

GEORGE BARBAROW

Hitchcockery

IT IS REPORTED OF ALFRED HITCHCOCK that he enjoys practical jokes, especially those devised by himself. With this thin bit of hearsay biographical evidence as a starter, we can proceed to an examination of his films, and quickly we find practical jokes in abundance, in divers guises. Two stand out. In *Foreign Correspondent* we see a hired killer rushing at us, aiming to push us off a tower. "We" are presumed to be identified with the hero, Joel McCrea. The following shot shows the figure of a man plummeting to the street, and we wonder if at last the impossible has been accomplished: "we" killed, with fully three quarters of the film left to go. And in *Stage Fright*, if we accept photographic evidence of a murder as it is ostensibly told by the reasonably good looking young man at the beginning, we languish in confusion and illogic until the ending reveals that the evidence is false; to understand the situation fully, we are supposed, at first sight, to reject a fully developed sequence as wrong. If we don't have intuitive genius, the joke is on us; at the end we realize that the moviemaker has been indulging a personal quirk at our expense.

Hitchcock evidently believes that cinematic technique can serve any end. All that is required of a moviemaker is to know more than his audience, like any professional magician. If the film is a failure, the illusionist's trickery is at fault. *Rope*, an attempt to make a film without any cuts or dissolves at all, was repudiated by the master in great haste as soon as he saw the certified financial report of its flop. Now, trying another tack, he has constructed what is probably the longest piece of sustained cross cutting since the advent of sound report of its flop. Now, trying another tack, he has constructed what is probably the longest piece of sustained cross cutting since the advent of sound films, a feat visible, along with most of the most successful of his previous tricks, in his latest picture.

Strangers on a Train has a murder, and a psycho, and the "good" character's inability to tell all the truth to the police, who are, God knows, desirous of the truth, but too stupid to recognize it. And there is a carnival. And there are trains, numberless trains between New York and Washington, with several stops and stopovers at a small town somewhere in the middle. In his most highly admired films, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *The Lady Vanishes*, Hitchcock used railroads; so, in *Strangers on a Train*, Hitchcock uses the cars of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford. He knows that trains are inherently fascinating, and that trains are, beyond carping, cinematographically tremendous. One of the subjects shown in France during the earliest year of movie projection, 1895, was *Arrival of a Train at the Station*, and we have all heard about *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the foundation of many an exhibitor's

fortune. The first movie show I ever saw, at the age of five, included a shot of a locomotive rushing toward the camera, and I collapsed with delight.

Hitchcock has steelier nerves. Almost alone among his contemporaries, he has discovered the basic use of the movie camera and projector: the manipulation of their first property, the illusion of motion, to induce a state of feeling in the viewer. On the mass level, the feeling has been described by one word, "suspense." The Hitchcock method is to set up an artificial situation involving a crime, the police, a mechanical monster (*Strangers on a Train* has two—the train and the merry-go-round), and "almost anyone" who could be you; then he sees to it that there is a chase, ending in a desperate physical struggle that is finally won by "you", and is recognized by the police as a proper victory.

The chase is beset by photographable difficulties. In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, the police pursue, in a moving train, the trail of the hero until they approach vicious chained dogs in the baggage car. They, and we, know that nobody has passed this barrier. In the same film, the hero is handcuffed to the heroine (a character not included in John Buchan's original story) and is thus circumscribed in his movements. In *Stage Fright* the "hero" escapes the police by locking the door of his automobile; while they try to break the closed window, he starts the engine and drives off. In *Lifeboat* inept people are constantly dropping valuable tools overboard. In *Foreign Correspondent* an assassin escapes through a crowd that is watching public ceremonies in the rain (any form of water is photogenic), and the pursuers cannot catch him because they are hindered by the bovine multitude hidden beneath umbrellas. And in *Strangers on a Train* the vital bit of evidence, a cigarette lighter, is dropped down a storm drain; at the same time the tennis player is dropping a set to his opponent; later, the police are unable to climb aboard a rapidly whirling merry-go-round because one of their own bullets has killed the operator, whose body has fallen upon the high speed lever. In all these multipliable cases, the prime mover, the gimmick, is something visible, hence germane to movies.

Strangers on a Train is about twenty-five per cent successful in fulfilling one great movie requirement: visibility. If this estimate seems low, remember that the run of the pod product from Hollywood, or from anywhere else, is seldom more than five per cent visual. Here "visual" means expressing what there is to be said in terms of what can be seen. There is a tennis match, a cigarette lighter, a persistent and nervous murderer, a carnival, and railroad trains. The remainder of the film is taken up with talky scenes of people who range from silly to stolid, and this is time wasted, because most of it is used for verbal explanations of what you have seen or are about to see, and which you have understood, or will understand, simply because the visual material conveys the bulk of the meaning.

What makes the good part go is the cross cutting, which is primitive; but remembering that Hitchcock has almost no competition, we can realize that

he doesn't have to be subtle, or even original. His cross cutting sequence is of the type known forty years ago as "Griffith's last minute rescue": given two or more events happening simultaneously in different places, each bearing some conflicting relationship to the others, it is possible to delay the resolution of the conflict by "juggling" the several sequences. First there is a shot or two from one situation, then one or two or three from the others. The spectator is titillated by seeing the actions developing almost at the same time, and since shots from the several sequences are intermixed, he is forced to infer a connection among them. The usual resolution, and *Strangers on a Train* is certainly usual, is a deadly struggle between the principals of sequences, usually only two, and this is what happens here. By 1916, Griffith had progressed to a seven part cross cutting in *Intolerance*, a grand fugue, with the four main sequences resolved only in the mind of the spectator, and, as a poet will construct a big poem, containing images from everywhere. Hitchcock, being a technician in the field of mass entertainment, and not interested in ambiguities of the Empsonian, or Shakespearean, or even, in these days, Homeric types, has used the ancient last minute rescue (will the fire engines arrive in time?) to flavor his usual formula, and, also as usual, we can enjoy the flavor without being overwhelmed or elevated.

The big sequence is a pleasure to watch. Lasting twenty brilliant minutes, it comprises the two simultaneous parts, with free cutting back and forth between them, the urgency of each increasing the urgency of the other. While the top flight tennis match is being fought out in New York, the murderer travels by northbound train from Washington to the intermediate town to plant the fatal cigarette lighter at the scene of the crime, in order to convict the tennis player in the eyes of the law; and while the murderer is waiting, almost frantically, for the natural phenomenon of sunset to darken the carnival grounds, the tennis player is riding helpless, almost hopeless, in the southbound train that is, it is carefully pointed out, "late again." The murderer's purpose is eventually frustrated, not by anyone's heroic or imaginative action, but by one of the logical consequences of the crime itself: the evidence has to be planted at the actual place of the crime, on an island a few hundred feet away, and there are no boats available, all of them having been hired by the inevitable crowd of morbid curiosity seekers! Here is fine irony. Now it is the killer who must wait, helpless, while his opponent arrives at the carnival; then the two separate sequences are joined, and the violent ending takes place. Hitchcock has once more demonstrated his ability to compose a graceful piece of cinema by arranging a number of photographic images in a series that has comprehensible design and some measure of esthetic meaning.

The images represent related times and related bits of action, all "moving" toward the resolution. The sequence is primitive in that its "time" is simultaneous and progressive, and is the same time ("now") in both of the parallel

parts. The cutting is from place to place only, while the time is presumed to be forward only, much like the familiar time told by a clock. Griffith and a few others long ago discovered that the expressiveness of the cinema can be enormously increased by cutting back and forth in time, as well as from place to place; thus they could make visual statements involving anticipation and recollection. Using direct, forward moving time, Hitchcock is forced to introduce too many artificial delays. The tennis player's loss of a set, the lateness of the train, and the temporary loss of the cigarette lighter down the drain have an obvious and single function that makes for a feeling of monotony. Nevertheless, the substantial and exciting cross cutting sequence in these days of stodgy theatrical "movies" is something of a revelation, almost a new discovery. If more work of this order should come to the screen during the next few years, we might once again start thinking of the cinema as a possible art medium.

Strangers on a Train also reveals a quality somewhat less attractive, even at times repulsive, about Hitchcock's pictures. The magician shows hardly any realization of genuine emotion. He seems to believe that the mass audience wants or needs nothing more than to be "suspended", and that the spectators—all of them—are unwilling or unable to carry home and live with disturbing ideas or impressions; therefore he makes no attempt to induce profound emotional reactions. Tension is achieved by technical means, and is technically resolved at the end. If asked to make a film version of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Hitchcock would be attracted at once to the idea of suspense only: who killed the old man? We can assume that the characters and moods of the brothers, and especially the mercuric actions of Dmitri, would be subordinated to the leading question, which is merely Dostoyevsky's device for tantalizing his own audience, and that the terrible significance of the closing "Hurrah for the Karamazovs!" would certainly be lost. There is nothing humorous in Hitchcock's latest film, except for two shots that are more cruel than anything else, and there is no pity at all. The merry-go-round operator is hit by the stray bullet solely to make the closing scenes superficially more exciting, thus making humanity less important than machinery. And the Senator's daughters are quite calm, if not insensible, considering that the tennis player might be a killer, and the tennis player is also calm, or insensible, considering his suspect position, while he is required to play a Forest Hills match and win it! Nor have we the slightest sympathy for the killer, despite his obvious illness. Such pity is forbidden by the Hays Code, but could have been sneaked in by a Hitchcock, had he any compelling desire to do such a thing. With pity could have come terror; add them together, and we might have had that rarest of things, a film tragedy. But we have no tragedy. We have instead a piece of attempted mesmerism, twenty-five per cent successful. We have no pity, and, instead of terror, we have a remarkably brief scare.