

Buts & Rebutals

Hitchcock: a Defense and an Update

by David Lubin

All the wrathful prose in David Thomson's "The Big Hitch" (FILM COMMENT, March-April 1979) can be boiled down to two accusations against Alfred Hitchcock: his films lack moral probity and his interviews lack soul. Thomson's attack should be placed in perspective, not because Hitchcock needs to be defended but because those who take their film study seriously can't afford to get carried away by polemics that have the enticing aroma of a naughty dissent from critical consensus.

Both arguments that Thomson employs have been around for a long time, used in conjunction with high-toned critiques of poets, painters, and musicians ages before either Alfred Hitchcock or motion pictures came to be.

What bothers Thomson about the Hitchcock interviews is not simply that, as he puts it, metaphysical questions get shopkeeper answers. What is worse is that the director takes so damned much pleasure in talking about matters of mere technique—a fact which for Thomson gives proof that Hitchcock is something considerably less than a True Artist. But is the compulsion to talk trade so that contemptibly Philistine?

For, far from severing technique from meaning, Hitchcock has rather consistently used the former to enrich and amplify the latter with an authenticity belonging only to a handful of artists in any given medium. Despite what some unsympathetic observers might think, Hitchcock's technical complexity never outdistances his films' moral complexity, but rather serves to evoke it. The runaway carousel, for example, is not simply the pretext for a special effects *tour de force*, but also serves to strikingly metaphorize a personality, or even more seriously, a society that may at any instant go spinning out of control.

It is on this very issue of control that Thomson most vigorously takes Hitchcock to task. Worse than form without content, he seem to be saying, is form which indexes a morally-deficient con-

tent. This is the heart of his attack: Hitchcock, Thomson is claiming, neurotically regulates his film frame by frame because his attitude towards life is frightened, repressed, life-denying. What Thomson assumes here is an equivalence between the desire to dominate aesthetic materials and the desire to have absolute control over life itself. Such an assumption is naively reductive. To refute it, one need look no further than to Jean Renoir and a film such as *The River*, in which, though life flows freely in and out of the frame, the leaves on the trees were carefully spray-painted prior to shooting. Is that particular act of aesthetic manipulation to be regarded as a sign of moral stunting within Renoir himself?

If there is any consistent message at all in Hitchcock films, it's that one's at-



tempts at control mean very little in the face of life, chance, accident. Invariably, Hitchcock characters who seek to map out their own destinies as immaculately as Hitchcock himself maps out his films are rudely interrupted. Look at poor Alex Sebastian in *Notorious*, or the two students in *Rope*, or Rusk, "the Necktie Murderer," in *Frenzy*: their determined efforts to orchestrate their own and others' experience come unraveled, at first little by little, but then totally. The moral, if one feels the need to ascertain a moral, is that you can succeed at manipulating strips of film and other material objects, but you can't get away with manipulating reality.

Jefferies in *Rear Window*, Scottie in *Vertigo*, Norman in *Psycho*, and Marnie are all individuals who, in their own solipsism, struggle against the world to twist and distort what's out there into

conformance with their own troubled mental state. And that is why you don't get well-rounded characters; a man obsessed to the exclusion of all else is anything but well-rounded. Such a character can have no gradation of moral coloring precisely because he is too deeply stained by his one all-consuming passion. Hitchcock's is an art that highlights one character-trait at the expense of others just as it highlights a single detail in a room full of details—a gun, a wine bottle.

Thomson comes up with an honor roll of great directors such as Renoir, Ozu, and Mizoguchi to pit against Hitchcock. They, it is true, portray for us "the dignity of ordinary lives," but that's because they tend to be domestic realists whereas Hitchcock is an expressionist, with different but equally legitimate artistic *and* moral goals. As long as the arts have been around, this dichotomy of styles has existed. Is Thomson, by implication, suggesting that pastoral poetry is aesthetically and morally finer than epic poetry, Elizabethan comedy than French neoclassic tragedy, and Dutch genre painting than that of the Italian mannerists?

In narrative terms, Hitchcock's work is in the tradition of Virgil, Dante, Milton, Hawthorne, and Melville—storytellers whose moral universe is one in which an eternal warfare rages between Good and Evil. It is a universe of polarities, and thus for them, reality is inherently dramatic, or if you will, melodramatic, because the opposition between forces is continual. A Renoir, Ozu, or Mizoguchi, having an inclusive or "synthetic" moral imagination—"everyone has his reasons"—does not think in terms of polarities and oppositions the way that the exclusive, "analytic" artist does, and therefore tends toward a vastly different portrayal of life, one that is interested in reproducing the whole spectrum of light rather than an expressionistic chiaroscuro. (Renoir, by the way, although this is commonly overlooked, had throughout his career an expressionist, anti-realist streak in him, from his early *The Little Match Girl*

to his late *Petit Théâtre*.)

A synthetic-minded filmmaker—a Bazanian realist—is likely to incline towards deep-focus photography because that mirrors his way of perceiving life itself, whereas an analytical-minded filmmaker will turn more naturally to shallow-focus photography and cutting. This is not because his attitude towards life is shallow and manipulative, but because he thinks dialectically, thinks in terms of oppositions. An analytic imagination breaks down whatever it sees into component and opponent parts; when that imagination is also expressionist, as in Hitchcock's case, those which don't are dispensed with.

Hence Hitchcock's often remarked-upon close-ups of material objects. The reason the wine bottle full of uranium dust fills the screen, or the reason the camera swoops from a great distance away right up to a key in the hand is not, as Thomson implies, because Hitchcock cares more for inanimate objects than people, but because his sensibility sees in the concrete, symbols of the cosmic. The expressionist needs symbols because they stand for life, not as common sense reveals it, but rather as he sees it.

The same sort of distinction applies to "sense of place." The realist strives for a common sense, empiric accuracy in depicting the scene in which his action takes place, but the expressionist flattens, heightens, highlights, distorts, and otherwise alters the backdrop so that it might serve as an objective correlative to states of mind and to theme. The backdrop, like the inanimate symbolic object, is used to *express* feeling or meaning or both. The Hitchcockian mansion, the wayside motel, the Moroccan Casbah, are there not as reported facts nor, as one would suppose from reading Hitchcock interviews, to merely provide atmosphere healthy for the box-office, but because they help to throw into relief the moral as well as dramatic issues at stake. The realist might wish to help us understand and care for the people who crowd the Casbah, but Hitchcock doesn't do that because he chooses instead to amplify his protagonists' sense of helplessness and isolation in order to involve us in the fight between good and evil that is about to get underway. In India, Renoir showed the faces, and indirectly the soul, of the peasants in the marketplace, but then his theme was about the timeless unity of all mankind, not its timeless opposition.

Since Hitchcock's characters are, in a

sense, modern-day mythic, it is only natural that their fates are often played out, on, in, or adjacent to modern-day mythical—tourist-attracting—structures such as the Statue of Liberty, the Sugarloaf in Rio, a Dutch windmill, an amusement park, the Albert Hall, or Mount Rushmore.

Hitchcock's films are indeed disguised myths or fairytales, and like myths and fairytales, appeal to us on manifold levels. Superficially, good triumphs in the end. Beneath the surface, however, the conflict is shown to remain eternal and unresolved: Scottie solves the mystery and is avenged, but stands totally alone on the ledge, suspended in the middle of the screen existentially as well as cinematographically; Norman is safely locked away now, but is as far gone as can be. Thomson suggests that Hitchcock's work would be the delight of totalitarians because of the calculated way in which it calls forth forceful emotions, but what Thomson forgets is that a work of propaganda, unlike a work of art, cannot abide even the mere hint of irresolution and ambiguity.

On the surface, the Hitchcock narrative is precautionary, just as is, on the surface, a fairytale: "Don't do this—or else." If that's as deep as Hitchcock goes, Thomson would be justified in seeing here an art that negates life and advocates a refusal to enter into it. He would be correct in claiming that this controller of spectator emotions "puts the audience through it as a torturer, not a moral scientist or a teacher." That, however, is far from what is really taking place in either a good Hitchcock film or a good fairytale.

Instead, the audience is thrust vicariously into a symbolic realm of moral contest, and thus receives the opportunity in this "laboratory" or "classroom" environment (the movie theater, the campfire) to practice deciphering between disguised good and evil, and perhaps more importantly, to become wisely accustomed to sensations of danger and fear. When as children we admire Jack's strength as he climbs the beanstalk, applaud his bravery, love him for his high spirits, and cheer his ingenuity, we unconsciously resolve to make those qualities our own. Likewise, we instinctively shy away from those characters, not the witches and wizards who are evil yet resplendent, but rather the stay-at-home older brothers who are stupid, vain, cowardly, self-righteous, and selfish. Hitchcock films evoke from us a similar set of moral sympathies and anti-

pathies. In *North By Northwest*, we root for Roger Thornhill all the way because he is as witty as he is brave. In *Strangers on a Train*, we end up liking Bruno, the nominal villain, better than Guy, the hero who is over-eager to enter the ranks of society.

In Hitchcock, "high society" always stands for society at large. The same is true in the fiction of Henry James. This is only one of many similarities between the work of the short, bald, corpulent American who moved to England and the short, bald, corpulent Englishman who moved to America. Although the narratives of one are actionless whereas those of the other are rife with action, both artists are analytic thinkers, expressionists, intensive manipulators of their respective media. Both have a penchant for endowing a material object—a painting or a bowl in James, a key or cigarette lighter in Hitchcock—with an ever-widening set of dramatic and metaphysical overtones. Both experiment with narrative devices such as point of view (*The Ambassadors/Rear Window; The Golden Bowl/Psycho*). And with both artists, that experimentation is always subservient to theme: the use of a limited viewpoint is as necessary for dealing with Jefferies' voyeurism as it is with Strether's. The typical James and Hitchcock characters are forced to function not only in a highly repressive society, but also under strict formalistic control. As a result, these characters often give evidence of a barely-contained passion that may at any moment explode. I'm not talking about the famous Hitchcock glacial blonde that supposedly becomes a wild-woman in the bedroom, but rather of someone like Alex Sebastian or James' Merton Densher.

People accuse both James and Hitchcock of being cold manipulators, but what could be more charged with internal emotion than the story of an enormously wealthy, fatally-diseased young woman who discovers that the man she loves is marrying her purely for her money, or a man so full of impious adoration for the woman who deceived him that he entirely shelves his ordinary, everyday life so that he might go chasing after her ghost? It's appropriate that Bernard Herrmann's *Vertigo* score relies heavily upon the "Liebestod" from Wagner's *Tristan*. For what Richard Strauss exclaimed of that opera—"Such fire of sustained passion! It could have been written only by a man of ice!"—might certainly be said of that cinematic masterpiece. ☸

by Joseph McBride

On the very day he received the first American Film Institute Life Achievement Award in 1973, John Ford signed his last will and testament, and exactly five months later he was dead of cancer. Though all of the subsequent six recipients are still with us, the AFI tributes from the beginning have always had the uncomfortable feeling of premature funeral rites. "I hope I'm still alive when the AFI salutes me," Burt Reynolds joked in his recent *FILM COMMENT* interview. As the AFI hurries to bestow belated honors on the ever-dwindling number of great old-timers still in our midst, geriatric names naturally dominate the proceedings and will for the next decade to come. Since Ford, the winners have been James Cagney, Orson Welles (the youngest, at a mere 59), William Wyler, Bette Davis, Henry Fonda, and now Alfred Hitchcock, who was honored March 7.

Among those most prominently under consideration for future honors are Frank Capra, James Stewart, Cary Grant, George Cukor, and King Vidor, with the ailing John Wayne also sure to receive serious consideration for next year's award. The only person known to have turned down the award is the reclusive Katharine Hepburn, though the AFI received similarly negative response when it put out feelers to intimates of Greta Garbo. Perhaps, after the AFI has finished honoring as many of the elderly greats it can get to in the next few years, the pool of worthy honorees will be in better shape to receive their tributes. That should spare us the ghastly sight of a doddering Steven Spielberg being pushed out in his wheelchair to receive his award, or a toothless Peter Fonda feebly escorting his white-haired sister Jane to the dais for her acceptance speech.

These morbid musings are occasioned by the Hitchcock dinner, which was the most painful to watch since Ford's. In the three years since Hitchcock made his last major public appearance (plugging *Family Plot* in a national closed-circuit press conference), his physical condition has deteriorated alarmingly. Despite optimistic assertions from Hitchcock and his backers at Universal Studios, close friends of the venerable seventy-nine-year-old director sadly admit what was obvious to anyone who watched the AFI event in person or on CBS-TV: it is unlikely that Hitch-

cock has the strength to make another film.

Hitchcock had a pacemaker implanted in his chest two years ago, and he now finds that arthritis in his legs makes it difficult for him to walk. On the day of the tribute, readers of the *Los Angeles Times* were told by Charles Chaplin in an interview-profile of Hitchcock that aside from having to walk with a cane, Hitchcock was in better health than he had been before the pacemaker was implanted. What the readers weren't told was that the day before the dinner, AFI officials were thrown into a panic when Hitchcock's doctors forbade him to attend. As a precautionary measure, his acceptance speech was taped in advance, on the afternoon of the event. Hitchcock finally mustered up the strength to attend the ceremony—defying his doctors' orders to use his cane when he entered the ballroom of the Beverly Hilton Hotel—but he had trouble getting through the speech at the dinner even with the aid of cue cards.

As Todd McCarthy reported in *Daily Variety* several days later, TV director Marty Pasetta had to intercut both speeches to give viewers the illusion of

an error-free delivery. One of the gaffes rectified in the editing was Hitchcock's describing his honor as the "Lifetime Amusement Award," though there were those in the audience who felt that Hitchcock may have purposely misread the cue card at that point. The stitching process was evident to careful viewers, however, because Hitchcock was standing when he taped the speech against a black background in the afternoon, and was sitting when he repeated it at the dinner. He tried to stand up when AFI director George Stevens Jr. handed him the award, but he fell back into his chair in full view of the national TV audience. Pasetta skillfully edited out other embarrassing moments, tightening, for example, Hitchcock's painfully interminable entrance into the ballroom and disguising his slowness with rapid, multi-directional cutting. But he left in Hitchcock's turning to Cary Grant and clearly mouthing "Who's that?" when Sean Connery, the male lead of *Marnie* and also of Hitchcock's current film project, was introduced. Pasetta admitted that he had received some criticism for including that moment, but defended his decision by shrugging, "That's Hitch."

In addition to his own state of health,

another of Hitchcock's worries on the day of the dinner was whether his wife Alma, an invalid since two strokes left her partially paralyzed, would be able to attend. She made it, and indeed seemed more alert than her husband, who sat impassive as a statue throughout most of the evening. Both Hitchcocks require round-the-clock nursing care at their Bel Air home, but Hitchcock doggedly clings to his routine of holding story conferences every weekday in his bungalow at Universal for his 54th film project, a spy thriller called *The Short Night*.

Though plagued all his life by obesity, Hitchcock remained relatively robust until his wife had her first mild stroke in 1972. Intensely devoted to his home life, Hitchcock, as biographer John Russell Taylor reports in his recently published *Hitch*, reacted to Alma's stroke by "neglecting his own carefully guarded health, abandoning his usual regime and eating and drinking with more freedom than for many years—almost as though he felt he was only taking care of himself for Alma, and the possibility of life without Alma was not to be contemplated." Her second, more serious stroke accelerated his own process of decline.

If the last few years have been an ordeal for Hitchcock physically, his admirers around the world have the satisfaction that, unlike so many other veteran directors, he has never been shunted aside by Hollywood as "unbankable." His last real hit was *The Birds* in 1963, but Universal has been respectful and indulgent, as well it should be, considering that Hitchcock owns a large chunk of the stock of Universal's parent company, MCA Inc. Much of his holdings were acquired when he sold his two TV series to Universal's syndication arm, and MCA stock has split twice since then, giving Hitchcock a comfortable haven in a studio not always noted for its dedication to the art of the cinema. During the shooting of *Family Plot*, Hitchcock gleefully received daily reports on the boxoffice receipts of *Jaws*, which caused his stock to soar to even greater heights. Hitchcock has retained a certain irreverence toward his financial patrons, however. When I visited the set of *Family Plot* during the height of the *Jaws* euphoria, I heard Bruce Dern and Hitchcock discussing whether they should scrawl graffiti on the outside wall of William Devane's garage hideaway. Dern jokingly suggested painting the *Jaws* ad logo of a gaping shark's mouth on the wall, but Hitchcock puckishly

dead-panned, "No, Bruce, I know what we should write—'Fuck MCA.'"

Family Plot, though not without its charms, was generally considered a disappointment, and it's unfortunate that Hitchcock probably won't get another chance to cap his career with a final masterpiece. François Truffaut, whose book-length interview with Hitchcock has become the standard text on the director, came to Hollywood for the Hitchcock tribute and also for his own concurrent AFI retrospective. Truffaut's spirits, already dampened by the death Feb. 12 of his other cinema mentor, Jean Renoir, were made even more somber by his awareness of Hitchcock's infirmities. At a discussion following a Hollywood screening of Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, which Truffaut selected to show how Hitchcock has influenced him, Truffaut commented, "I regret that Hitchcock is not fifteen or twenty years younger, because he made his last few films before the recent tendency in Hollywood to increase budgets for films. Hitchcock would be the best director for disaster movies. It's a shame that while directors today have the ability to do incredible visual things, he can't take advantage of it . . . Yet I still prefer in his films the scenes which deal with human relationships. We speak too often of the strong visual side of his films and not enough of the emotions in them."

After *Family Plot*, Hitchcock vacillated for a while about his next project. Universal still refuses to let him shoot his dream project, James M. Barrie's wistfully melancholic ghost story *Mary Rose*, which it evidently considers too odd; Hitchcock's current contract at the studio, he told me, actually contains a clause enjoining him from making *Mary Rose*, though he slyly confessed that he sneaked a bit of *Mary Rose* into the opening seance scene in *Family Plot*. His sights eventually turned to *The Short Night*, a Ronald Kirkbride novel based on the real-life story of British traitor George Blake, who defected to Moscow after being convicted of causing the deaths of forty-two British agents.

The central character (to be played by Connery) is a brother of one of the traitor's victims; sent by intelligence agencies to kill the traitor before he reaches the USSR, the Connery character finds the pursuit complicated in perversely romantic Hitchcockian fashion when he falls in love with the traitor's wife (Liv Ullman), finally winning over her divided loyalty and persuading her to join in the killing. Though the script

calls for several elaborate visual set-pieces in the tradition of Hitchcock's classic thrillers (including a bravura aerial tracking shot which is meticulously described over a page and a half in the screenplay, and a climactic train chase across the Russian border), Hitchcock's associates say it is not so much the visual mechanics which engage his fascination, but, as always, the interplay of suspicion and trust in the suspenseful love story. As Truffaut observed in his testimonial at the AFI dinner, "You respect him because he films scenes of love as if they were scenes of murder. We respect him because he films scenes of murder as if they were scenes of love."

The screenplay of *The Short Night* is so vivid and precise in its visual detailing (aside from long dialogue master scenes, which are not broken down into shots) that a reader familiar with Hitchcock's style has little trouble imagining it on the screen. Despite Hitchcock's traditional protestations that the actual shooting of a film bores him, it is clear from the script that what would make it come alive is the intangible chemistry between the director and the performers enacting the love story. The first writer Hitchcock turned to for the project was James Costigan (*Love Among the Ruins*), but they couldn't agree on the approach, so Hitchcock brought back Ernest Lehman, who wrote *North by Northwest* and *Family Plot*.

This was a major surprise to Hollywood observers, because Hitchcock clashed with Lehman on *Family Plot* and actually went so far as to tell journalists that it was the strain of working with Lehman that caused him to have the pacemaker implanted. Hitchcock regarded the pacemaker as a badge of honor, opening his shirt in Chasen's restaurant to show it to a *Variety* reporter, tapping the device and solemnly intoning, "Ernie Lehman did this to me." Evidently all was forgiven, and Lehman finished the script of *The Short Night* on June 26, 1978. But when a production staff was assembled, and it became apparent that the extensive location shooting in Finland would necessitate relegating those scenes to a second-unit director, Hitchcock, rather than face facts and cancel the film, temporized by disbanding the production staff and calling for a script rewrite by David Freeman, which is still in progress at this time.

"Nothing will ever stop Hitch," his wife declared at Hitchcock's seventy-fifth birthday party. Now he's trying his damndest to prove her right. ☹