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Hitchcock, Truffaut, and the Irresponsible Audience

In the beginning of his opulently mounted interview with Hitchcock,^o François Truffaut writes that Hitchcock has always feared technicians who might "jeopardize the integrity of his work." But in this "definitive study" (to cite the dustjacket) Truffaut's own approach is so doggedly technical, so intent on style as opposed to meaning, that one wonders if the feared technicians haven't come in by a rear window after all. The interview is an anatomy of Hitchcock's work that shows little sense of what technical methods signify, or what stylistic devices express. Truffaut draws back from any exploration of the psychological depths of either Hitchcock himself or the movies Hitchcock has made. Hitchcock makes many leading remarks about his themes and methods that Truffaut glosses over. Hitchcock reveals fascinating shards of his psychological nightlife, but Truffaut only alludes to the dark area of voyeurism, exhibitionism, and fetishism that Hitchcock's films explore; he is too interested in showing his own knowledge of plot and technical details to go any further. And because of his lack of interest in the psychological dimensions of Hitchcock's films, Truffaut misses how Hitchcock in his best films manipulates the deepest reactions of his audience.

Has Truffaut been hampered by the difficulties of a long interview (fifty hours spread over several days), complete with translator? If we cannot have the experience of two directors talking equally, let us have an incisive picture of one. But Truffaut gives us neither. Recent journalism has developed the interview into a

vehicle of self-revelation. But what we learn about Hitchcock from *Hitchcock* is less due to Truffaut's insight than to his inclusiveness. There are 472 stills and full credits for all of Hitchcock's films. There is even a developing plot relation between two characters named "Hitchcock" and "Truffaut" which can be followed as a welcome counterpoint to the more obvious play of question and answer. But this plot reveals neither Truffaut nor Hitchcock; each tries to direct and each has cast the other in an uncongenial role. Truffaut's early impulse is to score points. He shows that his memory of *The Last Laugh* is better than Hitchcock's and he tries to make Hitchcock admit that his work was influenced by Fritz Lang. Hitchcock responds with his usual mask of evasive humor: he can't remember *M*, *The Spy*, or *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, but he will admit to changing a scene in the first version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* because he had noticed a similar scene in Mervyn LeRoy's *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. Underground arguments sometimes flare. While discussing *The Ring*, Hitchcock mentions visual touches he thinks no one noticed; Truffaut nods but wants to talk about what *he* noticed; Hitchcock replies that all the reviewers noticed *those* details. None of these conflicts is more than trivially illuminating. And it is difficult not to find Truffaut at fault. Instead of facing Hitchcock with probing questions, he plays the eager young man, ready to reel off complicated plots the master has forgotten, adulatory and bump-tiously arrogant at the same time. Instead of drawing Hitchcock out, Truffaut forces him back into his old masks.

Ideally, an interview can be a process of un-

^o F. Truffaut: *Hitchcock*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968, \$8.00.)

derstanding. But Truffaut has certain set ideas about Hitchcock. His emphasis on Hitchcock's technique of suspense and "dramatic impact" shows traces of the same kind of condescension or reverse snobbery that dubs Hitchcock "the world's foremost technician": however great a director Truffaut believes Hitchcock to be, he may not expect him to be interested in psychological themes as complex as those dealt with in *Jules and Jim*. This bias leads naturally to Truffaut's concern with workmanship and technical detail. He calls *Notorious* "the very quintessence of Hitchcock," "a model of scenario construction." Hitchcock calls the single-shot technique of *Rope* "quite nonsensical," but Truffaut's questions follow the familiar litany: "What about the problems with the color?" "What about the problems of a mobile camera?" "What is truly remarkable is that all of this was done so silently that you were able to make a direct sound track." Faced with Truffaut's almost programmatic bias, Hitchcock finds he can respond only in Truffaut's terms, and in the latter part of the interview he finally asserts—with Truffaut's approval—that he likes technical tricks much more than subject matter or acting.

Hitchcock's seeming agreement with Truffaut rests actually on a very different definition of technique that uses however much of the same language. Both Truffaut and Hitchcock make oddly archaic statements about the way sound film ended the great era of the cinema. Truffaut seems to have forgotten André Bazin's attacks against "pure cinema" cultists (such as "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage") for he comes on like young Raymond Spottiswoode. In line with his interest in technical details and fragments of directorial style, he treats each film as a "pure" object: a compound of techniques, or problems solved and unsolved. But all of Hitchcock's "techniques" are aimed at destroying the separation between the film and its audience. When Truffaut talks about the emotional effect of a film, he is speaking of dramatic irony, surprise, and the shock of realism. When Hitchcock talks about emotion, he is asserting the audience's involvement and implication in what is happening on the screen. In speaking

of *Psycho*, Hitchcock appears to follow the "pure" cinema line: "It wasn't a message that stirred the audience, nor was it a great performance or their enjoyment of the novel. They were aroused by pure film." Truffaut answers, satisfied, "Yes, that's true." But Hitchcock explains further what he means: ". . . the construction of the story and the way in which it was told caused audiences all over the world to react and become emotional." Truffaut responds: "Yes, emotional and even physical." Hitchcock snaps: "Emotional."

In the first half of the interview Hitchcock frequently drops hints of some larger issues, but Truffaut, bound in his own interests, plows on. Hitchcock suggests, for example, that his use of handcuffs has "deeper implications":

A.H. Being tied to something . . . it's somewhere in the area of fetishism, isn't it?

F.T. I don't know, but I have noticed that handcuffs have a way of recurring in your movies.

While Hitchcock vainly implies the emotional and psychological relevance of his details, Truffaut concentrates on an intellectualized appreciation of fine finish and professional gloss. He says of the death of Mr. Memory in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*: "It's this kind of touch that gives so many of your pictures a quality that's extremely satisfying to the mind: a characterization is developed to the limit—until death itself." Truffaut therefore interprets the paranoia implied by the subjective camera in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in technical terms as Hitchcock's effort "to sacrifice plausibility in favor of pure emotion." He does not perceive the relation between Hitchcock's typical technical devices and his deepest thematic concerns.

Truffaut's analysis and questioning falls down therefore whenever he touches upon larger areas of structure and meaning in Hitchcock's films. Truffaut dispenses with plot in the name of "pure" cinema; Hitchcock cares little about the minor springs of plot—what he calls the "MacGuffin," the gimmick—because he is dealing with more inclusive rhythms. "To me, the narrator, they're of no importance." And this

narrative sense, Hitchcock asserts, despite Truffaut's concern with technical virtuosity, is the most important part of his directional method. Truffaut talks about technique, but Hitchcock talks about the audience and its psychology. He manipulates the audience for his own ends, and he wants them to leave his films with a narrative sense of what has occurred. Truffaut does not grasp this idea because each film is for him a pure aesthetic object. But for Hitchcock it is the medium for a relation between the director and the audience. Truffaut discusses camera movement in terms of "dramatic impact," but Hitchcock continually expresses it as an element in establishing point of view.

Because of Truffaut's inability or unwillingness to explore Hitchcock's interest in point of view and his skirting of psychological themes and preoccupations, he is particularly blind to the central area of Hitchcock's work where technique and theme coincide in the study of voyeurism. Building on the interplay between directorial construction and audience understanding that is the basis of montage, Hitchcock develops certain themes that rely directly on the experience of watching a film itself. Even when Truffaut touches on the theme of voyeurism, he believes that the psychological interest is fortuitous:

F.T. Would you say that [James] Stewart [in *Rear Window*] was merely curious?

A.H. He's a real Peeping Tom. . . . Sure, he's a snooper, but aren't we all?

F.T. We're all voyeurs to some extent, if only when we see an intimate film. And James Stewart is exactly in the position of a spectator looking at a movie.

A.H. I'll bet you that nine out of ten people, if they see a woman across the courtyard undressing for bed, or even a man puttering around in his room, will stay and look; no one turns away and says, "It's none of my business." They could pull down their blinds, but they never do; they stand there and look out.

F.T. My guess is that at the outset your interest in the picture was purely technical,

but in working on the script, you began to attach more importance to the story itself. Intentionally or not, that back yard conveys an image of the world.

All through the interview Hitchcock has made remarks about "Peeping Tom audiences" and his efforts to manipulate them. But Truffaut never sees the larger thematic and structural implications of this interest.

Every movie is naturally voyeuristic, not only the most intimate ones, and that is a great part of their appeal—the sensuous immediacy that goes beyond the stylized realism of the fourth-wall theater. A feeling of occasion and artifice may separate us from a particular movie, as it usually separates us from even the most realistic play. But with the camera eye substituted for our own the potentiality for greater intimacy, mediated by "me, the narrator," is still there. The films of Hitchcock play in different ways with these psychological assumptions of the film form itself. Some are less successful and perhaps deserve the technically oriented analysis of Truffaut. But voyeurism is more than a metaphor for Hitchcock; he also emphasizes its moral dimension. In movies we can get away with observing without responsibility. André Bazin remarks in another context: "Incontestably, there is in the pleasure derived from cinema and novel a self-satisfaction, a concession to solitude, a sort of betrayal of action by a refusal of social responsibility." In some of his movies Hitchcock exploits this irresponsibility: "[In *Notorious*] the public was being given the great privilege of embracing Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman together. It was a kind of temporary *ménage à trois*." In a basically comic film like *Notorious* the audience can remain irresponsible, but in his best films the irresponsible audience must go through the punishment of terror. And Truffaut's approach breaks down most clearly when he is faced with what may be Hitchcock's most perfect expression of the interdependence of his themes and techniques—*Psycho*. In *Psycho* Hitchcock brings the voyeuristic assumptions of film form to the surface and in the process brings his audience from the

detachment of irresponsible spectators to the involvement of implicated participants.

Hitchcock's films frequently approach the problem of detachment and involvement through separate but complementary treatments that might almost be called "genres." In "comedies" like *The Lady Vanishes*, *North by Northwest*, or *Torn Curtain*, the central characters are a romantic couple, with whom the audience automatically sympathizes. They serve as audience surrogates in a series of adventures that turn out happily. The axe is never far away from the neck in these comedies, but all conflict is finally dissipated by the end of the film, frequently by near fairy-tale or romance means. At the end of *North by Northwest* Cary Grant tries vainly to pull Eva Marie Saint to safety, while she dangles from the face of Mt. Rushmore. He can't do it. But then he can do it. The straining impossibility turns into fairy-tale ease. He pulls her up—into the top bunk of their Pullman, speeding away from the Dakotas.

Hitchcock's tragedies have no such romantic couple for ease of audience identification and sympathy; Truffaut remarks that there is no one in *Psycho* to identify with. We cast around without bearings, looking for conventional movie clues to tell us we have found the "right" character. But everyone is suspect. The first possible romantic couple in *Psycho*—Sam Loomis and Marion Crane (John Gavin and Janet Leigh)—have a melancholic relation in which sex and money are the prime topics of conversation. The later relation between Sam and Marion's sister Lila (Vera Miles), because it is founded on such dubious grounds, only emphasizes that *Psycho* is not the place to find a romantic couple. Solving a mystery may bring together Margaret Lockwood and Michael Redgrave in *The Lady Vanishes*, but it does not work in *Psycho*. Neither Sam, nor Marion, nor Lila, is particularly attractive. We can never give any of them our full sympathy, although we are often sympathetic to each. And Hitchcock manipulates our desire to sympathize and identify. He plays malevolently on the audience assumption that the character we sympathize with most, whose point of view we share, is the same character

who is morally right in the story the movie tells. He gleefully defeats our expectation that our moral sympathies and our aesthetic sympathies remain fixed throughout the movie.

Hitchcock begins this manipulation at the very beginning of *Psycho*. He forces the audience, although we may not realize it immediately, to face the most sinister connotations of our audience role—our participation in the watching and observing that shades quickly into voyeurism. We see first a long view of a city and titles that read successively "Phoenix, Arizona. Friday December the eleventh. Two forty-three P.M." We sit back and turn on the "objective" vision we reserve for documentaries, the aesthetic equivalent for a detached contemplation of the truth. But we are forced instead to watch an intensely personal, even embarrassing, scene. The camera moves closer and closer to one of the buildings, until finally it ducks under a drawn shade and emerges in a hotel room where Marion, in bra and halfslip, and Sam, bare to the waist, are having a late lunch-hour tryst. Perhaps we can call on our documentary detachment to insulate us from this scene, and thereby resist Hitchcock manipulations. Truffaut insulates himself by an interest in plot dynamics: "The sex angle was raised so that later on the audience would think that Anthony Perkins is merely a voyeur." But throughout *Psycho* Hitchcock continually assaults our claims of objectivity and detachment in order to emphasize and illustrate our real implication.

Hitchcock successively involves us with Marion and then Norman Bates (Perkins) through the gradually increasing use of a subjective camera. In both involvements there is at first a residual doubt, a nagging compunction about the moral aspects of our aesthetic involvement. In terms of conventional movie morality, or what our second-guessing has provisionally told us about the morality of *Psycho*, Sam and Marion are wrong; she's even overstayed her lunch hour. Hitchcock plays on our desire to feel superior because we have figured out *Psycho*'s system of rewards and punishments: "You know that the public always likes to be one

jump ahead of the story; they like to feel they know what's coming next. So you deliberately play upon this fact to control their thoughts." He invites us next to feel morally superior as well as aesthetically. We can make a few moral distinctions on the basis of this first conversation between Sam and Marion. They can't get married and can't even find a pleasant place to meet because Sam has no money, at least not enough both to get married and to pay off his ex-wife's alimony. The lecherous rancher in Marion's office confirms our acceptance of the Sam-Marion relationship. What poetic justice it would be if his sexually tainted money could be used to make the dreams of Sam and Marion come true! By this point we have gone beyond Marion. We wait impatiently as she moves about her bedroom, debating whether or not to take the money; through Hitchcock's manipulation of our moral responses, we have already decided.

Our identification with Marion becomes more directed as we drive away from Phoenix with her. We sit in the driver's seat and look out the window; when we look at Marion herself, we hear the voices in her head, fantasies about what everyone in Phoenix must be saying. Except for the single establishing shot in which we see the police car pull up near Marion's parked car (and after all, at this time she is asleep), we remain inside the car with her, limited within the world of her imaginings, accomplices with her—for a time—in what she has done. The state trooper appears as a figure of vague malevolence; his shades reinforce his blankness. When he waits across the street from the used car lot, we are apprehensive with Marion. When she drives away and an offscreen voice yells "Hey!" we know it's the trooper. But it's not and he really doesn't seem to be waiting for Marion at all. Through the subjective camera and the audience's belief in economy of means ("every character fits in somewhere"), Hitchcock has given us that guilty, almost paranoid, state of mind that converts all outside itself into images of potential evil.

This feeling of guilt begins to dissipate when we arrive at the motel owned by Norman Bates

and his mother. Norman is a genial, shy young fellow, unassuming, pleasant. He's friendly, he makes jokes, he even invites nervous Marion to dinner. When his mother makes him withdraw the invitation, he talks to Marion feelingly about the traps life has put him in. Marion callously suggests that he should have his mother committed, "put someplace." We are beginning to turn against Marion. Norman is a sensitive boy and he loves his mother. Once again our conventional reactions come into play. We wonder if we have been wrong about Marion. Perhaps she did have some cause for the theft, but she has a bad streak. And that first image of sex in the afternoon may recur as proof. She invites Norman into her room, but he draws back. Was her sexuality a threat to Sam in the same way?

Hitchcock's gradual separation of our sympathies from Marion and attachment of them to Norman now becomes even more delicate. We follow Norman into the next room and watch as he moves aside a picture to reveal a peephole into Marion's cabin. He watches her undress and, in some important way, we feel the temptress is more guilty than the Peeping Tom. In the first scene of the movie Marion wore white bra and white halfslip. When she finally decided to take the money, while it lay on her bed as she packed, she wore a black bra and halfslip. She drove off in a black car and then traded it in for a light-colored model. But our conventional moral-aesthetic sense can't be fooled. Once again, as Norman peers through the peephole, we see the black bra and halfslip, and remember Marion's guilt, a guilt we do not want to share. This perhaps dubious pattern of dark and light only reinforces something more basic. Whether we realize it or not, we have had a Norman-like perspective from the beginning of the movie. We too were Peeping Toms when we looked through the window of the hotel room Sam and Marion rented. We shared the Peeping-Tom exposure of Marion when her boss noticed her (and us) staring at him through the car window. When we look through the peephole with Norman, we are doing something we have done before; this time, like the

first time, we know we won't be caught. We tend to blame Marion and not Norman because we are fellow-voyeurs with him, and we do not want to blame ourselves.*

It is worthwhile to emphasize the way Hitchcock manages our shift from Marion to Norman, since many commentators on *Psycho* assume that Marion's murder is somehow justified because she is a thief. But ironically enough her talk with Norman has convinced her that she has done wrong and should return to Phoenix. Her last act before the fatal shower is to figure out how to cover from her own bank account the loss sustained in buying the car. But her bra and halfslip have already given her away to Norman, whose psychotic view of people admits no shade between black and white, no difference between a mildly flirtatious invitation and a blatant proposition. Hitchcock masterfully implies that we can't tell the difference either. Perhaps the murder may also sardonically mirror our beliefs about Hollywood: Janet Leigh was the star of the first half of the movie; Perkins murders her and becomes the star of the second half. Perhaps we're also being invited to remember that Janet Leigh had recently disported herself sexually in another motel in Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958; *Psycho*, 1960). In any case, Norman had added her to his collection of dead birds; when he emerges from the bathroom after his "first" look at her, he knocks one of the bird pictures from the wall. Marion fits well into the collection because, after all, her last name is Crane and she comes from Phoenix. But she won't rise again. There's only one phoenix, and in this movie it's Norman's mother.

The sight of Norman cleaning up the bathroom after the murder reinforces our identification with him aesthetically and morally. Our hands hold the mop and swirl the towel around the floor; Hitchcock cryptically remarks to Truffaut about his own hypercleanliness. Nor-

man cleans up so well because he is a dutiful son trying to protect his crazy mother. Once again, Hitchcock forces us into the security of conventional moral reactions in the face of an absurd situation. In many of his movies he begins with an excessively normal, even banal, situation and then proceeds to show the maniacal forces seething just below the surface. Norman's mop reverses the process; the bathroom is gleaming and conventional once more. We are relieved that the most characterless place on the American landscape has become characterless once again. We have become so identified with Norman's point of view that we feel a moment of apprehension when the car refuses to sink all the way into the black pool. But it finally goes down. We heave a sigh of relief with Norman; the insanity has been submerged once again. Our relief masks our progress from the acceptance of illicit sex to robbery, to murder, what Truffaut with his rage for precision calls a "scale of the abnormal." The memory of our pleasure in Marion's nudity, even while the murder was in process, our effort to see if that was a breast or only an arm we half-glimpsed, all become submerged, especially since, with Norman, we may have decided that she deserved it.

Our sympathy with Norman also controls our feeling about the detective, Arbogast (Martin Balsam). Arbogast upsets Norman with his questions, and we have little or no sympathy with him through the camera. When he walks upstairs in the house, we get only one short shot of his lower legs. Then all the shots are face on, as if we were at the top of the stairs with "Mother." When the murder begins we look straight into Arbogast's face as he staggers back down the stairs under the knife blows. We follow him along with "Mother," striking again and again. The conventional and self-protective operations of our aesthetic and moral sympathies have once again implicated us in something we were not ready for. Hitchcock plays to Truffaut's prejudices by saying that the high camera shot—the bird's-eye view—that begins the murder segment was used to avoid showing "Mother's" face. But when he returns to it at

* Because of the importance of the motif of observation, especially through windows, it's worth noting that we see Hitchcock through the window of Marion's office.

the end of the scene, as Perkins carries her down to the fruit cellar, Hitchcock checks off our complicity. We are no longer so terrified.

Sam and Lila arrive during the day, presaging the illumination of Norman's dark subconscious. Previously the dark brooding vertical shaft of the house had stood high in the shadows behind the banal well-lit horizontal of the motel. With light now striking them both, the house is potentially no longer so mysterious. Sam cannot go in to discover the secret. Like Marion and Arbogast, he had first visited the motel (in one of the few inept scenes) at night. But this is Lila's first visit; Sam delays Norman through conversation. His bad acting (on two levels) and accusations of Norman keep us sympathetic to Norman and divided from Sam. In the house Lila has begun to move through the rooms and examine the furniture of Norman's mind. She sees a movement behind her and turns to find a full-length mirror. Like the audience, she has rummaged around in someone else's inner darkness and discovers there, instead of unknown horrors, something akin to herself. With Norman's return she races toward the fruit cellar and the final secret is revealed—"the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

Norman's psychosis is the MacGuffin of *Psycho*; its special nature is irrelevant. Hitchcock concentrates instead on problems of presentation and point of view, the uncertain line between the normal audience and the psychotic character, and the actually hazy areas of moral judgment. Throughout the movie we are placed in situations that challenge our conventionalized aesthetic and moral responses. Hitchcock's attack on the reflex use of conventional pieties is basically an attack on the desire of the audience to deny responsibility and assert complete detachment. The viewer who wants such placidity and irresponsibility is mocked by the pseudo-documentary beginning of the movie. If he chooses, he has another trapdoor available at the end—in the explanation of the psychologist.

Because Norman has murdered both his mother and her lover, we don't have the conventional out of psychiatric exoneration from guilt. But the psychologist does offer us a way

to escape responsibility by even more acceptable means; he sets up a screen of jargon to "explain" Norman. For the viewer who has learned anything from *Psycho* he must be dismissed. The visual clues are all present: he is greasy and all-knowing; he lectures and gestures with false expansiveness. But it is his explanations that are really insufficient. And one wonders if any categories would be sufficient. Like the moral tags dispensed by the Chorus at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the bland wisdom of the psychologist bears little relation to the complex human reality that has been our experience in the rest of the movie. We understand Norman because we realize the continuum between his actions and our own. We leave the front office of "clear" explanation, while the psychologist is still talking, to enter Norman's cell. Through Hitchcock's manipulation of point of view and moral sympathy, we have entered the shell of his personality and discovered the rooted violence and perverse sexuality that may be in our own natures. Our desire to save Norman is a desire to save ourselves. But we have been walled off from the comfortable and reasonable and "technical" explanations of the psychologist. The impact that *Psycho* has upon us shows how deeply we've been implicated.

In 1955 Truffaut and Claude Chabrol had gone to interview Hitchcock on the location set of *To Catch a Thief* at Joinville. In their excitement they walked on the ice of a little pond in the center of a courtyard and fell in, tape recorder and all. Truffaut turns this into a charming anecdote: "It all began when we broke the ice." But he conducts the interview as if this first encounter were cautionary. It symbolizes his unwillingness to leave the surface and plunge, however uncertainly, into the dark and icy depths.