meanings comparable to Verloc's bombs, claims Cohen. As he puts it, "By displaying in advance a dictionary definition of sabotage, Hitchcock puts the word, its definition, and definition itself, in question. Words are all sabots, 'mech[anical]

shoes' (says the barely legible opening text) or steps, suggesting by their dismemberment another definition (of definition)" (Secret Agents, 153).

The principal definition *Sabotage* will call into question, the word the film will "sabotage," will be "life." In a series of moves traceable back to a more recognizable form of deconstruction, Cohen identifies a number of cross-overs between seeming binary oppositions, showing how what appeared to be a firm distinction between two opposites collapses under scrutiny. The first of these is the border separating man from animal found, for example, in the aquarium sequence where the explosion of Picadilly Circus is imaged onto a fish tank that, serving as he says as a "deanthropomorphizing screen," displaces "the human" as such (Secret Agents, 156). Next, the division between the sexes will be called into question when, in the same sequence, we overhear a man commenting to his girlfriend how "after laying a million eggs the female oyster changes her sex." The existence of this "counternatural 'nature'—a sabotaging within the premise of natural signs and generation" (Secret Agents, 156)—accordingly cuts off "generation at its source," revealing "Nature" to Cohen as "another front" (Secret Agents, 156), whose creatures "are examples of technicity, animation, changelings belonging to a proactive mimesis without model or copy, a semiophysical morphing—that is, what is fully dissociative from the 'human' archive" (Secret Agents, 156-7).

Last, Cohen interrogates the border separating organic and inorganic "life" by way of an analysis of the famous Disney cartoon sequence that takes place just after Mrs Verloc has heard of Stevie's death. Featuring a bird drawn to look like Mae West, the cartoon performs the musical number, "Who Killed Cock Robin?" The first thing Cohen notes is something very odd about Mrs. V's laughter while she watches the film; it seems distinctly hysterical, "hallucinatory"—Cohen calls it "Homeric" (Secret Agents, 159). Distinct from the "aesthetic" laughter that accompanied Verloc's first attempt at sabotage, Cohen sees Mrs. V's convulsive laughter heralding a catastrophic morphing of both animal and human into sheer graphematicity. Watching the cartoon, Mrs. V. is thus like us, Hitchcock's filmgoing public, viewing a "sheer phenomenalization of form" (160), says Cohen, whose "spectral animation" produces a "life" that is nothing but a "sheerly technical script" (160). The arch figure Cohen finds for this in *Sabotage* is the shorthand a reporter uses to note down the name of the film Stevie was carrying when the time-bomb went off. Cohen observes how "the reporter records the film's title, *Bartholomew the Strangler*, but he does so in shorthand as the camera watches the paper fill with unreadable squiggles—figural traces neither mimetic nor letteral" (151). These "squiggles," Cohen claims, trope "the graphematics of *Sabotage* itself: seemingly mimetic, a mere recording action, it is yet a mode of sheer graphematics whose implications cannot at once be read or accessed" (158). Traced back to such "squiggles,"—nothing but *pure form*—Hitchcockian cinema empties out all existing definitions of "life," "nature," the "human," "gender," "sex," "agency," "memory," "personification," "identity," "the archive," "home," "the family," "the state"; in a word, "aura"—to use the Benjaminian concept that serves

Cohen as an umbrella term—along with the aesthetic-ideological program embodied, or rather, *seemingly* embodied in the era of the Book.

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Given the scale and virtuosity of Cohen's cryptonymic readings, it seems perhaps a little churlish to take him to task but this is nevertheless what I am compelled to do. For what I am about to say reaches into the heart of a central difficulty when assessing the respective "political" efficacy of psychoanalytic and deconstructive stratagems.[7] Let me repeat my earlier assertion: the war of reinscription is sexuation. Cohen's immediate response to this statement would likely be to say that, like Rothman, I have slipped back into the aesthetic program of the Book, insofar as I am attributing *content* to what is purely a *formal* event or disinscription, as he ultimately names it, a little unwillingly, at the end of *War Machines* (War Machines, 263). (Recall how for Rothman the bar series is associated with "sexual fear and the specific threat of loss or control or breakdown.") Yet this is far from what I mean for the simple reason that sexuation, understood in the psychoanalytic sense, has nothing to do with the attribution of content (whether biological or social) but rather, quite literally, with form. Let me put it as unambiguously as possible: the cut of (dis)inscription is the sexuating act. Or again, there is no inscription that is not sexed *because the cut is always a phallic cut.*

I would like now to fast-forward to the second volume, *War Machines*, for it is here we find Cohen's most extended meditation on the cut, whose most powerful formalization is detected in Hitchcock's *The Birds*. In the terrorizing starlings, Cohen discovers "a cut, a black hole or zero converted into proactive assault" (War Machines, 139) that, pecking out eyes, assaults the entire ocularcentric program. For the cryptonymist, it is as if the eviscerating techno-linguistic program of which all of the other animemes are mere phenomenalizations shatters into digital points and now, bent on destruction, returns as sheer avenging marks and cuts (although in the name of what blind "Justice" we will never know). Hence, far from being the avatars of an avenging "nature" or, in another nod to Žižek, Tippi Hedren's sexuality, the birds for Cohen are allied with the pulverizing of any possible "interpretation" and attribution of content, that is, of every possible re-citation within existing signifying networks. Attacking the schoolhouse, the key site of cultural transmission, Cohen finds the birds "interrupt[ing] human programming at the site of collective memorization, inscription" (War Machines, 151). Such dematerializing inscriptions

[7] I am implicitly following the distinction Alain Badiou makes between *le politique* and *la politique* in *Peut-on penser la politique*? Ed Pluth glosses the difference thus: "the political [*le politique*] is characterized by consensus building and the achievement of an adequate representation of the will of the people," whereas "politics" [*la politique]* must be thought of as "something that does not fit into the kinds of social connections (representations) sought after by the political." It is the second sense of politics [*la politique*] I intend to reference here. See Ed Pluth, *Signifiers and Acts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007) 149.

are nothing but technicity itself, "flying cuts [that] precede and supercede any epoch of the book past or to come as if en route to, and in excess of, a coming digital culture" (War Machines, 154). Anterior to "nature," these terrorist technomemes thus also assault reproduction in its most mythological and fantasmatic form of sex as the Ur-site of origin, taking with it an entire metaphorics based on distinctions between the organic and the inorganic, species and individual, genetics versus environment and so on, in the process. Born not of sexual coupling but of graphematic cuts, the birds slice through "the idea of nature as natural, as the originary, as ground, as mother, as reference" (152) so efficiently as to "bar" any possible aesthetic relapse (155).

Still, and rather interestingly, such technomemes do appear to have some odd kind of derivation or "origin" in what Cohen calls "the black hole of black holes" (War Machines, 102) into which the various black cats and black suns and acephalic black birds emerge and disappear as if through fleeting worm holes. This inky black bog serves Cohen as the prime site of the "prearchival, preoriginary 'archival' site, a-topos" called in *Psycho*, "Mother" (War Machines, 92), even if this is a "mother" who voids "all origins [and] transforms genealogical procedures" (War Machines, 94). Cohen likens this "Mother," or rather "Mothers," (War Machines, 253) to the Derridean *khora*, an "(a)material site or atopos of inscription before all phenomenality" (94) where language, letters "disaggregate into their composite of inscriptions." Although initially apparently femininely gendered, "Mother," in Cohen's usage, presents precisely a neutral non-site of sheer anteriority into which all of the binary oppositions spawned by a certain Enlightenment tradition dissolve, including and especially the original marker of difference itself, sex. Hence Cohen's descriptions of "Mother" as "detached from romance or sex" (War Machines, 78), "not necessarily a she, not of a gendered binary or origin" (War Machines, 77). Accordingly, at the very heart of the ocularcentric program, Cohen uncovers a (non-)figure who evacuates the entirety of what "she," as the key embodiment of cultural transmission, generation, family, origin, nature, earth, and so on, once was thought to represent. In the repetition "mother/Mother" (heard in the children's chant in *Marnie*: "Mother, mother I am ill"), one inaudibly shifts backwards from mother (as maternal figure, both gendered and sexed) to Mother with a capital M whose three triangles in her letter disarticulate—triangulate—all binary divisions such as male and female, man and woman. To enable us to hear this desexualization, Cohen frequently refers to Mother as "It," in which we must also recognize the most reduced and stripped down version of the bar series.

Desexing "Mother" in this way, Cohen goes a long way towards exploding one of the common myths in certain strains of gender theory which holds that sex is a socially constructed difference and can thus be attacked on the symbolic level (that is, by performing different symbolic meanings). By identifying sexual difference as a purely formal, that is, letteral difference, Cohen in fact shows up performative gender theory as the chiefly imaginary (rather than symbolic) strategy that it is. For when we play with and "perform" the signifiers of gender (in the sense of socially coded meanings),

we invariably invest them with content—content that admittedly may go some way towards reorganizing relations of power within the existing symbolic system. However, because it is imaginarily attached to the signifiers for which it produces signifieds, performative gender theory is unable to undertake genuine changes at the structural level, for this demands a conception of sexual difference as a purely formal difference.

Cohen is, in fact, very close to this formal (psychoanalytic) conception of sex as a certain relation to the signifier as such (rather than to its imaginary signifieds) when he locates sexual difference at the level of the letter. In his fourth chapter in *War Machines*, Cohen engages in his most detailed discussion of sex and gender which revolves around the figure of Mae West. In it, I find the most exacting and illuminating account I have yet read of *one side* of the feminine subjective position as it is condensed in Lacan's formulas of sexuation. As is well-known, in Lacan masculine and feminine identities are decided by the distinction of having or being the phallus (which, one recalls, is not the penis but the signifier of lack. Biological men can be feminine subjects just as readily—if not as easily—as biological women can be masculine subjects). To "have" the phallus is to be marked by lack as a masculine subject, whereas to "be" the phallus, as a feminine subject, is to embody lack itself.

With admirable subtlety, Cohen interrogates this feminine "being" of the phallus in the shape of Mae West, the "'female' female impersonator" whose "copying" of woman reveals a fault in the mimetic program of Western metaphysics. For as a woman in drag, "Mae West" can never reference an "original" woman without revealing how this original is already a repetition, a mask or pantomime over whose interior void the integument of a heterosexual norm has stretched and spread itself. "How long," Cohen asks, "for how many centuries or millennia, has 'woman' been this, a performative effect of another's eye mimed within its own prosthetics, an impersonation of another as itself which supplants any original it claimed to be reciting inversely?" (War Machines, 71).

To avoid any misunderstanding that all Cohen is doing is rehearsing the familiar trope of gender as a performative category, at this point one must recall how in *Sabotage* Mae West was allied with cinematic animation. As the object of masculine desire, the Mae West "bird" inflates and contracts in sync with the trilling notes of Cock Robin's wooing serenade in the Disney sequence. Yet as her cartoon stature cannot fail but bring home to us, this "performance" is based on nothing that has its source in the natural world. "Mae West"—Woman—is simply a projection of recurring marks (Cohen called them "squiggles") whose illusion of "life" is owed solely to the speed at which they flit through the masculine desiring light-apparatus to become projected onto an imaginary bodily surface or "screen." Such squiggles or inscriptions are quite literally "nothing" which, if we hear in this word the psychoanalytic term "lack," we find a persuasive way of understanding Lacan's famous statement, "*The* Woman does not exist": *being* the phallus, that is, the purely

formal, that is, letteral inscription of difference, she has no actual existence, no "life" beyond what is (imaginarily) projected onto her purely symbolic frame. For this reason, then, any change one might think one creates by reassigning different content to these projections (through their "queering" or through gender inversion) remains purely aesthetic (that is, of the order of the imaginary). Genuine "political" change, on the other hand, must take place at the level of symbolic inscription itself, which I emphasize is not of the order of symbolic or socially coded meanings but, rather, of the cut itself. A choice of a masculine or a feminine subjectivity comes down to the way one permits the cut of castration to be carved into one's psyche.

As I said previously, Cohen's is a deeply illuminating discussion of one aspect of the feminine position, but where I cannot follow him—or rather, find it unnecessary to follow him—is in his next move, which is to ascribe an unsexuated status to the (non-)site of this (dis)inscriptive process Cohen follows Hitchcock in calling "Mother." For I am convinced that the cut is always, inevitably a phallic cut to the extent that it is necessarily a representation. Cohen himself seems to allow this point when he asks if anything precedes this prosthetic "woman" who emerges from a "male-shaped discourse," troped tellingly, perhaps, in the filmmaker's first "talkie," *Blackmail*, as originating from a policemen's restroom, that is, in the toilet of the Law. As Cohen puts it, "a certain order of 'talk' is homosocially and male inscribed" (War Machines, 71).

To put it quickly now, my sense is that Cohen's insistence that "Mother" must present as a non-sexuated concept is what drives him into a neo-Schellingian language of progressively more archaic figures—the "prephenomenal," the "prehistorial," the "preoriginary," etc.—that, for all of the careful and subtle nuancing that Cohen gives them, could nevertheless be vulnerable to the very charge he levels at Žižek: that the Thing, the real, the "khora," Mother—however we wish to name it—occupies an anti-space, a bubbling non-site beyond or outside, or at the very least prior to the limits of the symbolic. The chief reason Cohen needs to rhetorically resort to this "reverse Aufhebung," I submit, is because he uncharacteristically misses something crucial about sexual difference itself which, as Joan Copjec never fails to remind us, is not a binary opposition.[8] It is only when man and woman are conceived as two opposing or contradictory halves that we need to seek out a "third" position, an "it" that would be "prior" to an Enlightenment program founded on the oppositions of light/dark, self/other, human/animal, literature/cinema, man/woman and so on. Understood, however, as two different modes of failure (to assume a full identity, for there to be a sexual relation), the problem disappears, for if man and woman are not binary oppositions engaged in an imaginary struggle for mastery, there is no need to seek recourse either in the reconciliatory, aestheticizing tropes of

[8] See for example Joan Copjec, "m/f, or Not Reconciled," in *The Woman in Question*, ed. Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1990) 10-18. See also her chapter "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" (from which the graph of the formulas of sexuation has also been adapted) in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

love and marriage that furnish the "universal reading room," or in Cohen's reverse Hegelianism—the positing of an archaic non-site of disinscription that destroys this binary logic before it even "begins."

As I stated, to my mind there can be no cut, no inscription that is not already sexed, for any act of representation always takes place, by definition, within the sphere of the phallically-drawn symbolic. Nor can there be any voluntary opt-out clause from this phallic economy, at least if we wish to speak and become part of a community of subjects. Hence the definitions of masculine and feminine are inevitably subject to phallically-drawn definitions (such as "having" or "being" the phallus). But while Lacan's famous "formulas of sexuation" proposed in his *Encore Seminar* expose the impossibility of ever escaping being defined by the phallus, we must recall that they define sexual difference each time not in one but two ways.

Masculine Side		Feminine Side	
$\exists x$	$\overline{\Phi x}$	$\overline{\exists x}$	$\overline{\Phi x}$
$\forall x$	Φx	$\overline{\forall x}$	Φx
There is at least one *x* that is not submitted to the phallic function		There is not one *x* that is not submitted to the phallic function	
All *x*'s are (every *x* is) submitted to the phallic function		Not all (not every) *x* is submitted to the phallic function.	

Table 1: Lacan's formulas of sexuation

The left-hand side requires little in the way of explanation, describing as it does the masculine logic of the founding exception, the one who, in escaping the phallic Law, serves as its ultimate support. An entire literature has been based on this Romance logic whose purest form, implicitly cited in the figure of Detective Ted Spenser in *Sabotage*, is often thought to be Edmund Spenser's allegorical poem the *Faerie Queene*.[9] We have already seen Cohen devoting his unfailing energies to the deconstruction of this logic that he tropes through the regime of the Book. On the

[9] Amusing evidence of Spenser's place in the English romance tradition is found in Anthony Trollope's archaic Miss Thorne who regards the allegorical poet as "the purest type of her country's literature," see *Barchester Towers* (London: Penguin, 1994) 189.

feminine side, however, we read the following: there is not one feminine subject that is not subject to the phallic function; nevertheless, not all are subject to the phallic function—two contrary statements that I am tempted to gloss thus: although there is not one cut that is not phallically drawn (insofar as ~~The~~ Woman, "being" the phallus, strictly speaking does not "exist" as Cohen already so aptly demonstrated. As the phallus, Woman "is" nothing but the pure lack that is inscription, the very cut itself), this is not to say, with the other side of the formula, that there would therefore be one cut that escapes the cut (as is the case in the masculine logic). Rather, I gloss it as saying the cut is itself cut from within.

How do you cut a cut? This sounds like a very odd proposition, but it has in fact a fairly simple answer. In what is starting to sound a bit like a phallic parlor game of paper, scissors, stone (which incidentally formalizes the Lacanian triad rather well—paper/imaginary, scissors/symbolic and stone/real), the cut of (symbolic) inscription is itself "cut" by the "stone" phallus of the real. I propose, in other words, to take Hitchcock at his word when he calls "Mother," mother. For this real phallus, this Medusa that freezes all symbolic binaries and turns its inscriptive cuts to stone pillars is the maternal phallus, the very same maternal phallus that haunts and torments the psychotic throughout all of her paranoid delusions. But we can now see the key difference between the psychotic and a neurotic's paranoia (which, as Freud points out, is frequently indistinguishable from psychosis in its earliest flowerings[10]). Herself uncut by castration, the psychotic misreads the maternal phallus as a fullness, a complete Other—that is to say, she mistakes the "not all" of woman for the masculine exception. The psychotic, in other words, makes a sexual category error when, on hearing the double negative "there is not one woman that is not subject to the phallic function" she draws from its contrary a positive statement. As we know from the most elementary mathematical logic, however, a double negative does not produce a positive: a lack of lack doesn't necessarily imply a plenitude.[11] What Cohen, on the other hand, albeit without naming it as such, enables us to see is how, intersecting every symbolically-drawn inscription, maternal phallus ceaselessly slices and dices the phallic cut from the *inside*. The neurotic is perfectly right, then, to feel paranoid since what this implies is a certain vertigo that comes from finding every fixed point, every ground, every handle or grip, every definition and orienting "quilting point" melting away not so much like quicksand but sand*stone* beneath our fingers, a devouring dissolve that never stops eating away at every law and limit, including and most especially the dividing line between "life" and "death." Sub-atomic Mater, it is with good reason we run as fast as we can from her into the arms

[10] Freud observes how the onset of a psychosis resembles that of neurosis. See his account of the Schreber case, "Psychoanalytic notes on an autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (dementia paranoids)," *Standard Edition* 12, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1978) 3-82, .esp. 49 and 56-7n.3.

[11] In contrast to classical mathematical logic, intuitionist logic requires only a proof of non-contradiction in the contrary of a double negative statement.

of the paternal metaphor, for there is no castrating cut he can inflict that could possibly be as bad.

On the failed honeymoon in *Marnie* that seems to ironically mime the Lacanian phrase "there is no sexual relation," Sean Connery tells Tippi Hedren about a species of insect called "phatid bugs" who "escape the eyes of hungry birds by living and dying in the shape of a flower." These bugs, I suggest, illustrate the logic of the maternal phallus. Tiny little living points, they gather into imaginary floral clusters to deceive the soaring graphematic cuts of cinematic deconstructions which, like Hitchcockian birds or roving Nazgul, remain to their peril blind to beauty and insensitive to love. Trusting that even if detected, such Sauronic agents of what Cohen calls "cinema" will take them for one of their own—that is, nothing but "pure" cuts, the formal inscription of sexual difference (as the reproductive organs of plants)—these tiny beating units of *jouissance* hide in full view of the symbolic Law. Intersecting inscription at every point, such living, pulsating, feminine *jouissance* discovers its securest and most effective site from which to launch its corrosive attack in the enveloping petals of the aesthetic and the confabulating leaves of the Book.

Hence my parting shot: by situating "Mother's" de-auratic powers in a non-sexuated, non-site associated with pure *techné*, Cohen risks losing sight of the "aesthetic" origin of de Manian mater-ial vision in which word we must also hear the insistent buzzing or humming of a specifically feminine *jouissance*. Nevertheless, one of the supreme values of Cohen's achievement lies in the way he decisively counters a disturbing tendency one occasionally finds in Lacanian readings to ascribe an almost transcendental status to this "Other *jouissance*," as Lacan calls it, associated as it is with the *jouissance* of female saints, or an absolute Other that might be mistaken for a religious concept. For by identifying it precisely as inscription or "writing," Cohen rightly re-situates this incomprehensible, in-scene (as opposed to her obscene paternal counter-part) Mother of Enjoyment right in the bones of the symbolic itself: Mother, a living if not necessarily breathing *écriture*, a DNA marrow of sheer enjoyment that traverses every phenomenal form and dissolves all symbolic definitions from within. For this Mother, what we call "birth" and "death" are irrelevant. Far stranger and more dreadful than any possible technicity is this "life" that transects all divisions of speciation, re-marking an "I" that is not so much an other as a multiple: we, the uncounted and perhaps uncountable communities of interconnected sub-dermal eco-systems in the cycles of whose flowerings a paranoid neurotic might briefly rest and refuel.