

## ALFRED HITCHCOCK

### Rear Window

There are two kinds of directors: those who have the public in mind when they conceive and make their films and those who don't consider the public at all. For the former, cinema is an art of spectacle; for the latter, it is an individual adventure. There is nothing intrinsically better about one or the other; it's simply a matter of different approaches. For Hitchcock as for Renoir, as for that matter almost all American directors, a film has not succeeded unless it is a success, that is, unless it touches the public that one has had in mind right from the moment of choosing the subject matter to the end of production. While Bresson, Tati, Rossellini, Ray make films their own way and then invite the public to join the "game," Renoir, Clouzot, Hitchcock and Hawks make movies for the public, and ask themselves all the questions they think will interest their audience.

Alfred Hitchcock, who is a remarkably intelligent man, formed the habit early—right from the start of his career in England—of predicting each aspect of his films. All his life he has worked to make his own tastes coincide with the public's, emphasizing humor in his English period and suspense in his American period. This dosage of humor and suspense has made Hitchcock one of the most commercial directors in the world (his films regularly bring in four times what they cost). It is the strict demands he makes on himself and on his art that have made him a great director.

Summing up the intrigue in *Rear Window* will not by any means convey its inventiveness, which is too complicated simply to recap. Confined to his armchair because of a broken leg, reporter/photogra-

pher Jeffrey (James Stewart) watches his neighbors through his rear window. As he watches, he becomes convinced that one of them has killed his bad-tempered, complaining, ill wife. The investigation, as he carries it out, even though he's immobilized by his cast, is part of the movie's plot. Now we have to add a bright young woman who would like to marry Jeffrey (Grace Kelly), and then, one by one, his neighbors across the courtyard. There is the childless household devastated by the death of a little dog they believe has been "poisoned"; a slightly exhibitionist young lady; a lonely woman and a failed composer who will in the end join together against their mutual temptations to suicide and maybe establish a home; the young newlyweds who make love all day; and finally the killer and his victim.

I see when I sum it up in this way that the plot seems more slick than profound, and yet I am convinced that this film is one of the most important of all the seventeen Hitchcock has made in Hollywood, one of those rare films without imperfection or weakness, which concedes nothing. For example, it is clear that the entire film revolves around the idea of marriage. When Kelly goes into the suspect's apartment, the proof she is looking for is the murdered woman's wedding ring; Kelly puts it on her own finger as Stewart follows her movements through his binoculars from the other side of the courtyard. But there is nothing at the end that indicates that they will marry. *Rear Window* goes beyond pessimism; it is really a cruel film. Stewart fixes his glasses on his neighbors only to catch them in moments of failure, in ridiculous postures, when they appear grotesque or even hateful.

The film's construction is very like a musical composition: several themes are intermingled and are in perfect counterpoint to each other—marriage, suicide, degradation, and death—and they are all bathed in a refined eroticism (the sound recording of lovemaking is extraordinarily precise and realistic). Hitchcock's impassiveness and "objectivity" are more apparent than real. In the plot treatment, the direction, sets, acting, details, and especially an unusual tone that includes realism, poetry, macabre humor and pure fairy tale, there is a vision of the world that verges on misanthropy.

*Rear Window* is a film about indiscretion, about intimacy violated and taken by surprise at its most wretched moments; a film about the impossibility of happiness, about dirty linen that gets washed in the courtyard; a film about moral solitude, an extraordinary symphony of daily life and ruined dreams.

There has been a lot of talk about Hitchcock's sadism. I think the truth is more complex, and that *Rear Window* is the first film in which he has given himself away to such a degree. For the hero of *Shadow of a Doubt*, the world was a pigsty. But in *Rear Window* I think it is Hitchcock who is expressing himself through his character. I ought not to be accused of reading things into it, since the honest subjectivity of *Rear Window* breaks through each shot, and all the more so because the tone (always serious in Hitchcock's films) is geared as usual to its interest as a spectacle, that is, its commercial appeal. It's really a matter of the moral attitude of a director who looks at the world with the exaggerated severity of a sensual puritan.

Hitchcock has acquired such expertise at cinematographic recital that he has, in thirty years, become much more than a good storyteller. As he loves his craft passionately, never stops making movies, and has long since resolved any production problems, he must invent difficulties and create new disciplines for himself to avoid boredom and repetition. His recent films are filled with fascinating constraints that he always overcomes brilliantly.

In this case, the challenge was to shoot a whole film in one single place, and solely from Stewart's point of view. We see only what he sees, and from his vantage point, at the exact moment he sees it. What could have been a dry and academic gamble, an exercise in cold virtuosity, turns out to be a fascinating spectacle because of a sustained inventiveness which nails us to our seats as firmly as James Stewart is immobilized by his plaster cast.

In the face of such a film, so odd and so novel, we are liable to forget somewhat the stunning virtuosity; each scene by itself is a gamble that has been won. The effort to achieve freshness and novelty affects the camera's movements, the special effects, decor, color. (Recall the murderer's gold-framed eyeglasses lit in the dark only by the intermittent glow of a cigarette!)

Anyone who has perfectly understood *Rear Window* (which is not possible in one viewing) can, if he so wishes, dislike it and refuse to be involved in a game where blackness of character is the rule. But it is so rare to find such a precise idea of the world in a film that one must bow to its success, which is unarguable.

To clarify *Rear Window*, I'd suggest this parable: The courtyard is the world, the reporter/photographer is the filmmaker, the binoculars stand for the camera and its lenses. And Hitchcock? He is the man we love to be hated by.

## To Catch a Thief

John Robie (Cary Grant), an American thief who had worked in France before the war, had such a personal technique that each of his crimes bore his stamp, and he had been dubbed “the Cat.” Eventually caught and imprisoned, Robie, when the prison was accidentally bombed, took advantage of the situation. He escaped, joined the underground and eventually became a Resistance hero.

The film finds Robie some years later, when he has completely retired to a villa in Saint-Paul-de-Vence to live in considerable comfort on the profits of his earlier career. His tranquility is soon spoiled by a series of jewel thefts in the great mansions and hotels of the French Riviera, thefts committed by someone as expert as he and in his style.

He falls under suspicion and his retirement and daily routine are disrupted. So the ex-Cat decides that the only way to get back his peace and quiet is to unmask the plagiarist burglar who has baffled the police. To track down his imitator he employs a dialectic Arsène Lupin would not disavow: “To unmask the new Cat, I must catch him in the act during his next theft; to figure out who his next victim will be (since “he” reasons by imagining himself in “my” place) all I have to do is imagine what I would once have done, or what I would do now if I were in his place; *that is, in the final analysis, in my own place.*” Naturally, Robie succeeds.

I have bothered to tell you the story line of *To Catch a Thief* in such detail to demonstrate that, in spite of appearances, once more Hitchcock remains absolutely faithful to his perennial themes: interchangeability, the reversed crime, moral and almost physical identification between two human beings.

Without wanting to reveal the outcome of *To Catch a Thief*, I am sure that it is no accident that Brigitte Auber resembles Grant and wears an identical striped jersey: blue-and-white for Grant, red-and-white for Auber. Grant’s hair is parted on the right, Auber’s on the left. They are look-alikes and opposites at the same time, so that there is a perfect symmetry throughout the work, a symmetry that carries over to the smallest details in the intrigue.

*To Catch a Thief* is not a black film, nor is there a lot of suspense in it. The framework is different from *I Confess* or *Strangers on a Train*, but the basics remain the same and the same relationships bind the characters to each other.

I mentioned Arsène Lupin before because this new film of Hitchcock's is elegant, humorous, sentimental almost to the point of bitterness, somewhat in the manner of *813* or *L'Aiguille Creuse*. It is, of course, a crime story that is designed to make us laugh, but nonetheless Hitchcock's basic idea led him to Jacques Becker's formula in *Touchez pas au Grisbi*: the thieves are burned out. The protagonist, admirably portrayed by Cary Grant, is disillusioned, finished. This last job, which forces him to use all his skill as a burglar for the ends of a policeman, fills him with nostalgia for action. You may be surprised that I consider *To Catch a Thief* a pessimistic film, but you have only to listen to Georgie Auld's and Lyn Murray's melancholy music and watch Grant's unusual performance.

As in *Dial M for Murder* and *Rear Window*, Hitchcock's use of Grace Kelly is critical: here she embodies the character of a superb Yankee Marie-Chantal, and she's the one who finally catches Grant by getting him to marry her.

I have read that *To Catch a Thief* has been criticized for its lack of realism. But André Bazin has pointed out the nature of Hitchcock's relationship to realism:

Hitchcock does not cheat the spectator; whether it is a case of simple dramatic interest or of profound anguish, our curiosity is not compelled by a vagueness about what the threats are. It isn't a question of mysterious "atmosphere" out of which all sorts of perils might emerge as from a shadow, but of an unbalance: a great mass of iron begins to slip on a smooth slope, and we can calculate quite easily how it will accelerate. The direction then becomes the art of showing reality only at those moments when the suspended perpendicular of the dramatic center of gravity is about to break away from its supporting polygon. Such direction disdains both initial shock and the final crash. For my part, I would certainly see the key to Hitchcock's style—a style that's so personal that we recognize it at first glance in even his most ordinary shots—in the wonderfully determinant quality of this unbalance.

To keep up this imbalance, which creates a nervous tension throughout a film, Hitchcock must obviously sacrifice all those scenes that would be indispensable in a psychological film (connections, exposition, climax), the more since it would obviously bore him to death to shoot

them. He is inclined to neglect verisimilitude in his mysteries, and even to despise plausibility, especially since a whole generation of misguided viewers credits only plots that are “historically . . . sociologically . . . psychologically” plausible.

Alfred Hitchcock has in common with Renoir, Rossellini, Orson Welles and a few other great filmmakers the fact that psychology is the least of his worries. Where the master of suspense achieves realism is in the fidelity to the exactitude and the correctness of the effects within the most improbable scenes. In *To Catch a Thief*, three or four basic implausibilities leap out at the viewer, but never has there been such precision within each image.

Here is an entry from the record: After Hitchcock had returned to Hollywood to direct the studio scenes for *To Catch a Thief*, his assistants remained in France to film the “transparencies” on the Riviera. Here is the text of a telegram he sent from Hollywood to his assistant in Nice to have him redo a scene which would last two, or perhaps three, seconds at the most on screen:

DEAR HERBY: Have watched scene where auto avoids oncoming bus. Afraid it doesn't work for following reasons: as we-the-camera take the curve the bus appears so suddenly that it is already past before the danger is realized. Two corrections: first: move along the long straight road with the curve at the end so that we are warned about the curve before we get there. When we reach the curve, we should be shocked to find autobus appearing and coming straight at us, because since the curve is narrow the bus should be on the left but we-the-camera should never take the curve straight. Second: in the projected shot, only half the autobus appears on the screen. I realize that this is due to the fact that you are swerving. This error can be corrected by keeping camera trained on the left so that at the same time as the auto takes the curve the camera can pan from left to right. All the rest of the shooting is breathtakingly beautiful. Regards to the whole crew. HITCH.

While it may be a minor film in the career of a man who knows better than all the others what he wants and how to get it, *To Catch a Thief* completely satisfies all his fans—the snobbiest and the most ordinary—and still manages to be one of the most cynical films Hitchcock has ever made. The last scene between Grant and Kelly is classic. It is a curious film that both renews Hitchcock and leaves him unchanged, an amusing, interesting film, very wicked about French police and American tourists.

—1955

## The Wrong Man

Two and a half years ago, my friend Claude Chabrol and I met Alfred Hitchcock when we both fell into an icy pond at the Studio Saint-Maurice under the gaze, at first mocking and then compassionate, of the master of anguish. Because we were soaked, it was several hours before we were able to seek him out again with a new tape recorder. The first one had literally drowned; it was ruined.

It was an extremely concise interview. We wanted to persuade Hitchcock that his recent American films were much better than his earlier English ones. It wasn't very hard: "In London, certain journalists want me to say that everything that comes from America is bad. They are very anti-American in London; I don't know why, but it's a fact." Hitchcock spoke to us about an ideal film one would make for one's own pleasure that could be projected on one's living-room wall the same way one might hang a beautiful painting. We "worked" on this film together.

"Would this ideal film be closer to *I Confess* or to *The Lady Vanishes*?"

"Oh, to *I Confess*!"

"*I Confess*?"

"Yes, by all means. For example, right now I'm thinking over an idea for a film that attracts me very much. Two years ago, a musician from the Stork Club in New York, returning home after work at about two in the morning, was accosted by two men at his door who dragged him to a number of different places, including several bars. In each place they asked, 'Is this the man? Is this the man?' He was then arrested for several robberies. Although he was completely innocent, he had to go through a trial, and by its end his wife had lost her mind. She had to be institutionalized and is to this day. During the trial, one of the jurors, who was convinced of the defendant's guilt, interrupted the defense lawyer as he was questioning one of the prosecution witnesses; the juror raised his hand and asked the judge, 'Your honor, do we have to listen to all this?' It was a small

infringement of the ritual, but it caused a mistrial. As preparations were being made for a new trial, the real culprit was arrested and he confessed. I think this would make an interesting movie, if we showed everything from the point of view of the innocent man, what he has to go through, how his head is on the block for another man's crimes. All the while, everybody is being very friendly, very gentle with him. He insists, 'I'm innocent,' and everybody answers, 'Of course you are, sure you are.' Completely horrible. I think I'd like to make a film from this news item. It would be very interesting. You see, in this movie, the innocent man would be in prison all the time, and a reporter or a detective would work to get him out. They never make films from the point of view of the accused man. I would like to do that."

A year ago, we learned from the American newspapers that Hitchcock was in the process of making a film called *The Wrong Man*. One didn't have to be a mind reader to figure out that it was based on the event we'd discussed.

Hitchcock has never been more himself than in this film, which nevertheless runs the risk of disappointing lovers of suspense and of English humor. There is very little suspense in it and almost no humor, English or otherwise. *The Wrong Man* is Hitchcock's most stripped-down film since *Lifeboat*; it is the roast without the gravy, the news event served up raw and, as Bresson would say, "without adornment." Hitchcock is no fool. If *The Wrong Man*, his first black-and-white film since *I Confess*, is shot inexpensively in the street, subway, the places where the action really occurred, it's because he knew he was making a difficult and relatively less commercial film than he usually does. When it was finished, Hitchcock was undoubtedly worried, for he renounced his usual cameo in the course of the film, and instead showed us his silhouette before the title appeared to warn us that what he was offering this time was something different, a drama based on fact.

There cannot fail to be comparisons made between *The Wrong Man* and Robert Bresson's *Un Condamné à Mort s'est échappé* (*A Man Escaped*). It would be foolish to assume that this would work to the detriment of Hitchcock's film, which is sufficiently impressive right from the start not to have to beg for pride of place. The comparison is no less fascinating when pushed to its utmost, to where the divergences between the two movies cast a mutual light on each other.

The point of departure is identical: the scrupulous reconstruction



of an actual event, its faithful rendering limited solely to the facts. For Bresson's film is as far from the account of Commandant Devigny as Hitchcock's is from the event reported in *Life* magazine. The reality, for both Hitchcock and for Bresson, was simply a pretext, a springboard for a second reality that is the *only* thing that interests them.

Since we are discussing the elements they have in common, we should point out that, faced with an identical problem, although they were seeking different solutions, Bresson and Hitchcock coincided on more than one point. For example, the acting. Just like Leterrier in Bresson's film, Henry Fonda is impassive, expressionless, almost immobile. Fonda is only a look. If his attitude is more crushed and more humble than Bresson's man who is condemned to death, it is because he is not a political prisoner who knows he has won to his cause half the world who thinks as he does, but an ordinary prisoner in criminal court, with all appearances against him and, as the film goes on, less and less chance of proving his innocence. Never was Fonda so fine, so grand and noble as in this film where he has only to present his honest man's face, just barely lit with a sad, an almost transparent, expression.

Another point in common—indeed the most striking—is that Hitchcock has almost made it impossible for the spectator to identify with the drama's hero; we are limited to the role of witnesses. We are at Fonda's side throughout, in his cell, in his home, in the car, on the street, but we are never in his place. That is an innovation in Hitchcock's work, since the suspense of his earlier films was based precisely on identification.

Hitchcock, the director who is most concerned about innovation, this time wants the public to experience a different kind of emotional shock, something clearly rarer than the famous shiver. One final common point: Hitchcock and Bresson have both built their films on one of those coincidences that make scrupulous screenwriters scream. Lieutenant Fontaine escapes miraculously; the stupid intervention of a hostile juror saves Henry Fonda. To this authentic miracle Hitchcock added another of his own making, and it will doubtless shock my colleagues. Fonda (in the film, he is of Italian descent and is named Balestrero) is lost. Waiting for his second trial, he cannot find any proof of his innocence. His wife is in a mental institution and his mother tells him, "You should pray."

So Fonda kneels before a statue of Jesus Christ and prays—"My

God, only a miracle can save me." There is a closeup of Christ, a dissolve, and then a shot in the street that shows a man who somewhat resembles Fonda walking toward the camera until the frame catches him in a closeup with his face and Fonda's superimposed. This is certainly the most beautiful shot in Hitchcock's work and it summarizes all of it. It is the transfer of culpability, the theme of the double, already present in his first English movies, and still present in all his later ones, improved, enriched, and deepened from film to film. With this affirmation of belief in Providence—in Hitchcock's work, too, the wind blows where it will—the similarities culminate and cease.

With Bresson there is a dialogue between the soul and objects, the relationship of the one to others. Hitchcock is more human, obsessed as always by innocence and guilt, and truly agonized by judicial error. As a motto to *The Wrong Man* he could have used this *pensée* of Pascal's: "Truth and justice are two such subtle points that our instruments are too dull to reach them exactly. If they do reach them, they conceal the point and bear down all around, more on what is false than on what is true."

Hitchcock offers a film about the role of the accused man, an accused man and the fragility of human testimony and justice. It has nothing in common with documentaries except its appearance; in its pessimism and skepticism, I believe it is closer to *Nuit et Brouillard* than to André Cayatte's films. In any case, it is probably his best film, the one that goes farthest in the direction he chose so long ago.

—1957

## The Birds

In *8½* someone tries to waylay Guido to propose a script that opposes nuclear arms. Like Fellini, I think that the "noble" film is the trap of traps, the sneakiest swindle in the industry. For a real filmmaker, nothing could be more boring to make than a *Bridge on the River Kwai*: scenes set inside offices alternating with discussions

between old fogies and some action scenes usually filmed by another crew. Rubbish, traps for fools, Oscar machines.

Hitchcock has never won an Oscar, although he is the only living filmmaker whose films, when they are reissued twenty years after their first appearance, are as strong at the box office as new films. His last film, *The Birds*, is admittedly not perfect. Rod Taylor and Tippi Hedren are imperfectly matched, and the sentimental story (as almost always, husband hunting) suffers from it. But what an injustice there is in the generally bad reception. I am so disappointed that no critic admired the basic premise of the film: "Birds attack people." I am convinced that cinema was invented so that such a film could be made. Everyday birds—sparrows, seagulls, crows—take to attacking ordinary people, the inhabitants of a seacoast village. This is an artist's dream; to carry it off requires a lot of art, and you need to be the greatest technician in the world.

Alfred Hitchcock and his collaborator, Evan Hunter (*Asphalt Jungle*), kept only the idea of Daphne du Maurier's short story: seaside birds take to attacking humans, first in the countryside, then in the town, at the exits of schools, and even in their homes.

No film of Hitchcock's has ever shown a more deliberate progression: as the action unfolds, the birds become blacker and blacker, more and more numerous, increasingly evil. When they attack people, they prefer to go for their eyes. Basically fed up with being captured and put in cages—if not eaten—the birds behave as if they had decided to reverse the roles.

Hitchcock thinks that *The Birds* is his most important film. I think so too in a certain way—although I'm not sure. Starting with such a powerful mold, Hitch realized that he had to be extremely careful with the plot so that it would be more than a pretext to connect scenes of bravura or suspense. He created a very successful character, a young San Francisco woman, sophisticated and snobbish, who, in enduring all these bloody experiences, discovers simplicity and naturalness.

*The Birds* can be considered a special-effects film, indeed, but the special effects are realistic. In fact, Hitchcock's mastery of the art grows greater with each film and he constantly needs to invent new difficulties for himself. He has become the ultimate athlete of cinema.

In actual fact, Hitchcock is never forgiven for making us afraid, deliberately making us afraid. I believe, however, that fear is a "noble emotion" and that it can also be "noble" to cause fear. It is "noble"

to admit that one has been afraid and has taken pleasure in it. One day, only children will possess this nobility.

—1963

## Frenzy

In contemporary London, a sex maniac strangles women with a necktie. Fifteen minutes after the film begins, Hitchcock reveals the assassin's identity (we had met him in the second scene). Another man, the focus of the story, is accused of the murders. He will be watched, pursued, arrested, and condemned. We will watch him for an hour and a half as he struggles to survive, like a fly caught in a spider's web.

*Frenzy* is a combination of two kinds of movies: those where Hitchcock invites us to follow the assassin's course: *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Stage Fright*, *Dial M for Murder*, *Psycho* . . . and those in which he describes the torments of an innocent person who is being persecuted: *The Thirty-nine Steps*, *I Confess*, *The Wrong Man*, *North by Northwest*. *Frenzy* is a kind of nightmare in which everyone recognizes himself: the murderer, the innocent man, the victims, the witnesses; a world in which every conversation, whether in a shop or a café, bears on the murders—a world made up of coincidences so rigorously ordered that they crisscross horizontally and vertically. *Frenzy* is like the design of crossword puzzle squares imposed on the theme of murder.

Hitchcock, who is six months older than Luis Buñuel (both are seventy-two), began his career in London, where he was born and where he made the first half of his films. In the forties he became an American citizen and a Hollywood filmmaker. For a long time, critical opinion has been divided between those who admire his American films—*Rebecca*, *Notorious*, *The Rope*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Rear Window*, *The Birds*—and those who prefer his English films: *The Thirty-nine Steps*, *The Lady Vanishes*, *Jamaica Inn*. Hitchcock's fifty-second film, *Frenzy*, was a triumph at the Cannes Festival and reconciled both schools of critics, who acclaimed it unanimously, perhaps

because it is the first film he's made in Great Britain in twenty years. Hitchcock often says, "Some directors film slices of life, but I film slices of cake." *Frenzy* indeed looks like a cake, a "homemade" cake by the septuagenarian gastronome who is still the "boy director" of his London beginnings.

Everybody praised the performances of Jon Finch as the innocent man and of Barry Foster as the strangler. I'd rather emphasize the high quality of the female acting. In *Frenzy*, for the first time Hitchcock turned away from glamorous and sophisticated heroines (of whom Grace Kelly remains the best example) toward everyday women. They are well chosen: Barbara Leigh-Hunt, Anna Massey, Vivien Merchant, and Billie Whitelaw, and they bring a new realism to Hitchcock's work. The formidable ovation given *Frenzy* at the Cannes Festival redeems the contempt that greeted the presentations there of *Notorious* (1946), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1957) and *The Birds* (1963). Hitchcock's triumph is one of style in *recitative*; here it has found its definitive form in a dizzying and poignant narration that never comes to rest, a breathless recitation in which the images follow one another as imperiously and harmoniously as the swift notes of the imperturbable musical score.

Hitchcock has long been judged by the flowers he places in the vase. Now we have at least realized that the flowers are always the same, and that his efforts are directed at the shape of the vase and its beauty. We come out of *Frenzy* saying to ourselves, "I can't wait for Hitchcock's fifty-third movie."

—1973