

‘Hitchcock’s Theory of Mind: Dial M for Murder as false belief test’

Paper delivered by **James Zborowski** at *Film-Philosophy*, King’s College London, 13.9.2012.

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The false belief test dates back to a study conducted by a pair of experimental psychologists, Wimmer and Perner, in 1983. Here is how Wimmer and Perner describe the test in the abstract for the article reporting their findings. The human test subject ‘observed how a protagonist put an object into a location x and then witnessed that in the absence of the protagonist the object was transferred from x to location y. Subjects had to indicate where the protagonist will look for the object at his return.’

The ‘right answer’, or we might say, the answer we would usually expect a human adult to give, is that the protagonist, not knowing that the object has been moved, will look in location x.

The subjects of Wimmer and Perner’s original test were children between the ages of three and nine. One of the authors’ key findings was that ‘None of the 3–4-year old, 57% of 4–6-year old, and 86% of 6–9-year old children pointed correctly to location x.’ And here is their summary conclusion in light of these results: ‘These results suggest that around the ages of 4 to 6 years the ability to represent the relationship between two or more persons’ epistemic states emerges and becomes firmly established.’

Since Wimmer and Perner’s original experiment, the test has been repeated, with variations, upon a variety of human and non-human subjects. The ability to perceive that others will, in certain circumstances, view the world differently from oneself has also been given a series of names by psychologists, neuroscientists and philosophers, and these different names often point to importantly different views of the mechanism or process

that allows most humans above a certain age to predict that the protagonist will think that the object is still in location x.

So, what does this have to do with *Dial M for Murder*? For those of you who don't know the film, I'll briefly sketch out its plot. Tony Wendice, a retired tennis player living in London, plots to have his wife Margo murdered. This seems to be partly because she has been having an affair, now terminated, with Mark Halliday, an American, and a writer of crime fiction. However, the main reason is that he has come to rely on his wife's wealth and wants to collect it all for himself. At least, this is what he tells Swann, a former acquaintance who, through a combination of blackmail and the offer of money, Wendice persuades to murder Margo.

The scheme is laid out for us in a mesmerising scene between Wendice and Swann in Wendice's apartment. Tony will leave a key to the apartment's front door under the stairs in the hallway. Swann will enter at a precisely appointed time, which will coincide with Tony calling his wife from a party he is attending. While Margo is standing at the telephone, Swann will take the opportunity to strangle her. He will then contrive the appearance of a burglary gone wrong, and leave the apartment the way he entered, replacing the key under the stairs on his way out. So that's the plan.

Fortunately for Margo, the murder goes wrong. While Swann is trying to strangle her, she manages to grab a pair of scissors and plunges them into his back, killing him. Tony, still at the other end of the telephone, speaks to Margo, telling her not to move anything and not to call the police.

Tony returns home, and whilst Margo is out of the room, proceeds to contrive a scene that will tell a different story from the one he had originally planned. Whereas earlier,

Wendice articulated his plan to Swann, and therefore indirectly to us, now he has no accomplice, so we must *infer* Wendice's intentions from his actions. We must *read his mind*, one might say. But there's another layer too. In order to successfully follow Wendice's train of thought and his actions, what we must be theorising about are the *inferences* that *others*, including the police, will make upon arriving at the crime scene and observing its details. Tony is trying to manipulate the beliefs of others by laying inferential paths for them to follow. As with the false belief test, we must keep in our mind the facts as *we* know them, and how things will appear to others. But of course, the film's scenario is a lot more complex, and the stakes are much higher.

Here is what Tony does. He removes the key from Swann's pocket and surreptitiously returns it to his wife's purse, from where he stole it earlier. The police will therefore not find a key to the apartment on Swann's body, something which would be difficult to account for. He burns the strangling device that Swann used, and replaces it with one of a pair of stockings from Margo's mending basket. He takes a love letter to Margo from her lover Mark, which Tony stole from her, and places it in Swann's inside pocket. The intended inference: Swann came to the apartment to blackmail Margo. So we now have a weapon that seems to belong to Margo, and a motive that appears to belong to her too.

A further small detail that makes the film yet more mentally taxing - but pleurably so, of course - is that we also must keep in our heads, as must Tony, the slightly different things he is telling the police on the one hand and Margo on the other, so that his plotting is not revealed.

Tony's scheme appears to succeed. Margo stands trial, is found guilty, and is sentenced to death. But fortunately, Inspector Hubbard, the lead detective on the case, has

figured out Tony's guilt, but needs more proof. He visits Tony on the eve of the execution, and via some ingenious subterfuge involving the swapping of their overcoats, manages to get Tony out of the apartment, and unable to get back in again, because Tony now has Inspector Hubbard's latch key, in Inspector Hubbard's overcoat, rather than his own. Hubbard has already told Tony to go to collect Margo's possessions from the nearby police station, in the hope that Tony will try to use the key in Margo's handbag to open the door.

Now, here is where it gets quite complicated. When Tony took the key from Swann's corpse, he thought he was retrieving Margo's key. But what Inspector Hubbard has figured out is that the key was in fact *Swann's own latchkey*, to Swann's own apartment. When Swann entered the Wendices' apartment, it turns out, he opened the door, and then replaced the key under the stair carpet *before* going in. And that's where the key remains. Hubbard's wager is that when Tony tries and fails to open the door using the key in Margo's bag, he too will, on the basis of what he *already knows*, realise all this, and use the key under the stair carpet to open the door, and in doing so, *perform an action which reveals that he possesses knowledge which confirms his guilt*. Here's a clip to show you how it pans out.

Show clip

When he discusses Hitchcock's film *Rope* in *Film as Film*, V F Perkins point out that the shift in our alignment from the murderers to the person who exposes them is aided by the film's structure. As he puts it, 'The first half of the film is *about* concealment, the second about search and revelation.' A similar thing is true of *Dial M for Murder*. For a long stretch of the film, we share with Tony the activity of predicting how others will interpret the clues he has planted. But as we have seen, we eventually come to share with Hubbard knowledge that Tony does not possess yet, and, even more importantly for my

argument, we do some ‘mindreading’ of Tony alongside Hubbard in the film’s closing minutes, with Hubbard even going so far as to ventriloquise Tony’s train of thought.

I think that when we recognise how crucial all of this second order intentionality, mindreading, or whatever we want to call it, is to *Dial M for Murder*, this recognition can help to account for the film’s structure and its success.

During the discussion of the film between Hitchcock and Truffaut, in the face of Hitchcock’s tendency to speak quite dismissively of the film, Truffaut stands up for it: ‘this is one of the pictures I see over and over again, and I enjoy it more every time I see it. Basically, it’s a dialogue picture, but the cutting, the rhythm, and the direction of the players are so polished that one listens to each sentence religiously. It isn’t all that easy to command the audience’s undivided attention for a continuous dialogue.’

I agree that the qualities Truffaut highlights are present and valuable, but I would contend that what makes *Dial M for Murder* really gripping is the sustained complexity of the inferences about multiple characters’ knowledge and beliefs that the viewer has to juggle. This is a large part of what *makes* it rewarding to listen to the dialogue religiously. And thinking of the film in this way also helps us to see the importance of its non-dialogue aspects, such as the scene where Tony wordlessly restages the crime scene, which I described earlier.

Cognitive scientists writing from an evolutionary perspective would argue that the ability to ‘read the minds’ of our peers is an advantageous thing for us to be able to do, and that part of the pleasure and pointedness of fictions is the opportunities they offer us to safely test and refine such skills. *Dial M for Murder*, one might suggest, provides the mental or social equivalent of a workout.

Pursuing this line of reasoning a little further, we might say that the film stretches its viewers, thus engaging them, but at the same time is careful not to place *impossible* demands upon them. Some of the work that has occurred since Wimmer and Perner's original false belief tests has tested matters such as how many nested sets of beliefs and desires humans can typically cope with. Robin Dunbar suggests that when we get to sixth-order intentionality, we start to struggle. To use the example he uses, we struggle to keep straight all the mental states involved in the hypothetical scenario 'Peter believes that Jane thinks that Sally wants Peter to suppose that Jane intends Sally to believe that her ball is under the cushion.'

Dial M for Murder clearly stays well within the limits suggested by such a test. If parsing orders of intentionality is a skill that commands relatively high levels of our mental energy, then *Dial M for Murder* does a good job of channelling us to deploy those energies effectively. It gives us a small number of key *objects* to use as loci for characters' inferences: the letter, the stocking, and most importantly, those look-alike latch keys. The latch-keys do a dance that provides enjoyable mental exercise, and fulfils our desires for a combination of complexity and coherence in artworks.

But then in other respects, the film is careful to *reduce* our cognitive burden. As Truffaut and Hitchcock note, locating most of the film in one room is not necessarily a liability. Within my reading, we can draw a parallel between the room in *Dial M for Murder* and the room used in the typical false belief test. We need a relatively simple and sparsely populated environment so that we can track and attribute the important and revealing small changes that occur within it. As well as having few locations the film also has few speaking parts. The muted emotional quality of the film can also, I think, be explained by the emphasis placed on mindreading matters. Even in places where the film could indulge in more emotion, it abstains. Inspector Hubbard never really breaks a

sweat. Margo spends a lot more time in quiet shock or grief than in extravagant displays of emotion. I think there is something in this idea that following the dance of the keys and so on commands so much of the aesthetic energy of this film, and our energy as viewers, that there is not much left over for other things.

I seem to have begun, then, to talk about limitations, and they are the last main thing I want to talk about. When I first made the connection between *Dial M for Murder* and the false belief test, I was quite excited. But something that also struck me almost immediately was that *Dial M for Murder* is often treated as a relatively minor Hitchcock film. I was also aware, of course, that the other avenues of cognitive psychology that have been more sustainedly applied to film have met with an ambivalent reception.

What's intriguing is that I think we can detect a certain degree of overlap between the way in which *Dial M* is critiqued, or at least damned with faint praise in relation to the rest of Hitchcock's output, and the kinds of critiques levelled against cognitive approaches to film. We can cover a fair amount of what's at stake in both cases with the adjective 'mechanical'.

Because I don't have much time left, all I can do here is sketch out some key objections to the deployment of theory of mind. The main source I'm going to draw on is a book by a philosopher who does not deal directly with film, but who articulates what I think is at stake with particular eloquence. The book is called *Rethinking Commonsense Psychology*, and the author is Matthew Ratcliffe.

One of the key prongs of Ratcliffe's attack is the fact that most cognitive psychological accounts of theory of mind commit themselves from the outset to the functionalist

language of 'beliefs and desires', and they tend to treat such beliefs and desires as objects that can be expressed in the form of simple propositions.

I want to read a short passage from Ratcliffe's book that exemplifies his critique. The literature on folk psychology, Ratcliffe argues,

'markets vague and unhelpful statements about beliefs and desires as platitudes that anyone with any sense would assent to. For example [and here he quotes one example of such literature]: "it is trivially easy to explain why John will carry his umbrella with him: it is because he *believes* it will rain and he *wants* to stay dry." [End quote. Back to Ratcliffe himself.] It is trivially easy to explain why John will carry his umbrella? Consider the following accounts of his behaviour.

1. As always, John switched off his alarm clock and got out of bed at 7.30. He dressed, ate breakfast, picked up his briefcase and umbrella and set off to work at the usual time of 8.30.

2. John opened the door and saw the unusually dark sky. He went back into the house and picked up his umbrella.

These suggest quite different explanations of why John carries his umbrella. In the first case, his behaviour is habitual and his picking up of the umbrella is part of a larger pattern of routine activity. At no point does he entertain the thought that it will rain. In the second, he looks up at the sky, explicitly considers the likelihood of rain and interrupts his schedule to retrieve an umbrella. Imposition of the terms "believes" and "wants" does not succeed in

distinguishing these scenarios, even though most everyday descriptions, even rather crude ones, would manage to convey the difference.

When I read Ratcliffe's critiques of theory of mind I was struck by how close they were to the critiques of the reductivism, and the failure to discriminate, of cognitive approaches to film in general, and some of the work of David Bordwell in particular, by writers including Andrew Britton, Douglas Pye, V F Perkins and, most recently, Alex Clayton. This is something I intend to pursue further elsewhere.

To return to *Dial M for Murder*. The reason that *Dial M* does not, I think, immediately highlight these limitations is that framing mental states as propositions is a large part of what that film *wants us* to do. For a lot of the film's running time, it's appropriate that we will have thoughts along the lines of 'Tony believes that the key in his wife's handbag is the key to his front door', 'the police will believe that Swann was blackmailing Margo with the love letter', and so on.

By contrast, if we turn to a film like *Vertigo*, for example, we can, of course, say something along the lines of, 'Scottie is led to Carlotta's grave as part of his being led to believe that Madeleine Elster is possessed by Carlotta Valdes', but such a formulation does not take us to the heart of the film's operations in the way that similar ones, I would argue, *do* in the case of *Dial M for Murder*. What does Scottie 'believe' or 'desire' by the end of *Vertigo*? *That*, we might say, is the critical question, and I don't think it's one that cognitive approaches based upon belief/desire psychology can take us very far in answering.

A quick concluding thought, then. For the reasons I've just outlined, I agree with several other writers that we need to be cautious about the applicability of theory of mind,

or belief-desire psychology, to film, even though in certain cases it can be very illuminating, as I hope I've demonstrated. But I think the *broader issue* that this paper is one response to is one that definitely needs further thought. A mainstay of Hitchcock's films, and criticism about them, is that we experience a particularly close relationship with one character. In all of the Hitchcock films being discussed on today's panel, as well as many others, a fundamental ingredient of that relationship is that we spend a lot of time, alongside that character, focussing our attention upon the minds of *others*. The kind of self-forgetfulness and absorption in the minds of others that fiction is often taken to encourage in its *beholders* is something being undertaken by these *protagonists* within the fiction.

Perhaps all this is just another way of saying that these attempts by fictional characters to be social mindreaders are one way for them to become viewer-surrogates. Nevertheless, as a relatively underexplored way of thinking about 'identification' or that other mainstay, 'voyeurism', I think it's a line of thought that deserves further consideration.