

I Saw, Therefore I Know? Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* and the Epistemological Potential of the Photographic Image.

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Abstract

*This essay examines Alfred Hitchcock's take on the epistemological potential of the photographic image, as played out in his 1956 film *The Wrong Man*. Through a close analysis of some of the key scenes in the film, I will show how the relationship between sight, knowledge, and the photographic image gets complicated in Hitchcock's treatment of the crime story.*

Ever since the birth of cinema, debates surrounding its nature have elected different aspects as foundational of the new technology. Cinema has been described at times as a language, an art form, an industry, a tool for capturing reality as it is or an instrument capable of revealing the hidden nature of things. The recent shift from analog to digital technology has fostered a new wave of theoretical studies on the ontology of cinema, leading scholars to reflect again upon the question that is asked in the title of André Bazin's best known collection of essays: what is cinema?

The different approaches that have been adopted throughout the history of cinema mirror not only the different positions of the scholars who have tried to give an answer to this fundamental question, but also the different roles that cinema has played at different stages of its history. As Tom Gunning points out in his essay "In Your Face: Physiognomy, Photography, and the Gnostic Mission of Early Film", ^[1] ^[#N1] there is an often overlooked tradition of early film and early film theory that considered cinema as a new instrument of knowledge, rather than just a new language or art form. This tradition, perhaps unconsciously, picks up on an aspect of early cinema that had been seemingly superseded by the affirmation of motion pictures as means of entertainment: it is what Gunning calls the "gnostic mission" of early film. He writes: "Early cinema, whether designed as entertainment, pedagogical tool, or instrument of scientific investigation, maintained an important relation to the gnostic impulse, although often operating as parody." ^[2] ^[#N2] Early films, therefore, retained the epistemological mission that was attributed to still photography; although cinema asserted itself very soon as a device of mass entertainment rather than a scientific tool, the gnostic impulse that accompanied its birth did not disappear, but kept playing an influence on the development of actual motion pictures. This connection was still apparent in the 1920s, when film theorists recognized this aspect of the new technology and, for instance, attributed a revelatory power to close-ups – especially of the human face. ^[3] ^[#N3]

But what remains of this gnostic drive in the later development of cinema? Has it been completely abandoned in favor of entertainment or aesthetics, or has it been playing a role, however different

than the one it had at the very beginning of film history? I will argue that the ways in Alfred Hitchcock has dealt with the relationship between cinema and knowledge is deeply indebted with the kind of epistemological reflection that surrounded early cinema and early film theory, and that aspects of his style can be actually traced back to the quasi-magical revelatory power attributed to photography in the nineteenth century. However, rather than continuing this tradition in a seamless way, Hitchcock at times questions the faith in the epistemological power of photography and film almost to the point of assuming a skeptical position. To clarify what I mean, I will take into account Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1956), and will see how the interplay between the photographic image and its epistemological potential gets complicated in unexpected ways.

Alfred Hitchcock and the Crime Story

The issue of knowledge is at the core of Hitchcock's cinema, and it manifests itself at the level of both style and narrative. A classical Hitchcockian storyline sees the protagonist being accused of a crime he has not committed, and having to investigate in order to find out the truth and prove his innocence. [4] More generally, it can be said that in most Hitchcock's films, whether they are seemingly traditional crime stories or not, the pursuit of knowledge is the only way to salvation. This is what happens in films as different from each other as, for instance, *North by Northwest* (1959) and *Marnie* (1964). However, these considerations alone do not account for the complexity of Hitchcock's discourse on knowledge and its relation to cinema and to the photographic image in general, nor for the ambiguity of his position toward knowledge in itself.

It is a notorious fact that Hitchcock, despite being mostly known as a director of crime stories, has always consciously avoided the narrative structure of the so-called “whodunit” – that is, a mystery story in which a detective has to collect clues in order to find out who committed a crime among a defined pool of characters, and in which, usually, the knowledge of the spectator (or reader) is aligned with that of the detective. In his famous interview with François Truffaut, Hitchcock defines the whodunit as an intellectual puzzle that is void of emotion; [5] although he does not give a judgement of value on the genre, he makes it clear that it is not what he is interested in. In fact, Hitchcock aims at provoking an emotional response in the audience, rather than a purely intellectual one. His well-known explanation of the difference between surprise and suspense is exemplary of his attitude:

We are now having an innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens and then all of a sudden, “Boom!” There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the décor. The public can see that it is quarter to one. In these conditions the same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen, “You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There's a bomb beneath you and it's about to explode!” In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second case we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. [6]

The suspense effect, in Hitchcock's terms, is therefore produced by a misalignment between the knowledge of the audience and the knowledge of the characters; if the audience knows something that the characters do not know, it will be in a state of suspense until the equilibrium is restored. According to what Hitchcock says in this famous extract, this technique is more effective in fostering an emotional response on the part of the audience than mere surprise is. However, I would argue that there is more to this technique than just the construction of a state of tension, and that the key concept of the passage is that of knowledge.

In particular, I believe that this passage raises two questions that Hitchcock does not answer directly here, but addresses implicitly in his films. Firstly, if the awakening of an emotional response in the spectator is what Hitchcock aims for with his filmmaking style, why the constant choice of the genre of the crime story? After all, there are genres that serve the same purpose as, or even more, effectively; horror, for instance, or melodrama. Certainly, Hitchcock's films are often hybridized with both; at the same time, though, the pursuit of knowledge through an investigation is nearly always the backbone of his works, and this is a typical trait of the crime story. I would suggest that Hitchcock's predilection for the detective story is due to the fact that this genre constitutes the most essential narrative transfiguration of the human quest for knowledge. However complex and nuanced the plot could be, this is the basic structure of any fiction of this kind: a detective has to go through an epistemological path to find out the truth about something. Considered from this point of view, Hitchcock's statement about suspense sounds reductive: however important the emotional response of the spectator might be, the misalignment of knowledge between the audience and the characters, in a type of story that thematizes the concept of knowledge itself, has consequences that go far beyond that.

This consideration leads to the second question: what is peculiar to the cinematic treatment of a mystery story? Or, to put it differently; what changes when the pursuit of knowledge is narrated through images rather than in words? The situation that Hitchcock imagines to exemplify the distinction between surprise and suspense (two people are talking and a bomb is hidden underneath their table) can be narratively constructed in literary fiction as effectively as in a film. It would not be difficult to imagine a similar scene in a spy novel, and the creation of a state of suspense would be probably as successful as in a spy movie. However, there is certainly a difference between the two kinds of treatment, and it has to do with what I mentioned at the beginning of this essay: the epistemological potential of films. I would not argue that the moving image has necessarily an epistemological function *per se*, but that some filmmakers, like Hitchcock, have investigated this side of cinema in their work, by exposing and complicating it at the same time. Hitchcock's films constitute a sort of epistemological *mise en abyme*, with a mystery story (that is, the most explicit narrativization of an epistemological quest) narrated through a potentially epistemological tool that reflects on itself as well as on the process of knowledge. *The Wrong Man* is one of the films where this mechanism operates more explicitly and is critiqued at the same time, so laying bare the complex relationship between perception and knowledge, and the ambiguous role that cinema and photography play in it.

The Wrong Man

On the surface, *The Wrong Man* is a typical Hitchcock film, insofar as it follows the pattern of the “unjustly accused man who has to prove his innocence” that is considered one of the trademarks of the British director. Manny Balestrero (Henry Fonda) is a bass player who works in a music club. Despite some economic difficulties, his life is happy and rewarding: he has a beautiful wife, two kids who adore him and a job that he loves. Everything changes the day in which he goes to his wife's insurance company to ask for a loan: some of the employees are sure that he is the man who did a holdup at the

office a few weeks before. The same night, the police picks him up from his house to interrogate him and to take him to some stores which had been robbed by the same man; apparently, everyone recognizes Manny as the person who did the holdups. It is the beginning of a real nightmare: Manny is imprisoned, then released on bail. Although his family and friends are sure of his innocence, the police and the victims of the robberies are convinced of his guilt; at the same time, his private investigations are unsuccessful and his wife falls victim of depression, to the point that she has to be transferred to a psychiatric institution. When everything seems lost, the man who actually committed the crimes of which Manny is accused attempts a new robbery at a grocery store, but is stopped, arrested and positively identified as the holdup-man. Manny is finally a free man, although it will take him and his family some time to recover from the trauma they experienced.

Even from this brief account, there is one thing that comes across as unusual for both a Hitchcock film and a crime story in general: the solution is not the outcome of an investigation, but arrives unexpectedly and by complete chance. If the real thief had not attempted another robbery, he would never had been arrested and Manny would have been imprisoned at his place. The recourse to a *deus ex machina*, that is, to a solution that is not dramatically constructed but rather artificially inserted to fix a narrative dead end, seems at odds with Hitchcock's obsession with details. But this seemingly unsophisticated narrative solution, rather than being an easy shortcut, in fact constitutes the core of the discourse on knowledge that Hitchcock constructs in *The Wrong Man*. [7].[#N7]

Let us examine a key moment in the film, almost at the end. Everything seems lost and Manny is praying in front of an icon of Jesus.



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Figure 1.

Manny praying in front of an icon of Jesus Christ.



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Figure 2.

Manny praying in front of an icon of Jesus Christ (reverse shot).

He is framed in close-up, his lips moving silently, when another image is superimposed to his face: it is the real culprit, who is on his way to do another robbery. He walks towards the camera, and his figure gets bigger and bigger on the screen until his face overlaps with that of Manny's. The superimposition of the two faces lasts for several seconds, and its unusual length signals unmistakably its role not only as the turning point of the story, but also as the place where form and narrative converge. [8][#N8] Finally, the image of Manny's face fades out, leaving only the face of the criminal on the screen. Do they look alike? Could the two men actually be mistaken one for the other? How do we know that the face we are seeing on the screen belongs to "the right man"? The key to the sequence, and the answer to these questions, is to be found in the superimposition itself. Its effect is twofold: while it blends one image into another, it could also serve as a sort of comparison between the two. The identical features would overlap, while there would be a mismatch between the parts of the image that look different one from the other.



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Figure 3.

The “right man’s” face superimposed to that of Manny’s.

The Epistemological Potential of Superimposition

The process of superimposition is peculiar to cinema and photography, and is often related to a certain kind of filmmaking that had its zenith in post-World War I European cinema. In particular, French directors of the 1920s largely employed it in their films, and theorized upon it in their writings. For Germaine Dulac, for instance, superimposition was a way of thinking by cinematic means. [9][#N9]. But superimposition, as a technique that is specific to cinema and photography, was also regarded as one of the places where a reality invisible to the naked eye could be revealed through the photographic reproduction and manipulation of the world. This tradition of thought is related, perhaps unconsciously, to a similar discourse that surrounded photography a few decades earlier. Already in the XIX century, in fact, superimposition was regarded as something way more important than a mere optical curiosity, and the revelatory power that was attributed to it had very practical consequences.

In his essay “The Body and the Archive”, Allan Sekula shows how the advent of photography coincided with a widespread drive to classify human beings, and criminals in particular. The photographic image of the criminal served as an index of the criminal itself, and allowed for the creation of an archive of deviance that could serve different purposes. There were two main approaches to this new kind of archive: that of criminologists, who were in search of “the” criminal body, and that of criminalistics, who hunted “this” or “that” criminal body. [10][#N10]. Despite the differences between the two approaches, there is clearly a common ground that both share: the necessary condition is the existence of a difference between a normal and a deviant body, a difference that only a camera, as a mechanical tool to register reality, can make emerge. As Sekula writes, “it was only on the basis of mutual comparison, on the basis of the tentative construction of a larger, 'universal' archive, that zones of

deviance and respectability could be clearly demarcated. [...] [T]he invention of the modern criminal cannot be dissociated from the construction of a law-abiding body”. [11].[#N11]

Francis Galton, whom we could define as a “criminalistic”, went after the definition of *the* criminal type by using a process that was very similar to superimposition: he called it composite photography, and it was a “process of successive registration and exposure of portraits in front of a copy camera holding a simple plate. Each successive image was given a fractional exposure based on the inverse of the total number of images in the sample”. [12].[#N12]. Through this process, he aimed at maintaining the common features, which would be those typical of criminals, while having the other parts of the image fade because of underexposure. In his view, the result would be the face of the criminal type. [13].[#N13]



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Figure 4.

Galton's composite photography.

Although superimposition is based on a different photochemical process, the similarities with composite photography are fascinating. Going back to the shot from *The Wrong Man*, we could say that Hitchcock's purpose is different from that of Galton's; while the latter aims at the suppression of the differences between two images, the former, while showing their similarities, exposes the features they do not have in common. However, the necessary condition for both approaches to be effective is the attribution of an epistemological power to the photographic image. Only the faith in the camera as a tool capable of revealing a truth that is invisible to the naked eye allows to see these images as gnoseological epiphanies.

I am not arguing that Hitchcock was unproblematically convinced that a moving picture camera is a gnoseological instrument, even less that he was interested in pseudo-sciences such as physiognomy or phrenology. However, he has been undoubtedly reflecting on the epistemological potential of the photographic image throughout his entire career. *Rear Window* (1954), a film he directed two years before *The Wrong Man*, is probably the most explicit elaboration on these issues. The photographer

Jeff (James Stewart) is able to *see* only through the mediation of his camera. Photography provides Jeff with a major clue (the box buried in the flowerbed), and it is thanks to his photographic equipment that he discovers the crime in the first place and saves himself from the final attack of the murderer. In *Rear Window*, Jeff achieves knowledge through the act of vision, and his vision is nearly always mediated by a camera.

After all, the relation between vision and knowledge is one of the pillars of Western culture. In Ancient Greek, the present tense of the verb οἶδα, which means “I know”, is also the present perfect of the verb ὁραω, which means “I see”. In Ancient Greek, “I know” and “I have seen” are synonyms: present knowledge is the consequence of past vision, at least according to etymology. This does not mean that this relation has always been accepted unproblematically, as testified by the various schools of philosophical skepticism which question the epistemological reliability of our senses. [14].[#N14]. The advent of photography and cinema has added one factor to the already problematic equation; how reliable is my sense of vision when mediated by a mechanical apparatus that is supposed to capture the world and reproduce it on a screen?

Rear Window is a meditation on this issue, among other things, and its conclusion in this respect seems to be rather optimistic: cinema and photography help reveal the truth by enhancing our sense of vision. *The Wrong Man* questions this seemingly positivistic assumption by challenging the faith in the epistemological reliability of vision itself; it departs from a case of mistaken identity (what the victims of the robberies have seen leads them to a false knowledge) and is resolved by a mere twist of fortune. The final *deus ex machina*, as I have suggested earlier, is much more than a mere expedient; it is actually a strong stance on the fragility of an epistemological path based on the faith in one's senses. Therefore, going back to the questions I have asked before and have not yet answered, what does the superimposition of the face of the criminal to that of Manny's reveal about the truth? How does the cinematic image, treated with a process that highlights its photographic nature, make emerge the similarities and the differences between the two faces that are at the core of the story of *The Wrong Man*? The answer, in my view, is: it does not. As we stare at the screen for those endless seconds, we cannot decide whether the two faces actually look alike or not, if the mistake on the part of the victims was justified, if the face of the criminal is different from the face of the innocent. It is a moment of failed revelation. What the superimposition does is giving a visual dimension to the moment in which the lives of the two men cross, changing the fate of both; but it does not reveal their hidden nature, nor any kind of absolute truth.

The moment chosen by Hitchcock for this frustrated epiphany is also revelatory of his skeptical attitude toward the achievement of knowledge: the close-up that is being superimposed with the image of the “right man” is that of Manny praying in front of a religious icon. One might think that this attributes a transcendental dimension to the story: after having failed to restore justice through his private investigation, Manny begs for the help of God, and his prayers are heard. Jean-Luc Godard, in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, chooses this moment to claim that Hitchcock is the only director, together with Carl Theodor Dreyer, who knows how to film a miracle. Here, Godard elaborates visually on an idea that he had already laid out in his celebrated review of *The Wrong Man* published by the *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1957. [15].[#N15]. He writes: “The transition here is no longer a hinge articulating the story, but the mainspring of the drama whose theme it paraphrases.” [16].[#N16]. But what is the theme, exactly? Godard suggests in his review, and confirms in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, that this moment represents the visual dimension of a miracle, and that *The Wrong Man* centers around the possibility that miracles might happen, and that cinema might be able to make them visible, if not intelligible.

In his essay “The Afterlife of Superimposition,” Daniel Morgan further elaborates on this reading and turns it into a meta-cinematic argument: “As Bazin saw it, Hitchcock made narrative into a metaphysical condition of his films: nothing lies outside narrative, there is no space for free action – in short, a kind of metaphysical determinism. [...] The force of Hitchcock’s narrative is of sufficient power that only a miracle – something from outside normal possibilities – can break it. The superimposition in *The Wrong Man* is a miracle precisely because it breaks the metaphysical conditions that define the world of the film: Manny is allowed to go free despite having been caught up in the inexorable narrative machine.” [17][#N17] For Morgan, therefore, the miracle of the superimposition has a twofold function: in freeing Manny from the inexorable machine of judicial authority, it releases him from the tight fabric of narrative necessity. But what is this narrative necessity? Is it really the imprisonment of Manny, that is, the logical conclusion of the premises laid out by the plot and only avoided thanks to the intervention of a miracle?

I believe that the discourse on knowledge that Hitchcock constructs in *The Wrong Man* points in a different direction. On a narrative level, there is a little detail that makes the reading of the superimposition as a miracle unconvincing, or at least incomplete. As Godard himself acknowledges in his *Cahiers* review, at this point Manny thinks that everything is lost and that he will end up in jail; therefore he prays for strength, not justice. With what could be considered a touch of black humor, Manny is given justice the very moment he stops praying for it, accepts his situation and asks Jesus to give him the strength to endure a life in prison; paradoxically, his prayers are not heard. One might argue that the ways of the Lord are infinite, and a reading of Manny as a modern Job would be definitely fascinating; however, given the way in which Hitchcock treats vision as a means to achieve knowledge throughout the film, I believe that this interpretation would be limiting, if not plainly misleading. The superimposition betrays its revealing potential, and does so contextually with Manny’s unfulfilled prayer: it is at this intersection of narrative and style, and in the tension between the two, that Hitchcock’s uncertainty toward the possibility to pursue knowledge through a well-defined path, be it rational or transcendental, fully emerges, elevating chance to the role of main driving force of the story. The resolution comes unpreparedly, and the photographic image fails to give a sense to the casual twist of fate; in this respect, the fact that it is a happy resolution is hardly significant. As Godard claims, the superimposition is “the mainspring of the drama whose theme it paraphrases,” but the theme is that of the unintelligibility of fate, disguised as faith in the photographic image as agnoseological epiphany; in other words, it is the celebration of chance disguised as a miracle.

This scene also explains Hitchcock’s aversion for the structure of the whodunit, which is, on the contrary, a puzzle in which every piece must fit according to a logically consequential structure. Chance plays nearly no role in it, or else the rules of the game between the author of the story and its consumers would be invalidated. [18][#N18] Although Hitchcock has avoided the whodunit narrative structure in the vast majority of his films, *The Wrong Man* is probably one of his clearest departures from it. Besides what I have just said, there is another key element that shows how different the world that Hitchcock portrays is from that typical of a whodunit, and it has to do again with the main object of my analysis: the relationship between perception, knowledge, and the photographic image.

Sight, Knowledge, Belief

The pattern of knowledge in *The Wrong Man* is rather simple: broadly speaking, Manny and his family know he is innocent, whereas the victims know (or, they believe they know) he is guilty. There are other characters involved with various degrees of knowledge (Manny’s lawyer, for instance, or the

guilty man himself), but, for sake of simplicity, we can limit our analysis to these two groups – leaving out, for now, the key role of the audience's knowledge, on which I will return later.

The knowledge of the first group is grounded on factual experience; Manny knows he did not commit the holdups because he actually did not, and his wife knows it because she was with him when the robberies took place. The rest of his family and his colleagues trust him because they have known him for years and do not consider him capable of committing any criminal action. The knowledge of the second group is based on what they have seen: a criminal whom they identify as Manny. For most of the film, the police consider this second group as more reliable than the first; the victims are sure of what they have seen, and do not seem to have any reason to lie, unlike Manny and his dear ones. This structure changes at the end of the film, and the turning point is the second lineup: when in front of the man who attempted the robbery at the grocery store, the victims of the previous crimes identify him as the holdup man, so implicitly acknowledging their mistake in accusing Manny. It is significant that, while we see the lineup that incriminates Manny at the beginning of the film, Hitchcock chooses not to show the one that acquits him; while we hear the voices of the policemen and of the witnesses, we are shown Manny's reactions to what happens off-screen. This choice is in accordance with Hitchcock's will to involve the audience emotionally; we are with Manny during both identity parades, and we are led to share his fear, anxiety, and, finally, relief. But I believe that there is more than this to his stylistic decision.

This point brings into the picture the element that I had temporarily set aside, the audience. If we share Manny's feelings during the second lineup, it is because we know he is innocent, and we have known this throughout the whole film. But, how do we know this? Or, to put it more generally: what exactly does the audience know? The film opens with Alfred Hitchcock warning the audience that they are going to see a suspense picture which is based on a true story, and yet is stranger than any other thrillers he had ever made. After this introduction, a title card superimposed on the shot of a ballroom defines January 14, 1953 as “a day in the life of Christopher Emanuel Balestrero that he will never forget”. Although these shots give us some preliminary information about the story, neither of them mentions the fact that Manny Balestrero will be an unjustly accused man. And yet, this knowledge would put the audience in a greater state of suspense since the very beginning of the film; we would know a fundamental detail that none of the characters know yet. Actually, if we focus exclusively on the plot, there is nothing that proves positively that Manny is innocent at any point; of course, he is the main character of the story and we are led to believe that he is innocent, but there is no plot element that corroborates our belief. He has no “cast-iron alibi,” to use a term dear to whodunit authors. How can we be so certain of his innocence, then?

Let us see Manny's first appearance. After a handful of shots of the ballroom, which is progressively clearing out, Hitchcock cuts to the band playing. Manny is on the left side of the frame; when they stop playing, he picks up his bass, says goodbye and leaves. A couple of policemen seem to follow him in the street, and their imposing figures look like a premonition of the authority which is going to loom over him for most of the film.



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Figure 5.

Manny leaves the jazz club followed by two policemen.

He walks to a metro station, and, when he sits on the train, we finally see his close-up for the first time. It is Henry Fonda, whom the audience must know very well. He reads a newspaper. Hitchcock cuts back and forth between his close-up and what he is reading: a list of horse races, an advertisement for a car, an advertisement for a bank, and the list of horse races again. At every page, his expression changes from neutrality, to a smile, to concern, almost fear. This sequence of shots and counter shots fosters a quasi-kuleshovian effect, but in reverse: instead of reading Manny's expression according to what he sees, we read what he sees according to his expression. We then infer that he is mildly interested in horse races, that probably he would like to buy a new car but cannot afford it, and that his financial situation worries him. These elements might make us suspicious of his intentions and might later lead us to agree with the employees at the insurance office: he is the same person who robbed them. And yet, at every close-up of Manny that shows up in the film, we only see innocence. [19]

[#N19]

This is certainly a consequence of the audience's familiarity with Fonda's star persona; besides having impersonated mostly positive heroes, he played the role of the unjustly accused man twice before; in Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937) and in John Brahm's *Let Us Live* (1939). [20]. [#N20]. Our perception is therefore influenced by an extra-diegetic knowledge: we see Manny and have seen Henry Fonda in his previous roles, therefore we know that what the other characters see is wrong, or, more precisely, leads to an incorrect knowledge. This does not simply mean that Hitchcock has chosen Fonda for this role in order to lead the audience to believe that he is innocent without having to state it out right, although this is probably true; it also means that we are implicitly asked to follow a sort of hermeneutic circle that touches the film we are watching, the other films starring Henry Fonda and the other films directed by Hitchcock. This mechanism reverses the classical relationship between sight and knowledge: sight does not simply precede knowledge, but is also influenced by it.

Following a long epistemological tradition that originates in some of the readings of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norwood Russell Hanson devotes the first chapter of his book *Patterns of Discovery* to this issue. [21][#N21] What is seeing? Is it a mere physiological response of the brain to the light passing through the eyeball, or is it an act of interpretation of the world? Hanson rejects both explanations. He claims that seeing is an experience; eyeballs are blind, and it is people, not their eyes, who see. [22][#N22] See, not interpret: interpretation is not a fundamental step in the seeing experience. It might precede or follow it, but it is not necessarily part of it. And yet, not everyone sees in the same way, even with normal vision. The example he provides is enlightening: if Kepler and Tycho Brache were on a hill watching the dawn, would they see the same thing? Physiologically, yes; the image that their eyes take in would be the same. But where Kepler sees a static sun, Brache sees a mobile sun. Is it a difference in interpretation? No; it is a difference in vision that derives from their previous knowledge – or belief. Where a physicist sees an X-ray tube, a child only sees an object made of glass and metal; and yet, they are seeing the same thing. “Observation of *x* is shaped by prior knowledge of *x*,” Hanson writes. [23][#N23] Our prior knowledge of Henry Fonda, therefore, shapes the way we see him in a way that is inaccessible to the characters in the film, and our different perception will influence in return our knowledge of the facts narrated.

There are other extra-diegetic elements that shape the spectator's perception of Henry Fonda's innocence. *The Wrong Man* is based on a true story, with which the audiences may have had a certain degree of familiarity. The title itself, *The Wrong Man*, cues us to see Manny as an unjustly accused man. [24][#N24] Hitchcock relies on this prior knowledge on the part of the spectator to create a story that offers no positive evidence of Manny's innocence, and plays with the interaction between extra-diegetic knowledge, knowledge of narrative facts, and perception to question the reliability of an epistemological path based on the faith in one's senses. It is this complex back-and-forth between sight and knowledge that causes the misalignment of perception between the spectator and the characters, and this tension constitutes the ground on which the whole film is based.

This is why the two lineups are treated differently on a stylistic level. Besides being important turning points in the plot, they are also stagings of the act of seeing; in the first lineup we look at the same scene as the witnesses, in the second case we do not. We do not need to, because at this point our knowledge is aligned with theirs; it would be discursively redundant. The first lineup, on the contrary, expresses visually the mismatch of knowledge between the witnesses and the audience. While we look at the same scene as they do, we see different things; where they see guilt, we see innocence. And yet, as far as the plot is concerned, we have basically the same knowledge of facts as they do.

This pattern repeats itself several times throughout the film. When Manny is asked to walk into the stores that had been robbed, for instance; or, more explicitly, in the long and disturbing scene at the insurance office. The employee at the desk sees a threat where we only see a man innocently asking for information, and, when she asks her colleagues to look at him, they see the same thing as she does. Hitchcock cuts back and forth between them and Manny, and, shot after shot, he looks more innocent to us and more guilty to them, as if the misleading knowledge based on the fallacy of vision were contagious. It is this interplay between the different nature of what is being seen that questions the epistemological reliability of vision itself; and this interplay is at the center of *The Wrong Man*.

Conclusions

The crime story, therefore, is for Hitchcock a privileged terrain to stage the relationship between faith and skepticism with respect to knowledge, vision and the moving image; it narrativizes this tension

without resolving it, in fact with the awareness that it cannot possibly be reduced to one term or the other. In this respect, the superimposition of the faces of Manny and of “the right man” is a revelation, but of a different kind: by questioning the epistemological potential of the photographic image, and of sight itself, it denies the possibility of discerning a visible difference between a “criminal body” and a “law-abiding body”, to use Sekula's terms.

Hitchcock, therefore, follows a tradition of thought that originates in XIX century photography and is inherited by silent film theorists and directors. Not surprisingly, detective stories were a popular genre that implicitly reflected upon the evidentiary and epistemological value of the moving image. In titles like *The Evidence of Film* (Lawrence Marston and Edwin Thanhouser, 1913), *Une erreur tragique* (Louis Feuillade, 1913), or *Le Mystère des roches de Kador* (Léonce Perret, 1912), the solution to the mystery is placed in a roll of film, sometimes with misleading consequences. [25].[#N25] But, perhaps, the most fascinating example of this tradition is to be found not in a crime story, but in the ending of Victor Sjöström's *Ingeborg Holm* (1913). The eponymous protagonist regains her mental health by looking at a photograph of herself as a young woman. In *Ingeborg Holm*, the photograph had recorded not only the appearance of the protagonist, but also her true nature, thus allowing her to find herself again after she had been lost for years. “[The photograph] is the model,” as Bazin would write years later in his “Ontology of the Photographic Image.” [26].[#N26] Ingeborg's photograph becomes the physical embodiment of her true self, and her only means of self-recognition.

Hitchcock inserts himself in this cinematic tradition of epistemological thought, and complicates not only the faith in the photographic image as an instrument of revelation, but also the faith in vision itself as an instrument of knowledge. Manny and the thief look alike and different at the same time, as there is no way of archiving their “criminality” together with their appearance. If we see innocence in Manny's face, it is because of our prior, extra-diegetic knowledge; but, what does innocence in itself look like? Does innocence have a face? Does guilt? The superimposition does not provide us with an answer to these questions, or, rather, seems to suggest that there is no answer to such questions: it seals not only the unreliability of our senses with respect to the pursuit of knowledge, but also the intrinsic unknowability of the object at which we are looking. Paradoxically, the knowledge of this unknowability is what cinema is able to foster; if the superimposition does not make sense of the twists of fate to which human life is subjected, it warns us against a blind faith in what we think we know.

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Notes

1. Tom Gunning, "In Your Face: Physiognomy, Photography, and the Gnostic Mission of Early Film," in *Modernism/Modernity* 4.1 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997): 1-29.
[↩\[#N1-ptri\]](#)
2. *Ibid.*, 2. [↩\[#N2-ptri\]](#)
3. See, among others, Béla Balázs, *Visible Man, Or the Culture of Film and The Spirit of Film*, in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, ed. Erica Carter (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), originally Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* (Vienna: Deutch Österreichischer Verlag, 1924) and *Der Geist des Films* (W. Knapp, 1930); Jean Epstein, "Magnification," "The Senses 1 (b)," and "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*," in *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1939: Volume 1, 1907-1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). In a very different context, see also Lev Kuleshov, "Montage As the Foundation of Cinematography," in *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, ed. and trans. Ronald Levaco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974) and Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions (1924)," in *S. M. Eisenstein. Selected Works. Volume I: Writings, 1922-1934*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
[↩\[#N3-ptri\]](#)
4. See Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 241.
[↩\[#N4-ptri\]](#)
5. See François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Touchstone Editions, 1984), 73. [↩\[#N5-ptri\]](#)
6. *Ibid.* [↩\[#N6-ptri\]](#)
7. The fact that *The Wrong Man* is inspired by a true story certainly had a strong influence on this narrative solution. In fact, a "*deus ex machina*" intervened in the real life of Manny Balestrero as well, saving him from a life in prison. However, it is significant that Hitchcock chose such a story as the subject of a fiction film, and adapted it without changing almost anything from how it was reported in the *Life Magazine* article which served as the film's main inspiration. In *The Wrong Man*, Hitchcock actually emphasizes Manny's fruitless investigations and renders the appearance of "the right man" even more decisive. See Herbert Brean, "A Case of Identity," *Life Magazine* (June 29, 1953). [↩\[#N7-ptri\]](#)
8. For an analysis of the role of superimposition as signal, see André Bazin, "The Life and Death of Superimposition (1946)," trans. Bert Cardullo, in *Film-Philosophy* 6.1 (January 2002). For Bazin, a superimposition traditionally signals the appearance of fantastic or supernatural events. Hitchcock is certainly not unaware of this tradition, and revives it by playing with the superimposition's association with the supernatural (the appearance of "the right man's" face on screen has been often read as the visualization of a miracle) and denying its transcendental dimension at the same time. [↩\[#N8-ptri\]](#)
9. Germaine Dulac, "The Expressive Techniques of the Cinema," in *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1939: Volume 1, 1907-1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 311. [↩\[#N9-ptri\]](#)
10. Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 18. [↩\[#N10-ptri\]](#)
11. *Ibid.*, 14-15. [↩\[#N11-ptri\]](#)
12. *Ibid.*, 47. [↩\[#N12-ptri\]](#)
13. For a broader study of the scientific uses of photography in the XIX century, including the work of Bertillon and Galton, see Josh Ellenbogen, *Reasoned and Unreasoned Images. The Photography*

of *Bertillon, Galton, and Marey* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012). [↗\[#N13-ptri\]](#)

14. For a thorough examination of the philosophical treatments that the relationship between sight and knowledge has undergone historically, with a focus on the contemporary skeptical approaches to this correlation, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993). [↗\[#N14-ptri\]](#)
15. “Le Cinéma et son double: Alfred Hitchcock. *Le faux coupable (The Wrong Man)*,” original review in *Cahiers du cinéma* 72 (June 1957); republished in *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, ed. Alain Bergala (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma / Éditions de l'Étoile, 1985): 101–108; English translation in “*The Wrong Man*,” in *Godard on Godard*, ed. Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (1972; rpt. New York: Da Capo, 1986): 48–55. [↗\[#N15-ptri\]](#)
16. *Ibid.*, 54. [↗\[#N16-ptri\]](#)
17. Daniel Morgan, “The Afterlife of Superimposition,” in *Opening Bazin. Postwar Film Theory and its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 137. [↗\[#N17-ptri\]](#)
18. See, for instance, S.S. Van Dine, “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories,” in *American Magazine* (1928). [↗\[#N18-ptri\]](#)
19. For a detailed and insightful investigation of Henry Fonda's close-ups in *The Wrong Man*, see Noa Steimatsky, “What the Clerk Saw: Face To Face With *The Wrong Man*,” in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 48-2 (Fall 2007): 111–136. [↗\[#N19-ptri\]](#)
20. On issues of stardom and typecasting, see, among others, Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998). Dyer devotes a section of his book to a case study of Henry Fonda's star persona. [↗\[#N20-ptri\]](#)
21. Norwood Russell Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry Into the Conceptual Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958). Other seminal works dealing with the issue of the relationship between perception and knowledge include J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) and John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). [↗\[#N21-ptri\]](#)
22. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*, 6. [↗\[#N22-ptri\]](#)
23. *Ibid.* 19. [↗\[#N23-ptri\]](#)
24. Although, interestingly, Hitchcock will give the same expression a completely different meaning in *Psycho* (1960), when Marion imagines various conversations happening among the people who have met her on her way to the Bates motel: she is defined as “the wrong one” by the car salesman, implying that she was acting like a criminal. [↗\[#N24-ptri\]](#)
25. For a thorough study of early crime fiction, with an emphasis on the French context, see Tom Gunning, “Lynx-Eyed Detectives and Shadow Bandits: Visuality and Eclipse in French Detective Stories and Films Before WWI,” *Yale French Studies* 108, “Crime Fictions” (2005): 74–88. [↗\[#N25-ptri\]](#)
26. André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 14. [↗\[#N26-ptri\]](#)

