

Mind My Business

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Dedicated to the “M.O.B. [Minds Own Business] ist” William Burroughs

“Most of the trouble in this world has been caused by folks who can’t mind their own business, because they have no business of their own to mind, any more than a smallpox virus has.”<sup>1</sup>

William Burroughs

In one of Hitchcock’s films, two strangers meet accidentally on a train. The first man intends to marry the woman he loves once his divorce with his unfaithful wife is finalized, and the other man hates his father. “Some people are better off dead, like your wife and my father for instance. (...) Let’s say that you’d like to get rid of your wife. Let’s say that you had a very good reason. Now, you’ll be afraid to kill her. You know why: you’ll get caught. And what would trip you up? The motive. Ah! Now, here’s my idea; it’s so simple. Two fellows meet accidentally, like you and me. No connection between them at all, never saw each other before. Each one has somebody that he’d like to get rid of, so—they swap murders! Each fellow does the other fellow’s murder, then there is nothing to connect them. Each one has murdered a total stranger.” For a series of Hitchcock films (*Strangers on a Train*, 1951; *North by Northwest*, 1959; *Psycho*, 1960, etc.), I would propose the generic title: Mind My Business. If the mother figures prominently in these films, it is to a large extent because she is—if we view the matter from the perspective of the infant once he has attained a minimal sense of separation from his mother and achieved a rudimentary ego—the first stranger who has minded the protagonist’s business. And it is possible that later in life, he’ll wish for a repeat of this situation—no experience of being minded by someone we already know prior to his doing so (a friend, a relative...) can reproduce that initial experience of life, being minded completely by a stranger. In Hitchcock, becoming an adult does not

entail that I should mind my own business, i.e. both not interfere with the business of others and conduct attentively my personal business; but rather that I have to either have the good luck of coming across a stranger who will replace my mother as the one who will mind my business, or else actively try to lure some stranger to do this for me. From this perspective, an infantile man is someone who still relies on the no longer appropriate person, his mother, to mind his business instead of enticing some new, appropriate stranger to do that. In *Psycho*, the sheriff tells Lila that the silhouette she saw in the house overlooking the motel where her missing sister, Marion, was last seen cannot be Norman Bates' mother, since, ten years earlier, the latter poisoned the man she was involved with when she found out that he was married, then fatally took a helping of the same stuff, Strychnine, and was buried in Greenlawn Cemetery. But in the final scene of the film, after the apprehension of Norman, and in the presence of the sheriff, who does not object to what he hears, the psychiatrist advances a different explanation of what transpired, one that he "got from the mother" of Norman. After living with her son for many years, she met a man. It seemed to Norman that she "threw him over" for that man, so he killed both of them. Since, according to the psychiatrist, "matricide is probably the most unbearable crime of all—and most unbearable to the son who commits it," Norman tried to erase the crime, at least in his own mind, first by stealing her corpse, hiding it in the fruit cellar, and treating it to preserve it, then by functioning at times as a medium for her thoughts, speech, and behavior. And because he was pathologically jealous concerning her, he assumed that she was as jealous concerning him. When Marion arrived at the motel and Norman was perversely aroused by her, at one point peeping through a small hole in the wall at her undressing in her motel room, his "jealous mother" was provoked and "she" killed her. For my part, I prefer to consider the film's events from the perspective of the aforementioned Hitchcockian motif of minding the other's business. Having found out that the man with whom she was involved was married, the mother poisoned him and then, wanting to commit suicide but unable to do so, asked her son to kill her. Once he acquiesced and minded her business—to commit suicide—by killing her, he had to find a way to make her fulfill her side of the implicit bargain: I mind your business and you mind mine. In Hitchcock, one can

never legitimately complain: *mind your own business* (as is clear in *Rear Window*, where the protagonist, a photographer with a cast leg who gazes through binoculars as well as a long-focus lens at his neighbors for much of the film, discovers a murder), since one of the motifs in Hitchcock's universe is: mind my business... and I'll mind yours. Rather, the paradigmatic Hitchcockian complaint is Bruno's recurrent one in *Strangers on a Train*, which can be formulated thus: "I have minded your business [by killing your unfaithful wife who made an infuriating about-face, refusing to sign the divorce papers], but you have not minded mine [by not murdering my disrespectful father:]!" This must also have been Norman's complaint in *Psycho* in the aftermath of his murder of his suicidal mother. Norman's weirdness is clear in his expectation that his dead mother's unfinished business will be respected, that his mother will keep her part of the implicit bargain from beyond the grave. He therefore steals her corpse, hides it in the fruit cellar, mummifies it, then begins to function at times as a medium for her thinking, speech, and behavior so she would mind his business. By repeatedly stabbing Marion in the shower, the "mother" minded her son's business, revealing thus that his desire is less to peep at his young female motel guest than to stab her to death. There is thus a major difference between Norman's murder of his mother, and his separate murders of the three young women at his motel: Norman did the first at the request of, and therefore for his (depressed) mother; but he committed the subsequent three murders, through the detour of his "mother," to assuage his own desire. In *Vertigo*, Scottie is frustrated not because Madeleine's husband has staged his desire for him but because he does not continue to do so once he has reached his own goal: to kill his wife and inherit her fortune. When exasperated Scottie tells Judy, "What happened to you? Did he ditch you? ... What a shame!", he is also thinking about himself, since he feels that he too was discarded by the husband, a stranger who proved that he can mind Scottie's desire better than he himself can: "He made you over just like I made you over, *only better*. Not only the clothes and the hair, but the looks, the manner and the words, and those beautiful phony trances." Hitchcock's universe is thus not a paranoid one: Scottie's problem is not that someone is constructing, unbeknownst to him, a fictionalized world for him; but rather that the other, having reached his goal, will stop doing so. In *North by*

*Northwest*, Roger Thornhill, a Manhattan advertising executive, is mistaken by a ring of spies headed by Phillip Vandamm for George Kaplan, a non-existent decoy created by the United States Intelligence Agency to divert suspicion from an actual agent. In order to create a convincing decoy, the Intelligence Agency established elaborate behavior patterns for Kaplan, moved his prop belongings in and out of hotel rooms, etc. When one of the members of the Intelligence team in charge of handling the case asks the others: “Does anyone know this Thornhill?” The others at the meeting answer negatively. “What are we going to do?” “Do?” “About Mr. Thornhill?” “We do nothing!” (...) “We can’t sit back calmly and wait to see who kills him first! Vandamm and company or the police?” “What can we do to save him without endangering our agent?” Is it true that they do nothing? No, soon after, they arrange for a special agent to meet Thornhill on the train; the meeting triggers a love affair between the two. Thus they ended up providing him, a stranger to them, with a lover, in this manner minding his business. In Hitchcock, the other has no right to place me in the position of *the wrong man*, to have me taken for the perpetrator of a crime he wants done, if he does not in the process try to provide me with my deepest desire.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Burroughs, *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (New York: Seaver Books, 1986), 16.

<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, Hitchcock’s *The Wong Man*, which is based on a true story, is an anomaly, *the wrong film*, since it shows a man unjustly mistaken for someone else *who is unaware of his existence*.