

Reviews

Books

HITCHCOCK

François Truffaut. *Secker & Warburg*, 5 gns.

Alfred Hitchcock, having agreed to a series of long interviews with François Truffaut, survives a fifty-hour stint disclosing and illuminating little that could not be discovered elsewhere. He is a master showman, a rhetorical film-maker and interviewee *par excellence* but he remains elusive. Understandably, many will want this book for their shelves. It has its rewards but at the same time it is exasperating.

The sections follow Hitchcock's career in chronological order; there is a filmography, and an inadequate select bibliography. Even at the end of the series of interviews, Truffaut is reverently calling him 'Mr. Hitchcock', still attempting to shape the interviews to a pattern they will not follow and describing films that Hitchcock has not seen (but clearly should have). In this instance, Hitchcock is undeniably kind:

T: I wonder whether you know *Night of the Hunter*, the only picture Charles Laughton ever directed?

H: No, I never saw it.

T: Well, in that picture there was a very good idea that reminded me of your films. Robert Mitchum plays the preacher of one of those secret, strange, religious sects. The word 'love' was tattooed on one of his hands and the word 'hate' on the other. His sermons consisted in a sort of pathetic struggle between the two hands. It was quite effective. When I saw that, it occurred to me that your pictures also describe the conflict between good and evil. It's shown in a great variety of ways – some of them quite powerful – and yet it's always simplified, just like that fight between the two hands. Do you agree?

H: I would say so. The other day we mentioned a slogan: the better the villain, the better the picture. We might turn that round and say, 'The stronger the evil, the stronger the film.'

Undeterred, Truffaut treats us to an illustration from *Night of the Hunter* and proceeds to pursue the subject of moral conflict in Hitchcock's films. But Hitchcock simply agrees with Truffaut to force him on to the next topic. Truffaut seems to lack the forcefulness to compel Hitchcock to lower his façade. It is unfortunate that one of the main points in a late chapter should still be Hitchcock's use of the camera to convey the viewpoint of a central character. It is the one thing that every critic knows as 'Hitchcockian'. It should have emerged in an early interview and then been abandoned.

Hitchcock seems to have developed little in the thematic sense, it is true. A film like *The Lodger* (1926) in which he exercises his own style for the first time, has striking similarities with *Psycho* (1960). To discuss one of his films often illuminates the others. At the same time, he appears to be attempting different technical approaches to achieve the same kinds of effect. If one considers *Blackmail*, *Notorious* or *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (both versions), it is immediately obvious that one of the things Hitchcock is trying to express is the subjective sensations and anxieties of the characters central to his interest. The story, at times, is told from the point of view of the main character. In *The Lodger* Ivor Novello fits the description of a murderer. It is a story loosely based on the 'Jack the Ripper' murders. He enters his newly rented room and notices on the wall pictures of attractive blonde girls and Bacchanalian rapes. Already he has shown nervousness when he hears the daughter of the house and now, as the camera moves round from picture to picture, the viewer knows from whose viewpoint they are being seen. His trembling response suggests an association with the murderer and the shadow of the window which crosses his face like a prison bar, conveys his torment, the consequence of his inability to even look at the pictures without an emotional upheaval. Similarly, in his first sound film *Blackmail*, Hitchcock attempts the same effect by careful and discriminate use of sound. Alice (Anny Ondra) has a boy friend in the police force. On the way home one night she is enticed up to an artist's flat and he attempts to rape her. In her panic, she picks up a knife and stabs him to death. We see her walking home in the early morning. She

walks by a tramp, asleep on the pavement, his hand outstretched, and this immediately reminds her of the man she has just killed. Here, Hitchcock laps the sound of Alice's response to the woman discovering the body. Haunted with feelings of guilt, she clammers into bed, just before a cup of tea is brought to her. Doors are used to cut off sound to leave the audience with Alice. Gradually the audience is shown how she feels. As she puts on her makeup, she catches sight of a photograph of her boy friend in uniform and the associations which she has, make her drop and break the lid of her powder bowl. She walks in silence downstairs and opens a door to where everyone seems to be talking about the murder. She enters a telephone kiosk and immediately the sound of the people outside is excluded. It would have been quite easy for Hitchcock to have shown the box from outside, the conversation still raging, but he tries to create the sensation of her isolation. Again, as she looks through the telephone directory for the telephone number of her boy friend's police station, the words 'Metropolitan Police' suggest to her more that she will be accused than helped and she decides not to make the call. Already the approach of the rest of the sequence is established. She seems to hear only those expressions which are like accusations to her. A customer, boorishly talking about the murder mentions the word 'knife' and she can think of nothing else. Soon the words that were seemingly being said by someone else, ring in her ears and become her own – distorted and amplified.

Truffaut lets most of this slip from his grasp. When Hitchcock begins to discuss the use of sound in *Blackmail*, for example, Truffaut cuts across to a question about trick sequences. If the manner in which Hitchcock builds tension around the main character had been adequately dealt with early in the interview, the repetitious (even dull) pattern of the book could have been avoided.

Everyone knows that Hitchcock repeats, refines and alters his films like a good rhetorician.

I suppose I'm limited to a certain field . . . yet I feel there's still a lot to be done. The phase I'm going through at this time is to try to correct a major weakness in my work in respect of the thin characterizations within the suspense stories. It's not so simple because when you work with strong characters, they seem to take you where they want to go. . . . This has always been a conflict with

me because I require certain effects. I'm drawn by the wish to put intriguing settings in my pictures.

Review – continued

Elsewhere, he has described how some of his films develop:

North by Northwest came into being because of a sole, provocative idea with which I had long been obsessed. The inspirational sequence takes place at the picture's climax, a unique predicament in which the hero, Grant, was placed before even one word of the script was written by Ernest Lehman.

When we began we hadn't the foggiest how to get Cary out of the mess. Or for that matter, how he got into it in the first place. So we worked backwards and forwards at the same time, trying one thought after another, racking our brains for weeks on end before we came up with the answers.

(Hitchcock interviewed in *Films and Filming*, July 1959)

Hitchcock's approach to film-making has been described in terms of the director asking himself the question 'How would it be if . . .' How would it be if a man were to be shot during a loud passage of music in the Albert Hall? (*The Man Who Knew Too Much*). How would it be if a man were to carry out a murder for someone else and attempt to blackmail him into doing the same for him? (*Strangers on a Train*). How would it be if a priest having received the confession of a murderer and bound by the secrets of the confessional, were himself to be suspected of the murder? (*I Confess*). This seems to explain why the set pieces tend to come in the middle of the film. Although there are some remarkable similarities between his films, Hitchcock is continually striving for something new. The centre piece of *North by Northwest* for example, has been influenced by many traditionally told murder stories. The wide open space, the blazing sun, the dry roads are the result of a conscious avoidance of the dark alley, the wet roadway and the gas street lamp.

Hitchcock's need of set pieces explains why a writer like Raymond Chandler found it difficult to work with him.

While Chandler worried about the most believable thing to be done by someone in a particular situation, Hitchcock always knew where they had to be – a tennis championship, a fairground roundabout – and was concerned mainly with devising ways of making his characters fit the pre-arranged pattern in as few moves as possible.

(*Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1966)

Hitchcock's interviews are as rhetorical as his film-making. It is charming but disappointing to discover that when he speaks to Truffaut of 'surprise' and 'suspense', he is basically repeating what he said in an interview in *Film* when he made a crude distinction between the two.

Take a very simple example: I'm sitting here with two or three people and we're jabbering away, some irresponsible talk about football, and suddenly a bomb goes off and blows us all to smithereens. The audience have fifteen seconds of shock. Now take the same scene and put the bomb under the table. Tell the audience it's there and going to go off in five minutes. Same scene, same dialogue. Look at the difference in the audience's emotions. They say 'Stop talking that silly nonsense'; they're getting nervous. The one thing you must not do is let the bomb off. I did it in *Sabotage* and I'd never make that mistake again. A foot must touch it and the bomb must be out of the window and exploding away. If you let it explode the audience is angry because you've put them through the wringer and then you confirm it.

Whilst Truffaut recognizes how frequently Hitchcock has made the distinction, he asks for it again.

There is a distinct difference between 'suspense' and 'surprise', and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. I'll explain what I mean.

We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, 'Boom!' There is an explosion. The public is *surprised*, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now let us take a *suspense* situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public *knows* it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is *aware* that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the décor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: 'You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There's a bomb beneath you and it's about to explode!'

In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of *surprise* at the moment of the explosion. In the second

case we have provided them with fifteen minutes of *sis-pense*. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. Except when the surprise is a twist, that is, when the unexpected ending is in itself the highlight of the story.

It has been refined, it is a little more polished, and slightly more coloured.

The thematic side of his films can be seen as a peg on which he can hang a different coat:

Most people forget that the true function of the film is to put together pieces of film to get ideas. Dialogue is incidental, though we use it naturally. I suppose one of the most cinematic pictures I've made was *Rear Window* where a man never moves from one spot, but, by what he sees from that window, he builds up a whole set of ideas through which he uncovers a murder. The whole story is told in the way he looks and reacts. To show you the pure power of how pieces of film change the idea imagine he looks at a mother nursing a child and you cut back to him and he smiles. Now Mr. Stewart is a benign gentleman. Take away the middle piece of film and substitute a shot of a girl in a bikini. *Now* he's a dirty old man.

(from an interview quoted in *Film*)

Here again the old master is at work, retaining those elements which are effective and presenting points in another way where they are not. In *Hitchcock*, he again talks about *Rear Window*.

It was a possibility of doing a purely cinematic film. You have an immobilized man looking out. That's one part of the film. The second part shows how he reacts. This is actually the purest expression of a cinematic idea. Pudovkin dealt with this, as you know. In one of his books on the art of montage, he describes an experiment by his teacher Kuleshov. You see a close-up of the Russian actor Ivan Mosjoukine. This is immediately followed by a shot of a dead baby. Back to Mosjoukine again and you read compassion on his face. Then you take away the dead baby and you show a plate of soup, and now, when you go back to Mosjoukine, he looks hungry. Yet in both cases, they used the same shot of the actor; his face was exactly the same.

In the same way, let's take a close-up of Stewart looking out of the window at a little dog that's being lowered

in a basket. Back to Stewart, who has a kindly smile. But if in the place of the little dog you show a half-naked girl exercising in front of her open window, and you go back to a smiling Stewart again, this time he's seen as a dirty old man!

Truffaut, of course, allows Hitchcock to ignore the relationship between his work and that of others. He makes no reference to the influence of Eisenstein on the assassination sequence in *Foreign Correspondent*. Nor does he mention how German Expressionism affected the making of *Blackmail*. Since Rohmer and Chabrol wrote on Hitchcock, it has been customary to trace certain metaphysical themes in his work. Many writers have written on this and there is not room for more than a sketch here. There do seem to be similarities of plot. Many of his characters seem to adopt the roles of other people in his films, sometimes taking over responsibility for some crime of which they are innocent. Sometimes they actually take over someone else's identity. In *The Wrong Man*, an innocent man, played by Henry Fonda, answers the description of a man known to have committed a number of robberies. His physical similarity with the criminal is so strong that he is identified by people as the thief. Hitchcock shows the two faces, one emerging from the other, almost as if they were separate sides of the same personality. Some of the shots of the handcuffed Henry Fonda, looking terrified and unable to control the situation emphasize that this could happen to anyone. In *I Confess*, Montgomery Clift plays the part of a priest who, having heard a confession from a murderer finds himself the main suspect. He is bound by the secret of the Confessional not to divulge the real criminal. By not doing so and by knowing all the facts of the murder, he too seems to be not only taking over responsibility for the crime he did not commit but actually becoming the person himself. In *Marnie*, Tippi Hedren has killed a sailor who was brutally beating her mother. Her mother was a prostitute and Marnie can remember nothing of the incident which took place when she was a child. Here the transference of roles moves in two directions. The mother has publicly taken the responsibility for the killing. She has a damaged leg which dates from the incident. She has kept Marnie from knowing the truth. On the other hand, Marnie seems to take over the role of prostitute, identifying herself with her mother. Sexually, she herself is frigid, but she always works for rich men, obliges them in any way she can and then steals from them, as if for services rendered. *North by North-*

west provides perhaps the most remarkable example of the manner in which Hitchcock characters adopt the role of others. Here, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) is mistaken by international agents for an American agent called Kaplan. At first he asserts his own identity. He has documents to establish his real one but they are discounted as forgeries. There follows an attempt to kill him by making him drunk and putting him in charge of a car on a dangerous road. He manages to escape and tries to solve the matter. However, when he calls at the United Nations building to see the person he thinks is responsible for the attempt on his life, he gives the name of Kaplan to the receptionist. In fact, Kaplan does not exist. He is a fictitious character created to enable American Intelligence to protect their real agent. (Hitchcock calls it his best Maguffin.) But although he doesn't exist, rooms are booked for him at hotels, his luggage is moved around, his suits are pressed by the hotel staff. Soon Roger Thornhill is trying on the man's clothing saying 'They've mistaken me for a much shorter man'. Even later when the facts are revealed to him, he is asked to continue to be Kaplan for a little longer and he agrees. By now he has actually become someone else. The film ends with a chase. Talking to the heroine, who asks him what became of his two marriages, he says, 'My wives divorced me; they said I didn't lead an exciting enough life'. *Psycho*, although superb in many respects, provides a crude example of the adoption of someone else's role. Here, the hero, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), who murders women as a substitute for making love to them, dresses up in his mother's clothes before he kills. By this, he satisfies two urges, his own sexual one and his (or his mother's) expression of disgust at anything to do with sex. In the closing shot of the film his personality is indistinguishable from that of his mother. In *Vertigo* the hero, James Stewart, forces a girl to dress like a girl who has been killed, even compelling her to relive the same events. Finally the girl sees herself exactly in the situation which led to the other girl's death and falls from the top of a tower.

Often, quite innocent people get dragged into the centre of Hitchcock films. They are obliged to play roles which are not naturally theirs. The terrifying situation often stems from two things: some people do not seem to care or believe in the seriousness of the dilemma of the central characters; others believe in spite of the evidence, that they are guilty of some crime of which they are really innocent and that they

are someone other than they are. A good example of the first is to be found in *North by Northwest*, where the two would-be assassins are travelling down in the lift with Roger Thornhill and his mother. He points them out to her. She unbelievably turns to them: 'You're not really trying to kill my son, are you?' After a brief spell of discomfort, the occupants of the lift are rocking with disbelieving laughter. Often in a Hitchcock film, the truth is spoken in jest. Examples of the other are to be found throughout his whole work, but it is worth noting that in *To Catch a Thief*, Cary Grant sets out to establish his innocence of some burglaries which have all his own trademarks. When he finally catches the thief and is holding her by one hand from a roof-top, he forces a confession from her. 'Now let me know who's who and what's what' he says to her, at the same time threatening to let her fall.

Similarities can be found in the confession-like sequences of many films. The agonized end of *Marnie* where the truth is finally unravelled is not too distinct from the end of *Psycho* at one level. And neither is particularly distinct from *Rope* which contrives to make the murderers confess. The film is not an unravelling of a mystery, but a psychological thriller in which the facts are known about from the beginning. Confession sequences appear in other films as well. *Under Capricorn* and *Spellbound* contain them and the disclosures of the East German scientist in *Torn Curtain* have the same tone.

But what of Hitchcock as social commentator? In *Psycho*, for instance, the Bates Motel where the murders take place is outside the town. People seem to deny any knowledge of what goes on there. The facile summing up by the psychiatrist enables everyone to shirk any feelings of responsibility. The explanation which he offers seems to be consciously glib, almost as if to cover up the possibility of this kind of thing occurring in a decent environment or to avoid his own feelings of responsibility. Yet a woman has been shown buying an insect spray. 'Insects or Man, death should be painless', she says, which again suggests the way in which death can be systematically carried out in contemporary society, without emotion, without any real belief that the people being murdered are different from animals.

In *North by Northwest*, there seems to be an emphasis on the ability that rich people have to buy whatever they want. Cary Grant always has money at his fingertips and never

waits for change. Perhaps even people can be bought. When he goes to the auction and confronts Eva Marie Saint and James Mason they talk about prices. He asks how much he paid to get her. The morality of relationships does not seem to count. Hence the intelligence organization is prepared to let Eva Marie Saint sleep with James Mason, even perhaps be killed, for its own reasons. Certainly it feels its cause is more important than either of their lives, or their life together. In the final chase on Mount Rushmore, Eva Marie Saint and Cary Grant cling to the traditional images of American democracy. They have travelled together on the Twentieth Century Express. Although at one level, it is comedy, it seems to reach beyond joking to a commentary on political morality.

Hitchcock is an old hand at it. In *Notorious* which Truffaut understandably admires, he explores similar ground. Ingrid Bergman is forced to undergo many harrowing experiences to prove her love for Cary Grant and her loyalty to the United States. In effect she proves neither because both want more than can be given. *Notorious* and *Marnie* both contain sadist heroes.

Mark Rutland's background contrasts with that of Marnie. His attitude towards money and her struggles all suggest a solid class attitude towards the characters. Strut, from whom Marnie has stolen, turns round at one point and says 'Just wait till you've been victimized' and we are immediately shown Marnie. But victims require persecutors and in this film they can only be provided by Mark and the kind of person with whom he mixes who are all prosperous businessmen. The villain is Mark, just as the villain of *Notorious* is Cary Grant. Both are sexual blackmailers; Mark even owns up to it. Money, it seems, can buy anything.

The ends of Hitchcock's films are also ignored. He jokes about the train going into the tunnel in *North by Northwest* and mentions the delightful irony in the last shot of *To Catch a Thief* where as John Robie (Cary Grant) kisses Frances Stevens (Grace Kelly) he finds that the mother-in-law will be moving in and we are shown his anxious eye. But his general approach is hardly mentioned. Elsewhere he has said:

I always feel the last reels of a film should have a lift. You have the audience sitting there all that time deprived of their social processes, so you need to give them a lift. I've even gone as far as to change the style of acting – to

make it a little hammier a little stronger – because of the length of the film.

It follows that with alterations because of commercial reasons, the conclusions have to be looked at carefully. *Blackmail* had a completely different ending in its original plan and the ending we know has to be understood in this light. The ending of *Notorious* where Devlin (Cary Grant) returns to rescue Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) who is being slowly poisoned, rings false. He has said that he is leaving for Spain. He seems to have condemned her to death. And yet he returns to save her. It seems like a wish, a dream on the part of Alicia, the kind of thing she would want to happen rather than what does occur. Similarly, the end of *North by Northwest* also sees death although it is heavily disguised. Eve (Eva Marie Saint) and Roger Thornhill can no longer hold on to the rock face of Mount Rushmore. She says so and there is a sudden cut to Roger Thornhill now married to her pulling her up to the bed in a railway carriage. There is no explanation or connection between them, merely the hope or fantasy that this could happen. It is more consistent with the style of the film to accept that they do die and that the final shots reflect unfulfilled hopes. It is also additional evidence for believing that the end of *Psycho* is meant not merely as a joke but as a way of emphasizing the reluctance that there is in society to seriously examine its own nature.

The value of *Hitchcock* is that we have collected together some of Hitchcock's best anecdotes, a larger number of new, if, on the whole, minor facts which contribute to the catalogue of examples of his totally commercial style. A sequence from *Torn Curtain* was removed from the final version mainly because of his experience with *The Secret Agent*.

I made that picture in England thirty years ago and it was a flop. Do you remember the reason why? Because the central figure had to commit a killing he didn't want to do, and the public couldn't identify with a hero who was so reluctant to carry out his mission. So I felt that with *Torn Curtain* I would be falling into this trap again through that factory scene.

It is this dedication to the audience that becomes the main influence on his style. It comes out at every opportunity. He slips it in when talking about *Psycho* and benevolently patronizes Truffaut who expresses amazement at its profit. Ignore

the notices, is his advice and design your films 'for an audience'. It is advice that may well have fallen on deaf ears because Truffaut shows no real understanding of Hitchcock's films. The tricks fascinate him and the technical problems, but never the genuine macabre which is as much Hitchcock as the position of the camera in a first person sequence. Somehow the theme of *Psycho*, concerned with what lies beneath the surface of social respectability, never emerges. Truffaut doesn't even develop the structure of *Marnie* or examine the nature of Marnie's compulsive stealing. Hitchcock tries to help but Truffaut isn't having any.

Review – continued

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