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Hitchcock's World

***Is Hitchcock really the master metaphysician of the screen portrayed in such works as Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol's* HITCHCOCK?**
We present here a vehement dissenting view.

Le cinéma, ce n'est pas une tranche de vie, mais une tranche de gateau. . . . This comment of Alfred Hitchcock's from a conversation with Jean Domarchi and Jean Douchet (*Cahiers du Cinéma,* December, 1959) crystallizes the director's attitude to the medium in which he has worked for almost 40 years. At heart, he has remained a practical joker, a cunning and sophisticated cynic amused at the French critical vogue for his work, contemptuous of the audience which he treats as the collective victim of a Pavlovian experiment, perennially fascinated by his own ability to exploit the cinema's resources. His narcissism and its concomitant coldness have damaged those films whose themes have called for warmly sympathetic treatment: *The Ring, I Confess,* and *The Wrong Man* are obvious examples of stories which, demanding humanism, have been treated wth a heartless artificiality.

Above: Hitchcock (dark suit) shooting PSYCHO.

The mechanics of creating terror and amusement in an audience are all Hitchcock properly understands. The portrayal of physical or intellectual passion is beyond him, and he has never directed a sexual encounter with the slightest perceptiveness. He either exploits his performers, or mocks them, or both—certain mannerisms are seized on and used merely to create a reliable response in the spectator. Occasional efforts to extend his range, to probe below the surface of a theme, have failed.

Hitchcock's much-discussed ability to use the revelatory personal gestures of a character is most strikingly displayed when he has a destructive comment to make. In *Rebecca,* the predatory American tourist squashes her cigarette in a tub of cold cream; in *To Catch a Thief* a similar lady thrusts her stub into the gleaming yellow eye of a fried egg; in *The Paradine Case* the English judge Lord Horfield's lecherous gaze pounces in subjective camera on a woman's white shoulder; in the party sequence of *Notorious,* someone leaves an empty whisky glass perched on a prone woman's breastbone. Conversely, when the script is saying something quasiserious, the director withdraws with a yawn: Walter Slezak in *Lifeboat,* James Stewart in *Rope,* Joel McCrea in *Foreign Correspondent* can utter their Fascist, anti-Nietzsche or patriotic speeches if they like, but Hitchcock is waiting to juggle the next lens.

Contemporary critics strive to convince us that a severely admonitory attitude to Hitchcock's work is misplaced. They refer chiefly to those who denounce him as a sadist doing moral damage to his audience. His defenders feel that an onslaught on the director along this line is merely puritanical and purse-lipped, that his films are simply there to be enjoyed, guiltily or not according to the state of one's psyche. Hitchcock, of course, remains amused by this controversy and beyond it.

I believe that an understanding of Hitchcock's *oeuvre* can only be reached when it is seen in the hard, unwavering light of this commercial-minded philistinism. He remains at heart a cheerful London showman with a tough contempt for the world he has made his oyster. Discussion of metaphysics in his work seems to me ludicrous, especially so in the various articles published in *Cahiers du Cinéma;* his own answers to questions put to him in the *entretiens* which have appeared in that magazine should clarify for the doubtful his amusement at the earnest French enquirers. He has simply taken the most dynamic popular art form of the twentieth century, toyed with it, and dared to explode some of the central myths it has established.

Where he has been most skilful of all is in his grasp of what can move the masses without fail. His pitiless mockery of human susceptibilities springs from a belief in the essential absurdity of those susceptibilities. It is not a gentle mockery. We know, for instance, the response that the sight of a child or dog in danger can evoke even in the most brutally sophisticated people. No one save Hitchcock would dare to turn this natural responsiveness to his own adventage. In *Sabotage* (1936), the boy Steve Verloc carries a can of film, neatly wrapped by his sister Sylvia, from the flat above the cinema where he lives into a bus headed for Piccadilly Circus. The tension is achieved, predictably, by keeping the audience guessing about the exact moment a bomb contained in the can will go off. Any competent director could have managed this. But, as Desmond Tester (who played Steve Verloc), reminded me recently, Hitchcock was afraid that the boy's danger alone might not be enough to disturb the audience. So he gave the old lady sitting next to him a puppy to play with, concentrating on its gambollings until the exact moment of the explosion. The introduction of the puppy constitutes the Hitchcock touch.

In *Secret Agent* (1935) Hitchcock had shown a dog frantically barking in a closed room as its master goes to his death on a mountainside miles away; here again, the effect is exactly calculated, the audience's reflexes understood. Now that audiences have grown

more cynical themselves, he has been able to exploit more cruel impulses: in *Psycho* (1960) the plunging of a knife blade into a woman's nude body in a shower is deliberately made to represent the thrustings of the sexual act, so as to unleash the repressed libidinous sadism of large numbers of spectators. In nearly every case, the effect has come off so strikingly that even the most detached critic is bound to be engaged. Hitchcock's mastery of the medium is never more sharply expressed than in those sequences where he wants to make us release our repressions vicariously as he has released his cinematically.

The skill with which he has engineered the mechanism of his films has varied sharply from work to work, but in those films dominated by morbidity, physical disgust, and terror his gifts have usually been in striking display. *The Lodger, The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934 version), *Sabotage, Foreign Correspondent, Rope, Strangers on a Train* and *Vertigo* remain, in my view, his finest achievements in the medium. Whatever one might think of their internal rottenness and viciousness, their deliberate pandering to mob lust, they brilliantly succeed as cinema, and are conceived, executed and embellished by a dazzlingly clever mind.

Over the years, Hitchcock has gradually developed his technique of designing the production in advance, blueprinting each scene so that it is, in effect, edited before it is shot. His last three productions were worked on in great detail by Saul Bass, whose mocking, superficial brilliance seems exactly to fit with Hitchcock's own. This method of preplanning the entire production means that the actors ("cattle" has been Hitchcock's word for them) simply serve as pawns in a game played with the audience. This is very well when they have to be nothing more than acceptable props, but when they are called upon to express passion or terror the effect is numbingly mechanical. The love scenes Hitchcock so elaborately shoots, usually set in "high life" for the hicks to goggle at, are invariably sexless, antiseptic, and rather nauseatingly cold: the much-quoted ear-lobe feast in *Notorious* with Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman necking against a cynically clumsy backdrop of Rio de Janeiro; the flaccid grapplings of James Stewart and Kim Novak, mounted, we are told, on a revolving platform; the dumb connexions of Wilding and Bergman in *Under Capricorn*—all show an interest merely in camera manipulation. He is more at home with people who show no visible evidence of sexuality at all: notably an array of dead, middle-aged Englishmen and Americans who come on and off the chalk-line in successive films to commit murders or shudder obediently in moments of disaster. And the perverted also fascinate him: one recalls the Lesbian housekeeper Mrs. Danvers in *Rebecca,* caressing the transparent nightdresses of her dead mistress, and a succession of homosexuals, ranging from Peter Lorre's tittering assassin in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* to Leonard, the obedient and clinging secretary of *North by Northwest*'s smooth master-mind.

The numb hero and heroine, the sexless but useful character players, and the parade of sexually twisted oddballs in Hitchcock's films are, more often than not, engaged in a chase, and it is in the chase that he has found his central dynamic. To ensure universality, he has

"Libidinous sadism"—Grace Kelly does in Anthony Dawson as he tries to kill her, in DIAL "M" FOR MURDER.

seized on monuments everyone can recognize and to set his characters in motion across them —the British Museum, the Statue of Liberty, Gutson Borglum's sculptured heads of the presidents at Mount Rushmore. The combination of *National Geographic Magazine* and *True Detective* audience appeal is smartly managed.

Sometimes, of course, the chase runs below the surface of the work, rather than physically disclosing itself in the action: in *Vertigo*, for instance, and in *The Paradine Case*, the search for the true identity of a mysterious woman. Sometimes the chase is the director's own: he is trying to discover the way people die, or the way they react to danger. The observation, the degree of understanding, is adolescent, but the chasing after facts about modes of behavior is adult, similar to a novelist's insatiable curiosity.

What makes Hitchcock especially fascinating is that, by dealing with the studio bosses on the terms they understand, making money for them, he has now reached a point of freedom usually possessed only by those working outside the commercial cinema. *Psycho*, for instance, is a very free film indeed, not merely a commercial exploitation of a theme, but a personal work of genuine if unpleasant self-expression. The obvious analogy is with the films of Kenneth Anger, which express without restraint the homosexual vision of life and death. In Hollywood, this degree of freedom has been accorded to few, and usually only to those whose rather sickly brand of humanism has corresponded with that which is assumed cynically by the director's employers. John Ford's deliberate romanticizing of the harsh, ugly, and vicious history of the West has served both to deceive more than one generation of children and to display his own incorrigibly juvenile and sentimental mind.

William Wyler's middle-class, middle-brow values have always been respected by the toughest tycoons. Zinnemann's liberalism, too, has found a ready ear among the illiberal, the enemies of liberty. Only Billy Wilder, nihilistic, brilliantly vicious, and destructive, has managed, like Hitchcock, to get away with the expression of a cynicism rarely, in Hollywood, carried beyond the conference room. Still "box-office," and therefore still safe from interference, Wilder and Hitchcock can explore their worlds without fear of compromise or restraint.

II

In the films Hitchcock made during the silent period, there is an obvious impatience with the tired Shaftesbury Avenue conventions of the time. "Love" scenes are done with bored contempt, matinee idols and limp British leading ladies cast in the film because of studio requirements, are barely directed at all. The scripts (mostly written by Eliot Stannard or Hitchcock himself) seem merely to provide opportunities for camera display. He established a style by adapting the German technique of releasing the camera in the action, using heavily shadowed photography for melodramatic scenes, heightening the key for love scenes or comedy. Although his films of the early period have been praised for realism, they are in fact highly stylized, almost abstract in design, while the playing throughout is deliberately theatrical. Hitchcock takes his camera into seedy rooms, alleys, grubby theaters, but never attempts to make these places look like the real thing. Rather, he makes over a highly artificial and impressionist version of London or the English countryside into his own dream-image, as, during the sound period, he was to do with many countries from Switzerland to Australia.

Sometimes the style is so elaborate, so exhibitionistic, that it destroys, rather than enhances, the dramatic content. In *The Ring* (1927), a story about the infidelity of a boxer's wife, the theme would have excited another writer-director to provide a moving study of human fallibility. Hitchcock simply used the plot-line to excuse a stunning display of technical virtuosity. The technique is the opposite

of, say, Pabst's: the camera is used to play with, not explore in depth, the characters and their relationships. The whole film is a heartless *jeu d'esprit* beginning with a maliciously observed fairground sequence, in which the primitive performers are mocked; proceeding to the scenes of the wife's abandoning of her husband, who sees her frantic Charleston framed in a mirror at a party; and finally erupting into a dizzying Albert Hall boxing match, the wife's face reflected in a pail of water, the crowd swimming in a dazzle of arc-lights.

It's clever, but we don't care—and at times the virtuosity becomes ludicrous. The heroine is told by a gypsy she must return to her true love, and the camera travels along the fortune-teller's arm to disclose a king of hearts clutched firmly in her palm. The final scene at the Albert Hall, entertaining at first, gets out of hand as the hero lurches in a punch-drunk stupor, the lights swimming in triplicate in his rheumy eyes.

Champagne (1928) is also a series of set-pieces, some of them striking in themselves. The opening is very enjoyable: a slow fade-in through a champagne glass of a ship's first-class saloon, the passengers applauding a team of acrobatic dancers; then a daring series of shots as a plane flies past to salute the vessel, the passengers swarming out on deck like a disturbed colony of ants. Later, the hero's seasickness is amusingly exploited, his eyes blurring as the subjective camera explores a plate heaped with rich food; the heroine seen in triplicate as the hero greets her in his cabin. Devoid of tenderness, the love scenes are done with cynical smartness, or simply tossed away.

The Lodger (1926) remains the best of Hitchcock's silent films. Its reputation, thoroughly deserved, has remained intact because in it the soulless mechanism works perfectly, the detachment and coldness suit the subject—a straight murder story—and the setting, London, lends itself perfectly to bizarre stylization. The sexlessness of all the scenes involving the hero and heroine is less offensive when passion is not, as it purported to be in *The Ring* and *Champagne*, the central theme.

The Lodger opens with a killer loose in the London fog; the police are baffled, and all they know is that the murders take place on Tuesdays, and that blondes are the only victims. A white hand slides down a banister rail above a deep, sinister stairwell; a tall figure moves out into the night; news placards announce the killings; at a pie-stall, someone looms up, frightening the bunch of Cockneys—he's pretending to be the killer. In a vaudeville theater, there's a gaggle of blonde chorus girls: one pulls off her wig to disclose a brunette Eton crop, telling her friends with a laugh that *she* will be safe; a natural blonde announces she will wear a brunette wig home. Captions interlace the sequence, the letters printed at eccentric angles and in varying sizes: *Tonight golden curls.* This looks very much like a Hitchcock joke, used to parody the Eisenstein technique of making the titles part of the cumulative rhythm of a sequence (cf. *Battleship Potemkin*). At the very end of the film, he turns the tables on the critics, who have probably been thinking that the phrase *Tonight golden curls* is meant to symbolize the killer's thoughts as he wanders the street. When the detective and his girl go into a final clinch, the camera moves out of the window to disclose lights flashing the phrase, which is now revealed as a slogan for a peroxide advertisement.

Several sequences are charged with a peculiarly Hitchcockian irony, notably the arrival of the suspect Jonathan Drew (wanly played by Ivor Novello) at the boarding-house, looking at the portraits of four blonde calendar girls on the walls. When he asks for the portraits to be removed, the suggestion is that he is stricken with conscience, or that the reason for his killings may be a fanatical loathing of blondes. Later, it emerges that the pictures remind him of his sister, who was murdered during a dance in a way which foreshadows the famous opening assassination scene of the 1943 *Man Who Knew Too Much.*

The faultiness of the Hitchcock method is shown in one brief scene when the suspect is pursued by the mob until he hangs helplessly on a railing by his handcuffs. On paper, this must have looked exciting: the terrified youth fleeing his pursuers in the writhing fog, the helplessness of impalement, and then the horror of a mindless crowd beating an innocent victim. But Hitchcock's total lack of sympathy, his cynical use of rather scrappy editing to bring off a tried-and-true effect, ruins the scene. There is no sense of involvement, and the sight of about 200 extras rather feebly pummelling the boy's by no means robust physique excites nothing but mirth. It isn't a failure of technique (though the sequence isn't very well assembled) so much as a failure of intensity, of concern for those involved in a very probable situation.

Blackmail (1929) reveals all the faults of *The Lodger* with none of its virtues. The story is full of possibilities for profound and imaginative observation of a human being under stress. Alice White (poorly played by Anny Ondra), stabs an artist who tries to seduce her, and is haunted by a blackmailer, Tracy (Donald Calthorp) who tries to extract money from her detective boyfriend. The murder, the subsequent terror of the girl, the detective's agonized crisis of conscience (duty or love) all seem promising material for melodrama. The film's enormous reputation probably springs from its inventive use of sound—the word *knife* echoing in the frightened girl's brain at the breakfast table, the loud clang of a doorbell, voices and telephones chiming during a *montage* sequence. Yet seen today, in both sound and silent versions, it appears a flat and tired performance, the camerawork static, the acting (except for Calthorp's) little better than amateurish.

The all-important murder sequence is badly fluffed: the camera completely fails to probe the terror, ugliness, and misery of the situation, and the subsequent blackmailing and chase are handled without the slightest sense of involvement. Only in one or two individual shots—the blackmailer slipping down a chain past a massive Egyptian head, the mocking portrait of a clown darting out of a canvas to frighten the heroine—is Hitchcock's hand shown, though the bantering or bored attitude to the romantic episodes is characteristic. The film is dead inside, and, *pace* the critics of the day, it doesn't really succeed in breaking (as *The Lodger* to some extent did) with the frigid British film conventions of the 1920's.

Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine in REBECCA.

III

Blackmail bridges Hitchcock's work in the silent and sound period. *Juno and the Paycock* (1930), an efficient but rather flavorless version of Sean O'Casey's play, was followed by the gimmicky but insipid *Murder* (1930), *The Skin Game* (1931) from a Galsworthy play, *Rich and Strange* (1932), *Number Seventeen* (1932), and *Waltzes from Vienna* (1933). A poor batch: but Hitchcock brilliantly recovered in 1934 with *The Man Who Knew Too Much,* co-produced, like most of his most interesting films of the next few years, with Ivor Montagu.

The Man Who Knew Too Much opens with a fine virtuoso flourish: the murder of a secret agent (Pierre Fresnay) as he dances with the

tweedy British housewife (Edna Best) in a Swiss hotel. A brief shot of a ski-run; a man on skis with the smile wiped from his face; a bullet hole neatly drilled in one of the huge glass windowpanes of the ballroom. Fingers neatly circle the hole as they point at it; a sinister little man (Peter Lorre) emerges from the half-giggling, half-startled crowd, and Fresnay goes pale. The bullet has found its mark: as Fresnay dies, he tells his companion where she can find a note that has to be passed on to the authorities. Before she can do anything, her daughter is kidnapped, and the film develops through a frantic pursuit of Lorre and his gang.

Together with *Foreign Correspondent*, *Vertigo*, and *North by Northwest*, this remains Hitchcock's most brilliantly executed chase story. Several sequences have become justly famous among enthusiasts: a visit to an even more than usually evil dentist, preceded by a waiting-room scene in which seedy faces and old numbers of *Punch* have a horrible reality (most people's horror of dentistry is cleverly exploited); the assassination in the Albert Hall, built up in a flurry of cross-cutting from the bulging curtain and the protuberant revolver to the fatuously complacent diplomat, the gun shot timed to the clashing of a pair of outsize cymbals; and most striking of all, the final showdown which recreates the Sidney Street siege. The onslaught on the house has several good touches: as police tip a girl out of bed to use her mattress as a shield, they make nervous English sex jokes; and one man says that his wife will not approve if she hears about it, and at that moment a bullet kills him. Later when a piano is turned into a barricade, a squalid little clerk looks on nervously, afraid his bowl of aspidistras will be shattered.

Peter Lorre's Abbot, the criminal mastermind behind the gang, is a wonderfully detailed creation, effeminate and cruel, the huge fish-eyes humorlessly fixed and dead as the lips part for an hysterical girlish giggle, the plump fingers forever playing with a silly chiming turnip-watch. A sprinkling of homosexuals in the cast and the obvious fascination with seedy London backwaters also show the Hitchcock touch, and the observation of crowds, especially the congregation in the chapel used as a headquarters by the gang, is as cynical as usual.

The Thirty-Nine Steps (1935), despite its reputation, does not stand up nearly so well to close inspection today. The celebrated sequences—the mysterious woman (Lucy Mannheim) staggering into the hero's room with a knife in her back crying "Get out or they'll get you too!", the scene in the crofter's cottage in the Highlands, the last showdown in a music-hall involving a seedy Memory Man—are all done on a level of routine efficiency, without much flair. *Secret Agent* (1936) obviously engaged the director's imagination far more completely, and the fantastically involved plot, foreshadowing that of the more brilliant *Foreign Correspondent*, contained countless opportunities for gleeful sadism and cold, brutal mockery of human beings under stress. The story, almost impossible to synopsize, takes Ashenden, a novelist disguised as special agent, to Geneva accompanied by a charming killer The Mexican (brilliantly played by Peter Lorre). Grossly simplified, the next part of the story unites Ashenden (John Gielgud) and Elsa, another agent (Madeleine Carroll) in murdering the wrong man, whom they take to be a German spy. At the end of the film, they locate the real spy, who has posed as a charming American (Robert Young).

Wonderfully fast-moving and loaded with suspense and clever twists, *Secret Agent* is only slightly handicapped by the weak technique of British films of the time. The opening is justly famous: the fake funeral of the novelist Edgar Brodie, whose identity is to be concealed in that of Ashenden. It was a master-stroke to set the funeral during a bombing of London, the camera deliberately settling on a man's stub arm as he lights his cigarette cynically, from one of the funerary candles, with his one hand.

The murder of the wrong man by The Mexican is no less well staged: the victim's dog

yapping in the room miles away, Ashenden watching through the telescope sights, yelling a futile "Look out!" at the tiny figures far away on the mountainside. And above all there's the scene, so often critically referred to, but still fresh, in which The Mexican and Ashenden visit the church, hearing the high single whine of an organ note, entering the apse to find the dead man slumped over the instrument, his finger pressing one of the keys. . . .

Sabotage (1936) again showed the director at the height of his powers. The opening establishes a seedy and grubby little East End fleapit, the saboteur Verloc (Oscar Homolka) returning home after trying to get sand into the Battersea generators, washing the sand down the kitchen basin before his wife can notice it; the organizers of the sabotage attempt discover Verloc's failure and order him to plant a bomb in the Piccadilly Circus underground station cloakroom, concealing the bomb in a can of film. The sequence I've already referred to in which Steve Verloc (Desmond Tester) is delayed by the Lord Mayor's procession while carrying deadly freight entrusted to him, is directed with ferocious assurance, and Tester still recalls the relish with which Hitchcock handled it. At one moment, a toothpaste demonstrator insists on subjecting the boy to a furious tooth-scrubbing ordeal, and apparently the director couldn't tear himself away from the shot of the boy squirming in the chair.

The murder of Verloc by his wife after she discovers that he has been responsible for her brother's death is one of the three or four most impressive set-pieces in the Hitchcock repertoire. For once the method of blueprinting the sequence in advance works admirably. The sequence begins on a note of drab domesticity: the couple in the cramped kitchen, the husband grousing about the damp pile of greens on his plate. The editing is built up in the Griffith manner, as the woman struggles to keep herself from committing the murder, dropping the knife only to pick it up again when more meat has to be served. Her hands open and shut on the knife; the husband rises, a look of death on his face; he crosses past the camera and makes a sudden grab at the knife handle. The locked hands fill the frame; a cry, and he falls. Shot almost without dialogue, the scene has been conceived in terms of silent cinema; today, probably, Hitchcock would make more play with music and the incidental sounds of the room—the squeak of a chair, the click of the knife on the plate.

Young and Innocent (1937) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) are simple chase stories, lightly and quite cleverly done, but too artificially propped up with theatrical "characters" in the cast. One recalls them chiefly for the individual "turns" of seasoned actors and actresses: Mary Clare presiding over a sinister children's party in *Young and Innocent* or glowering through sinister pebble glasses in *The Lady Vanishes;* Catherine Lacey as the "nun" with the huge, haunted eyes in the latter film. But both films date badly, and technically don't really measure up to Hitchcock's best works of the period.

After a routine barnstormer *Jamaica Inn* (1939), Hitchcock moved to Hollywood the same year. *Rebecca,* made for Selznick in 1940, looks surprisingly good today, and despite its falsity and women's-magazine values, it's a neatly concocted romantic farrago. There is little of Hitchcock in it, except for his loving emphasis on the housekeeper's infatuation for her dead mistress, and the obvious relishing of Florence Bates's superbly vulgar American tourist, Mrs. Van Hopper. As usual, the "love affair" that provides the pivot for the farrago is handled with cold boredom, and appropriately played by Joan Fontaine and Laurence Olivier.

Foreign Correspondent (1940) remains one of Hitchcock's masterpieces. Several sequences are stunningly pulled off, especially the assassination in the rain, all popping flashbulbs, startled faces, and swarming umbrellas; the superbly recorded episode in the windmill, with the hero listening desperately to the agents' guttural, low-pitched conversation in a lan-

guage he doesn't understand; the torturing of the diplomat in Tottenham Court Road; and most dazzling of all, the clipper disaster in the last reel, again recorded with magnificent artistry by Frank Mayer. The sense of involvement as the clipper loses altitude, the passengers are flung into startled heaps, and the sea finally rushes in, is superbly managed. In particular, one recalls a single shot (over in the fraction of a second), in which three victims of the crash are drowned as the water moves up over their heads to the cabin roof.

After two insipid films, *Suspicion* and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith,* and a badly mishandled attempt to recapture the *Secret Agent* flavor in *Saboteur* (Hitchcock admits that was one of his failures), the director returned to form with *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) which, until it collapses in the last two reels, has an admirable fluency, pace, and freshness of observation. Charlie Oakley (Joseph Cotten) is an American Landru who murders women for their money; dodging the police, he hides with his unsuspecting sister Emma (exquisitely played by Patricia Collinge) and her family in Santa Rosa, a small California town. The rest of the footage is taken up with his niece's realization that Uncle Charlie is a killer, and a final showdown on a train (clumsily done) in which Charlie falls to his death.

Behind the credits, long-skirted figures swish to the tune of the Merry Widow Waltz, which later acts as a sinister refrain in Dmitri Tiomkin's score (this is probably Hitchcock's first dramatic use of music). The small-town background and family scenes are observed with amused but disagreeable detachment, especially the behavior of the Oakley's little pebble-glassed brat, who reminds me of a younger Pat Hitchcock in *Strangers on a Train.* The uneasy, elliptical, half-affectionate relationship between Charlie and his relatives has been beautifully realized, partly through the dialogue (in which Thornton Wilder significantly had a hand), partly through the unusually detailed handling of the cast.

The establishing shots of *Lifeboat* (1943) show a freighter's smokestack disappearing in oily water, a crate of oranges bobbing, a copy of *The New Yorker* with the celebrated top-hatted man on the cover, a sprinkle of dollar bills, a deck of cards fanning out (was it a royal flush, like the one Hitchcock in person displayed in the final sequences of *Shadow of a Doubt?*). In a lifeboat, with a corpse floating past in the mist, perches the elegant stranded journalist Mrs. Porter (Tallulah Bankhead). Unfortunately, the film doesn't live up to this jaded and elegant opening. It soon bogs down into routine melodrama, with a cast of characters, crudely "typed" in Jo Swerling's script, reacting predictably to storms, starvation, etc., in the studio tank.

Spellbound (1945) a pretentious botch, re-

"An enjoyably ridiculous spy story"— NOTORIOUS, *with Cary Grant, Madame Konstantin, Ingrid Bergman, Claude Rains.*

lieved only by the clever use of white bedspreads, tablecloths, a shaving-brush twisting in a mug to convey the tormented hero's obsession with whiteness, was followed by *Notorious* (1946) which, after a terrible first two reels, settled into an enjoyably ridiculous spy story. There is a particularly good scene in which the cuckolded husband of the heroine wakes his mother up in the morning to tell her his wife has been unfaithful to him: this is beautifully played by Claude Rains and Madame Konstantin (who doesn't seem to have appeared in any other film, more's the pity).

The Paradine Case (1947) and *Rope* (1948) don't seem to be very highly regarded critically (except, of course, in France) and one wonders why. They are among the most elegantly, intelligently made of all Hitchcock's films, and *Rope* may very well be, as he claims, his greatest technical *tour de force*. *The Paradine Case*, scripted with admirable literacy by David Selznick from Robert Hichens's novel, returns to the *Rebecca* mood, but with far greater intensity. The story—a beautiful and mysterious widow who has murdered her blind husband is defended by an infatuated barrister—is as novelettish as it sounds, but as usual with Hitchcock the plot is nothing, the exploitation of its visual possibilities everything. Throughout, Lee Garmes's camerawork is beautifully manipulated by the director, from the opening arrest of the doomed Mrs. Paradine through the stylized, Teutonic prison scenes to the trial scene at the end—perhaps the most brilliantly staged single set-piece of the film. One recalls especially the slow, circling movement that accompanies Mrs. Paradine almost everywhere, emphasizing the reptilian nature behind the perfect Madonna mask (Alida Valli's remarkable performance, icy on the surface yet suggesting the seething repressed passions inside, has never been properly assessed). And there are imaginative effects all the way through: a snatch of Annie Laurie echoing down a stone corridor as Mrs. Paradine's visitors arrive at the prison; jagged camera movements, accompanying the confrontation of the vicious servant Latour with the barrister in a country inn; the enormous slow tracking shot accompanying Latour's departure from the courtroom for the last time, Mrs. Paradine in the dock straining her ears for the last of his footfalls. Tom Morahan's sets and the delicately recorded sound-track owe much to Hitchcock's scrupulous control.

Farley Granger in STRANGERS ON A TRAIN.

Rope is also, for some reason, critically *un film maudit*, perhaps because of its abandoning of editing in the use of reel-long takes. Yet the sharply directed playing of the cast, the impeccably disciplined camerawork on one set, and the wonderfully sustained mood of tension and terror underlying the conventions of a late afternoon New York bachelor's party, all show the director at his best. The story, based on the Leopold–Loeb case, has two homosexuals, Brandon (John Dall) and Philip (Farley Granger) murdering a friend, David Kentley (Dick Hogan) and hiding him in the living-room chest, from which they serve dinner to his sometime girl-friend (Joan Chandler) and parents. There is a slight loosening-up of the film's taut structure towards the end, when the publisher, Rupert Cadell, over-played by James Stewart, decides to expose the killers after discovering what they've done, but up till the final reel the film has admirable sharpness, precision, and delicacy. The situation evidently appealed

Gregory Peck, Alida Valli: THE PARADINE CASE.

strongly to Hitchcock, with his passion for irony, and assisted by Arthur Laurents's sophisticated script, he extracts the utmost from it. The color photography (Joseph Valentine and William Skall) and the use of a marvelous process screen which charts the changing light from late afternoon to darkness, are admirable, and the players, especially Sir Cedric Hardwicke and Constance Collier as the dead boy's parents, play with great intelligence and style.

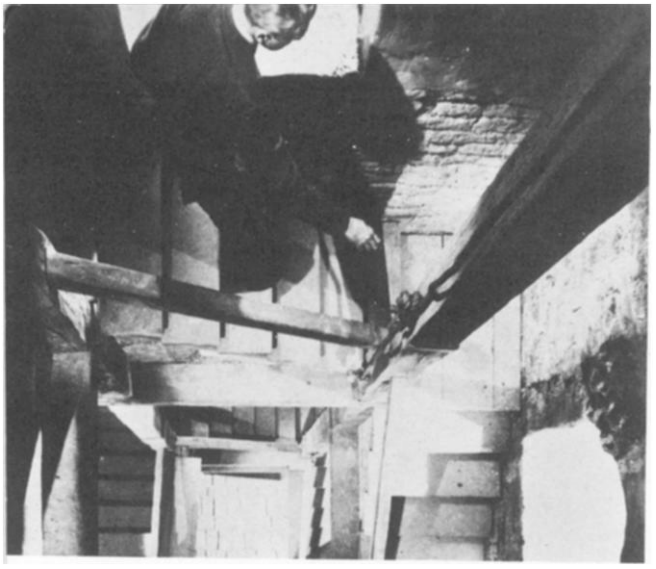
IV

It was clear, by 1948, that Hitchcock had matured enormously as a craftsman, and that he had far more interest in details of performances than in the 'thirties, where his actors (with odd exceptions like Peter Lorre and Mary Clare) were indifferent. His pace, handling of editing, had changed, and his films had grown more deliberate, more subtle.

In England and America, his critical reputation had come pretty low: most reviewers were nostalgic for *The Lady Vanishes* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, which were actually much inferior to *The Paradine Case* and *Rope* (though it is still sacrilege to say so), and didn't like the "new" Hitchcock with his elaborate technical effects and eschewing of rapid editing. I think, looking back on the reviews of that period, they were wrong, but unfortunately Hitchcock added fuel to their fire with almost all the films of the next few years, which suffered from slowness and deadness to a remarkable degree.

Few films of a major director can have been worse than *Under Capricorn* (1949), with its achingly dull long takes and flatulent playing by the entire cast, or *Stagefright* (1950), or *I Confess* (1953). Set respectively in Australia, England, and Canada, these tiresome farragos showed how incomparably cold and dead Hitchcock's films can be when they don't excite his imagination. Of his films of the 1950's, one passes over the long list of indifferent works with a shudder—*To Catch a Thief, The Trouble with Harry, The Wrong Man,* the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*—all of which showed Hitchcock's worst faults, archness, facetiousness, hollowness of content, at their most galling. *Dial M for Murder,* apart from the murder of the blackmailer (lovingly handled with a lingering close-up of scissors sinking into the victim's back) was conventional, and so was *Rear Window,* despite an undercurrent of rather repellent *voyeurism.* The remaining films of the period, *Strangers on a Train, Vertigo* and *North by Northwest,* deserve more serious and detailed analysis.

Strangers on a Train (1951) seems in retrospect like an oasis in the desert of Hitchcock's worst period in the sound era. It's closer, in its sophistication and ingenuity and (except intermittently) rather slow pace to the films of the very late 1950's than to those of 1950 and 1952. Like *Rope,* it deals with homosexuality —but in a far more flippant way: Bruno (Robert Walker), the simpering, girlish villain of the piece, is second cousin to the characters played by Peter Lorre in the films of the 1930's. The film opens with a famous sequence shot from ankle-level of two well-shod pairs of feet carrying their owners through a railroad station, onto a train and into a saloon-car, when the two men meet for the first time. The different walks—one brisk and athletic, the other loose and effeminate—are beautifully distinguished.



VERTIGO.

Later, Bruno makes a big play for Guy Haines, a tennis champion (Farley Granger), on the train journey between Washington and New York. Flattering, cajoling and batting his eyes, he suggests with a giggle that they exchange murders: Bruno is to kill Guy's rejected and spiteful wife in return for Guy murdering Bruno's father. Since neither will have a motive for the executions they perform, neither will be discovered by police.

The rest of the film shows Bruno's murdering Mrs. Haines after Guy scornfully rejects the arrangement, Bruno's desperate journey to the fairground island where he has killed her to plant Guy's cigarette lighter at the scene of the crime, and a final showdown on a carousel that has gone wildly out of control. Aside from some feeble sequences involving Guy and his girlfriend (Ruth Roman, whose performance was a decided liability) the film is one of the most sophisticated Hitchcock has made: a dazzle of cynical observation, ruthlessly cruel exposition of character, and glittering visual glamor.

The textbook sequences—the tennis match intercut with Bruno's journey to the murder scene, the murder itself, reflected in the dying girl's glasses—are deservedly renowned, but perhaps rather conventional; where the film more strikingly succeeds is in the treatment of silly, predatory, middle-aged women who seem to hold a special fascination for Hitchcock. Marion Lorne's performance as Bruno's mother —painting an inane daub, giggling and obsessive—is matched by that of Norma Varden as a monstrously infatuated party-goer, almost strangled by Bruno in a moment of accidentally induced rage (a bespectacled girl, played by Patricia Hitchcock, reminds him of his former victim). Robert Walker daringly plays Bruno, and there is an unforgettable display of nerves, nastiness, and edgy sensuality by Laura Elliott as the ill-fated Mrs. Haines.

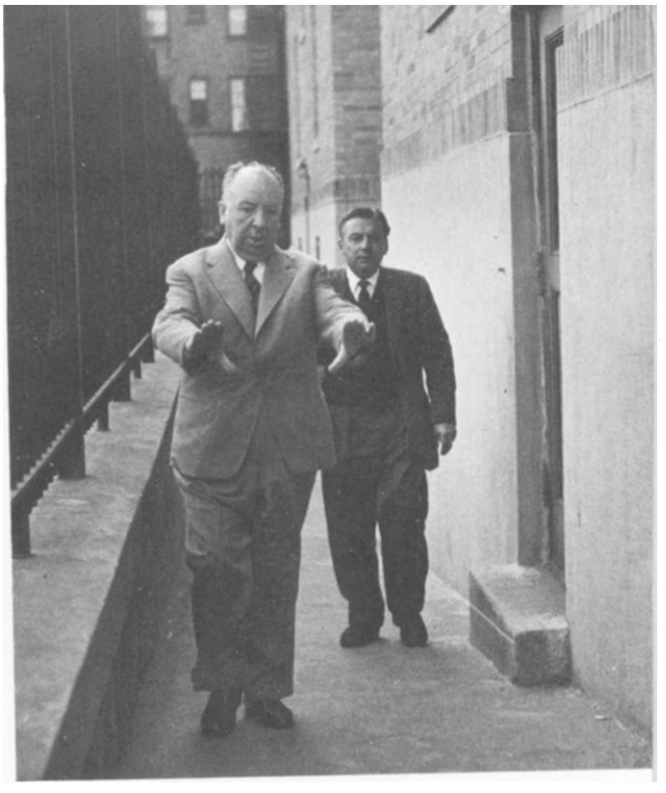
Vertigo (1958) has been unmercifully treated in the English-speaking world, its peculiar dreamlike pace and deliberate air of surreality completedly wasted on the majority of critics. Carefully examined, it shows a complete and exciting departure for the director, and the fantastically complex visual texture, owing much to Saul Bass (more than 780 separate shots were drawn up in advance) deserves full-scale examination on its own. In my view, Robert Burks's camerawork for the film represents one of the high water marks of color cinematography, others being George Berinal's work on *The Thief of Baghdad*, Jack Cardiff's on *Black Narcissus* and Charles G. Clarke's on the exquisite *Margie*, directed by Henry King.

The extremely complicated (and ultimately ridiculous) story of *Vertigo* involves a detective, Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) in a search for the vanished wife of a friend, Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore). He finds her, only to see her plunge to an inexplicable death from the bell tower of an old Spanish mission. Soon after, Ferguson meets another girl with an odd resemblance to the dead Madeleine, and the script springs its surprises from that moment on.

What Hitchcock manages (as often before) is a total suspension of disbelief in the impossible goings-on before one's eyes. Surrendered to, the film invades one's consciousness with rules of its own: this is one of those films

(Charles Vidor's *Gilda* was another) which completely creates a decadent, artificial world unrelated in any way to the real one. It has taken the French, not bound by the rule of thumb that judges a film by its verisimilitude, to see that the unreality of *Vertigo*, its free play with time and space, makes it a genuinely experimental film. It opens with a dream (after Saul Bass's breaktaking credits with their spirals and huge blue eye staring out) in which Scottie is clinging in terror to a gutter after a superbly managed chase across rooftops. His fear of heights, and the subsequent vertigo from which the film's drama springs, is conveyed with dazzling skill, and the music of Bernard Herrmann accompanies the sequence with fantastic virtuosity. The whole of the pursuit of the apparently resuscitated girl, across a graveyard, into an art museum, through a redwood forest, is shot with a marvelous and deliberately sustained air of fantasy. *Vertigo* is one of the peaks of Hitchcock's career, a film in which his coldness, his detachment, have found their perfect subject.

A Hitchcock gargoyle: REAR WINDOW.



Hitchcock realist—on location for THE WRONG MAN.

North by Northwest (1959) is by comparison a lightweight, but great fun and (though not nearly as well made as *Vertigo*) at times brilliantly directed. It's virtually a remake of *Saboteur* with better actors, and of course it's far more assured, more cunningly managed, than the earlier film.

The set-pieces—Cary Grant being machine-gunned by a crop-dusting plane, the last frantic scramble over the Mount Rushmore stone heads (dreamed up by Hitchcock years before)—are vastly enjoyable, even when seen for the third time, but the film's greatest success is with the playing of the cast—James Mason's master criminal, Eva Marie Saint's ambiguous heroine desperately switching sides, and Cary Grant's smooth advertising man may be conceived on a comic-strip level, but they

NORTH BY NORTHWEST.

are played with splendid sophistication and *brio*. The mocking, cynical script of Ernest Lehman, Robert Burks's photography, and above all the pounding score of Bernard Herrmann, admirably serve Hitchcock's requirements.

The director's latest film to date (*The Birds* is being edited at time of writing), the notorious *Psycho*, has already been definitely dealt with in *Film Quarterly* by the editor, and I don't propose to add much to his remarks, except to say that I found John Russell's camerawork rather grubby, and the whole film rather hastily slapped together (Hitchcock has said that he wanted to do it quickly because he wasn't sure if it would be box-office, hence his failure to use Robert Burks, who is notoriously slow and careful). The film's obsessive quality, its feverish unravelling of the director's neuroses, makes it a genuinely personal work, however much one may disapprove of it. It's probably the only film of Hitchcock's in which he's unleashed himself from first to last. And perhaps no other film of his has had so tumescent an effect on an audience, nor so ferociously reduced them to helpless terror.

The Birds promises to be even more abandoned, to combine sexual symbolism and the techniques of torture in a still more self-indulgent degree. Prudes may sniff, but as Penelope Houston has rightly remarked in more than one review, it's far too late to get prudish about Hitchcock. He has now, after almost 40 years in cinema, got the power to do almost exactly what he likes, to scrawl his signature on the world's lavatory walls without restraint. He's still a child, pulling wings off flies, playing with the cinema like a toy. But there is no other director whose *jeux d'esprit* can be shared with equal pleasure by the masses and specialists alike.

[Illustrations courtesy Albert Johnson.]