

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE SKIN GAME (1931)

Alfred Hitchcock

OVERVIEW

The Skin Game (1931) is the fifth sound film of the celebrated British auteur Alfred Hitchcock. It was based on a 1920 play of the same name by John Galsworthy, who would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature the year following the film's release. The film was a critical and commercial success, although it is now considered to be a relatively minor item in Hitchcock's oeuvre. Hitchcock biographer Donald Spoto argues that the film "reveals a Hitchcock detached from his project." The director himself would remark that while it was "one of the most successful pictures" from his time working in Britain, *The Skin Game* marks a period in his career when he was moving away from more conventional dramas and was beginning to "get more and more interested in developing a suspense technique." *The Skin Game* is significant, then, in part because it is a Hitchcock film that lacks the very distinctive qualities that have come to be associated with the "master of suspense." *The Skin Game* is ultimately a relatively conventional morality tale, albeit a compelling one.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

An early sound film of Hitchcock's, *The Skin Game* lacks any non-diegetic sound or musical soundtrack to accompany the dialogue. This is notable because the use of non-diegetic sound would become so integral to Hitchcock's signature filmic style later in his career, most significantly in the infamous shower scene in *Psycho* (1960). In the case of *The Skin Game*, however, the film does not suffer too much from this omission. This is mostly because the film is a fairly faithful adaptation of the play on which it is based, and thus most of its emotional energy is designed to be conveyed by the acting and dialogue. Indeed, for a Hitchcock film, it is, for the most part, remarkably unambitious in its cinematic qualities. For example, the camera mostly tracks the actors as if filming a stage production, rather than making use of shot-reverse-shot editing. Despite the conventionality of much of the film, however, there is evidence in moments of Hitchcock's burgeoning virtuosity behind the camera. The director would himself be critical of his efforts in later interviews: "I played around with technique in those early days. [...] It never occurred to me that I was merely wasting footage with camera tricks and not getting on with the film." There is certainly a tension *The Skin Game* between a kind of static filming of a scene as if it were on a stage, and Hitchcock's seeming desire to develop a distinctly cinematic language. Despite Hitchcock's self-criticism, there are some remarkably innovative moments that exhibit his growing talent, chief among them the exhilarating auction scene in which the camera inhabits the point of view of the auctioneer scanning the audience for bidders.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mr. Hillcrist	A wealthy aristocratic landowner
Mrs. Hillcrist	Wife of Mr. Hillcrist and mother of Jill
Jill Hillcrist	Daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Hillcrist
Dawker	An employee of the Hillcrist
Mr. Hornblower	A successful, self-made businessman
Charles Hornblower	Mr. Hornblower's eldest son
Chloe Hornblower	Charles' wife
Rolf Hornblower	Mr. Hornblower's younger son

SYNOPSIS

Mr. Hornblower, a self-made businessman, has purchased land in rural southern England from the Hillcrist, a long-established aristocratic family. Relations between the families deteriorate dramatically in the wake of Hornblower's eviction of tenant farmers from the land.

Hornblower intends to build a factory in the area, something he kept secret from the Hillcrist family initially. He plans to further expand his ownership of land in the immediate vicinity of the Hillcrist estate, eventually winning a bidding war at an auction for the required land.

Following the auction, the Hillcrist family learns from their employee Dawker that Chloe Hornblower, the wife of Hornblower's eldest son, has a morally dubious past that she has hidden from her husband and father-in-law. Mr. Hillcrist refuses to use the information as blackmail, but Mrs. Hillcrist goes behind her husband's back and threatens Mr. Hornblower, who agrees to return the land in exchange for the Hillcrist family's silence.

Chloe learns that her secret has been revealed to her husband, despite the attempts of Mr. Hillcrist, who has discovered his wife's blackmail of Hornblower, to keep him from hearing of it. Distraught, Chloe drowns herself. Hornblower vows to seek revenge for the Hillcrist family's destruction of his family.

SCENES

A meeting on a country road In a rural setting, a young man driving a car and a young woman on horseback meet along a path. They discuss the conflict between their families and, while they disagree, they are amicable with one another.



The tenant farmers are evicted From within a small cottage, voices are heard. The farming family who lives there are being evicted by the wealthy Mr Hornblower while his driver waits outside with his car.



Appeal to the Hillcrists The tenant farmers who were served their eviction notice in the previous scene visit the home of the Hillcrists to protest the actions of Hornblower and to appeal for the Hillcrists' help. The Hillcrists are appalled and angered to hear that Hornblower has broken what they understood to be a condition of their selling him the land on which the farmers live, that is, not to evict the farmers who live and work that land. They promise to speak to Hornblower and are optimistic that he will honour his word.



Dawker's information After the farmers' departure, the Hillcrists' employee, a man named Dawker, informs the latter that the woman who is selling the land adjacent to theirs has promised to not sell directly to Hornblower but to put the land up for auction.



A visit from Hornblower Hornblower is summoned to the Hillcrists where, after an initial attempt at civility, an argument ensues. Hornblower warns the Hillcrists that he has no intention of allowing the farmers to stay on the land and that he plans to extend his plans for his factories further still by purchasing a piece of land for sale that adjoins the Hillcrists' estate.



Chloe Hornblower tries to make peace At the auction, Chloe Hornblower, the wife of Hornblower's eldest son, approaches Mrs. Hillcrist and tries to amend their cold relationship. Mrs. Hillcrist rebuffs Chloe's attempts at making peace, accusing Chloe of not doing enough to oppose her family's plans to spoil the natural beauty of the area.



The auction The land is put up for sale and a dramatic bidding war ensues. The Hillcrist have employed Dawker as a shadow bidder taking cues from Hillcrist in a back row. The bidding is raised to an astronomical price, and it is ultimately purchased by a third bidder—neither, it seems, a Hillcrist nor a Hornblower.





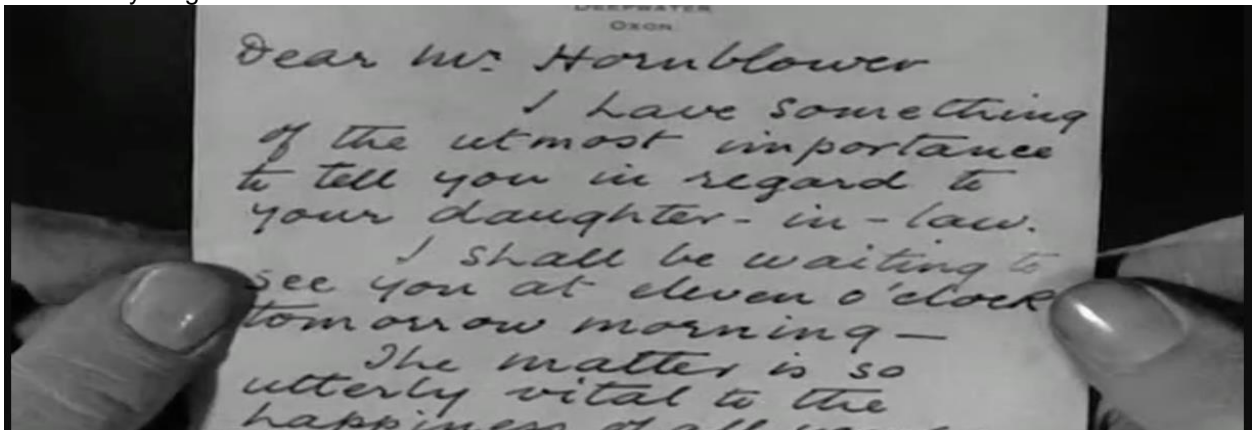
Hornblower taunts Hillcrist As Hillcrist sits in his car outside the auction, satisfied that Hornblower was prevented from making his purchase, Hornblower approaches him and reveals that he, too, had a shadow bidder—the mysterious man who ultimately won the auction. Hillcrist is infuriated at being outfoxed.



Revelations about Chloe Hornblower Dawker informs the Hillcrist family that he has received information about Chloe Hornblower's past that would bring the family into disrepute. Hillcrist refuses to exploit the information on moral grounds, despite suggestions from his family that it may be in service of a higher cause.



A letter is sent Hornblower receives a letter from Mrs. Hillcrist informing him that she has information regarding his daughter-in-law that he will want to urgently hear. Concerned, Hornblower asks Chloe if there is anything that he should know—she assures him that she has been honest with him.



An attempt at bribery Chloe, aware that the Hillcrists have uncovered her secret past, begs Dawker not to use her secret against the Hornblower family as it will result in the end of her marriage. She offers Dawker money in exchange, but he refuses.



A burgeoning romance is aborted Jill and Rolf, the daughter of the Hillcrists and the youngest son of Hornblower, meet to discuss the family feud. Rolf conveys his indifference to the conflict and his desire to continue their relationship, but Jill insists that their continued affair is unsustainable: the bitterness between their families has grown too strong.



The secret is revealed Hornblower visits Mrs. Hillcrist and insists on hearing the “lies” that they have concocted about his daughter-in-law. Mrs. Hillcrist reveals that Chloe, prior to marrying his son, was employed as a woman who would visit hotels with men who were seeking to engineer evidence for their own infidelity for their divorce proceedings. Shocked, Hornblower refuses to believe it. Chloe is summoned to deny the accusation, but Dawker has arranged for one of her former clients to provide evidence.





Blackmail With the evidence of Chloe's past life now irrefutable, Hornblower is forced to concede to the demands of Mrs. Hillcrist in exchange for her silence. He is also forced to renounce his title to the land he has purchased and to sell it to the Hillcrist at a loss.



Chloe, Jill, and Mr Hillcrist hatch a plan Mr Hillcrist learns of his wife's blackmail of Hornblower and disapproves. When Jill encounters Chloe sobbing, father and daughter attempt to comfort her. Chloe reveals that her husband is coming to ask Hillcrist what the secret is that Mrs. Hillcrist alluded to in her letter. She explains the hardship in which grew up after her father's bankruptcy and how her marriage has given her a new lease on life. Hillcrist agrees to tell her husband that the secret is of a less scandalous nature: that she was once accused of stealing money from an employer. However, when Charles arrives he reveals he has already forced the truth out of Dawker.



Drowning Overhearing her husband's reaction to her secret, Chloe is distraught and jumps into the Hillcrist's pond, drowning herself. Charles returns to the house with her body. Overcome with grief, Hornblower threatens his revenge.



The tenant farmers return After Hornblower's departure, the tenant farmers come to thank the Hillcrist's for driving Hornblower out of town. The Hillcrist's, still in shock at Chloe's suicide, barely muster a response. After the farmers depart, Hillcrist remarks that he had "forgotten of their existence." He questions the purpose of the family's "gentility" if it "can't stand fire."



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mr. Hornblower

Mr. Hornblower's name is a good indicator of his character and his impact on the inhabitants of the village to which he has moved. In a telling moment, Mrs. Hillcrist comments upon the arrival of his car as it pulls noisily into her family's driveway: "It seems to make more noise than any other."

Hornblower is a brash individual, a man with formidable energy who walks into rooms like a whirlwind. The shock of his arrival so thoroughly discombobulates the Hillcrist's previously stable and pastoral existence that they are driven to compromise their own prized good name in a bid to halt his seemingly unstoppable progress.

Beneath Hornblower's bluster, however, there is a fragility and an anxiety stemming from his class status. His rage at the Hillcrist's seems to result as much from their disdain of his working-class mannerisms as it does from their bid to frustrate his business. The one thing his money cannot buy him is the respect of an aristocratic class whose gates are locked to those who lack the hereditary credentials necessary for entry.

Relentless If the Hillcrist's represent the past—a family whose relationship to the land goes back generations—Hornblower's origins are murky: "had no ancestors, you see; no past, just the future." Unshackled from the weight of hereditary legacy, though, he is free to embody the spirit of a new industrial capitalism that refuses to entertain sentimentality. The first time we hear Hornblower's voice he is evicting tenant farmers who have lived on the Hillcrist's land for many years. It seems that Hornblower is constitutionally unable to comprehend why anyone would want to stay in one place: "I've got my money and I've got to keep moving with it." Whatever obstacles are put in the way, he appears capable of overcoming them by sheer force of will. Even when he is momentarily flustered at an auction by the bidding war that the Hillcrist's force him into, he is ultimately willing to pay an outrageous sum for a piece of land that he deems essential to growing his vast business empire. Part of the tragedy of Hornblower's character is that his relentless energy is only halted with the emotional impact of his daughter-in-law's suicide. This is only a brief moment of genuine serenity, however, and he soon finds himself with a new purpose—seeking his revenge for her death.

Resentful Even as Hornblower is, by his own articulation of his motives, dictated in his actions by the necessity to keep moving with his money, there is, the film suggests, a deeper psychological drive that animates him. Early in the film, Hornblower challenges the Hillcrist's on their personal dislike of him, despite their protestations that their objections are based solely on Hornblower's intended use for the land. Hornblower draws their attention to their snubbing of his daughter-in-law, a slight he takes personally. Indeed, his anger at the Hillcrist's is a result not of an innate dislike of them, but out of a feeling of rejection. In the very first interaction that the audience witnesses between Hornblower and the Hillcrist's, the former seems eager for the latter's affection and respect. It is only when Hornblower realizes that the Hillcrist's icy exterior will never be relinquished—that he will never, no matter how much money he has to his name, be permitted entry into the aristocratic class—that he becomes almost maniacally fixated on purchasing the piece of land to which the Hillcrist's have the most sentimental value attached. By the end of the film, this resentment turns to a purer kind of hatred, as he vows to enact revenge for the suicide of his daughter-in-law.

Mr. Hillcrist

Hillcrist functions as Hornblower's opposite: where the latter is brash, energetic, and unrefined, Hillcrist is the picture of nobility with his quiet air and placid demeanour. As the head of a wealthy aristocratic family, at the beginning of the film he carries himself like a patriarch, refusing to be brought down to Hornblower's level despite the latter's provocations. However, by the end of the film Hillcrist is thoroughly morally compromised and can no longer lay authentic claim to the one advantage he retains over Hornblower—his good name and sense of moral worth.

Honourable Hillcrist is clearly a respected member of his community. The tenant farmers who Hornblower is threatening with eviction in one of the film's opening scenes appear comfortable going to Hillcrist with their situation to seek his support. Ever the benevolent lord of the manor, Hillcrist affirms their claim to the land based not on any legal writ, but the belief that Hornblower's word would be honoured. This proves ultimately to be a naïve belief, but it shows how seriously Hillcrist takes these values of honour and tradition. Similarly, when presented with an opportunity to use the lurid revelations about Hornblower's daughter-in-law against him, he refuses out of a sense of honour. He deems the sanctity of marriage and respect for privacy to sit above his own interest in preserving the tranquility of his home.

Powerless Ultimately, though, Hillcrist's honourable stature does not serve him well in a battle that fundamentally comes down to the irreconcilable interests of two property owners. There is a sense throughout the film that Hillcrist's values, however admirable they may be, are doomed to be compromised by the imperatives of economic competition. Hillcrist's first step in this direction is his decision to employ a shadow bidder in the auction for the land that Hornblower so badly wants for his factory. Ultimately, Hillcrist loses this battle because Hornblower himself employs a shadow bidder, thus deceiving Hillcrist into believing the land would not be sold to be developed. In entering such a dirty game, Hillcrist reveals that he does not know how to play. In the wake of this, Hillcrist seems to give up on such unsavoury tactics, but he also does little to prevent his wife from pursuing a course of blackmail against Hornblower. By the time he learns of her actions, it is too late and the series of events that lead to the death of Chloe Hornblower have already been set in motion. In a telling final scene, the tenant farmers come to thank Hillcrist for taking on the Hornblowers and protecting their interests. After they leave, Hillcrist turns to his wife and says, "I'd forgotten their existence." This line reveals that Hillcrist's attempts to fight Hornblower have ultimately led to the compromising of the very values he thought he was fighting to preserve.

Chloe Hornblower

Of all the characters caught up in the feud between Hillcrist and the Hornblower, it is Chloe, the wife of the eldest son of Hornblower, who proves to be the ultimate victim of a war that has gotten out of hand. Chloe is presented initially as a mysterious woman whose significance to the drama is made clear, even as her exact role in it remains ambiguous for about half the film. Once her character is more fully introduced, however, she is revealed to be a gentle soul, whose past (as a woman who provided services to men who needed a pretext for their divorce) was born out of necessity rather than any personal moral failing.

Modest While initially a mysterious figure with very few lines, Chloe grows to be one of *The Skin Game's* most compelling characters. If Hillcrist represents stability and Hornblower the dynamism of an emerging class, Chloe sits somewhere in the middle. Like Hornblower, she is desperate to escape her poor origins. Like Hillcrist, though, what she ultimately desires are stability and a peaceful existence. In an emotional scene, she reveals to the Hillcrist that she married Charles out of a desire for security—something denied her in her youth.

Desperate As her situation worsens with the looming threat of her past being revealed to her husband, Chloe becomes increasingly desperate and thus increasingly tragic as a figure. She attempts to bribe Dawker into silence, but it is made clear to her that no matter how much money she offers she cannot compete with the Hillcrist's claim to Dawker's services. As her options dwindle and she overhears her husband's cruel response to the revelations about her past, she drowns herself in Hillcrist's pond. Her actions speak to the delicate tightrope she has been forced to walk her entire life. Her past actions that have caused her so much trouble in the present were done to help her bankrupt father, but in helping one male figure in her life she had ended up disappointing another. Chloe is thus ultimately a victim of circumstance, a vehicle for the film's ultimate message that one's class background is not something that can be overcome.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Industrialization

The Skin Game's first and final shots both show a pastoral environment. The first features workmen casually strolling in a wooded path; the second shows a tree being cut down. Between these two shots lies a central thematic of the film: the destruction of a bucolic rural environment by the forces of industrialization.

The erosion of nature is foregrounded repeatedly in the film. At one point, a shot of the rural landscape crossfades into one of factories. Similarly, at another moment in the film the camera frames what appears to be a natural landscape, only for the camera to zoom out to reveal it to be an advertisement for the sale of land—the very land that Hornblower intends to purchase for his factory.

Despite these moments in which the loss of the rural landscape to industrialization feels like an unambiguous tragedy, the film, at the level of story, is much more ambiguous. Indeed, it is their desire to protect their land against development that ultimately leads the Hillcristes to take actions that undermine their claim to a “gentility” that supposedly has its roots in their custody of a bucolic, unchanging landscape.

As for the relationship of other characters to industrialization, of course Hornblower represents the frenzied pace of development in human form. Between Hornblower and the Hillcristes, however, there seem to lie a range of opinions. Firstly, the tenant farmers who are being evicted experience the full force of displacement. On the other hand, in a brief but important moment during the auction, a villager is shown commenting on the changes brought by the arrival of Hornblower's industrial development: “wonderful improvement we are having in the town... I hear we will be having the electric light soon.” This idea of “improvement” as a social good, one that the Hillcristes are by extension opposing in their efforts to stem Hornblower's rise, suggests that beyond the dichotomized class interests of the aristocracy and the new bourgeoisie lies a more conflicted set of class interests: those of the labourers who make up the majority of the inhabitants of the village.

Class conflict

The struggle over the land in *The Skin Game* ultimately boils down to a struggle between two classes: the established old aristocracy, represented by the Hillcristes, and an emergent bourgeoisie, represented by Hornblower. Both classes have something the other lacks. In the case of the aristocracy, the Hillcristes have their name, their reputation, and their sense of “gentility” bestowing on them an almost custodial relationship with their land and those who live on or near it. This is best exemplified in the Hillcristes' close relationship to the tenant farmers who come seeking their aid in an early scene. Hornblower, on the other hand, has his money and the ability to overwhelm the financial capabilities, however impressive, of the Hillcristes. Their difference in this respect is that the Hillcristes have their money stabilized in their land, whereas Hornblower's money is that of a capitalist's: it is constantly accumulating, as indicated by his exclamation that “I have my money and I've got to keep moving with it.” And yet Hornblower is new to his wealth and thus has only his money to lean on, whereas the Hillcristes are established and irreproachable members of their community. It is thus not surprising that Mrs. Hillcrist ultimately decides to target this weakness of Hornblower through threatening the exposure of his daughter-in-law's secret.

Ultimately, this struggle between these two classes ends in their mutual ruin. While it is Hornblower who suffers the most with the suicide of Chloe and his enforced retraction of his claim to the land, the Hillcristes lose a hugely valuable, if intangible, thing—their claim to the moral high ground. Indeed, Hillcrist's closing lines in the film express this regret at the revelation of the ultimate flimsiness of what he had thought was an immutable trait: “what's gentility worth, if it can't stand fire?”

FLAWS

Greed

Greed is an important driver of the plot in *The Skin Game*. Without Hornblower's greed, there would be no conflict between his family and the Hillcrist. One could argue that Hornblower is ultimately responsible, from his greed for the destruction of many characters' lives in the film, to the tenant farmers who are threatened with eviction, to his own daughter-in-law whose past is used against Hornblower as a weapon in the war with the Hillcrist. However, although the Hillcrist's desire to maintain their landed wealth might appear more virtuous, it is in the last analysis no less motivated by greed for the Hillcrist's are spectacularly wealthy and they are willing to use that wealth for the maintenance of their status. Indeed, in the film's thrilling auction scene, the bidding war rises to astronomical sums, sums that both Hornblower and Hillcrist are more than willing to pay, albeit for ostensibly differing reasons.

APPEARANCE VERSUS REALITY

The tension between what is real and what merely appears to be real is a common theme across Hitchcock's films. While it may be more emphatically present in other films than this one, particularly in *Vertigo*, *The Skin Game* nevertheless strongly foregrounds this theme. In one shot, for example, a rural scene is depicted, only for it to be revealed as an advertisement for land for sale. In other words, the "land", something supposedly rooted in the earth, becomes a mere image of itself, something to be bought and sold. There is also the tension between the characters, between who they appear to be and who they actually are. Chloe Hornblower appears to be a lady, a morally upstanding wife in the eyes of society, but she has a past that reveals her life to be one of constant struggle and desperation. Similarly, the Hillcrist appears to be impeccably moral whereas Hornblower is revealed to be irredeemably greedy and merciless. In reality, the Hillcrist are just as willing to resort to cunning and malicious tactics to get what they want. Hornblower, on the other hand, is revealed to be a doting father-in-law, who in family matters (as opposed to business) is sentimental and unendingly loyal.

PAST

Throughout *The Skin Game* there is a preoccupation with the past, in multiple senses. First, there is the "past" that the Hillcrist wish to preserve. This incorporates both their ancestries, for as Mr Hillcrist emphasizes, he is one in a long line of landowners. And it is this aristocratic sense of duty to the land as the embodiment of a family history that motivates him in his fight against Hornblower. Hornblower, for his part, is emphasized as having no past—he has only the future, encapsulated in his money and his perception of land not as the embodiment of history but as a site for future economic gain. Finally, this overarching idea of the past comes to a head in the revelations about Chloe Hornblower. Her attempts to escape her past represent the attempts of a working-class woman to mold herself into something new, unmoored from the weight of tradition and morality. Chloe also represents, by extension, Hornblower's own inability to entirely control the future: the past, even if not his own past, comes back to haunt him.