

Review of *Dark Energy: Hitchcock's Absolute Camera and the Physics of Cinematic Spacetime*

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Abstract

Skerry's *Dark Energy* draws from astrophysics' most popular and intriguing concepts—from Eisenstein's theories of relativity to questions surrounding the expanding universe—and trace them metaphorically through Hitchcock's films.

Keywords: Hitchcock, cosmology, montage, Eisenstein



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Review of Philip J. Skerry, *Dark Energy: Hitchcock's Absolute Camera and the Physics of Cinematic Spacetime*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013. xxii + 175pp. ISBN 9781441189455, \$29.95 (pbk)

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As a final chapter in *Dark Energy: Hitchcock's Absolute Camera and the Physics of Cinematic Spacetime*, Philip Skerry includes a transcript of his interview with cosmologist Sean Carroll. During the discussion he agrees with Carroll “that the ideas of modern science are sometimes ‘startling and alien,’ and that they can provide unique metaphorical source material for literary creators” (p.119). This line is a foundation for Skerry’s project: he will draw from astrophysics’ most popular and intriguing concepts—from Eisenstein’s theories of relativity to questions surrounding the expanding universe—and trace them metaphorically through Hitchcock’s films. Entropy, for example, becomes a vehicle for describing *Rear Window’s* (1954) unwinding of the tightly structured lives inside an apartment building (p.42).

Imaginative linking also drives Skerry’s approach to Hitchcock’s biography. Some crossovers between science and cinema, such as Hitchcock’s stint as an electrical engineer, produce insights into the director’s peculiar sensibilities; others, like Hitchcock’s birth within a decade of Albert Einstein’s and their “sharing of a particular scientific and cultural *zeitgeist*” fail to point at anything larger than coincidence (p. xviii). Because these two towering figures of the twentieth century never encountered one another, Skerry allows metaphor to fill in the gaps. He often refers to their mutual fascination with trains—an optimal tool, both thought, for experimenting with time and space. Skerry unpacks this moving metaphor in a variety of ways, including a discussion of Nicholas Roeg’s film *Insignificance* (1985) in which a

hypothetical Marilyn Monroe illustrates to Einstein her understanding of the theory of relativity with a toy train (p. 137). The connection to Hitchcock is not explicit, but it blends rhythmically with Skerry's treatment of the many trains in Hitchcock's oeuvre.

The grounds for Skerry's code-switching between scientific method and scientific metaphor is Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*, specifically its claim that ideas spring to life quickly and spontaneously based on unconscious conclusions. Skerry imitates Gladwell's method of interviewing subject-matter experts for evidence and anecdotes. He also details his own "Blink moment" (p. xx). To a degree, therefore, the text is performative, such as when he tells the story of his own revelatory car ride which led to new connections between Hitchcock and Einstein.

In the second chapter, Skerry explores one of the book's two key terms— "Hitchcock's absolute camera," the strategy of subordinating everything in cinematic production to the visual composition of the camera. It works as an instrument of *mis-en-scene* and as an orchestrator of montage. The use of the possessive is crucial because Skerry does not speak of the term in reference to any other filmmaker. Essentially, this is Hitchcock's singular ability, inextricably linked to his biography. He frames Hitchcock's mixed education in the sciences and the arts as a testament to his unrivaled understanding of light. Hitchcock's interest in Soviet montage theory and his exposure to German expressionism in the 1920s become evidence of his unrivaled grasp of film editing and shot composition.

Skerry deploys the "absolute camera" in the third chapter to carve out a middle space for Hitchcock as both an auteur and a genuine collaborator. Using *Rear Window* as a case study, Skerry describes the set as blend between a Renaissance artist's workshop and a scientific laboratory. Here his devotion to Hitchcock inhibits what might have been a more critical and

historical discussion of the terms “absolute camera” and “pure cinema,” with their modernist attachment to the heroic artist, and their problematic notion of an aesthetics of purity and absolutism.

If the term “absolute camera” provides evidence of Hitchcock’s technical virtuosity, then Skerry’s second key term, “dark energy,” exemplifies conceptual virtuosity. Scientists use “dark energy” to refer to a yet-unobserved force responsible for the expansion of the universe. Skerry employs it in his fourth chapter to discuss the moral discord sown by two antagonists: Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and Bruno in *Strangers on a Train* (1951). This metaphorical stretching of dark energy is the book’s least successful turn, taken against the advice even of one of the cosmologists Skerry interviews, who, when answering a question about dark energy as a symbol of moral evil, says plainly “I don’t think there is any connection there...let’s instead look at the connection of mystery vs. clarity”—a connection which Skerry ignores in favor of the former (p. 124).

The final sections contain the most fertile ground of the book, exhibiting Skerry’s skillful analyses of Hitchcock’s films. Chapter five combines the production and reception history of *Psycho* (1960) with Thomas Khun’s theory of scientific paradigm shifts, demonstrating both the impact of the famous shower scene on film censorship and the usefulness of Kuhn’s thesis in cinema studies. Chapter six dedicates itself to *Vertigo* (1958) and the recurring figure of vortexes in Hitchcock’s work. Skerry conjectures that the spiral signifies a quantum entanglement of characters, who are unpredictable only as much as they are interrelated to one another.

As previously mentioned, the book concludes with transcripts of Skerry’s conversations with physicists Sean Carroll and Martin Bojowald. These interviews point back to the text’s

most salient points as much as they point ahead to new directions, like cinema's affinity with quantum gravity and its destruction of "absolute time" (p. 141).

Throughout the book, Skerry's enthusiasm is obvious, both for Hitchcock and for popular cosmology. Aficionados of Hitchcock will find new language with which to marvel, and those humanists with an interest in physics will find inviting ways to engage landmark theories of the last century. The most serious criticism that can be leveled against *Dark Energy* is that its metaphorical linking rarely strives further than panegyric. The bulk of scientific material is used to proclaim Hitchcock's genius (Skerry on repeated occasions compares him to Mozart and Shakespeare). Ironically, however, the book successfully makes the case that audiences are ready for so much more. While there might be little debate about Hitchcock's brilliance, the book leaves no doubt that the investigation of cinematic spacetime has just begun.

References

Gladwell, M. (2005). *Blink: The power of thinking without thinking*. New York: Little, Brown and Co.