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by David Thomson

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His age and his stamina deserve decent acknowledgment. His physical condition might arouse tenderness, if it were easier to conceive of embracing him. We owe him our sense of intricacy in film, even if we wonder whether this sort of detail fulfills or defrauds the medium. His list of movies is guaranteed recognition, if only because he has labored so narrowly to insure that no one else could have filmed a foot of it. But we have settled too quickly for that authoritarian proof of authorship. Signature is not enough. Without an enriching contribution to experience, it can be merely a logo, like his own brief appearance in ev-



ery film, a cute and ghostly trademark.

It is instructive, though, to notice how a recurring signature can overawe the study of film. In no other art is it possible to think of a career's work stamped with such remorseless personality and effectiveness, yet still so vulnerable with regard to achievement; so exact and nerve-racking, but so inimical to life. The purpose of this exasperated mugging of Alfred Hitchcock is not to hurt or abuse a senior professional—he seems constitutionally immune from either—but to show that glittering engineering and morbid perfection do not take up all of film's potential or satisfy our hopes as an audience. Hitchcock protests that his films are for his audience, and his com-

mercial reputation survives, despite several aberrations when self-imposed riddles left him with his back to the crowd. But the deference to the audience never conceals the gloating that they are prisoners, and his mastery is that of a jailer. His textbook diligence often aspires toward the comprehensive locking up of people—better still if they are 'The Wrong Man, for then the locksmith is a black humorist, too.

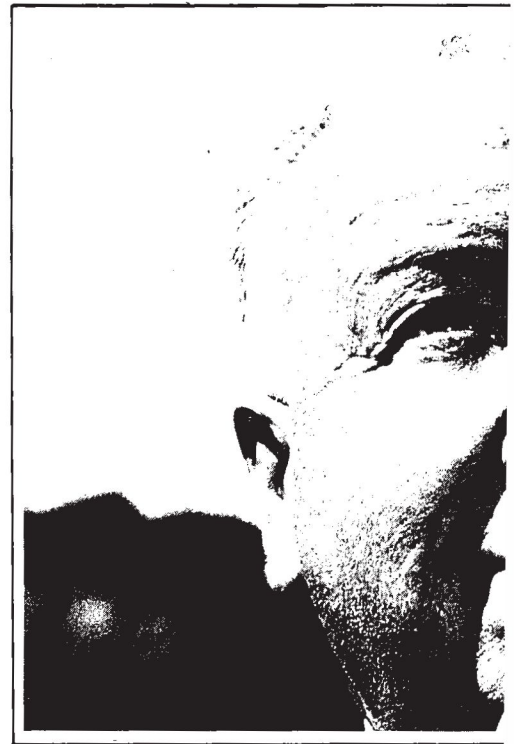
The problem with Hitchcock has always been of finding an approach consistent with the variety of appeal in his films. You can regard that range as being true to the deliberate layers of meaning in his films that are unpeeled with all the expert provocation of a stripper—he is the supreme clerk-poet of the withheld as erotic, of mystery as hard-on. Or it could be a sign of inner betrayal, whereby character discloses more than consciousness knows. This most interviewed of directors has remained cryptic because of an elusiveness that suggests fear of candid exchange with a questioner. It has been his way to agree crushingly or to miss the subtle points put to him. Metaphysical questions get shopkeeper answers; matters of trade or technique make him garrulous and avuncular, freeing that unnerving Alfred, the poker-faced tease who likes to pinch our nipples.

In times past, that was attributed to his solemn wit. He was allegedly the inscrutable prick for inflated questions. But so many interviewers were more idealistic than he seemed capable of being. Careful reading suggests that Hitchcock has frequently not understood the drift of his questioners, but that he is too wary of losing face to admit it. Time and again, the point of misunderstanding turns on his small-minded piety about "pure cinema." It is the faith of austere inexperience. God knows what pure literature or pure painting might be. Surely we require the impurity of human intransigence to temper the awful sublimity of unhindered formalism? I cannot imagine pure cinema, yet I suppose that Leni Riefenstahl's thunder of style obliterating individualism is our most ominous approximation to it. Still, Hitchcock has been praised by men as humane as Robin Wood and François Truffaut for the witless naiveté that films can be cut off from feelings, ideas, and consequences. How often he has professed his own shriveled purpose; and how persistently we have insisted on merciful ambiguities which, for some reason, this hardly retiring man has declined to speak about.

Look at a passage from Truffaut's forlorn attempt to furnish a room for the supercilious hero. It concerns *Rear Window*, a film we have not seen in years, and which looms out of its de-visualized zone as a supposed testament on filmmaking, voyeurism, marriage, and the drastic responsibilities of seeing and being seen. I once chose a clever image from it for the cover of a book, because I

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thought it a cogent nutshell of significance, a key to cinema. And if I try to crack the shell now, it's not just because the film has faded with forgetfulness. My attitude toward Hitchcock has grown more alarmed over the years, yet I'm confident *Rear Window* is still a compulsive, nihilistic game. But I doubt if it is a key or a good enough answer, for Hitchcock has not sensed the most demanding questions film can ask. Nutshell answers are always convenient and tidy—attitudes of mind that restrict Hitchcock and abet his startling ignorance of how people actually think and behave. The master does not film the world; he armors himself against it with bleak homilies and rat-community models. The determinist

survey is so foreboding that it does not need to reach a conclusion. The methodology projects its own dismal end-game.

Truffaut offered *Rear Window* as one of his favorite Hitchcock films. Yet his first question contains an indulgence that he would never have permitted to Claude Autant-Lara or Julien Duvivier: "I imagine that the story appealed to you primarily because it represented a tech-

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nical challenge: a whole film from the viewpoint of one man, and embodied in a single, large set." We shall see in a moment that Truffaut was not really content with that stultifying challenge. But he was ready to condone it in Hitchcock—no matter that the nearly contemporary diary on the making of *Fahrenheit 451* shows his excitement at moments when technique is subsumed by personality, chance, and life's gestures. That movie may not be very good, but it's the effort of a man who, in 1967, praised Jean Renoir because "His work unfolds as if he had devoted his most brilliant moments to fleeing from the masterpiece, to escape any notion of the definite and the fixed, so as to create a semi-

improvisation, a deliberately unfinished open work that each viewer can complete for himself, comment on it as it suits him, approach from any side."

Is it senseless to chastise Hitchcock for not being Renoir? To rebuke a closed film because it is not open? I have to say that it seems not only sensible, but necessary. It may be the only way of piercing the bravura of technical completeness or purity behind which Alfred hides. It is necessary because of Hitchcock's abject answer to Truffaut's hopeful question: "Absolutely. It was the possibility of doing a purely cinematic film. You have an immobilized man looking out. That's one part of the film. The second part shows how he reacts. This is actually the purest expression of a cinematic idea."

No, Alfred, it is not the purest, and it is not even an idea. It is only the glib exposition of a cross-stitching mechanism, which if cherished above all else will leave the film cold and oppressive from neglect of human mystery and doubt. Talking to Truffaut, Hitchcock traced this preoccupation to Pudovkin and to Kuleshov's hallowed experiments with Mosjoukine. He never indicates the least interest in any intention behind Russian experiments in editing, or in Kuleshov's films. It is as if a social scientist had appropriated a spasm of the brain first identified by a poet; it is B.F. Skinner tidying up after Coleridge. An idea is something that transcends mechanism. If the editing connection is neatly equated with neurological spark and the segue of information theory, then what is lost is the possibility of resonant and transforming art.

*Rear Window* is a mechanism that falls short of wisdom. The notion contained in so many appraisals of the film—that the photographer is callous and the killer worthy—is treated with the utmost cynicism by Hitchcock himself. He never exceeds the implacable but mindless safeguard that the Law is the immaculate object of our obedience, and that obedience is judgment. It is not that Hitchcock himself has a reverence for life or is touched by the lives lost. On the contrary, he despises or miniaturizes most of his people, and has an intense imaginative obsession with methods of killing and the attractive fantasy of wiping out opponents and problems. But he cannot entertain the Lang-like expectation of reason, kindness, and weary grace being driven to kill someone. Raymond Burr's murderer stays at the far end of a telescope, and his reasons are as locked up and as stereotyped as any policeman

would want.

It is seldom discussed, but Hitchcock's sensibility is one of voluntary and neurotic enslavement. He regards the Law without a mature appreciation for its ethical basis, but in paranoid awe of its authority. Yet Hitchcock's mechanistic imagination is all triggers, blades and lethal traps: it is an eloquent example of the oppressed mind being driven in against itself, of dictatorship generating self-loathing. I cannot forget that this putative great artist admits a dominant anxiety about having a policeman knock at his door. Whatever the childhood trauma, to go through life so overshadowed is to suffer a huge burden upon the spirit. It seems to me that it has helped sever technique from meaning, that it has provided for a ministry of fear, and



that it suggests a degree of depression in Hitchcock that has emerged rarely—in *The Wrong Man*, *Vertigo*, and fleetingly in *Under Capricorn* (Ingrid Bergman's drunken self-destructiveness), *Psycho*, *The Birds* (Jessica Tandy's ingrowing doubts about her ability to cope), and *Rebecca* (where the identification with Joan Fontaine's dowdy panic is remarkably acute).

The Truffaut interview is a fascinating text. It shows how the movie industry has promoted impact without substance, and produced the lowered gaze of the craftsman as opposed to the outward awareness of a novelist. So often, Truffaut's teeming questions were countered with terse answers:

**Truffaut:** I was still a working critic the first time I saw *Rear Window*, and I remember writing that the picture was very gloomy, rather pessimistic, and quite evil. But now I don't see it in that light at all; in fact, I feel it has a rather compassionate approach. What Stewart sees from his window is not horrible but simply a display of human weaknesses and people in pursuit of happiness. Is that the way you look at it?

**Hitchcock:** Definitely.

And so they moved on to the next film, the questioner ardent and generous, the answers so often cramped and withdrawn. I wish Truffaut had not shelved his intuition of cruelty in *Rear Window*. The original review (reprinted in his collection *The Films in My Life*) is very perceptive. It revels in the skill of the picture, but sees "moral solitude" and "a vision of the world that verges on misanthropy." It concludes by calling Hitchcock "the man we love to be hated by"—a very shrewd description of what it is to subject oneself to the Hitchcock roller-coaster. There is hostility exuding from the film. What Stewart sees across the way is not horrible, it is only manipulated. It is the anticipatory spying that is loathsome, and its philosophical weighing on the action that is so claustrophobic. The film does not address this insight, but a critic should not spare it: that Hitchcock's nervousness of people induces his flinching caution that they are menacing and nasty. His style is tyrannical, premeditated, and icily framed, because the initial disposition is afraid of human liberty.

That has made Hitchcock the victim and flagbearer of American film's taste for vicarious violence, melodramatic fear, and fantastically reality. We know the legend that Hitchcock expanded in Hollywood because of the greater technical resources and the more polished pursuit of craft. But I think he also flourished because the American climate was so indifferent to daily realities—indeed, worked with the marketing policy of distracting audiences from them. Not only was the dream more persuasively fabricated in America. Its cultural role was more established than it has ever been in Britain, where common sense has always impeded movies.

But, of course, that is only another way of measuring Hitchcock's modest ambition as an artist. Neither the use of the Statue of Liberty in *Saboteur* nor the lucky allusion to the atom bomb in *Notorious* suggests that Hitchcock has known or cared about what is going on in the

world. His sense of place is rooted in tourist postcards, back projection, storyboard sketches. His characters are uncritically indebted to clichés, with this one reservation: he has taken creative pleasure in undermining certain glossy or comfortable images (James Stewart in *Vertigo*, Cary Grant in *Notorious* and *North by Northwest*). The use of Freud in *Marnie* is as half-baked as the ecological dismay in *The Birds*. In every case but *Vertigo*, Hitchcock's use of mental disturbance has been lurid and ill-informed. Of course, *Psycho* works as a roller-coaster. But who can miss its bland wish to make a box-office shocker out of exploited psychological material?

**T**here is one character in a Hitchcock film who intriguingly embodies the director's alienation from reality: Robert Walker's Bruno Anthony in *Strangers on a Train*. Historically, that film has been used in the critical approach that believes in Hitchcock's concern with moral ambiguity and infectious culpability. That interpretation says that Bruno and Guy need one another, that Guy's dilemma benefits from Bruno's irresponsible energy just as Bruno's outcast state yearns for Guy's respectable achievement.

But even if you allow for the superb coup in which Guy moves behind the railings beside Bruno, any metaphysical association of the strangers is made tenuous by Hitchcock's reluctance to give them an equal reality in our minds. Casting has something to do with this. Robert Walker is on the wing with scandalous, camp zest; Farley Granger is beyond attentiveness. We all know Hitchcock's caustic definition of actors, but we seldom wonder if that was a sign of his being so uneasy with them that he tried to intimidate. I suspect that *Strangers* benefits from the resentful spite of Robert Walker, just as *Psycho* gained some of its poignancy from Anthony Perkins' dainty self-pity. There is no proof of that, and no sure way of arguing that any performances are outside a director's control. But Robert Walker has an instinct for Bruno's unstable caprice that seems more than Hitchcock's wish to understand.

It produces a special tension and amorality in the finished picture between action and imagination. The meeting on the train has no semblance of chance because the manner of the film is so grindingly fateful that it sees criss-cross wherever it looks. It is as if Bruno were directing the movie, confident that his

schemes can suppress the world of reason and action that he claims to admire in Guy, the tennis player. Any pattern of order or purpose in a film wins adherence from the audience; we want it to be About Something, even as C.F. Kane hoped "rosebud" would solve his life.

Thus the underlying affinity of the film's wicked drive and Bruno's demented vision easily turns Guy into a stooge. It is not just Farley Granger's petulance, but Hitchcock's arrangement of the trap, that puts us on the unwholesome side of Bruno. It's more than a reversal of moral order; it's a way of making us believe in secret design at the expense of external reality. By the time the train sequence is over, we see crosses, too: we have no difficulty in finding the "hidden" cross at the Medford depot, and no sense of having surrendered reality in the process. We are enlisted. Our vicarious adventurousness has been separated from conscience or responsibility. We have become Bruno—and, like, him, we regard the world as a backdrop, and other people as instruments in our dream.

I don't believe Hitchcock is aware of the alliance, but the film assists Bruno's madness. Something like this occurs in *Psycho*, but there the victimization of Janet Leigh does provide a focus for outrage. In *Strangers*, only the deserving are killed. The future of love and happiness that Guy is being denied is a hollow sham. Hitchcock never makes us believe in or want it, and in none of his films is *Happily Ever After* more than a perfunctory, sour way of ending. The dignity of ordinary lives—the heart and soul of Renoir, Ozu, Mizoguchi, Rossellini—is a closed book to Hitchcock. Domesticity horrifies him, and is invariably a pretext for macabre comedy or secret viciousness. That is why Bruno is so apt and unwitting a portrait of the director. Bruno has no real life: even the parents we see could be figments of his mania. He is a man of ideas, envious of doers and blithely unconscious that his elegant plans inflicted a monstrous, prettified destruction on others.

Bruno puts people through it, just as Hitchcock once confessed he thought of audiences. Bruno is the motor for the film. Its own delight in fastidious precision can never rise above his childish sense of perfection. His plan becomes our way of watching. Miriam, Guy's wife, is a viper egging on her own death, and just one example of the Hitchcock films' tight-lipped fear and loathing of women. We sneer and snarl at her vain flirtations as Bruno follows her. He



comes up on her blind side, but always holds the most advantageous ground as far as the camera is concerned. It knows where he is, because it is under his psychic orders. When Bruno bursts the little boy's balloon, our cheers free him from any moral restraint. We expect him to kill; we have digested the destiny of the film's style. A boat called Pluto, the shadows on the wall in the tunnel of love, the delicious delay—all are private jokes between the film and its audience. That is why, when Bruno throttles Miriam, he tenderly hands the body down to us as our prize. We are as convinced by de-  
rangement as he is; we share in the act and the loss of reality that allows it. The real complicity in *Strangers on a Train* is not between Guy and Bruno. Guy is a minor item in a satanic proof. The true passion of identity and understanding is between the film's form and our willing support.

The eventual shower slaughter in *Psycho* is also a rape to satisfy the repeatedly frustrated sexual longing that the film aims at Janet Leigh. She is so often alone, but for our eyes, that the movie encourages a mood of paranoid horniness. She dresses and undresses so often, she commits a crime that permits us to treat her as a kind of surrogate whore—she earns our lust and provokes the knife. The cunning of the process is unquestionable. But it disregards any real life for Janet Leigh's character, and it only embroils us in the lunging attack of a sex maniac, sacrificing its own potential subject of one personality overwhelmed by another. We are the accomplices of Norman Bates, but the movie recklessly confuses voyeurist sensationalism with its panorama of health and madness. In the end, *Psycho* is just the cocky leer of evil genius flaunting tragic material but never brave enough to explore it.

If you can contemplate that interpretation of *Strangers* and *Psycho*, it does demand a very serious question of Hitchcock's self-awareness. What I am suggesting is a heathless or pusillanimous endorsement of evil, if the trick is thoroughly understood. But Hitchcock's face stays starchy, and I do not give him credit for Bruno as a significant diagram of film's separation of the world from fantastic thought. That is where *Rear Window* is so crucial. Only in the critics' minds is it a testament to film's insidious force. Hitchcock himself is too timid, too complacent, or too unambitious to grasp the meaning that a few people have felt. He is too professional to insist on our noticing the ugliness in our response to

film. So he concentrates on box office and purity and the smirking condescension that despises people. An adolescent tidiness settles over most of his films to save any risk of exposure.

*Rear Window* cannot begin to probe James Stewart's character because it has no interest in Raymond Burr's. It cannot handle motive or responsibility because its view of the world is so timid. Hitchcock is committed to withdrawal: he makes the bomb but abdicates from its use; he puts the audience through it as a torturer, not a moral scientist or a teacher. His endings warn against participation: *Strangers on a Train* has an innocent inquiry cut off; *Psycho* says never drive off alone, never stop at the motel, never take a shower; *North by Northwest* is a screwball horror story about the perils of mistaken identity (the light obverse of *The Wrong Man*); *Vertigo* shows how disastrous love and dedication are; *Rear Window* tells you to keep the drapes

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pulled (a very English sensibility); *The Birds* advises frozen sobriety lest the balance of nature be upset; *Marnie* is about a numb woman who clings to her childhood damage as an alternative to behaving like a grown-up. It is the terrible isolation that trusts no one, but believes superstitiously in a rigged fate, bad seed, and warped nature. It is the gloomy nervousness that allows police states, that stays at home, tends the garden, and goes to bed early.

That stance encourages many teachers to use Hitchcock as a way of showing students how film works. His detailed gathering together of films is intimately tied to the nature and devices of the medium—what Hitchcock would call “pure film.” But he is the worst example to take because he proposes the irrelevance of theme or content. It ought to be a matter of doctrinal basis that film needs the ragged flux of reasons and actions that Renoir tries to keep in one fraught shot.

The most baleful aspect of Hitchcock is the dogged discipline that everything must be fitted together and that any detail can be isolated. It needs a slave to watch all those ordained movements and oblique angles without detecting a fear of life, of spontaneity, and of the viewer's free mind.

Hitchcock has deplored the withering tedium of shooting. We know how meticulously preconceived his pictures are. I am not asserting that is the “wrong” way to make films; it is after all, akin to the way of Bresson, Ophuls, and Lang. But I am arguing that Hitchcock's defects as an artist—omissions of intelligence, doubt, and humanity—are the direct consequences of his way of working. We may feel that Hitchcock is a graphic artist with as much instinct for anxiety as Edvard Munch has. But that reference only exposes the lack of pity in the films. Tragedy is so protected against in Hitchcock that the anxiety becomes a fetish. *Vertigo* does possess an authentic depth of pain. Yet sadly, the director is unwilling to re-release one of his largest “flops” without a substantial guarantee. *The Wrong Man* does have that mysterious extra pathos of the lawyer's ineptness and the wife's breakdown. It is the one Hitchcock film that admits an order above and beyond the master's design.

But the bulk of his work only illustrates the smallness of mastery. The movies can be more than the whiplash of superiority and domineering mistrust. When we appraise the overall achievement, we should remember the alarming taste for cinema that totalitarians have displayed. This last verdict from Hitchcock is the more disconcerting if one thinks of the enthusiasm that Lenin, Mussolini, and Goebbels had for man's emotion and moving pictures.

**Truffaut:** Would you say that *Psycho* is an experimental film?

**Hitchcock:** Possibly. My main satisfaction is that the film had an effect on the audiences, and I consider that very important. I don't care about the subject-matter: I don't care about the acting; but I do care about the pieces of film and the photography and the sound-track and all the technical ingredients that made the audience scream. I feel it's tremendously satisfying for us to be able to use the cinematic art to achieve something of a mass emotion. And with *Psycho* we most definitely achieved this. It wasn't a message that stirred the audiences, nor was it a great performance or their enjoyment of the novel. They were aroused by pure film. ☼