

1



The Lady Vanishes, but the Letter Remains: Kristeva and the Maternal Real(m)

Hitchcock's early film, *The Lady Vanishes* has received much analysis from a feminist perspective. On one level, it can be read as an allegory of the losing and the regaining of the lost maternal object in the figure of Miss Froy.¹ From another perspective, it has been viewed as the attempt to express the feminine desire of Iris, the woman who is about to be married but becomes "derailed" once she encounters the mystery of Miss Froy's disappearance and the presence of her helper and future lover, Gilbert.² I would like to argue that before one enters into the different ideological interpretations of this film, one must first examine what can be called the "materiality" of the text.³

The Hotel of Babel

The story begins with a view of mountains and then the panning camera enters into a hotel. At first there is silence and then a cacophony of voices in different foreign languages emerges. The hotel takes on the air of being a veritable Tower of Babel. It is as if Hitchcock was saying to us: "See what happens when you add voice to film? Wasn't it better when things were just silent and the language of film was produced through the pure medium of the image—A medium that was much more universal and did not have to suffer

from the particularity of different languages?" Is Hitchcock telling us that even though language is full of sound and fury, it still signifies nothing?

I will argue that not only does the opening of the film comment on the transition between silent film and talking films, but it also sets up a binary opposition between masculine-controlled speech and a feminine form of writing. I hope to show how the "phallogentric" control of speech in the film (and in Hitchcock's work in general) is constantly subverted by another form of language that centers around the insistence of letters, blocked images, and writing.⁴

By starting off with a scene of silent images, Hitchcock is able to illustrate the transition from the pre-Oedipal Imaginary order to the post-Oedipal Symbolic order. In Lacan's theory, this movement of transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic is structured by what he calls the "paternal metaphor."⁵ This rhetorical trope accounts for the dominance of the masculine Name-of-the-Father over the maternal realm of Imaginary desire. To be a subject of language and law, for Lacan, means that one has given up one's Imaginary dual relation with one's (m)other or ideal and has identified with the Symbolic Other through the internalization of the super-ego.

In the structure of the paternal metaphor, one's desire to return to the mother is repressed into the realm of the unconscious by the binding power of the law against incest. Every act of speech and symbolization, then, serves to reenact this separation between the Real subject and the Imaginary mother-figure. In this sense, language is itself Oedipal and patriarchal, because in our culture men are most often associated with the law and women with images.

Lacan in part bases the connection between the paternal function and the Symbolic signifier on the fact that it is always a question who the biological father of a child is, while it is always clear who the Real mother is. "The attribution of the procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of a recognition, not of a real father, but of what religion has taught us to refer to the Name-of-the-Father" (199). In *The Lady Vanishes*, this connection between language and paternity is constantly stressed, as well as put into question.

In one of the first scenes of the film, Iris is talking to her friends about her upcoming marriage and she states that: "I shall take the veil . . . and change my name to Mrs. Charles Fotheringale . . . I've no regrets." By being submitted to the veil of marriage, Iris, thus, desires to take on the name of Fotheringale, a last name that sounds very close to father. In response to her vow to get married, one of her friends asks her: "Couldn't you get him to change his name instead?" This question shows an awareness of the way that a female's identity can vanish beneath the name of her husband. To paraphrase Hegel, we can say that the Name is the death of "The Lady" because the female subject vanishes beneath the Name-of-the-Father and her presence now becomes veiled.

This movement of repressing the female subject beneath the father's name, anticipates the disappearance of the maternal figure, Miss Froy, on the train. What I would like to examine later is the connection between these two disappearances, but for now I will turn to a scene of feminine writing that counters the dominance of the paternal metaphor.

A Scene of Feminine Writing

Miss Froy takes Iris to the dining car of the train that they are on. Since they have not yet been formally introduced, Miss Froy begins to say her name but the train whistle blows and her voice is drowned out. Iris asks her if she said her name was "Freud." She replies, "No Froy, it rhymes with Joy." Here we find a double reference to the founder of psychoanalysis and the rhyming power of language.

By saying that her name rhymes with joy, Miss Froy is trying to communicate to her listener, not on a level of signification nor meaning, but rather on the level of sound and identity. However, this attempt to communicate through speech ultimately fails so Miss Froy writes her name on the window by tracing the letters "F-R-O-Y." If we see the window as the screen or even as the lens of the camera, we could insist that Hitchcock is attempting to show his preference for film writing over film speech.

Miss Froy's resistance to the paternal metaphor is signaled by the way that she attempts to play on the metonymic aspect of language and not on its metaphoric side.⁶ In his "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," Lacan distinguishes metaphor from metonymy by arguing that metonymy is concerned with the connection and displacement between signifiers, while metaphor works by replacing one signifier with another signifier and thus inducing an effect of signification (164). In this theory, metaphor points towards the creation of meaning, while, metonymy is determined by the movement of desire and the production of new word associations.

We can illustrate this difference between metaphor and metonymy by looking at the difference between the productions of Iris's name and Miss Froy's name. In Iris' case, she has decided to let her husband's name substitute for her own name. The manifest signification of this process is that society now recognizes her to be her husband's wife. I would add that the repressed signification of this process is that she has now lost her own identity by being subjected to the name of the Other.

In opposition to this metaphorical structure, the unmarried Miss Froy plays on the letteral level of language. She first highlights the aural aspect of language by pointing out the rhyme between Froy and joy and then she accentuates the visual part of language by writing her name on the window. In both instances, she is not producing a new meaning; rather, she is attempting to materialize through sound and vision, the immaterial signifier.

This attempt to give a material foundation to language, represents one of the central elements of Lacan's return to Freud. In the "Agency of the Letter," Lacan states that, "by 'letter' I designate that material support that concrete discourse borrows from language" (147). Lacan wants to turn to this materiality of language, in part, to show how many of Freud's discoveries about the unconscious are founded on a careful attentiveness to the play of letters and are not based on a concern for meaning.

An example of this insistence of the metonymic letter in the unconscious can be found in Freud's discussion of his

dream of the botanical monograph. In his interpretation of this unconscious production, Freud argues that: "Botanical' was related to the figure of Professor Gartner, the blooming looks of his wife, to my patient Flora, and to the lady of whom I had told the story of the forgotten flowers." The movement of these associations follows the insistence of the letter in the unconscious. The connection between botanical, Gartner, blooming, Flora, and Flower has nothing to do with any actual or lived connection but is motivated by the play of the signifier.

From the concept botanical to the name Gartner, the association is based on the literal derivation of the proper name—Professor Gartner is only a gardener in name and not in life. Likewise, the pregnant wife is only related to the Gardner in the sense that she is blooming, after a seed has been placed in her. Here, the connection is based on a "litaralized" metaphor. The next association to his patient Flora is also only motivated by the insistence of the letters in her name that connects her to the general theme of flowers. This example shows how the unconscious connection between different dream associations is determined by the metonymical movement between signifiers and letters.

According to Julia Kristeva, the unconscious is inherently revolutionary and poetic because it plays on this level of the letter and not on the level of meaning and social restraint:

Murder, death, and unchanging society represent precisely the inability to hear and understand the signifier as such—as ciphering, as rhythm, as a presence that precedes the signification of object and emotion. The poet is put to death because he wants to turn rhythm into a dominant element; because he wants to make language perceive what it doesn't want to say, provide it with matter independently of the sign, and free it from denotation.⁸

This description of the threat of the poetic can be applied equally to Freud and to Miss Froy. We must not forget that this female spy on the train is kidnapped and threatened with death, because she sings a certain song that has a

secret code ciphered into it. Thus, her song highlights the dimensions of rhythm, ciphering, and presence that Kristeva insists defines poetry and the unconscious resistance to the dominant social order of the paternal metaphor.

A feminine way of speaking and writing for Kristeva involves, in part, a return to the maternal realm of rhythm, sound, and materiality. "The unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language . . . maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed instinctual, maternal element" (136). What defines this maternal element for Kristeva is a lack of identity, and a dominance of instincts, rhythm, and matter.

In Hitchcock's film, we find a remarkable illustration of these maternal elements when we see, superimposed, the rhythmic movement of the train wheels with the multiplication of the images of Iris's friends. The rhythm of the train puts Iris to sleep and allows for her to "regress" back to the maternal realm of confused images and sounds.⁹ In this sense, her search for the Lady who has vanished can be read as representing her desire to return to a state that is positioned as being before the imposition of social order and law.

If, in order to become a subject of language, one has to accept the paternal metaphor and distance oneself from the realm of the mother, poetic language and feminine writing represent a reversal of this process. Furthermore, in Lacan's notion of the ethical unconscious, it is only through the material (and we can add maternal) insistence of the letter that the subject maintains a relation with the Real. Hitchcock in his work continuously shows that the Real evidence or traces that are left behind in a crime are letters and written signs because words vanish in thin air, but letters tend to remain.

This insistence of the letter is borne out when Iris begins to look for proof of Miss Froy's existence. Every one on the train says that they never saw her. In fact, they are all lying because they have something to hide. In this way, Hitchcock links spoken language to deception, and it is only by following the traces of letters and writing that Iris will be able to discover the truth about the Lady.

The first form of proof that Iris collects of the Lady's existence is the letters that Miss Froy has traced on the

window. My hypothesis is that this scene allegorizes the way that speech serves to efface women and that it is only through a form of feminine writing that their presence is allowed to reemerge. In other words, we can read Iris's pursuit of the lost Lady as her search for a form of feminine existence that is continuously denied by the males on the train.

The second "material evidence" that Iris finds is the teabag box label that has been discarded and has ended up stuck against a window of the train. Tea, whose very name is a homonym for the letter *T*, is represented by the repetition of the letter *H*, which is found in the brand name "Harriman's Herbal Tea." Furthermore, Iris's last name is Henderson and throughout the film we see her wearing and holding things with her initials *I H* clearly displayed. One could read this insistence of her initials as an indication of Hitchcock himself; as if he is saying that "I am H." We shall see how this insistence of letters in the names of Hitchcock's character's can never be ignored.

In fact, the name "Iris" can be read as a double reference to the *I* and the "eye." She is the one who has seen the Lady and who is looking for the proof of her absence. We, as the audience, are placed in her position; we are the eye that is looking for the presence of the lost object, just as Hitchcock is trying to look for the Real object that has been effaced through the process of representation. On the level of speech, every one denies the Lady's existence, but on the level of writing, her presence is retained. Once again, we find here the association of speech, deception, death, and disappearance on the one hand, and presence, truth, and writing on the other.

So far I have related the vanishing of the Lady to the "fading" of the female subject below the patriarchic structure that drowns out the female voice. In this sense, the Lady vanishes because she has no place in the male-directed discourse of film representation, just as the subject vanishes beneath the power of language and the desire of the Other. Early in the film, Hitchcock illustrates this structure by placing Gilbert's room right above Iris's; Gilbert is literally the signifier that stands above her and drowns out her voice.

When Miss Froy and Iris first meet, they are in the hallway of the hotel and they both are complaining about the noise that is coming from above them. Iris decides to call Boris, the head of the hotel, to get him to stop the musical noise. When Boris enters Gilbert's room, he sees three servants doing a folk dance under Gilbert's instructions. Each time Gilbert stops playing his phallic clarinet, he has the servants stop in their place, and he writes down their positions. This scene, in part, shows how masculine discourse serves to regulate the movements of the body.

When Boris asks Gilbert to stop the noise, Gilbert's reaction is very telling. He exclaims, "You dare call it noise. The ancient music which your present ancestors celebrated every wedding for countless generations. The dance they danced when your father married your mother." Here, Gilbert's music and discourse is directly tied to the social and historical realm of the Name-of-the-Father.

In opposition to Miss Froy's free-floating song, Gilbert's music is regimented and highly structured. This distinction between the paternal and the maternal orders of music becomes most evident at the end of the film, when Miss Froy has entrusted Gilbert with the mission of remembering her secret song for her. During the last part of the film, Gilbert is constantly humming this song, so he won't forget it, but as he enters the lobby of the foreign office, he realizes that he can no longer remember it. Then he starts to hum a song but he realizes that it is the Wedding March. The song of marriage and social union, thus, serves to repress and efface the tune of a secret maternal code.

Luckily for the cause of world peace, Miss Froy has survived and the final scene shows her playing the coded song on a piano. Upon seeing Miss Froy, Gilbert's final line in the film is "I'll be hanged!" Couldn't this be an indication of the threat that is posed by the resurfacing of the maternal realm of the coded song? Gilbert feels that he will lose his head because he can no longer control the material and instinctual side of language.

This forgetting of Miss Froy's song and presence is doubled in the film by Gilbert's constant references to his father and his refusal to acknowledge his mother's role in his own

creation. At one point in the film, Gilbert blurts out, "You know, it's remarkable how many great men begin with their fathers." Here the paternal claim for creation is so strong that it completely removes the mother from the act of conception. Kristeva has provided an explanation for this masculine desire to repress the creative role played by the mother: "Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing."¹⁰ Gilbert's constant references to his father can therefore be related to his attempt to reinforce his paternal metaphor by denying the creative and productive power of his mother.

Miss Froy's return at the end of the film, while it can be seen as a potential threat to Gilbert's paternal order, is maintained and controlled by being placed in the political realm of the Foreign Office. After all, her coded song was written and determined by the men at the British Governmental office. The production of her unconscious discourse is, in this sense, predetermined by a masculine mode of language.

We can also interpret the Foreign Office itself as the locus of the social Other that attempts to control and regulate all of the foreign elements that threaten to undermine the stability of the state. The dialectic between social control and the threat of a foreign destabilizing influence dramatizes, on a social level, the linguistic battle which determines Hitchcock's text. It is also this very dialectic that structures the "The Ethics of Linguistics" for Kristeva:

Ethics used to be a coercive, customary manner of ensuring the cohesiveness of a particular group through the repetition of a code. . . . Now however, the issue of ethics crops up wherever a code (mores, social contract) must be shattered in order to give way to a free play of negativity, need, desire, pleasure, and jouissance."¹¹

Need, desire, pleasure, and jouissance are the foreign elements that serve to threaten any fixed paternal code of order and social regulation. Like Lacan, Kristeva believes that any ethical theory must take these "poetic" elements into account.

In Hitchcock's work we find a careful attention to the way that language is split between these two processes of the paternal metaphor and the maternal metonymy. Like Miss Froy's secret song, Hitchcock uses names in his films in order to point to these two opposing levels of language. The wordplay of father and Fotheringale, as well as Froy and Freud, and Iris with iris, point to an unconscious insistence of the letter inscribed within the dominant discourse and name of the Other. In other words, there is another discourse that has been repressed and is attempting to make itself heard within the central discourse; just as there is an "unconscious text" that at times emerges within the conscious text and plot of the film.

What makes Hitchcock's work so doubly impressive is that he is able to play on both of these levels of language at the same time. Through his use of the paternal metaphor, he makes his films into consumable products by clearly pointing to the paternal control of feminine desire. His constant need to end his films with the resolution of a mystery and the promise of a marriage shows the dominance of a conservative paternal ideology. Yet, at the same time, through his constant meditation on the processes of representation, he allows for a more poetic and feminine form of discourse to emerge. In a similar sense, Freud's careful analysis of the inner workings of Victorian society allowed him to explore both the conservative side of paternal order and also the more radical aspects of language and sexuality. I would argue that any feminist-inspired theory of ethics must be able to articulate and play off of these two combatting linguistic and social forces.

Barring Sexuality

Not only are there multiple forms of textuality that are inherent to Hitchcock's film, but we also find multiple forms of sexuality that are repressed, yet continue to return. In the first scene of the film, we meet two British gentlemen who must share a room and a single bed. Later on we find these same two men in bed together with their pants off. This can

be certainly read as a not-so veiled reference to homosexuality. After all there are several references to something “queer” going on in the hotel and on the train.

In another room, we find three women who are undressing and discussing the evils of marriage together. This room also relates to the different forms of sexuality that are permitted behind closed doors but not in the open. In this sense, the hotel that is found in the opening scenes of the film is not only a tower of linguistic Babel and diversity but also of sexual multiplicity and deviation. Once everyone moves from the free-play of the hotel to the enclosed structure of the train, everyone’s sexuality is forced back into the closet.

One of the couples that we find in a train compartment is a man and a woman who are both having affairs. When the woman threatens to bring their relation out into the public, the male warns her that he is trying to become a judge and that “the law like Caesar’s wife must be beyond suspicion.” In other words, on the level of the law of the signifier, there can be no illicit sexuality.

However, we know from Hitchcock’s films that no one is beyond suspicion—anyone can be accused of a crime and everyone does commit some crime or other, either in an act or through desire, and therefore everyone is guilty. Yet Hollywood and the American Puritan ethic wishes to deny our acts of transgression, so all must go on behind closed doors. In this sense, behind every door is the subject’s unconscious desire. This metaphor is in fact not foreign to Freud, who often argued that the unconscious is like a room that is guarded by a censor.

Returning to the early scene of the two men in the hotel room, which is likened to a closet, we find in the middle of the room a large support beam that cuts across the camera’s frame and against which one man continuously bumps his head. I would like to read this black line as the materialization of the social censor and the sign of the barred or repressed subject. Something can’t be shown in the scene because the bar is in the way. It is not only therefore the Lady that vanishes in the film, but also different forms of sexuality that are blocked from view.

The black bar is a common symbol in Hitchcock’s work and is most often presented in the form of a pillar or a

shadow that runs across the body of a character.¹² In the case of the two men who stay in the same room together, we can read the pillar that cuts across the scene as the social barring of homosexuality. We also see in many of Hitchcock's camera angles, some form that is blocking part of the scene. For example, in the scene that follows the two men in the hotel room, Hitchcock directs the camera in such a way that the stairway blocks its view. In fact, part of virtually every scene is eclipsed by some bar or pillar or staircase. It is as if Hitchcock is showing us the proof of the limits of representation in order to open up a nonrepresentational space.

By nonrepresentational space, I am referring to the idea that certain forms of art do not signify through meaning, but rather through form and tone. For instance, Patrice Petro, in her reading of this same movie, draws on Kristeva's work in order to argue that desire is set in motion in the film through the repetition of a song that is nonrepresentational because it foregrounds rhythm, affect, and movement and not the represented plot.¹³ In other words, there is something in the scene that cannot be seen nor understood, yet its presence is still felt. I would argue that this unseen presence is the very limit of the field of representation that opens up the space for the emergence of bi-textuality and the return of the vanished Lady.

One can affirm that the presence of feminine desire and existence can only be maintained on this border between the represented and the unrepresented. In a Symbolic world that is dominated by masculine values and definitions, Iris plays the role of the female who refuses to give up her initial relation with the maternal order. All of the men on the train continuously attempt to get her to stop her search for her lost object, Miss Froy, but she resists. Dr. Hartz tells her that her memory of the Lady is only "a vivid subjective image" and that a concussion "may have curious effects upon an imaginative person." He thus tries to convince her that she is lost in the Imaginary and that she should pull herself back into reality.

However, I would like to counter Dr. Hartz and insist that Iris's refusal to accept Miss Froy's absence represents an attempt to resist the deadening effects of language that

are based on the primal separation from the mother and the Imaginary order.¹⁴ As Freud argues in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in order for a subject to become a subject of culture and language, he or she must first overcome his or her attachment to the mother and his or her instinctual needs.¹⁵ Lacan adds to this theory in his seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* that the word is the death of the Thing and that the primal Thing for every subject is the Mother (67).

In an essay appropriately entitled for our purposes, "The Lady Vanishes: Sophie Freud and Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Elisabeth Bronfen argues that Freud's development of his theory of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is tied to the death of his daughter Sophie.¹⁶ As is well known, in this text, Freud observes Sophie's son playing with a cotton-reel, whose disappearance and reappearance represents the child's attempt to transcend the Real comings and goings of his mother by mastering her absence on a Symbolic level of play. Thus, instead of dealing with the absence and presence of his mother, the child first plays with the absence and presence of his toy and finally with the German words for absence (fort—gone) and presence (*da*—there). Bronfen summarizes the effect of this game in the following passage:

In the narratives that use this fort-da game as privileged example for the child's acquisition of language, it functions as an allegory for the symbolic mastery of sensations and commentators of this narrative posit that the origin of language and subjectivity is based on loss, on the figurative "murder" of the body, the soma, the thing, the real; representation is grounded on absence of the referred-to object. (983)

What is therefore lost in the gaining of language is an unmediated access to "sensations," "the body," "the soma," "the thing," "the real," and "the referred-to object." In Freud's, Lacan's, and Kristeva's theories all of these lost elements of the Real and of the body are tied to the separation that society places between the mother and the infant.

Iris's refusal to forget about Miss Froy's existence, then, represents a desire to return to the Real and to a state of

nonseparation. It will be my argument that this resistance to the Symbolic death drive is representative of Hitchcock's general relation to language and the field of representation. As a film director, he is placed in the phallic role of dictating the rules and regulations of a certain form of representation, yet his obsession with the feminine form and the realm of material images places him in a position that is analogous to the resisting feminine object.

The Ethical Return to the Real

Hitchcock's ethical unconscious is therefore determined by his own desire to return to an initial state of pure sound and vision, before language and social hierarchy are placed in their dominant positions. Yet, simultaneously, he shows a certain horror of the unsymbolized Real and the feminine and homosexual figures that are forced into representing this limit to language and the knowable. Like all subjects of the unconscious, he desires to return to a state of pure sexual excitement, what Lacan calls "jouissance," however, he still fears being lost in this primitive state of the undifferentiated Real.

The Lady Vanishes, in this sense, allegorizes the way that women are used in films to manifest both the foundations and limits of all forms of representation. As an object of exchange, the Lady circulates a coded message, but as an object of desire, she makes present an absence that causes one to desire to know. Thus, the representation of women in film is used to support the paternal metaphor by circulating the effects of power of the masculine-controlled signifier, while at the same time their presence continuously threatens discourse by presenting the maternal metonymy of the letteral insistence of the Real. The combination of these two opposing modes of discourse creates a bi-textual form of sexuality and representation. Furthermore, the insistence of the materiality of the immaterial signifier serves to combine together the visual and aural aspects of language in a form of unconscious textuality that resists the deadening effects of the Symbolic death drive.