

## HITCHCOCK'S FILMS

By Robin Wood. (New York: Barnes, 1965)

It does not take a reader long to confirm a suspicion that the author of *Hitchcock's Films*, British critic Robin Wood, wishes himself identified with the *politique des auteurs* as pursued by *Cahiers du Cinéma* in France and by *Movie and Motion* in his native England. In his thirty-six page introduction, Wood staunchly establishes his solidarity with the hitchcocko-hawksiens by defending Hawks's *Rio Bravo*, digresses into a defensive attack on "the characteristic 'Establishment' line" (as followed by Penelope Houston and *Sight and Sound*), and tells us finally that he will concern his study with the five most recent Hitchcock films, as they represent "an unbroken chain of masterpieces and the highest reach of his art to date." The British films are dismissed entirely because they are "overshadowed by (Hitchcock's) recent development," yet *Marnie* is the subject of a labored, 29-page essay. Wood adumbrates the merits of the director's early Hollywood work, then proceeds to the meat of his book. Besides *Marnie* ("one of Hitchcock's richest, most fully achieved and mature masterpieces"), there are analytical essays on *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psyche*, and *The Birds*. These are preceded by studies of *Strangers on a Train* and *Rear Window*, important, we are told, "in relation to Hitchcock's oeuvre as a whole."

Wood spends a great deal of space indulging in the sort of "interpretive excesses" for which he sometimes condemns his colleagues—Jean Douchet, Claude Chabrol, and Erich Rohmer, among others. Phonograph records (in Miriam's shop in *Strangers on a Train*) are said to symbolize a "vicious circle" of existence; a model ship in the office of Gavin Elster (in *Vertigo*) suggests "escape," and the Presidential faces on Mt. Rushmore are to be viewed as "guardians of order" over a chaotic world.

Far more disconcerting, however, is Wood's refusal to examine the question of the director's personality, particularly that aspect of Hitchcock's canon that *has* been consistent and mean-

ingful—his unique sense of humor. Like it or not, Hitchcock's pitilessly cynical attitude toward modern man has exercised such force of direction in his work that to disregard it in any study of his films is quite unreasonable. And it is strangely out of character for an exponent of the auteur theory. This sin of omission seems to have been perpetrated through the author's interest in defending Hitchcock's films as serious moral statements. Thus, in *Strangers on a Train*, Bruno Anthony's mother represents "an extension of the chaos world," no longer to be simply enjoyed as the pottering old fibbertigibbet she obviously was meant to be. The peculiar assortment of oddballs, ninnies, and gargoyles Hitchcock assembled to attract Jeffries's voyeuristic interest in *Rear Window* are here reduced to "variations on the man-woman relationship." And Mrs. Bundy, the myopic ornithologist in *The Birds*, is not a preposterous old Lesbian, but a dramatic means of voicing the audience's possible conclusion that the supernatural attack is but an absurd nightmare. In answer to Wood's opening question ("Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?"), I should like to know why we have to take him nothing but seriously. . . .

When Wood advances his thesis, however, his book is often fascinating. He builds a strong case for the theory that Hitchcock's films reveal a "therapeutic" theme, whereby "a character is cured of some weakness or obsession by indulging in it and living through the consequences." With sometimes captivating (and unusually detailed) exposition, Wood proceeds to demonstrate how Hitchcock extends the "therapy" to the spectator. In watching *Rear Window*, for example, we actually do tend to identify with Jeffries through Hitchcock's use of a standard filmic convention—the subjective shot, which imprisons both the protagonist and the audience within the confines of a single room, from which all of the action is viewed. As Jeffries spies on his neighbors, we find that we are indeed "spying with him, sharing his fascinated compulsive Peeping-Tom-ism." And the long tracking shots in *Psycho* do serve to make us "see things we are afraid to see." When Lila

goes into the Bates menage, her slow, determined exploration is rendered in subjective dolly shots which build almost unbearable suspense by putting us in her shoes. As Wood points out, we dread her entrance to the house; but, at the same time, we greatly desire it—if only to satisfy our morbid curiosity—because we want to be frightened, we want to see another murder. In such observations, the author has at least excelled in defining the nature, the exact nature, of the suspense in most of Hitchcock's films. Wood's conclusion seems to be that the director's approach is that of a twentieth-century moralist and that the suspense itself serves as our instructor, arousing within us as it does conflicting reactions to the predicaments of Hitchcock's protagonists.

—JAMES MICHAEL MARTIN