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Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*:

A Game of Phallic Keys

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Rarely have I found a story, novel, play or film that lends itself so openly to psychoanalytical investigation as Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*. Difficulties will rise as we go along--an "analysis" is never easy--but we can tell from the start that the material is here for us to see: money, a letter, and those keys on which the conclusion of the police inquiry depends. And since we are speaking of difficulties, let us start with the first one. Hitchcock, the director of the movie I have chosen to analyze, *is not the author of the scenario*. Indeed, the film script is an adaptation of Frederick Knott's play, with the same title, and although most of the dialogue has been kept by the film director (1) we shall not be able to ascribe what we analyze, words, symbols, fantasies and plot to a single author (since obviously the images in the film and the way they are arranged have to be attributed to Hitchcock) but to a composite "subject", made of the writer of the original play and of a particular "reader" who liked the play so much that he decided, or accepted, to retell the story in his own way and made a film of it, keeping most of the dialogue and remaining faithful to the plot. Such a mixed subject cannot of course be the object of a analysis, and I do not intend to speak of Hitchcock or of Knott as if they were on the analytical couch. But the result of their artistic effort remains, and the resulting discourse is going to reveal, as we are going to see, a lot of fundamental information which shall permit not only a close reading of the film symbolism, but also prove a valuable verification of some of the most central tenets of psychoanalytical theory.

To begin with, I would like to show how a central--perhaps obvious--fantasy organizes the "story" from beginning to end, which is a way of showing how unconscious desire designed the plot. This can best be illustrated by the first scenes of the film, a quick succession of frames which in passing clearly demonstrates Hitchcock's talent and stresses his personal share in the enterprise. In less than 65 seconds indeed, we are shown, as in a nutshell, what the main theme of the work is.

Opening scene: a street and an English policeman--perhaps a reminder that "justice" always prevails and that the "wicked" are always caught; I read it as a sign that all will be well in the end, although "well" must be questioned, naturally, since it refers to the fantasy unfolded in the film.

Actual beginning of the action: *husband kisses wife* (one frame).

Husband and wife sit down for breakfast in a scene which is slightly more complex--several frames here, or rather a camera movement which goes from one to the other-- *husband enters*, his mail in hand, spills some salt and throws some over his shoulder (this shot is rather rapid and apparently casual, but perhaps it points to his hope that he will have some luck in his enterprise), then opens *a letter*, while on the other side of the table his *wife discovers in her newspaper the arrival of a man whom we shall soon identify as a friend of hers*.

A sea-port and a large transatlantic steamer (the *Queen Mary*, in fact, and one may wonder whether this is not a discreet sign pointing to the "mother" in a film that could well be entitled "*Dial M for Mother*" as, with some insight, Paul Gordon suggested.(2)

Old friend disembarks.

Old friend--obviously "the other man"--*kisses wife* (one frame).

In other words--or images--in hardly more than a minute, we are shown that the film we are going to watch is about love, forbidden, or transgressive love, a betrayal, perhaps, and its consequences. We shall see. But what is straight away obvious is that this visual introduction in some ten or twelve frames

(husband and wife/a letter and a visitor/visitor and wife) does correspond to the triangular structure which constitutes one of the theoretical bases of psychoanalysis.

Such a structure is well known, even to those who reject Freudian theory; it describes the infant's relationship with its parents, where the mother is the child's first love object, while the father represents the agency who, at first, stands between child and object. The Oedipus myth is of course the best representation we have of such a triangular structure, and we now know that this can also be expressed in a more abstract and general manner as "Subject, bar and object" (Lacan).

This triangular structure, in any case, exactly corresponds to the central fantasy which I take to have been the source of our story from beginning to end: the unconscious project to get possession of the mother, a desire to re-appropriate the object lost at birth and, more generally, a confrontation with the "bar", *la barre*. Such is the tragedy--more a drama, in fact, than an actual tragedy, as we shall see--which is told in *Dial M for Murder*.

Let us follow the unfolding of the action and see what happens to our first three characters, each in a specific symbolic role. That evening, then, Margot (Grace Kelly) and Mark (Robert Cummings) go to the theater; they leave Tony, the husband (Ray Milland), at home for he has apparently some urgent business to take care of and cannot go with them. This is, of course, an excuse to stay alone at home since he is planning to meet another person, Captain Lesgate or Swann (Anthony Dawson), who is our fourth character. If I add Chief Inspector Hubbard (John Williams) to the list, we have the five main characters in *Dial M for Murder*. Five characters, then, but because what we are analyzing is a representation, we shall keep in mind that the status of a character in a film or in a theatrical play is of course different from that of a real person. Here for instance, exactly as in a dream, the two men in the original triangle have each a symbolical double and what we are looking at is still a triangle. In a word, as in a dream, a character which is only a sign--you can say a *signifier* if you wish--may not always be assigned a unique role or identity and can carry several *signified* (displacements) while, concurrently, we can also have two

characters having partly the same symbolic function and collaborating to represent a single entity (condensation). With Swann, we have a double of Tony, Margot's husband: they both "collaborate" in planning Margot's murder, and we shall note in passing that both husband and "killer" are equally attached to money--Tony, because he lives more or less at the expense of Margot and plans to inherit from her after her death, and Swann because he agrees to kill for money, was identified by Tony as a thief, and also lives more or less at the expense of his lady friends and of his landladies. There are several exchanges of large amounts of banknotes in the film--clearly shown by Hitchcock-- first at the beginning, between Tony and Swann, and later on, towards the end, when Tony hides in a blue attaché case what he intended to give Swann after the murder. Together with letter, bag and key, this constitutes our fourth important symbol. And as we well know, money is often considered as representing what the infant wishes to offer its mother (or perhaps also to receive from her in a symbolical exchange (excrements).

We also have a similar "double sign" (one signified for two signifiers) in the second half of the movie, when Mark and Chief inspector Hubbard can be seen following almost the same path in their search for the missing key, with almost the same gestures, as we shall see. For the sake of verisimilitude, Hubbard is naturally slightly ahead in his inquiry, but it is obvious in the end that they both want to save Margot, the difference being that Tony is a symbolic representation of the infant--the lover--while Chief inspector Hubbard finally appears as a benevolent parental image, a grandfather perhaps, and we also remark that if the latter is a member of the police force, Mark is a writer of detective stories for television.

One object: Margot as the mother; one subject: Mark as the child, with Hubbard as his second (who in our story however also represents justice, that is to say *in this oedipal fantasy* the accomplishment of the child's unconscious desire); and between the two the father of the law or *la barre*: the murderer in two persons. Such is the triangular structure of the oedipal fantasy.

This is corroborated by what follows in the plot once Swann has accepted to be the active agent of the murder in order to provide Tony with a fool-proof alibi. What follows on the screen, and most

vividly so, in the best "Hitchcockian" manner, is Swann's attempt to strangle Margot, and I speak of a corroboration because the scene is indeed a particular chapter of the oedipal story: we are still in "the triangle".

It does not take much psychoanalytical knowledge to interpret Margot's attempted murder as a representation of the "primal scene", the depiction of the sexual relationship between the parents as perceived, seen, heard or even simply imagined by the child, one of our primal fantasies distinguished by Freud, *Urszene*. In the movie, the actual scene--which apparently took several days to shoot--shows Swann's assault on Margot and is quite evocative of a sadistic sexual encounter, an extremely violent fight where the man tries to strangle the woman, (3) while Tony (this time vividly in the place of the child, displaced, as in a dream again), at the other end of the phone, hears every sound of the struggle, "faint cries" he says.

In Knott's plot, however, most dramatically, it is the aggressor who in the end is killed. Fighting for her life indeed, Margot manages to get hold of a pair of scissors and stabs her opponent who falls dead to the floor. Needless to say, Hitchcock's vivid image of the deadly weapon, handled like a dagger but a pair of scissors all the same, can easily be analyzed as what "castrates" the aggressor, and we do not even have to wonder to what an extent the choice of scissors was conscious or not.

The first half of the movie ends here: the murder of the Lady did not take place and this can easily be interpreted as the effect of the child's desire to save her: in his aggression--and we can add, in his attempt to castrate the symbolic mother-- the wicked father has failed; the oedipal structure is still commanding the action and will continue, as in a dream, to organize what happens next. Swann is dead, one half of the wicked father, in fact a signifier, has been disposed of, but the other "half" is still very active and supremely clever.

For Tony, very brilliantly, reverses the situation: his first attempt having failed, he now turns Margot from a victim to a murderess. She killed Swann because he was blackmailing her! Placing the

letter which he stole earlier on Swann's corpse--"in [his] inside pocket"-- and making it appear as the object of a blackmail, Tony leads the police to imply that Margot must have let her aggressor in herself since on the other hand no "proper" key could be found on him. The police, in any case, are easily convinced of her guilt.

Hubbard. [...] she let him in herself. At present that appears to be the only way he could
have entered.

A letter, a key; we cannot fail to notice in the narration the proximity in these two signifiers: they do follow the same path. Like the keys, Mark's love letter is an essential element in the logic of the "dream" we are trying to elucidate, and we must not be satisfied with the apparently realistic meaning of this sign. For even though this letter becomes an essential factor in the demonstration of Margot's guilt as far as the realism of the murder story is concerned (convincingly or not) it carries on the other hand great symbolical significance: because it occupies the same space in the Lady's bag as her key, it is not too difficult to see in these two signs a representation of "something" specifically belonging to her.

His first attempt having failed, we saw how Tony launched a second attack: Margot knew Swann, she opened the door to him and in the end killed him because of the danger he represented. We shall see whether the argument is solid enough to completely convince Chief Inspector Hubbard, but what is certain is that such a "purloined" letter cannot escape the attention of the critic, and in particular its trajectory. Edgar A. Poe's famous tale comes naturally to mind here, and so does Lacan's no less famous psychoanalytical commentary on the "Purloined letter", *La lettre volée*. It is true, the similarity does not extend beyond the trajectory of the letter and beyond the interpretation of the letter as phallus, but one may well wonder whether Poe's story was not at first a source of inspiration for Frederick Knott, whose play nevertheless retains its own originality. We remember how, the previous evening, Tony explained to Swann how he stole Mark's love letter from his wife's bag and we shall satisfy our desire for logic in saying that he then simply acted out of curiosity or jealousy (let us not be too exigent). But now that

Swann is dead, suddenly faced with an entirely new situation, Tony is going to be able to put this first theft to serious use, transforming it into a formidable proof of the Lady's guilt. Is this all though? Could the letter possibly still have another symbolic dimension? What do we have beyond the realistic "surface" of the detective story? And indeed, the trajectory of this "purloined" letter--a letter stolen but also *détournée*--is full of interesting information and we must carefully study the track it follows. As in Poe's tale, the letter is a token of the (phallic) fate of the person who owns it: when in the Lady's *bag* (body, womb), it represents her sexual integrity or even her integrity *tout court*, in the husband's hands, it is his trophy; he has, to the child's despair, deprived the Lady of such sexual identity (castration, annihilation), and in the inside pocket of the dead "murderer", as we shall see, it is nothing more than a dead phallus, a no-phallus..

We have now reached the second half of the movie, the most original part of Frederick Knott's plot, the part where keys take on the role of the letter, for they too have an interesting trajectory. We have already met "money", "letter" and "bag", with "key" our list of meaningful signs is now complete. Earlier in the story, just before going out with Mark to their "stag party", we watched the husband taking his wife's key from her bag--exactly in the same manner as he stole the letter-- a whole frame shows him hiding the stolen key in his hand behind his back. In fact, the whole plot depends on this particular key. Tony needs it to allow the murderer to come silently into the apartment for he does not want to take any risk and cannot afford to leave his own key which he will need to strengthen his alibi: what happened must really appear as a surprise for him, *he had nothing to do with it*. (4) We know by now, of course, that there is more to it than this rational, realistic explanation: already, stealing the letter was a first symbolical castration, repeating this first theft has the same meaning and this is only the beginning.

It is now time for us to turn to these highly symbolical keys. (5) As in Poe's *Purloined letter*, the object(s) Tony stole belonged to the Lady. Tony "purloined" his wife's key, and although it is apparently the same key as his--"they are all alike"--we are going to see that it has a different function. To

Frederick's Knott credit, *Dial M for Murder* is also a story about sexual difference. Here is the dialogue:

Hubbard: How many keys are there?

Margot: Only two. Mine is my handbag; (*To Tony*) You had yours with you. (6)

There are two keys then, the key of the husband and the key of the wife, and since they are identical, which seems to contradict the obvious observation that the bodies of men and women, on a specific place, are very different, we have to conclude that the identity mentioned refers to something else than simply the body. I interpret the likeness of both keys as the sign that women and men have something in common and I take it to be a "something" they are both missing and desire to recover, call it ideal, unity, or...phallus,(7) in short a very abstract item, and the very essence of desire. Needless to say, the loss I think we suffered at birth is not consciously acknowledged, is never accepted in fact, and it is the task of unconscious desire to conceal this loss and find a substitute for what is missing. Although he always refused to be dragged into the realm of metaphysics, Freud used the term *Ersatz* in his theory of representation, and this is where our ability to speak comes in: thanks to language, we represent, that is to say put a sign in the place of...absence. That this is tied up with sexuality--so essential to us--explains how we have come to confuse the abstraction I am speaking of, in fact our *lack*, with what we see on our bodies: we make use of an undeniable difference between the sexes to signify an essential incompleteness. Hence Lacan and his insistence on the phallus as a fundamental signifier. Hence also my own usage of *phallus* and *phallic* to signify body integrity or completeness even, and of *castration* to recall a menace to this integrity, a fear of annihilation in fact. As we can see, much more than a question of exact resemblance, the symbolical dimension of the "latchkey" in Hitchcock's movie so easily perceived does not only depend on resemblance (in which case we might think the key of the film does not have the proper size!) but points to an abstraction.

Which brings us back to our keys, both phallic but with a difference. In the movie, this difference is perfectly respected, and we can say that Margot's key and the key of her husband are different because they have in fact different roles. Admittedly, both keys open the door, but the Lady's key stays outside, under the stair carpet precisely; it permits entrance, yes, penetration, but it does not "come in" itself, remains hidden, and if we pay attention to the way Hitchcock carefully filmed key and carpet we do not have too much difficulty in thinking of a clitoris under its hood.

Like the incriminating love *letter* (which is also a sign of the child's oedipal desire), the *bag* is definitely Margot's, and so is *her own key*, often mentioned as being in her bag as we just noticed. None of this could be properly interpreted if it were not for Chief Inspector Hubbard who will cleverly devise a mouse-trap for Margot's husband in a desperate attempt to confound the real culprit, the wicked father of our oedipal triangle. Very much a double of Poe's Dupin, Hubbard, although he has never openly shown any doubts about the Lady's culpability--suspense!-- does not however seem satisfied with the jury verdict and this incites him to organize a little game of keys. Like him, Mark, his (symbolical) double as we know, suggests a similar interpretation of the facts of the night but still cannot find the hidden key. As the child in the triangle, he wants to save the Lady, that is to say wishes her to recover her own feminine phallus, her own sexual integrity, wishes in a word to save her from castration, but it seems he cannot do so without the help of some benevolent figure. Hubbard represents this benevolent figure--perhaps Knott's dream of a good father image?--and has already located the missing key. As he wants to be sure, however--for after all Margot may have left the key outside herself and still be responsible for the aggressor's entrance--he puts both Lady and husband to the test.

It now only remains to expose the real culprit and to save the Lady. Let us then look carefully at the film, frame after frame, and pay attention to what is said. We have already learnt quite a lot. For instance, that there are only two keys, Margot said so: "*The door was locked and there are only two keys.*" Two keys? But what of Chief Inspector Hubbard's own key? And there is also Swann's!

Right. Let's see what relationship we can establish between all these keys and start with what the dead man had in his pocket(s). Coming back from his party and finding a corpse on the floor of his apartment, the first thing Tony did was to place the incriminating love letter in the dead man's *inside* pocket, and then, as if this were an exchange, look for Swann's key.(8) He does find a key, then, and when Margot has her back turned, hurries to replace it into her bag from which earlier on he had extracted his wife's key. So far so good, all is in order; it seems everything is now in its proper place. Well, perhaps.

With Chief Inspector Hubbard's key, things are slightly more complex because it is obvious that the policeman's key has nothing to do with the apartment or with the murder scene. This latter key, in fact, is only a decoy, the instrument of a verification since "*After all, most men carry a latchkey about with them.*" A little harmless game, then, devised by the policeman, but not deprived of symbolic signification all the same--one never plays innocently with "keys"--something like a little boy's game: "Show me yours, and I'll show you mine."

For Hubbard must be certain that Tony has *his own* key with him. Pretending thus to find a key on the floor--and Hitchcock makes it sure that we see it is his own key the inspector picks up and will then put back into his waistcoat pocket (and not in his raincoat, which therefore will be empty)-- he asks:

Hubbard. (*He holds up the latchkey*) Is this yours sir?

Tony. (...feels in the pockets of his raincoat. From one of them he takes out his latchkey and holds it.) No I've got mine here. (9)

And now for the test, the final verification: who opened to Swann, who allowed him to come into the apartment? The inspector does not know, but *we* know it cannot be Margot since we witnessed Tony's preparation for the murder when he explained to Swann what he would have to do. What we do not know

is whether he will succeed in his second attempt to destroy Margot--suspense! And to save the Lady, Chief Inspector Hubbard still has to produce an irrefutable proof.

He has found the key which the aggressor--the "murdered murderer"--used to penetrate into the room (and, as instructed, replaced it back afterwards where it belonged, outside, under the stair carpet), but this is not a sufficient proof since one does not know who placed it there; the Lady may have left it there herself.

Hence the ultimate verification. Margot is brought back from prison (never mind the absence of realism here); she has her bag with her, and from it she extracts her key or rather what she thinks is her key and of course it does not fit and fails to open the door!

Hubbard. You've got a key. Why didn't use it?

Margot. I did. But it didn't fit the lock.

And it does not fit because it is not her own key.

That was Tony's mistake--fault indeed, since it amounted to a symbolic castration--Tony's mistake because he was thus symbolically depriving the Lady of her sexual identity, first by stealing her key from her bag at the beginning, and then, second, by replacing it by what represented the sexual organ of a man who was dead, a no phallus as we saw.

There only remains to put Margot's husband to the test. We know Tony represents the father figure in our triangle-- and since as spectators we already know he is the guilty one there is no reason to doubt the issue of the experiment. By exchanging the raincoats, then, and leaving--or pretending to leave-- Hubbard has made sure that Tony's contains no key and will be led, after a short moment of hesitation, to realize that Margot's real key must still be on the stairs. And indeed, after a few seconds of suspense, this is what happens, and Tony goes back to the stairs and finds the right key, therefore betraying himself and proving he is the one who placed it there.

Mark. [...] why didn't Wendice [Tony] use it just now?

Hubbard. He didn't use it because he doesn't realize it's there. He still thinks it's in his wife's handbag.

And we remember that he put Swann's key in his wife's handbag, thinking it was her key which Swann had not replaced under the stair carpet.

Hubbard. It had always surprised me that *no key* was found on Swann's body. After all, most men carry a latchkey about with them. (*my italics*)

As much as the dramatist's wish to protect the mother (the child's wish indeed, so that he could run away with her), what caused Tony's downfall in the end was the fact that he took Margot's feminine "key" for a masculine signifier, thus confusing a feminine phallus with the phallus of a dead man, that is to say a signifier which had no longer any signified, that is to say represented *nothing*.

The "oedipal" conclusion is a happy one. But it is of course the conclusion of a fantasy, I mean of *eine Phantasie*, of *un fantasme*: a source of pleasure for the writer and for the film director, a source of pleasure for me as part of the audience, the film is nevertheless based on unconscious desire. But today, we know that dreams can be analyzed, as can literary works, and when we stop being simply part of the audience, when we become, that is, researchers or psychoanalysts--an ambiguous role -- Knott's story and Hitchcock's film become an extraordinary document which verifies all of Freud's theses: the existence of a fundamental human triangular structure first, which accounts for our unconscious oedipal wishes, and in which in turn the lacanian schema representing Subject, bar and object *a* perfectly fits, to which can also be added the representation of what we call the primal scene, castration and of course sexual difference, but a difference with a similar *symbolical*, abstract phallus for all.

NOTES

1. Frederick Knott, *Dial M for Murder*, Dramatists Play Service Inc., 14 East 38th Street, New York 15, N.Y.

In the play, the introduction is slightly longer; Hitchcock suppressed a few pages where Margot speaks of her relationship with Tony, apparently happier now, and she also mentions Mark's letters, which she burnt except one; Tony speaks of his writing. Except for this the dialogue is the same until the very end, where, again, Hitchcock shortened the play's last lines simply showing the two "lovers" running away together.

2. Paul Gordon, *Dial M for Mother*, 2008. The book is a presentation of most of Hitchcock's films but, curiously, does not devote much space to *Dial M for Murder*.

At the time the film was made, Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth's II mother, was referred to as "Queen Mary, the Queen Mother".

3. We know that strangling can often be analyzed as a displacement of castration. We also learn that at the times he was filming *Dial M for murder*, Hitchcock was thinking of *Rear window*, where the wife, this time, is not castrated but simply annihilated (perhaps cut to pieces), all this under the eyes of James Stewart!

4. And perhaps, also, he does not wish his own masculine key to seem responsible for the murder?

At this point of our inquiry, it seems however necessary to stress that there is not much that is *really* logical or rational in the way the movie handles the facts of the story if we look carefully at the facts reported. I am particularly thinking of what happens to Margot's key. Indeed, there was no need--other than symbolic--to steal that key in order to place it under the stair carpet to permit Swann to come in, and it might have been simpler for the husband to hide his own key instead since Swan had been instructed to replace the key where he found it. As a fundamental signifier, however, Margot's key had to be stolen and

hidden in order to play its part as proof of the husband's guilt. Once again, we can observe how unconscious desire controls the "facts" reported in so many works of fiction.

5. Directly inspired by the Knott-Hitchcock movie, a similar "game of keys" is played in *A Perfect Murder* (1998), scenario Patrick Smith Kelly, director Andrew Davis--Knott is mentioned in the credits--, but the story is different; we are in front of another "case".

6. When discussing how Swann may have come in, Margot will repeat this:

"But he can't have got in that way. The door was locked and there are only two keys.

My husband had his and mine was always in my handbag."

7. The latter being a consequence of a visible sexual difference, but also of the way power has been distributed throughout history.

8. An exchange? Perhaps not quite, since letter and key both carry an identical symbolic meaning: fate ...or phallus. We shall then say that the one replaces the other.

In all logic, since he told Swann to replace the key in the corridor, that is not where he should have first looked, but fiction characters, like humans in real life, do make mistakes, sometimes unconsciously so. This, as we saw, was Tony's fatal mistake.

9. For clarity's sake, I have added the stage directions.