HITCHCOCK BLONDE: CINEMATIC REFERENCES ON PAGE AND STAGE

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Abstract: After a brief investigation of thematic, structural and cultural aspects in Terry Johnson's play *Hitchcock Blonde* (2003), this paper discusses cinematic references scripted in the text by the British playwright. Thereafter, we aim at providing evidence that in the homonymous Brazilian stage production, by Vigor Mortis (2008), the director Paulo Biscaia not only transposes the indications of the use of video and other cinematic features from page to stage, but creates a series of innovative media technologies not present in Johnson's text, which will be analyzed in the light of contemporary theoretical perspectives.

Keywords: *Hitchcock Blonde*. Terry Johnson. Paulo Biscaia. Intermediality. Cinematic references.

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HITCHCOCK BLONDE: REFERÊNCIAS CINEMÁTICAS NO TEXTO E NA CENA

Resumo: Após uma breve investigação sobre aspectos temáticos, estruturais e culturais da peça *Hitchcock Blonde* (2003), de Terry Johnson, este trabalho discute as referências cinemáticas que o dramaturgo inscreve em seu texto. Em seguida, objetivamos evidenciar que na produção cênica homônima da Vigor Mortis (2008), o diretor Paulo Biscaia não somente transpõe as indicações do uso de video e outras especificidades cinemáticas da página para o palco, mas cria uma série de tecnologias midiáticas inovadoras, não encontradas no texto de Johnson, que serão analisadas à luz de perspectivas teóricas contemporâneas.

Palavras-chave: *Hitchcock Blonde*. Terry Johnson. Paulo Biscaia. Intermidialidade. Referências cinemáticas.

A lifetime of being looked at instead of loved.
Terry Johnson, *Hitchcock Blonde*

The recent feature film *Hitchcock* (2012), directed by Sacha Gervasi, conveys idiosyncrasies of the public persona of Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) and reveals some behind-the-scenes incidents of *Psycho* (1960), a thriller movie that inspired a great number of offshoots in different genres and media, among them three film sequels; a shot-by-shot remake by Gus Van Sant; a great variety of slasher movies; and a television drama series. However, long before the release of the film, the British playwright Terry Johnson had already explored fact and fiction attached to Hitchcock's public persona in *Hitchcock Blonde* (2003), underscoring mainly the movie

director's voyeuristic inclinations. Johnson not only thematizes the cinema of Hitchcock, but also reflects on cultural anxieties, among them the media-saturated consciousness of contemporary society and its predilection for simulacra instead of reality.

Hitchcock Blonde is a postmodern pastiche, a patchwork text that borrows bits and pieces from Hitchcock's life and work. After the impact of Foucault's discourse analysis and Derrida's deconstructive approach, pastiche structuration has become an important device for textual composition, and positive value has been attached to it. Contemporary critics have argued that, besides being an important tool for textual composition and social critique, pastiche preserves cultural memory:

> Postmodern pastiche is about cultural memory and the merging of horizons past and present. One of the markers that set aesthetic postmodernism apart from modernism is that its artistic practices borrow ostentatiously from the archive of Western culture [...]. It becomes possible to look at pastiche structuration in several arts as an exemplary feature of aesthetic postmodernism. (HOESTEREY, 2001, p. xi)

In this regard, Johnson creates a complex dramatic narrative by borrowing and pasting together themes and motives from *Psycho* (1960), mainly calling attention to the famous shower-scene. He also appropriates specific references from other hits of Hitchcock's filmography, such as *Vertigo* (1958), *Marnie* (1964), *Rear Window* (1954) and *The Birds* (1963) to devise narrative strands of his own invention.

The *mise en abyme* structure of the verbal text

The structure of *Hitchcock Blonde* includes two parallel, intertwined plots. The first, set in 1999, tells the story of Alex (late forties), an ambitious media lecturer, who invites Nicola (early twenties), an attractive young student, to accompany him to his Grecian holiday villa to help him uncover the enigma of recently

discovered Hitchcock footage. The second, dating back to 1959, shows three personages getting involved in a scheme of seduction, crime and mystery: a movie director called Hitch and two nameless characters, referred to as the Blonde and the Husband respectively.

In order to expand the dramatic narrative's semantic web of cross-references, Johnson makes use of the stylistic device known as *mise en abyme* (DÄLLENBACH, 1989). The interlaced narratives mirror each other, since the relationship of Hitch and the Blonde, in 1959, is doubled, with differences, by Alex and Nicola, in 1999. Alex can be seen as Hitch's *Doppelgänger*, sharing his inclination for voyeuristic pleasures.

The 1999 plot, alongside the scenes which portray Alex's stratagems to seduce Nicola and later rejecting her love after a few sexual encounters, centers around the detective work of the couple, trying to get insight into the storyline of a homemade movie, presumably shot by Hitchcock in 1919, with a handheld camera, featuring a blonde woman preparing for a bath. The few frames they manage to salvage from the deteriorated reels of tape makes them believe having brought to light the *Ur*-shower scene. In their view, the 1919 fragments hold the key for solving the enigma of the film director's obsessive fixation for blondes. Obviously, the 1919 plot constitutes a third narrative strand entirely invented by Johnson.

The 1959 sequences, inspired by the fragmented *film noir* aesthetics, present Hitch auditioning and preparing a blonde woman to act as the body-double for Janet Leigh in the shower-scene of *Psycho*. As he is aware that she aspires to be the leading lady of his next film, he proposes to screen-test her in the nude. The nude sequences, shot in his inner sanctum (a private space of antique cameras, film equipment and clapper-boards of his films), mirror the action of the 1919 movie Alex and Nicola are restoring. The 1959 Blonde accepts the proposal, hoping to get fame and financial reward, as well as escaping from the mediocrity of her life and from the violence of her rude husband. In these scenes, Hitch is presented as a

gross, perverse manipulator, harassing the Blonde with sexual banter and humiliating her when she shows willingness to concede him sexual favors.

The theme of scopophilia: the pleasure of looking or of being looked at

The most infamous gossip about Hitchcock's public persona is that he nurtured a scopic drive, tending to indulge in voyeuristic, unconsummated relationships with his leading ladies. Among his biographers, Donald Spoto became notorious for underscoring the film director's inclination for abusing his female stars, mainly in *The Dark Side of the Genius***:** The Life of Alfred Hitchcock (1999) and *Spellbound by Beauty*: Alfred Hitchcock and His Leading Ladies (2009). However, while some critics argue that Spoto is a sensationalist writer, partly responsible for the fabrication of the myth of Hitchcock's voyeuristic-scopophilic tendencies, others accept such malicious banter at face value.

Scopophilia is a Freudian term, also related to Jacques Lacan's notion of the gaze. Hitchcock's predilection for the objectified image of blondes, real or fake (chemically converted brunettes), is discussed by Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", first published in 1975 in *Screen*. In her provocative essay, she argues that in classical Hollywood cinema, women are represented mainly in terms of sexuality, as objects of desire for the male gaze: "The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at" (MULVEY, 1999, p. 825).

Johnson cunningly draws attention to both sides of the sexual politics of looking. In Act I, Scene V, the Blonde, who aspires to become the leading lady of Hitchcock's next film, imparts to her husband minute details about the sexual pleasures she experienced on the set when, completely naked, she was being looked at by the

entire film crew before the shower-scene, reaching an orgasm when she realized that Hitchcock was secretly gazing at her:

> **Blonde:** I am theirs to look at. [...] So then it begins. A tingle in my feet flowing up through my ankles and lapping my calves, submerging my thighs. A warmth between my breasts flushing up across my chest, rising through my throat, burning my cheeks. There is pride in it and shamelessness and excitement. A feeling of being there and nothing between me and them but somewhat more of me than usual. And gradually I feel better than I've felt for a long, long time. I glance upwards and there, high up on the gantry, is a man. No one but me knows he's there. *His gaze is our secret.* My heart begins to race. I think, Christ, don't let me get wet. But I'm tingling. I'm ringing like a bell, and no one can hear me. And no one seems to notice. Then I came. I hardly moved a muscle. But I came. Can you believe that? You listening? I was afraid I would come, then I came. And you know the next thing I thought? I thought I wonder what'll happen when I tell him. (JOHNSON, 2003, p. 33-34, my emphasis)

Notes of voyeurism are struck throughout *Hitchcock Blonde*: Hitch's obsession with blondes and Alex's fascination with Hitchcock's ideologies are highlighted as two sides of the same coin. Like Hitch, the media lecturer is afraid of real physical intimacy or commitment with women of flesh and blood, preferring the thrills of vicarious experience that cinema provides.

Near the end of the play, Nicola's comment on voyeurism as a poor substitute for real human relationships such as love and sex (JOHNSON, 2003, p. 91), quoted in the epigraph, constitutes a critical reflection on contemporary society's penchant for virtual rather than real life relationships (BAUDRILLARD, 1994). Nicola enacts the role of the observer in the dramatic text, while the audience exerts a similar position in the stage production.

Intermediality in the sense of intermedial references

Johnson's inscriptions of film devices in *Hitchcock Blonde* and Biscaia's ingenious exploration of cinematic representational practices

in his homonymous stage production will be analyzed in the light of Irina Rajewsky's concept of

> Intermediality in the narrower sense of intermedial references (*intermediale Bezüge*), for example, references in a literary text to a specific film, film genre or film qua medium (that is, so-called filmic writing), likewise references in a film to painting, or in a painting to photography and so on. (RAJEWSKY, 2010, p. 55)

Rajewsky further clarifies that cinematic references in literary texts or stage productions cannot be genuinely filmic, since the medial conditions of cinema are not present in their materiality, but are "employed and fashioned in a way that corresponds to and resembles elements, structures and representational practices" (RAJEWSKY, 2010, p. 57) of the movies. In this sense,

> [...] while genre specificities and the prescriptive and restrictive rules of a genre are based solely on conventions that can be played with, undermined and transcended without any problems, medial specificities entail material and operative restrictions that can be played with, but cannot be undermined with the use of the respective media-specific means and instruments. [...] What can be achieved in this respect is only an illusion, as 'as if' of the other medium. (RAJEWSKY, 2010, p. 63)

Thus, according to Rajewsky, in the case of intermedial references, basic constraints emerge which draw attention to medial delimitations and border crossings.

The use of video scripted in Johnson's text

In the introduction of *Staging the Screen*: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre, Greg Giesekam (2007, p. 2-3) reports that although recorded media in the theatre were used almost a century ago by stage practitioners, such as Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, it is common knowledge that the generalized use of media technologies in the theatre is a more recent phenomenon. Among the experimental artistic manifestations that explore the interaction between live performers and video material, he mentions a notable tendency

emerging in our time, namely the inscription of media technologies in dramatic texts, such as "*Hitchcock Blonde* (a West End hit) and *Midnight's Children* – where *the authors scripted in the use of video***,** as opposed to it resulting from a directorial or design decision, as is more commonly the case" (GIESEKAM, 2007, p. 2, my emphasis). Indeed, along these lines Johnson's play is permeated by unusual stage directions which look like instructions in a film script.

At the opening of Act One, an iris out shot (a black circle closing at the end of a scene) is inscribed in the text, followed by indications that suggest a camera movement of travelling in: "*1999. Iris out onto small room in a wide black void. Alex's study in a 1960s building. Nicola, early twenties, reads an essay. Alex, late forties, dressed late thirties, gazes out of a window to whiteness beyond*" (JOHNSON, 2003, p. 3). This scenic direction reminds the audience of the opening title sequence of *Vertigo* (1958); the iris out shot can be related to the circular, spiral spinning images that emerge from Madeleine's eye in close-up, highlighting the notion of the gaze – one of the main themes of Hitchcock's thrillers – that Johnson borrows to construct his play.

Thereafter, in the essay Nicola reads to Alex, the legendary sequence of more than 90 film snippets, each no more than a second or two of duration, immediately evokes the memory of the shower-scene in *Psycho,* which constitutes the *Leitmotiv* of the play:

> **Nicola:** Opening shot, first angle: her torso, the knife, twenty-one frames. Second shot: tight close-up of mother, twenty-seven frames. Third shot: tighter version of the first angle, the promise of her breasts, brackets, unfulfilled, brackets; twelve frames. Fourth shot, third angle, top shot, fourteen frames; time enough to register not the nipple but the knife that obscures it. Fifth shot: close-up of her face. Forty-nine frames. The Body Double cutaways involve nine set-ups. Close-up of her back, framed by shower curtain, arm and knife in foreground. Shallow focus top shot; her full torso; she struggles with mother. Medium close-up of both arms, one naked, one with knife, victim's body in background. Focus remains shallow; only the knife is sharp. Close-up of her belly; the knife slashes in and out of frame. Big close-up, two blades: her shoulder, the knife. Top shot of her legs and the blood. Blood hits the floor of the shower. Two tight handshots; one

> pressed against the tiling, the other grabs the shower curtain. Another top shot as she slides into the bath. (JOHNSON, 2003, p. 3)

When Alex accuses his protégé of plagiarism, claiming he is the author of the content she's reading, the playful mood and critical intent of the text is established right away, since it is widely known that Hitchcock himself wrote the detailed description on how he manipulated the camera to provide the audience with the impression to see a woman in the nude. This cunning artifice of handling the camera is referred to in Act I, Scene II, when Hitch lays bare what he expects from the Blonde as body double of Janet Leigh for the shower-scene: "You may rest assured we shall create the *impression* of nudity whilst never gratifying the audience with actual nudity as such. [...] However. Creating such an *impression* will entail by way or procedure a great deal of nudity" (JOHNSON, 2003, p. 17).

Video and mediatized elements are incorporated in the text for different purposes. The abrupt cuts of the plot flashing back and forth in time, from 1999 to 1959 and 1919, are marked by cinematic references as, for example, the change from Scene II to Scene III in Act I: "*The void opens up from 35 mm to 70 mm widescreen and transforms to...1999. A spacious villa. White space. A patio and a pool*" (JOHNSON, 2003, p. 18).

The process of restoring the deteriorated 1919 Hitchcock film essay, frame by frame, is carefully scripted in the text, aiming at allowing the audience to contemplate the fragments while the characters talk about them:

> **Nicola:** Flock roses, as it happens. And a face. Medium close-up. Foggy, but a face.
> **Alex:** Let me see.
> **Nicola:** I think I found the leading lady.
> **Alex:** How do you know she's the leading lady.
> **Nicola:** She's a blonde.
> *Lights fade as, projected on to and dissolving one of the walls of the villa, the grainy yet mesmeric image of a woman's face, slightly startled, an eyebrow raised. An immaculately posed, yet undeniably real moment in time.* (JOHNSON, 2003, p. 26)

> […]
>
> **Nicola:** Let's just go on with it. Remember the first shot we found: our leading lady?
> **Alex:** She's dressed in black.
> **Nicola:** So we've a blonde in mourning, and a dead man.
> **Alex:** Bare bones of a plot. A film that was never completed. That only ever existed in his mind's eye. But we know his mind and we're familiar how he used that eye [the camera]. Look at what we've got so far.
> *More images come up almost simultaneously. The 1919 Blonde sits at a dressing table, three reflections of her looking back at us in the hinged mirror. She leans hard against flock wallpaper, her hand pressed to her mouth. A cutaway of her high heels.*
> **Alex:** All the usual ingredients, all the familiar themes; identity, trauma, moral irony, but what is it *about*? At a not-so-wild guess, I'd say desire. Terror and desire. Our heroine exists in mirrors and high heels and in the eyes of others. A man dies. I can't help feeling she's to blame.
> **Nicola:** I can't help feeling she's in danger. (JOHNSON, 2003, p. 57)

Psycho's shower-scene is evoked once more in an impressive stage direction that features the interaction of a live performer (the actor incarnating Alex) and a holographic image (a representation of Nicola showering in the nude):

> […] *Alex sits on the patio steps, cuts a slice of lemon, and puts it in his drink. Gently the shower by the pool turns itself on. From beyond the shower, shimmering, naked, Nicola appears. Oblivious of Alex, she showers. Alex stands and walks towards her. Coincidentally, he has the knife in his hand. He realizes this and puts it down. She turns to see him coming. Reaches out her arms. He steps into the shower and as he does, she dissolves, disappears. He stands in the shower, becoming sodden. Nicola appears, dressed as before, from the other direction.* […] *She turns off the shower. He stands there, dripping.* […] *She walks toward him and doesn't stop. They tumble backwards and she kisses him, committed, passionate, intent.* (JOHNSON, 2003, p. 64)

This hallucination experienced by Alex shows that he is in love with the idea of love in the "*Psycho*-mode", so much so that he actually sees Nicola, the object of his desire, materializing in the shower.

Hitchcock Blonde (2006): Paulo Biscaia's intermedial stage production

Paulo Biscaia is a multimedia stage director, cineaste and video designer, who tends to combine and merge elements of theatre, cinema and graphic novels to engage in new aesthetic experiences and produce unusual effects, drawing mainly on narratives full of violence, soaked in blood. His company, the Vigor Mortis, based in Curitiba, in the state of Paraná, is a Brazilian version of the *Théatre du Grand-Guignol,* the horror theatre of Paris, whose methods and potentials he investigated in his MA dissertation at London University.

In 2006, Biscaia directed an adaptation of Terry Johnson's *Hitchcock Blonde* for Vigor Mortis. Although some film and video technologies were already inscribed in Johnson's dramatic text, a series of innovative cinematic techniques combined with theatrical devices not included in the playscript, are foregrounded in Biscaia's homonymous stage production, thus enhancing the semiotic levels of representation and theatricality.

In this sense, besides integrating into the performance most of the scenic indications scripted in Johnson's text, the Brazilian director manipulates cinematic strategies, among them computer-aided image effects, with the purpose of simulating the filming process. For the sake of fluidity and smooth transitions of the interlaced, alternate plots, a versatile stage design that favored the use of cinematic visual effects was created. Two acting spaces were devised: the first one, levelling with the seating area of the spectators, followed the protocols of a theatre set, while the second one, built on a higher, upper level, constituted a cinematic acting space, displaying a screen made of a transparent shower-box curtain (Fig. 1).[1]

[1] Photographic images have been inserted into the text with Paulo Biscaia's permission.

Figure 1 – The cinema screen made of a shower-box curtain.

Onto this stylized screen, which visually alludes to the shower-scene of *Psycho*, digitally computerized images, such as sceneries, window-frames and video-clips are projected to simulate filmic strategies. The window-frames allude to the cinematic process of framing and allow the spectators to view several actions performed by the live actors behind the transparent screen. Part of the live action of the 1999 plot, specifically the couple engaged in the restoration process, is presented "as if" it were a film. Furthermore, during the process of restoration, filmstrips of Hitchcock's 1919 filmic essay can be seen on the screen by the audience, simulating the unravelling of the celluloid (Fig. 2).

The scenes of violence, which take place in the kitchen of the Blonde's home, are also presented as live action behind the transparent screen. Because of her revelations of the sexual excitements she experiences on the set, every time the telephone rings, her husband gets infuriated, because he believes she is receiving a call for another audition. On such occasions, he takes off his belt and beats her. These episodes are interspersed with the

Blonde's imaginative flights, conveyed through visuals relating to the film *The Birds*, which indicate that she aspires to become the leading lady of this movie to escape from her unsatisfactory life.

Figure 2 – Window-frame through which the live action is made visible.

A sequence of pre-recorded frames, featuring close-ups of the 1919 Blonde contemplating herself in the mirror, with her hair done in the Kim Novak style in *Vertigo* and combined with expressionistic lighting and music, is projected by the actor incarnating Hitch (Fig. 3). The same images are also seen by the audience during the process of restoration of the 1919 Hitchcock footage.

Figure 3 – Video clip featuring a close-up of the 1919 Blonde.

The different narrative strands were performed alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, on both the theatrical and the cinematic acting spaces, while fluid transitions were accomplished through sound and lighting, simulating cinematic dissolves (Fig 4).

Figure 4 – The 1999 and 1959 plots acted simultaneously.

Throughout the stage production, music is related to several Hitchcock films, mainly *Psycho* and *Vertigo,* which underpin the themes and motifs of *Hitchcock Blonde*. The soundtrack of screeching violins, violas and cellos, for example, used by Hitchcock to intensify the suspense during the shower-scene, is dislodged in the performance and introduced, for the effect of shock, in the scene where Hitch tests whether the Blonde's husband is dead by plunging a knife into his ribs. In fact, he is aware that the man is not dead and applies the test solely to demonstrate his *expertise*.

This scene is a follow-up of a series of episodes in which outbreaks of violence are set into motion, because the Husband feels humiliated with the infamous revelations of the Blonde. This seems to be the reason why she has sought information about the art of stabbing a person to death and the best way to get rid of the corpse, subjects on which Hitch excels. Eventually, the knowledge acquired is put into practice at home. She stabs her husband repeatedly in the chest, but commits a series of errors that turn out disastrous. Needless to say that her husband resuscitates when Hitchcock applies the test.

After returning back home, she tries to make up with her husband, but when the telephone rings and he starts taking off his belt, she seizes a kitchen knife and stabs herself. Before she collapses, she grabs the transparent shower-box curtain and knocks it down, an action which, besides alluding to the shower-scene of *Psycho* once more, exposes the artifice of the fake cinema screen.

Concluding remarks

Both, Terry Johnson and Paulo Biscaia pay homage to Hitchcock who created unique effects of camera movements to undermine conventional practices and modify visual perception. Johnson's use of pastiche in the spirit of postmodernism and the unorthodox stage directions inserted in his play *Hitchcock Blonde*, as well as Biscaia's fresh and new ways of using cinematic references in his homonymous stage production evoke the cultural memory of

Hitchcock's *oeuvre*, which remains as popular as ever in the consciousness of movie aficionados.

Throughout this essay, evidence has been provided that the complex intermedial relationships on page and stage have not been developed only for aesthetic purposes or for challenging textual or theatrical conventions, but have been implemented for devising additional layers of meaning and for calling into question issues of medial specificities and border crossings.

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