Moralizing Uncertainty: Suspicion and Faith in Hitchcock’s *Suspicion*

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Abstract: This paper presents a phenomenology of suspicion by way of a close reading of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1941 film, *Suspicion*. The main argument of the paper is that suspicion is an interpretive strategy that can be used for making sense of situations that appear ambiguous or uncertain. In developing this argument, I claim that suspicion and faith are actually related interpretive experiences, a point that is articulated in the film although it is generally overlooked. Faith and suspicion may be equally paradoxical conditions, but they are essential strategies by which the world is interpreted and uncertainty is domesticated.

Suspicions amongst thoughts are like bats amongst birds, they ever fly by twilight.
— Francis Bacon

For the interpreter to “perform” the text, he must “understand” it: he must preunderstand the subject and the situation before he can enter the horizon of its meaning. This is that mysterious “hermeneutical circle” without which the meaning of the text cannot emerge.
— Richard Palmer

In a discussion of the hermeneutical problem of symbolism, Paul Ricoeur draws attention to the double-sided nature of discourse. Multivocality, or polysemy, Ricoeur points out, is a constitutive feature of all human communication. Meaning is a plurality, a kind of semiotic surplus. “When I speak,” Ricoeur says, “I realize only a part of the potential signified” (1974, p. 71). This condition, as

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Derrida famously argued, is the “indefinite referral of signifier to signifier . . . which gives the signified meaning no respite” (1978, p. 25). Meanings are excessive, spilling beyond the perimeters delimited by dictionary definitions. The problem of symbolism, according to Ricoeur, is how communicants make sense out of signs that are duplicitous by their very nature, for if “only a part of the potential signified” is actually realized in a communicational event, then what passes the outskirts of our understanding undetected is an infinity of interpretative possibilities (1974, p. 71). When we communicate, it is by virtue of our capacity to limit ourselves to partial conceptions of the world that any comprehension can occur.

Yet in spite of this semantic partialness, our communications are intelligible, a consequence of the astonishing collaboration between symbols, referents, and contexts. That our semantic intentions are accomplished at all indicates that we manage to arrive at mutual understanding in the face of persistent alternative interpretations. Our concentration on a single intended meaning does not neutralize other potential interpretations, Ricoeur states, but is facilitated by the individualizing focus of specific units of speech, such as sentences. Indeed, Ricoeur maintains that

the rest of the semantic possibilities are not cancelled; they float around the words as possibilities not completely eliminated. The context thus plays the role of filter…. It is in this way that we make univocal statements with multivocal words by means of this sorting or screening action of the context. It happens, however, that a sentence is constructed so that it does not succeed in reducing the potential meaning to a monosemic usage but maintains or even creates a rivalry among several ranges of meaning. Discourse can, by various means, realize ambiguity, which thus appears as the combination of a lexical fact—polysemy—and a contextual fact—the possibility allowed to several distinct or even opposed values of a single name to be realized in the same sequence. (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 71)

Hence discourse realizes ambiguity at the point of intersection between lexical fact (words) and context. Ambiguity is an inherent aspect of discourse, and therefore is a foundational matter for anyone concerned with interpretation, however quotidian the circumstances. Contexts are filters we use to screen out as many of the competing interpretations as is reasonable. We do this, as Ricoeur suggests, because we need to produce univocal meanings from multivocal symbols. Although this implies that ambiguity attends all efforts at interpretation, the appeal to socially and culturally relevant contextual information enables us to bracket this chorus of alternative significations so as to make immediate sense of our experience. Or such is the supposition we make when we claim to have understood.

If ambiguity is never eliminated but continues to “float” about our discourse, it is always possible to recapture one of these ethereal alternatives and render it the centre of our attention. There are any number of reasons why one might do so. One might choose this course of action owing to feelings of unease produced by nagging doubt, or suspicion. Or one might find that a stated intention is at odds
with one’s prevailing beliefs or faith. Any one of us might be wary of the univocal interpretation to which culture and common sense pushes us—indeed, suspicion is very often produced out of the very semantic density to which Ricoeur refers. Suspicion, as Kenneth Burke (1966) might suggest, is a terministic screen that deflects attention from some aspects of the world in order to draw out attention to other aspects, and to other interpretations. Suspicion may seem irrational, but it can also produce the sorts of interpretations that permit us to find our footing.

In this paper I argue that suspicion can be conceptualized as an interpretive framework whose principal function is to bring order to circumstances that otherwise would remain confounded by uncertainty. This is not an entirely original idea, of course, as the relation between the practices of textual demystification and cultural interpretation has been argued by a variety of commentators, such arguments focusing occasionally on the role of suspicion as an underlying analytical principle. Taken as such a principle, suspicion can be viewed as integral to the modernist project of a rational, deconstructive understanding. The “hermeneutics of suspicion” that is commonly associated with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud can suggest both method (the dialectic; depth psychology) and ideological commitment. One is driven by one’s suspicion, in other words, to discover the hidden truths, the contradictions, and the traces of false consciousness that constitute the reality of social relations, political economic practices, and even psychological fixations. Thus suspicion can be seen as a Janus-faced figure: it is a form of uncertainty motivated by unclear, equivocal, or doubtful perception. But so too it is a form of certainty that draws its subject onward by the seductive allure of what is already suspected. And it is this latter aspect that inspires advocates of the hermeneutics of suspicion to pry free the deceitful masks of social convention in search of an underlying reality.

However, arguments of this sort can suggest that suspicion is a teleological endeavour, one in which the subject finds his or her interpretations matched up in the final moments against a truth that has been predetermined by the same sources from which the conditions of mistrust first arose. I am not suggesting that all forms of analytical inquiry prefigure the conclusions to which they come. My point is more modest, for what I want to do is to look at suspicion itself instead of focusing on the results of a suspicious inquiry. What is it to be suspicious? Suspicion may indeed be an important motivational power, but how might we say more than that in the attempt to examine suspicion in its own right? If we were to treat suspicion as a kind of interpretive filter—a contextual element, as Ricoeur would say—can we examine it in the same fashion that subjects are scrutinized in the field of cultural studies?

If my main ambition is to put forward the claim that suspicion constitutes a kind of interpretive framework, my method is to accomplish this analysis with a reading of one of Alfred Hitchcock’s early American films, the aptly titled Suspicion. When Hitchcock took up Frances Iles’s 1932 novel Before the Fact for adaptation, he was fresh from the bittersweet success of Rebecca (his first film in America and the Academy’s selection for Best Picture of 1940), but still some-
thing of a novice in the ways of Hollywood. His experiences with American actors had been less than uniformly pleasant, and his dealings with the politics of production had been mixed. Many in the film industry in the United States accused Hitchcock of laziness, describing him as a director who took much longer to complete his work than did more seasoned American filmmakers. He was regarded as an eccentric and an outsider, a director whose working methods were unfamiliar in the Hollywood studio system. Hitchcock’s strategy of “cutting in the camera,” which permitted him extraordinary control over his production, had frustrated and angered David O. Selznick, his first American producer. The major studios had made evident their suspicions about Hitchcock’s abilities to adjust to the Fordist mentality in Hollywood from the moment it was announced that he was relocating in America.

For his part, Hitchcock was suspicious of authority, a feeling that could metamorphose into dislike when he discovered that his plans were being interfered with from above. Hence when Selznick loaned Hitchcock to RKO Studios in 1941 to work on *Suspicion*, Hitchcock relished his release from Selznick’s controlling gaze nearly as much as he welcomed the opportunity to slip back into the role of auteur. But a number of problems interfered with the film’s production, including illness and interruptions in the completion of principal photography. In addition, Hitchcock’s use of time once again proved to be something of a concern to studio executives. The meticulousness of the auteur was unappreciated by those in Hollywood whose vision of the film business tended to be circumscribed by a single value: efficiency. Hence suspicions in the industry about Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* circulated as the production lurched from one delay to another.

The result of the various setbacks that plagued the production, according to commentators who judge the film unkindly, was a compromised narrative. Many critics have suggested that the film betrays Hitchcock’s inexperience with the American culture industries in a number of ways, most notably in its ending. For instance, in an otherwise enthusiastic essay about the film, Mark Crispin Miller is blunt in his condemnation: “The ending is, indeed, a disappointment” (1988, p. 274). He goes on to say:

> In a hurry to prepare the film for a summer premiere, Hitchcock quickly worked out and shot this ending after another version … was hooted down by a preview audience. While Hitchcock’s unwonted haste will explain the ending’s general shoddiness, however, the scene’s fundamental weakness is not technical but dramatic: Hitchcock simply was unable to devise a strong conclusion…. By locating *Suspicion* within its heroine’s mind, Hitchcock had written himself into a corner. (Miller, 1988, p. 275)

Miller’s points are well argued, and his overall analysis of the film is engaging and insightful. But I would contest his view of the film’s conclusion. My disagreement is not with his evaluation of the film’s ending, for I have no intention of offering an assessment of the merits or demerits of *Suspicion*’s denouement. Rather, I believe Miller’s claim that Hitchcock had written himself into a corner is motivated by the image of a narrative resolution that would be faithful to an ele-
mentary level of textual interpretation, a resolution that would actually compro-
mise the film rather than enhance its poignancy. In short, many critics of the film,
including Miller, disregard the possibility that it deals with a phenomenological
approach to suspicion per se, and not only with the suspicions of the film’s her-
one. I believe that we must attend to Suspicion in terms of what it offers us as a
text about suspicion so as to recognize more fully the film’s intricacies. How does
suspicion operate in Suspicion?

The film
With Cary Grant and Joan Fontaine in the starring roles, Suspicion was the title
eventually chosen for Hitchcock’s adaptation of Before the Fact.3 Cast in a role
that contrasted sharply with his usual screen image, Grant played Johnnie
Aysgarth, a dissolute but charming spendthrift whose convention-flouting esca-
pades initially shock the socially reserved Lina McLaidlaw (Fontaine). But Lina’s
shock is short-lived, and against her better judgment she is beguiled by Johnnie’s
roguish ways. His devil-may-care attitude is an irresistible force, and Lina, capti-
vated by Johnnie’s rakish demeanour, rewards him with her heart.

The contrasts between Johnnie and Lina are important to the film’s plot on
several levels. Notable is the difference in Lina’s and Johnnie’s social standing. A
prim and proper young woman, Lina is used to a sedate, bookish, and uneventful
life. Her wealthy and upright parents oppose her burgeoning relationship with
Johnnie, but they are powerless to stem the tide of her desire. Long stifled by their
stodgy ways, Lina sees in Johnnie’s carefree manner the prospect of romance,
adventure, and excitement. His freewheeling approach to life, so opposed to
Lina’s sense of propriety, sets off pointedly the plodding and predictable course of
her own existence, and this contrast arouses her spirit for escape as much as it
inflames her passion. Johnnie is an emblem of all that her parents reject—and
resent, and their contempt for Johnnie colours Lina’s affections with a sensual
longing for the forbidden fruit, the taboo liaison. Johnnie is the outlaw who will
rescue her from the confines of spinsterly boredom.

Hitchcock establishes the contours of this relationship with remarkable cine-
matic economy. The film opens in blackness with only the sound of a moving train
situating the story. We then hear a man’s voice (Johnnie’s) as he apologizes for
having bumped into a woman’s (Lina’s) leg: “Oh, I beg your pardon, was that your
leg? I had no idea we were going into a tunnel.” The sparse and clipped dialogue,
which reflects Hitchcock’s enthusiasm for double entendre, suggests also some-
thing of Johnnie’s obliviousness to the concerns of other people. Then, as the train
emerges into the daylight, Hitchcock commences to sketch the contrast between
the two characters in chiefly visual terms. Johnnie, apparently, is hung over. Lina,
fully alert, is reading a book on child psychology. Johnnie is tired and dishevelled,
an obvious victim of his own weaknesses and passion. Lina is restrained and quiet,
dressed in an expensive overcoat, with matching hat and gloves. These visual con-
trasts, which speak loudly of the pair’s differences in terms of social class, intel-
lectual interests, and lifestyle, are made with a series of visual juxtapositions
characteristic of Hitchcock’s penchant for “pure cinema.”4 The opening sequence,
with its emergence from darkness into light, is a potent stylistic motif for the theme of suspicion, for Lina will shortly find herself plunged into alternating moments of doubt (darkness) and clarity (light) in the course of the film. In addition, the train is an effective symbol suggesting the freedom that Johnnie will come to represent for Lina, even as it indicates the sense of confinement she will experience in her marriage.

In this opening sequence Johnnie and Lina are merely strangers on a train, but Hitchcock contrives to present them as an incipient couple by manufacturing a circumstance requiring their collaboration. And because matters of trust and uncertainty will come to figure prominently in the course of the narrative, it is hardly surprising that this circumstance involves a confrontation with authority. The conductor enters the compartment and discovers that Johnnie is riding first class with a third-class ticket. At first, Johnnie tries to argue his way out of the predicament with hopelessly convoluted and comedic logic, but the conductor’s impassive gaze makes it plain that he is immune to Johnnie’s persuasive charms. Convinced of the conductor’s intractability, Johnnie abruptly asks Lina for money so he can make up the difference between his ticket and the first-class fare to which, significantly, he appears to believe himself entitled. When Lina begins to explain that she hasn’t sufficient change in her purse, Johnnie unexpectedly leans forward, reaches directly into her purse, and removes a stamp which he hands triumphantly to the conductor. Lina is understandably shocked by the audacity and the suddenness of Johnnie’s actions, but Hitchcock’s camera lingers on her long enough to show us that she is plainly captivated as well. Lina’s text on child psychology is given fresh meaning in light of these events, for Johnnie’s impulsive and immature conduct would seem to constitute the very sort of behaviour in which Lina is apparently interested. Johnnie is also a subject against which her academic insights might be measured. In any event, it is clear that Hitchcock’s initial cinematic exposition provides reference points for a good deal of the subsequent character development upon which the story will rely.

This brief sequence is also important in terms of narrative development. First, Hitchcock’s arrangement of the *mise-en-scène* suggests a visual foundation for the theme of suspicion. Lina knows the sort of person that Johnnie must be, but her knowledge provides her with no protection from her desires. Again, the book on child psychology is a significant symbol on this point. Lina’s studious approach to interpersonal relations suggests a tendency to reduce emotional complexities to scientific principles. However, her attraction to Johnnie is impulsive, almost instinctual. When Lina later overhears her father explaining that she is “not the marrying sort” she rushes immediately into Johnnie’s arms and kisses him on the lips, an overdetermined response, to be sure, but a response that makes evident Lina’s wish to constitute herself in opposition to her parents’ image. Moreover, her dash into Johnnie’s arms is not the studied and deliberative action of the scholar, but a performance that Lina stages for herself as a means of self-persuasion. The dichotomy of mind and emotion is developed throughout the film in
Richard Allen (1999) has defined this aspect of Hitchcock’s work as a mode of “metaskepticism” that recognizes ambiguity as a narrative ploy for heightening audience uncertainty. This ambiguity colours not only individual scenes, of course, but shapes the intertextual resonance that brings apparently disparate parts of the story into unison. In a sense, nothing in the film is accidental, and each scene is meant to echo other scenes across a spectrum of cinematic elements. The movement from the darkness of the tunnel into the daylight is just one illustration of the self-referential structure of the narrative. Hence while some commentators see the initial meeting between Johnnie and Lina as an innocent and unmotivated staging, this sort of reading overlooks the foreshadowing that permeates the opening. For example, Joel Finler has said that “the picture is almost half over before the central theme, of ‘suspicion’, first begins to emerge” (1992, p. 49). Nothing could be further from the truth. In these first scenes the viewer is made keenly aware of Johnnie’s irresponsible nature, and of Lina’s attraction to him nonetheless. It is clear that Hitchcock is trying to raise audience suspicions about Johnnie, about his motives, and about any future liaison with him that Lina might be contemplating. Finler is correct only if we limit ourselves to overt displays of suspicion on the part of Lina, but as a central interpretive problematic, suspicion enters the film even as the train enters the tunnel. Simply from the fact that the film opens in confusion and in darkness we can infer that the theme of suspicion is the interpretive frame for the narrative.

A second element that makes this opening sequence both prescient and thematically important is the way that Hitchcock organizes spatial relations as metaphors for class and gender. This is accomplished in part by the use of cuts between Johnnie and Lina, who are seated on opposite sides of the train car. The invisible boundary that separates them is made evident in the medium two-shots Hitchcock combines with alternating close-ups. But he also reveals the permeability of this boundary in the transgression committed by Johnnie in bumping into Lina’s leg. This event suggests a sexual contravention, just as his literal raid upon Lina’s purse, which furthers the sexual symbolism, also transgresses the boundary of social propriety. Indeed, Johnnie’s literal movements in this sequence are figurative movements as well. He has already breached conventional and economic boundaries by placing himself where he has no right to be: in a first-class car with a third class ticket. And he has violated boundaries of appropriate sexual conduct (and unspoken codes of civility) in brushing against Lina in the dark. Finally, his infringement on her financial resources establishes his impetuosity and his disrespectful attitude concerning social conventions in an especially convincing manner.

Following their whirlwind courtship and marriage, the straitlaced Lina McLaidlaw (for whom her parents have “laid” down the “law”) grows increasingly suspicious that her beloved Johnnie is up to no good. Fettered by her upper-class domesticity, Lina finds Johnnie’s impulsive behaviour alternately
charming and mysterious. And as she attempts to piece together his motivations, Lina’s suspicions deepen until she has convinced herself that Johnnie is more than an enchanting if irresponsible reprobate: he is a murderer as well. Hitchcock presents the intensification of Lina’s paranoia with the use of extreme close-ups and low-key lighting. In this regard the film clearly contains elements commonly associated with the film noir cycle, especially as this interpretation relates to the use of lighting and shadows. But as Michael Walker suggests, although “the link between the Hitchcock chaos world and the noir world suggests that Hitchcock is more of a noir director than has generally been recognized,” we need to take account of the fact that “Hitchcock is so strong an auteur that his films tend to be seminal . . . rather than derivative and [that] they have far more connections with one another than with any particular cycle or genre” (Walker, 1992, p. 16).

In the case of Suspicion there are elements one could fairly describe as consistent with the thematic and visual style of noir, but there are also surrealistic qualities to the film that betray Hitchcock’s personal touch far more than they reveal his allegiance to a particular genre. In the film, as in other Hitchcock works, the focus is on the subjectivity of the central character, and thus many of the atmospheric touches are intended not only to heighten suspense, but also to deepen the emotional turmoil that Lina is undergoing. For instance, in one of the film’s most celebrated scenes, Johnnie carries a glass of milk upstairs to an emotionally spent Lina. As the scene unfolds the cinematic point of view is the spectator who has been privileged with a location near the top of the staircase as Johnnie ascends amidst the ominous shadows. But the emotional point of view is clearly that of Lina, who, though tucked away in her bed and unable to see her husband, imagines that the glass of milk he is carrying is poisoned. Hitchcock heightens both forms of suspense (the cinematic and the emotional) by placing a light bulb inside the glass so as to draw the viewer’s attention to that object. The innocence of milk, with its maternal and medicinal associations, is confounded by the suspicion that it may have been contaminated. Though much remarked upon as an emblem of Hitchcock’s fondness for gimmicks and visual trickery, the luminous glass of milk unites precisely those features that prefigure Lina’s suspicion: innocence and evil. Ultimately, it is her uncertainty about Johnnie rather than anything about which she can be certain that takes her to the eventual pinnacle of her suspicion and apprehension.

All of which serves to show that as Hitchcock pushes the narrative along with a series of ambiguous developments and situations, he is able to keep the viewer’s suspicions firmly locked in Lina’s perceptual and interpretive fields. This containment owes much to our general reluctance to question the reliability of the authorial voice. Thus when Lina scrutinizes the events of her everyday life only to convince herself that she is destined to be Johnnie’s next victim, the conclusion is hardly a shock. All the clues are there: the clandestine sale of wedding gifts to pay off his gambling debts; secrets and lies about being fired from his job; his fascination with a local author’s detective stories and the possibility of a lethal, unde-
tectable poison; the taking out of a life insurance policy; the mysterious death of Johnnie’s closest friend—who could blame Lina for her fears?

It is at this point that the issue of the film’s conclusion becomes a matter of debate, for in a remarkable narrative twist the story resolves in Johnnie’s favour. He may be a gambler, but he’s no killer. Moreover, in the film’s closing scene he vows to go straight and become a conscientious drone in the capitalist hive, a turn of events that frequently strikes first-time viewers as abrupt and stilted. Perhaps those critics and observers who jeered the conclusion were inspired in their denunciations by Hitchcock’s remark that a more sinister ending would have suited him better. The studio, he claimed, had vetoed his plans for a darker, malicious conclusion in which Johnnie is found to be the criminal Lina suspects. Hitchcock’s concern about the ending was sufficiently intense, it is said, that when the film debuted in August of 1941, he was prepared to disown the project should audience reaction be unfavourable (a preview audience had already laughed at a version of the picture that featured an even more improbable conclusion) (Spoto, 1983, p. 256). But audiences of the day apparently found the ending eminently satisfying. Although it is possible they were pleased to see that Johnnie Aysgarth’s reputation was salvaged, they may have been more relieved to see Cary Grant redeemed. Hitchcock’s suspicions about audience rejection turned out to be groundless.

Lina’s suspicions, it turns out, were groundless too, mere fantasies fashioned from an overactive imagination. Johnnie was terribly misunderstood. True, he was a schemer, a gambler, a thoughtless rogue—but murder had never entered his thoughts. In the picture’s closing moments, reconciled at last to the delusions of her mischievous mind, Lina must find a way to reorient herself to Johnnie, to put her previous fears behind her, and to overcome the illicit suspicions that have infected her thoughts.

The uncertainties of suspicion
That her suspicions were unfounded does not mean that the picture’s central issue devolves to the facile observation that Lina somehow managed to get things wrong. The film does not merely preach truth above misapprehension, for this would mean placing Lina’s subjectivity in the domain of the irrational and the feminine, while locating the solution to her problems in the world of rational masculinity. Of course, these associations are operating at one level in the film, and recognizing this aspect of the gender politics of the narrative is important. But there are other elements central to the narrative that eclipse the issue of truth and falsity. Gender politics is an important aspect of the film’s subtext, but we need to avoid the reduction of these dynamics to nothing more complex than the unmasking of error.

In the first place, Lina’s suspicions are not all that suspect. Indeed, a major point of the narrative is missed if it is reduced solely to the view that Lina is emotionally unstable, or that her suspicions are produced from irrational impulses. Lina’s apparent tendency to jump to conclusions may reflect some of her insecurities in her relationship with Johnnie, but it is unfair to usher her too quickly to
the psychoanalyst's couch on that account. It is more valuable to recognize the way that insecurity and suspicion may often be linked, and to attend to the way that suspicion can symbolize fear and uncertainty. Suspicion may speak more to feelings of powerlessness than it speaks to the desire for control. Consequently, suspicion must be de-pathologized if other important elements in the film are to emerge.

Second, although Suspicion deals with a conventional binarism between masculine and feminine modes of perception, there is a depth to the central characters' relation that helps to disguise much of the subtlety of this dichotomy. This is the overarching question of the function of interpretation, for it is an integral aspect of the film that the heroine's efforts at understanding produce equal measures of confusion and logic. And it is the mundane nature of Lina's environment that assists in normalizing her uncertainty as a newlywed woman. Indeed, that Lina should grow suspicious even as Johnnie remains charmingly oblivious to the misconstruals to which Lina is inclined is readily accepted in the viewing experience. Lina's introspection and Johnnie's sexually accented extroversion both serve to assist the orderly progression of the narrative by grounding its psychological pignancy in the ideology of gender relations. This ideological configuration is normalized both as the viewing experience and as the dynamic of power. Were the situation reversed—were Johnnie to exchange his extroverted manner for Lina's introverted suspicions—the picture would assume a peculiar quality indeed. How we understand another's behaviour is contingent upon our place in the hierarchy of social authority. The mode of suspicion that emerges is a function of desperation more than it is a function of gender identity.

Suspicion speaks not only of irrational impulses, then, but also of the problems of interpretation, and about the urges that drive each of us toward sense making. To break the film down into truth (Johnnie) and falsity (Lina) is to ignore the fact that it is precisely suspicion's power to affect our lives that Hitchcock explores with insight and sensitivity, irrespective of the veracity of those conjectures. Suspicion is an interpretive scheme conditioned by feelings of powerlessness, disenfranchisement, and disconnection. The content of the suspicion is thus secondary to the overall picture—not only the picture that Hitchcock filmed, but also the picture that Lina constructs for herself and for viewers in her interpretation of events. Had Lina's suspicions proven correct in the end, the subject of suspicion would command our attention just as profoundly. We are, as Kenneth Burke notes, symbol-using and symbol-misusing animals (1966). Lina may misuse the symbolic tokens of her world in seeking to understand Johnnie's actions and behaviours, but she produces meaning nonetheless. Every one of us constructs our interpretations of events through the manipulation of symbols, and we make meanings in this way to guide our actions.

This analysis suggests that what is especially provocative about Suspicion is that Lina's fantasies are no more outlandish than Hitchcock's plot. As viewers, watching events unfold from Lina's point of view, we are encouraged to side with her against Johnnie so that each piece of the cinematic puzzle contributing to his
supposed guilt fits neatly into the overall picture of reality that Lina creates. Lina stands in for Hitchcock himself, providing us with a director's judgment in the ordering of events and the assignment of significance to some episodes over others. Along with Lina we construct the reality the film shows us.

This observation suggests that some of the negative response to the picture's final moments may have been doubly motivated. Not only were critics influenced in part by Hitchcock's own denunciations of the ending that the studio “forced” on him, but some critics also may have felt cheated, even disrespected. The sense-making power of the cinema is so encompassing that to have our constructed portrait dashed from its easel in the climactic movements of the movie is a jarring, disconcerting experience. Indeed, this discomfort speaks to at least some of the discomfort we associate with suspicion and its forbidding darkness. No one likes to be made a fool of—not Lina, as she grows suspicious of Johnnie, and not the filmgoer, who feels betrayed by the film's denouement. Hence the claim that the picture ends on an unsatisfying or unconvincing note is justified only if the viewer can demonstrate that some compelling and logical set of reasons entailed by the actual narrative forbids the conclusion to which we are treated. I doubt that this is possible. More germane is that the finale generates precisely those feelings of mistrust embodied in the experience of being suspicious.

Although Lina's suspicions, as we learn in the end, are nonsense, at the same time, they are sense, for they provide her with a scheme for understanding events and behaviours for which she has no familiar interpretive framework. Non-sense is an evaluative concept speaking to the other's interpretations. As Lina reconciles herself to Johnnie, the viewer must reconcile him or herself to the fact that Lina's behaviour must be reframed in order to be more fully understood. Only in this way does the viewer avoid becoming trapped at a superficial level of critique.

**Suspicion and faith**

The reconciliations that conclude the film point to a further connection between two apparently disparate conditions enfolded within the narrative that is not so easily detected. This is the continuity between Lina's suspicions and her final optimism, a linkage between her suspicions about Johnnie and her eventual faith in his promise to reform. A connection can be drawn, in other words, between two distinct ways of moralizing uncertainty: suspicion on the one side, and faith on the other. In moralizing uncertainty, redemption and despair can be articulated concurrently.

I can clarify this point with the argument that suspicion is a form of faith, that both suspicion and faith rely on the power of the will to transcend the bare empiricism of facts and to embroider lavish patterns of significance from the flimsiest of threads. When faced with incomplete evidence we are also faced with choices. Should we believe, or disbelieve, and if we believe, what will we believe? When the evidentiary basis is shaky, what sort of belief will we entertain?

We may not always choose faith even though we choose to believe. This is because suspicion is faith's shadow, the dark underside of unsecured knowledge. Where faith promises redemption, suspicion augers destruction. In the beginning,
Lina chooses suspicion, and it is only with her suspicions successfully quelled that she is able to look to the future with hope. Suspicion, then, is often a framing of the past, while faith is a reading of the future. In either case—suspicion or faith—we search for bridges to carry us over the abyss of not knowing.

For Kierkegaard, the leap of faith was one solution to the problem of these gaps, for although faith may be paradoxical—a criterionless choice, he argued—faith is the answer to the problem formulated by the conditions of our uncertainty. The incompleteness of our knowledge compels us to the existential challenge of making a choice. As Kierkegaard argued, “[F]aith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off” (1941, p. 64). At such moments of heightened indeterminacy, faith offers itself as a vehicle to convey us to safety. With faith in the ascendancy, the incompleteness of our knowledge no longer throws suspicion’s shadows of doubt across our minds. Instead, it becomes a “mystery” pervious to the penetrating light of faith. Faith is a choice Lina makes in order to stave off the all-consuming torment of suspicion.

In taming her suspicions and bringing them under her command, Lina redirects her energies into an unfounded faith in the future. Put differently, in a cathartic release from her obsessions, Lina replaces her unwarranted suspicions about Johnnie’s intentions with unwarranted faith in Johnnie’s intentions. The same events and activities that were initially interpreted as evidence against Johnnie are reframed not so that they assume an adiaphoric function, but so that they emerge as testimonies to Johnnie’s goodness and upstanding character. In the film’s final images, Johnnie’s willingness to forgo the pleasures of his playful yesteryears signals the couple’s entrance into a world of respectability and upper-class sensibility. This is made possible by a number of transformations, not the least of which is Lina’s willing suspension of suspicion in favour of a willing subscription to Johnnie’s promises. Lina’s faith is on one hand the undoing of her suspicions, but on the other it is an extension or transformation of those suspicions. This continuity is easily overlooked, especially if our attentions are directed not to the problem of interpretation, but to questions of truth and falsity. Suspicion is a film most suited for the hermeneutic analysis of hermeneutics.

Indeed, suspicion is a kind of hermeneutic circle. One approaches the events for which an interpretation is sought predisposed to an understanding. This predisposition is then confirmed by the logic of subsequent interpretations. A great number of events that Lina might otherwise allow to pass without commentary are magnified by the interpretive scheme of her suspicions. When Johnnie’s friend Beaky dies suddenly while overseas, Lina remembers a formerly innocuous comment Johnnie made that Beaky’s taste for brandy would one day be his undoing. The discursive play of Lina’s thoughts brings Johnnie’s comment back to her, and places it in the new text she is mentally composing in which Johnnie plays the role of killer. Comments that were first interpreted as a friend’s lament now become murderous foreshadowings—and potential threats to Lina.

But if suspicion is a semiotician’s nightmare, the product of an overly interpretive mind, faith can be the termination of inquisition. Or, to put that differently,
whereas suspicion is a continual questioning of the evidence, faith is a willing suspension of the inquisitive faculties. They are both modes of interpretation, but they differ in that whereas suspicion seeks the truth within, faith seeks the truth without. Hence there is a claustrophobic quality to suspicion and the questioning that it generates. This is made evident in the claustrophobic quality of Lina’s life that prevails during the height of her suspicious thinking. But with faith there is an opening of windows, an optimistic dismissal of the minutiae by which she was surrounded. In place of questioning, there is blind acceptance. Lina abandons her hermeneutics of suspicion in deciding that Johnnie can be trusted. Johnnie, of course, has not really changed. What has changed is Lina’s manner of dealing with the unknown.

These changes are important to a further understanding of the film. As with other of his works, in *Suspicion* Hitchcock reproduces the hegemony of heterosexuality in the production of the romantic couple. But it is significant that for the relationship to achieve stability it is Lina who must undergo a transformation, a shift from suspicion to faith, from darkness to light, from the past (what Johnnie has done) to the future (what Johnnie will become). Lina must deal with her suspicions by accommodating herself to Johnnie. Lina must suppress her emotions in service to Johnnie’s putative ambitions. Her new life will hinge on the assurances he offers. Lina must completely change the belief system underlying her interpretive framework. For his part, Johnnie is required only to promise his intentions to reform.

It is noteworthy that as viewers we have no particular evidence to believe that Johnnie’s promise to conform to the bourgeois lifestyle he has formerly rejected should be taken at face value. But as our cinematic point of view throughout the film has been Lina’s, it is difficult to reject her faith out of hand. Some distance from the absorption with which we attend to the film is required to recognize the several layers of deception that appear to be mobilized against Lina—and against the viewer—in the picture’s finale. Lina may seem foolish in accepting that Johnnie has at last discovered the roadway to economic and emotional responsibility. But this foolishness is attenuated somewhat by the viewers’ humanity: each of us is inflicted by the human compulsion to believe. Johnnie’s promises are palliatives of the moment, but Lina’s desires are so strong that she is prepared to accept the medicine and move unquestioningly into the future with all of its uncertainties. Faith, not suspicion, now attends her.

In substituting faith for suspicion, Lina empowers herself, for if suspicion is the emblem of the powerless, faith is the symbol of the empowered. Both are strategies for dealing with the inevitable state of not knowing, yet faith makes a prize of ignorance, raising it aloft as an emblem of unconditional love. In that climactic moment in which she stands on the precipice of ignorance, Lina turns her suspicion around in her mind and finds faith is the opposite side to the coin of uncertainty. This becomes the currency with which she will purchase her future.

Suspicion, then, is an inverted form of faith, but how do we arrive at suspicion? Is it also a leap of faith, or, perhaps, a leap of despair? These are compli-
cated questions, far more tangled than they may appear when expressed so simply. One of the dilemmas we face if we read Hitchcock’s film merely as an exploration of Johnnie’s odd behaviour and Lina’s misguided attempts to understand him is that our efforts to interpret Johnnie’s behaviour leave us inattentive to the real task: trying to interpret Lina’s interpretations. Of course, Hitchcock provides plenty of material along the way to suggest that Lina is more right than wrong, but without such scenes the film would degenerate into a one-dimensional portrait of a disturbed mind. What is more to the point is that suspicion is not in and of itself a sign of pathology any more than faith is an indication of abnormality.

But here is another dilemma: is faith an abnormality? Is faith a sign of pathological weakness, a symptom of our collective inability to live with uncertainty? This may be too strongly worded. Though uncertainty is one of the more conspicuous charms on the bracelet of postmodern fashion, it is neither a novel nor utterly nihilistic part of the ensemble. We must all face up to the fact that there are aspects to others that remain forever hidden from our view. To have faith that we can rise above petty suspicion, or to be suspicious about the sincerity of faith, amount to pretty much the same thing: the world is largely unexplored, and reconciling ourselves to the limitations of our individual perspectives is an act born of both courage and despair at one and the same moment.

Thus, suspicion is not merely a product of our perception; it is the mode of apprehension by which we make our perceptions meaningful. But suspicion only functions effectively to the extent that others can be brought into its web of intrigue; otherwise, the doubts and misgivings give way to paranoia, to obsessive thinking, and to social ostracism. Suspicion is a mode of interpretation that reinforces isolation. Hence in Hitchcock’s film, we see Lina retreating ever further into a private enclave of foreboding and mistrust. We see self-absorption overtake her life rationally and emotionally. Her suspicions become all-consuming even as her day-to-day life becomes one of unbearable solitude. It is important to note that in taming these obsessions, and in coming to give herself over entirely to faith, Lina also provides us with a glimpse into the unspoken details of solidarity.

Taking Johnnie at face value, taking Johnnie at his word, and taking Johnnie as one who is worthy of her self-denial are equally crucial parts of the experience of community life, especially the willing suspension of doubt that Lina engages in daily. And so it is with us. Unable to peer into the truth of another’s intentions, we are forced to go on faith constantly. As the philosopher Knud Løgstrup has written:

Regardless of how varied the communication between persons may be, it always involves the risk of one person approaching the other in the hope of a response. This is the essence of communication and fundamental basis of ethical life. (1971, p. 18)

Lina has reasons for doubting Johnnie; she also has reasons for having faith in his promises. And yet, whether she opts for faith or for suspicion, it is Lina who is making the choice, Lina who is seeing the world one way and not another. Compelled to decisions—decisions about her life with Johnnie, decisions about
Johnnie’s faithfulness, decisions about love and romance—Lina struggles to make the leap of faith and to leave suspicion behind. Hence her faith is indeed the medium of her salvation. Most viewers will say that it is Johnnie who is redeemed by the film’s end, but Lina’s redemption is the more compelling act of conversion in the final analysis.

Notes
1. Burke writes:
   We must use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity. (1966, p. 50)
2. Ricoeur has sketched out this position by arguing that interpretation can be an exercise of suspicion. He develops this position by distinguishing between interpretation as the “recollection of meaning” and interpretation as “the “reduction of the illusions and lies of consciousness” (1970, p. 32). This latter position, he says, is dominated by “three masters”: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. He writes:
   All three begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering; all three, however, far from being detractors of “consciousness,” aim at extending it. (p. 34)
   Other writers echo these ideas. For instance, Hans-Georg Gadamer has suggested that interpretation, in its modern sense, is concerned with “the alienation of consciousness itself” (1976, p. 116). He writes:
   If in earlier times interpretation aimed at nothing more than the explication of the author’s true meaning (and I have reasons for believing that this concept was always too narrow), it is now explicitly the case that interpretation is expected to go behind the subjectivity of the act of meaning. It is a question of learning to get behind the surface of what is meant. The unconscious (Freud), the relations of production and their determinative significance for social reality (Marx), the concept of life and its “thought-constituting work” (Dilthey and historicism), the concept of existence as it was once developed by Kierkegaard against Hegel—all these are interpretive standpoints that our century has developed as ways of going behind what is meant in subjective consciousness. (p. 117)
3. Donald Spoto (1983, p. 255) reports that other titles Hitchcock considered included *Search for Tomorrow*, *Men Make Poor Husbands*, and *Girl in the Vise*.
4. Hitchcock made many references to his work as the “art of pure cinema.” Briefly, Hitchcock meant that cinematic narrative is visual, and that the assembly of images (especially the montage) is the mode of creativity characteristic of film. Narrative development occurs as the successive presentation of images, sometimes at the expense of dialogue. This view suggests a supplemental role for language in Hitchcock’s works and reinforces his designation as an auteur. Hence juxtaposition and editing played a crucial role in his cinematic stylistics at the expense of plot. Indeed, Hitchcock once said, “I’m interested not so much in the stories I tell as in the means of telling them” (cited in Bazin, 1972, p. 64). See also Hitchcock’s conversations with François Truffaut in François Truffaut with Helen G. Scott (1985).
5. Laura Mulvey’s work on this theme is relevant. See especially her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975).
6. It is obvious that in *Psycho* Hitchcock plays a similar trick upon his audience by removing the heroine from the film only one-third of the way into the picture. A less well known Hitchcock film, *Stage Fright* (1950), also pulls the rug from beneath the viewer’s feet when in the final moments it is discovered that an opening flashback depicting one of the character’s recollections...
was actually false. Though it is an unstated rule of the cinema that flashbacks show only reality, the convention was so utterly embraced by filmgoers and critics that for Hitchcock to upturn that tradition was considered by some commentators to be an unfair manipulation of the audience’s trust.

7. For Kierkegaard’s views on faith, see, for example, Fear and Trembling (Kierkegaard, 1941). Paul Tillich also sketches the outlines of a dialectical theory of faith in his classic treatise Dynamics of Faith (1957).

References