



ALL PHOTOS: UNIVERSAL PICTURES

PLOTS AND PATTERNS

by Roger Greenspun

After fifty-three movies and seventy-five years, a major reputation may come to seem more a burden than a reward. Or maybe not. I only know how it looks from here, with neither movies, reputation, nor even years in comparison. But I also know how much gets dragged up and out each time another Hitchcock movie opens. It is the dark side of auteur theory, the vengeful realization of the scholar's boast that the past is always with us, and the inescapable fact that with Hitchcock almost everybody suffers total recall. It used to be fun a dozen years ago to point out how none of the popular critics reviewing the last of Hawks or Ford, or those Thirties Renoir masterpieces that only got here in the Sixties, knew the context of what they were looking at—and usually panning. Well, with *FAMILY PLOT* everybody knows the context of what he is looking at, everybody has a mental filmography. And though I don't notice that the commentary has gained in brilliance, it certainly has piled up references and career comparisons ready to hand.

So, perhaps because *FAMILY PLOT* is a comedy and has a burial (and a non-burial) in it, it is compared with *THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY*; though I can think of no other Hitchcock, not even *UNDER CAPRICORN*, it less resembles. And maybe because it is a comedy and has a jewel thief of sorts, it is compared with *TO CATCH A THIEF*. My own preferences would have been *MR. AND MRS.*, until I took another look at it, and *NORTH BY NORTHWEST*, which it occasionally does resemble and even copies from in a few specifics. *FAMILY PLOT* is a "couples" movie. There have been a lot of those in Hitchcock's career. *THE 39 STEPS*, *FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT*, *SABOTEUR*, *REAR WINDOW*, *TORN CURTAIN*—I'm merely listing from the top of my head—put these together with *FAMILY*

PLOT and you begin to feel that *He's Telling Us Something*. Compared with Ford, Hawks, Welles, even Renoir, Hitchcock's happens to be one of the great normative visions in the history of world cinema. To an astounding degree, men and women still have the option of loving one another and living together in sanity and happiness—under the aegis of Alfred Hitchcock.

Perhaps in this connection, a friend who is also a film critic observed that *FAMILY PLOT* is Hitchcock's "most erotic" movie. When I asked him what he was talking about, it turned out he was talking about the fact openly admitted that Bruce Dern as George Lumley and Barbara Harris as his friend Blanche Tyler sometimes live and also (when he has the energy) make love together, and so do the other couple, the bad guys, William Devane and Karen Black, for whom sex seems a somewhat more stimulating thing. There is a lot to say about sex in *FAMILY PLOT* but not, I think, about eroticism, which doesn't get into the film in any appreciable degree, perhaps because it would upset a rather delicate balance if it did. In some of his films Hitchcock uses eroticism, always obsessively. Grace Kelly's overwhelming profile in *REAR WINDOW* or her smoothly orchestrated first kiss (not the God-awful fireworks) in *TO CATCH A THIEF*; Kim Novak heartbreaking in a soft sweater late in *VERTIGO*; Laura Elliot's fatal provocation in *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*; or Janet Leigh stripped down to her brassiere for heavy lunch-hour petting in *PSYCHO*—there isn't really much of it, but when it appears it is very potent, enviable, guilty. I find it a more interesting kind of guilt than the famous Hitchcockian "transferral of . . ." which it will be pleasant not to write about this session.

You don't get any of that in *FAMILY*

PLOT, where the voyeuristic power of eroticism gives way to a pair of real sexual relationships, which wouldn't look like anything on the screen. The only stirrings of lust I felt were for a pretty girl in a red dress seen in passing. She has an after-church date with a priest. Almost everything in that little tryst is important, including the place, the time, the vows of celibacy, and of course the red dress (Blanche Tyler wears or carries white, a color that expresses her and eventually helps save her life). But altogether, it doesn't count as the erotic high-point in the master's generally not so erotic career.

I'm inclined to put that matter alongside the question of Barbara Harris's wink at the end of the movie, which some critics abhor, but which my friend again found thrilling as Hitchcock's very first on-screen admission of complicity with his audience. That doesn't seem much to hang on to. Like ontological considerations of the unsteady back-projection in *MARNIE*, or the meaning of the artifice in the artificial little hill in *TORN CURTAIN*. I'm willing to bet that a lot of the cinema solutions in which Hitchcock shows technical interest are of technical interest. His is in a sense an older style of film production that delights in its devices, its expert matching of studio and location. Questions of what Hitchcock meant by various little gestures may be of less interest than a closer look at what in fact he shows. Thus, the beginning of *FAMILY PLOT*, which is also one of the most gorgeous justifications I can recall for the mechanics of camera movement in recent movies—all in one sweeping turn that links Barbara Harris with Cathleen Nesbit, and including in its view a rich and fanatically detailed living room setting—this seems as important as Barbara Harris's wink at the end, and in-

deed, may even furnish the weight of deliberate darkness that balances it.

I've seen *FAMILY PLOT* three times, and it gets better each time, though I'm not sure I'll want to see it soon again. Hitchcock movies may be very great, but they aren't bottomless wells. Something in any major Hitchcock performance begins to pall after much exposure, something that is supremely calculated but not sufficiently felt. I grow tired of watching the actors, perhaps because they seem to have reserved so little inside themselves—for example, Jimmy Stewart in *VERTIGO* as against Jimmy Stewart in *THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE*. Ford's people live and deepen for us through all the limiting conventions of their roles. Hitchcock's people, individualized to the teeth, tend never to escape beyond their characteristics. One of the problems I have with Barbara Harris's wink at the end of *FAMILY PLOT* is that I don't know what in Barbara Harris's being it comes out of. The red blood that stains the whiteness of her blouse when she is drugged by hypodermic needle during the film's climax a little bit earlier is an altogether different, more moving, more satisfactory matter. But that may only illustrate the special range and ranking of iconographic powers in Hitchcock's cinema.

Ultimately, *FAMILY PLOT* may be more fun to think about than to see—or at least, to see for the fourth time. There are moments of quite stunning intensity: almost all the opening sequences, through the payment of the first kidnap ransom; the tense wait in the roadside café (but not the semi-slapstick automobile thrills that follow); the second kidnapping, of a Roman Catholic bishop; the confrontations that take place inside Arthur Adamson's solemn subdued jewelry store—where the wrong people keep showing up at embarrassing moments. But some of the principle action sequences seem relatively lax and unfocused, and I suspect that *FAMILY PLOT* figures only half-heartedly as an adventure film. Indeed, it mistrusts adventure, as the best Hitchcock movies often do. Its central position is that a healthy respect for love and money offers better guidance through this vale of tears than does the secret shudder down the spine of life lived recklessly for beauty and thrills. That's practical philosophy. Like Bresson, like Ozu, Hitchcock constructs a cinema of philosophic principles.

In this respect, *FAMILY PLOT*, which some have praised for its hilarity, may just be Hitchcock's most serious movie—or one of his most serious, or anything but his funniest and most erotic. It deals in private human relations on several levels, most notably in Blanche and George and Fran and Arthur, its two most prominent couples, but extending

also to that priest and his after-church date, and even to the little café where they meet—Abe and Mable's, another couple presiding, and not I should guess the happiest in the film. In the course of his investigations to help his friend Blanche develop a little uncanny information from the spirit world, George Lumley questions a middle-aged saleswoman working at a department store brassiere counter. Her name is Vera Hannagan (Marge Redmond), and she has one of those marvelously open smiling intelligent Irish faces it seems a privilege to share time with even on a movie screen. Her late father, a chauffeur, had, forty years before, arranged the secret transfer of a child whom George wants to track down, and George eventually gets an uncanny amount of information from Mrs. Hannagan. But I am especially impressed by the incidentals of their interview, by the way she says "God rest him"—twice—when she mentions her dad, and the obvious affection she brings to the memory of both her parents, and the just as obvious interest she shows when George mentions reward money for the help she might give him. A kind of practical grace, based on specific human ties and equally specific human needs, keeps touching the movie. Mrs. Hannagan is a good example, but there are others. Even Joe Maloney (Ed Lauter), the slimy garage owner and the film's only—well deserved—death, had a mother and father he was apparently good to. At least that's what the priest says over his grave before he is lowered into place in his family plot.

There is nothing too original in the notion that the Hitchcock movie titles carry a glamour all their own, and that with a few exceptions they are as witty as anything that gets into the films. Sometimes they *do* get into the films, virtually sum up the films on several levels at once. Thus *ROPE*, which tells you how that apparently seamless movie is made as well as how it accomplishes its murder and traps its murderers; or *SHADOW OF A DOUBT*, which not only works its little catch-phrase title into an exploration of a retributive relationship but also bases its retribution upon the potency of a succession of little superstitions and catch-phrases. *SHADOW OF A DOUBT* belongs with the greatest Hitchcock. *FAMILY PLOT* at the very least belongs with the greatest Hitchcock titles. Not the original choice for the movie, it nevertheless seems inspired in its humorous pun, its potential for deeper meaning, its contrast to the title of the book on which the film is based, Victor Canning's *The Rainbird Pattern*.

The book's story has been made familiar enough in several of the film's reviews not to need repeating here. Ernest

Lehman's screenplay is in fact an excellent adaptation, owing a good deal to the mechanics of the novel and absolutely nothing to its mood or meaning. The novel has many virtues, not the least of which is a highly logical climax full of dark surprises, mostly revealed in the last few pages. After three kidnappings and four cold-blooded murders (two committed by British government agents) it is determined that Julia Rainbird's grandnephew, the son of the man she had hired the spiritualist Blanche Tyler to find for her, is the bearer of an hereditary curse, a tendency to solve his problems by killing—like his father and his grand-uncle and indeed his grand-aunt before him. That is the Rainbird pattern, and it is nothing like Hitchcock-Lehman's family plot.

"Plot" vs. "pattern." You can feel the release from ominous solemnity. You can appreciate the pun, and knowing enough about Hitchcock, you can guess the pun will count. But it must be understood that the habit of mind involved in using a pun also counts, and that it reflects not only upon graveyard matters and the convolutions of a story, but also upon the idea of the "family," which is really the key to the film.

Among the several changes the movie makes in the book's material—the transfer of the action from England to California, the introduction of a happy ending, the removal of much semblance for a motive for the kidnapers' ransom demands, the removal of old Julia Rainbird's guilt, the change in the presence of Madame Blanche from a 180-pound earth goddess to Barbara Harris—not the least important is the virtual elimination of the official defenders of the law. There are a few cops present, to ask questions, to comment gratuitously on the perfection of the crime ("Not a God-damn mistake!" I could count a few mistakes), to throw in the small red herring of a hot-on-the-trail investigation for a moment halfway through the movie—as if to remind us there *is* an investigation, because we've gotten interested in something else. We've gotten interested in a pair of couples, mirror opposites in some ways, and in a suspense plot that is full of comic irony but almost wholly devoid of suspense. Once we know that Arthur Adamson is the Eddie Shoebridge who was really Julia Rainbird's illegitimate nephew—and we know it pretty quickly—we have only to wait and see how the people in the movie will make the same discovery and so catch up with us. Not a terribly chilling diversion.

And yet there are some chills, and there is a serious theme as well. Old Julia may not be the murderess she is in Victor Canning's novel; but she committed a crime years before, when she removed her wayward sister's son, a crime for which some well-connected (though, in-



Above: Couple No. 1 (Bruce Dern and Barbara Harris).

terestingly, unmarried) old men are paying now. Eddie, the cast-away child, locked his foster parents in their burning house and then pretended to have himself buried with them, while he took the suspiciously universal last name of Adamson. He is enough like Cain for the name to work: half cast-out, half self-exile from the comforts that should have been his. "If he's still alive, I'll find your son," says Julia to her dead sister through the medium of Blanche, "and I'll take him in my arms and love him . . ." The speech and the sentiment belong wholly to the film's conceptions of Julia and her sorrow. One of its several old folks, she takes her place beside Mrs. Hannagan's parents, or the Shoebridges, who adopted Eddie, or maybe even the rich shipping magnate who would like to think that the woman who helped kidnap him was someone lovely and considerate, and about twenty-five years old.

The dead and those approaching death form a background of memories and fears in *FAMILY PLOT*, and also a background of love. Of the two couples in the foreground, both frauds and not what they seem, one couple kidnaps while the other couple searches for a lost child. Those actions overshadow the plot. And in a basic though simplistic way, they are what the film is all about. The kidnappings are fairly subtle, providing the temporary semblance of a home, with wine and gourmet cooking, for some old men who are in fact held below ground in what could almost be a secret mausoleum. But kidnapping must be the ultimate crime in the world where the ultimate benevolence is the loving remembrance, perhaps the loving creation, of families. The geometric groundwork of the movie (people quite literally keep crossing each others paths, while the wonderfully decrepit little cemetery where Eddie Shoebridge ought to be buried becomes a rectangular maze enforcing confrontations), that groundwork gives way to an—overhead—network of potential beneficence even more encompassing.

Below: Couple No. 2 (William Devane and Karen Black).



The relative ease with which Blanche and George find Julia Rainbird's lost nephew is thus part of the meaning of the film. And I assume it matters that the fake spiritualist Blanche keeps a religious image (a little statue of the Virgin, I think) in her kitchen, where none of her clients will see it. It's not that she's uncommonly devout—though I suspect that everybody in this movie is devout. It's just that her experience like much experience in *FAMILY PLOT*, abounds in intimations of powers beyond the present. When Arthur Adamson presumed to kill himself off and yet go on living, he parodied those powers and blasphemed against the order of things worse than he knew. He didn't escape them; he is bound to repeat them. Between Blanche's crystal ball—she first appears to the camera within that crystal ball—and the big round diamonds Arthur collects as ransom, there is enough similarity of form to make the difference in function a framing device for the entire movie. In advancing from Julia Rainbird's phony seer to the audience's true conspirator, Blanche has simply changed her spheres of knowledge. With her natural kindness and her healthy taste for sex and money, she is the best spirit in the movie. And she doesn't need a private line to the other world to prove it.

Blanche, a blonde, wears white. Arthur's mistress and partner Fran, a brunette, wears a bleached blond wig and a white sweater under the black raincoat that works as part of her disguise. The colors that dominate in *FAMILY PLOT*—deep red, white, black, occasionally green—create a continuing moral interplay of the most powerful intimations of death, life, purity, and passion behind the semi-social comedy up front. Similarly, the cross references between Blanche and Fran, and between Blanche/George and Fran/Arthur, do more than just establish a comparison by contrast. They help extend a context in which everything somehow connects. Not so much for the specifics of connection as for the *idea* of connection, an idea that when necessary can raise the energies of a zany missing-persons plot into near sublimity.

I doubt that such potential makes *FAMILY PLOT* a masterpiece, or even a near miss. There are aspects of the Bruce Dern/Barbara Harris connection—a deeper bliss within some superficial bitterness—that don't work, and that render what should have been the happiest of Hitchcock's long history of combative couples something more like a terrific actress and a good actor working together, but slightly out of synch. The central comedy-fright sequence, the uncontrollable automobile, fails sufficiently to scare (me, at least) or to amuse, and the suspense tricks associated with it seem derivative almost to the point of embarrassment. Enough of those things together depress a movie—as I think a lot of the most intellectually ambitious Hitchcock is depressed: *MARNIE*, *I CONFESS*, *TOPAZ* perhaps. Unless you read your Hitchcock out of text books, you have to start from what you see on the screen. That you always finish with much more derives from an understanding of cinema as a verbal-visual continuum unparalleled except in the greatest Renoir. This makes the context "Hitchcock" supreme even when individual instances fail or only fitfully succeed. The revelation of *FAMILY PLOT* within this context is not its excellence but its benevolence, a benevolence that even its cardboard villain (a wonderfully toothy William Devane, and my favorite performance in the movie) has trouble dissociating himself from: given the millions Julia Rainbird wishes to bestow on him, he is finally done in by his own good fortune. As the film works out from mystery into certainty and from darkness into light, it discovers prospects for casual good feeling that through the memories of generations extend even beyond the grave. No secret needed for these blessings; rather, as W.H. Auden once advised:

. . . trust in God;
And take short views. ☸