

FRAMEWORK

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WARREN SONBERT
Selected Writings

Guest Editor
JON GARTENBERG



Figure 1. A youthful Warren Sonbert during the time he was a film production student at New York University.

atmosphere but for "effects," the more gruesome the better. He wants us all to cry, "Ha!" at frequent intervals. Even in Mrs. Radcliffe a primrose by the river brim may well be just a simple primrose, but to Hitchcock it must be something sinister—at least until the moment of horrendous fear has passed.

Critics speak of the mechanical quality in Hitchcock. This is just the point. It is mechanical, artificial. It is a drama of puppets, forever dancing to the tune of the puppet-master. The people have no life of their own, and their world is not a real world, even as the world of the true whodunit is a real world. In fact the whodunit succeeds in proportion as its world is real and plausible. An implausible whodunit is a contradiction in terms. Hitchcock succeeds in proportion as his world is implausible.

And yet he is not a master of fantasy either. The simple truth is, I am afraid, that Hitchcock in his many thrillers lacks the true imagination—the imagination that he had in abundance once. Compare his work with what seems at a glance to be similar—the work of the old serials and of a man like Lang who was influenced by them. There we have atmosphere, a sort of beauty, no matter how outrageous, how bizarre the incidents.

They are indeed poetry, those films, the real *films noirs*. They may call to mind Webster, Tourneur. When Lang sums it all up in that masterpiece of its kind, *Spione*, the whole film seems to be lit with flashes of lurid lightning. The endless procession of Spies, coming and going on their inscrutable missions, dwells in an impossible land of fantasy, and yet it holds us with its imaginative beauty.

With Hitchcock all is prosaic, practical. His very unreality is commonplace. In short his body of thrillers is a sort of modified English Grand Guignol. In place of all the Continental gore there is a subtler form of horror, but still we *know* that this is not true, that such things don't happen. And that is not the right attitude to have before a work of art. For this we must have the willing suspension of disbelief. We must *believe* with our hearts, however well we know that we are presently going home to a dinner of corned beef and cabbage.

It is here, I feel, that Hitchcock, after holding us so superbly in his old films, falls down. The films are fun, but they go only so far. They do not finally persuade us of their truth. So I for one miss the other Hitchcock.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK: MASTER OF MORALITY

Warren Sonbert

Alfred Hitchcock is America's finest director. His themes are cynical yet moralistic. He exploits the materialism, and pettiness of the boobs, his audience. The protagonists in almost every one of his films are a notorious coterie of perverts, murderers, thieves, and impotents. Yet these monsters usually end up in each other's arms, accompanied by the audience's solemn approval. James Stewart personifies the Hitchcockian hero. In the four films of Hitchcock's he has appeared in, he has played a Nietzscheist (*Rope*-1948), a voyeurist (*Rear Window*-1954), a chauvinist (*The Man Who Knew Too Much*-1956), and a necrophiliast (*Vertigo*-1958). This latter film is Hitchcock's greatest and one of the best films ever made. It's a film in the same sense as *North by Northwest* (1959), but that was a joyride, *Vertigo*, isn't. This long, demanding, surrealist dream continually adds amazement to disbelief, to eventual suspension of reality.

Stewart plays a detective, suffering from the titled dizziness. In *Rope*, he walks with a limp, while in *Rear Window* he has a broken leg. This recurring impotency signifies his ineffectual character, inability to relate, and isolation through complacency.

An old college friend hires Stewart to follow the mad wanderings of his wayward wife, Kim Novak. She seems to be a reincarnation of a similarly disturbed ancestor who eventually killed herself. Kim then proceeds to throw herself into San Francisco Bay, is fished out by Stewart, falls in love with Stewart, and leaves Stewart in a successful second try off a Spanish mission tower. Our hero in turn goes mad, and winds up at Happy Dale. Barbara Bel Geddes plays "mother" to our Oedipus and faithfully awaits Stewart's release. An ultra slow fadeout concludes the first half of the film.

The second half finds Stewart released and in intoxicated pursuit of his lost, and quite dead love. He encounters a tramp who matches her features, but differs harshly in personality. By training her, even dressing her, and making her over completely into his former love's image, he gets his perverse kicks. He is foaming at the mouth in delight. This tramp is actually his lost love, and she, along with the husband pushed the real wife off the tower. Kim is thus a murderer. She and Stewart love each other, but morality has to triumph to the spectators dismay. The ending brilliantly presents Hitchcock's taunting attitude.

late. Stewart's self-destructive character makes him twice responsible for the death of the same love. Embraced, the two huddle miserably atop the deserted tower. Suddenly a black, horrendous figure springs up and frightens Kim to step back with a scream and topple to the ground. We hate this enigmatic monster because it has spoiled a happy ending. This horrid creature steps into the light and there stands a nun! But although this moral symbol is the immediate cause for death, it is Stewart's own weakness that is responsible. Through the nun, Hitchcock has scorned the naturalistic values of his audience, for they actually resent the triumph of good over evil.

Kim Novak gives her best performance, mainly because Hitchcock was sagacious enough to keep her mouth shut and utilize her beauty. Her blank, vapid expression fits perfectly. Stewart's acting reaches the zenith of his limited ability: only Hitchcock and John Ford have been successful in capturing his prime naturalism. A bit of surrealism is injected before and during the credits by Saul Bass, whose breathtaking title techniques are sometimes better than the films themselves. Bass' reputation is realized for he has assisted both Hitchcock and Otto Preminger in their recent masterworks. Bernard Herrmann's score is as tingling and moody as the film. The combination of stimulating and exciting music and the knowledge of the dangers of over usage is rare. As for Robert Burks' photography, it is a landmark in the American cinema. The sheer glory of the camera's success is accomplished by Burks in his misty wanderings through a graveyard, an art museum, a redwood forest, and a flower shop.

In addition to all that is there, the film is also fascinating for the weird and mysterious touches that are never explained. The two times that Stewart and Kim go to the Spanish mission, they are driving on the wrong side of the road. One of the frames of the final scene at the mission appears to be an exact visual reproduction of El Greco's *Storm Over Toledo*. And not since Howard Hawks' *Scarface* have there been so many crucifixes jutting out in odd and hypnotic positions. The actors perform as if in another century, as if of another time removed from reality, as if drugged, lulled into airy movements. At every return the film yields new wonders and puzzles.

Marnie (1964) is another prime example of Hitchcock's striking ambivalence and advocacy of playing by the rules of the game—his game. Marnie (Tippi

relative of the other complex and erratic Hitchcockian heroines: Alida Valli in *The Paradine Case* (1947), Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, Eva Marie Saint in *North by Northwest*.

Mark (Sean Connery) serves as the complacent figure of the film as well as a pretty sick fellow himself. At first, he is elated at the prospect of continuing his hobby of studying instinctual animal behavior at first hand with Marnie as his guinea pig. This dark pastime is not too different from Anthony Perkins' taxidermy in *Psycho* (1960). He coerces Marnie into marriage by threatening to reveal her crimes to the police. Their relationship develops into a sado-masochistic exchange. He is nihilistically inclined, a destroyer of art and beauty—shown vividly by his deliberate destruction of the sculpture. In the course of the film he bribes, blackmails, and even becomes an accessory to his wife's crimes, with the ironic result that he can't even make love to her. And as all Hitchcock complacents he is woefully sorry afterwards.

Marnie's mother (Louise Latham) is the menacing figure of the film, who despite absence from direct participation, pervades all the perversity. She is in fact responsible for the crimes of her daughter because of her debased raising and social poisoning of her child. Thus we have the Hitchcock guilt link.

The fourth personality is the subjective realism of Hitchcock's camera. Alain Resnais, the Master's disciple, has used this technique more blatantly in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1962), and *Muriel* (1963), because of its adaptability to his themes of the elusiveness of time, and the loss of clarity of memory through indifference. Because Hitchcock's design is more subtle and controlled it is not as noticeable but decidedly more artistic. Subjective realism is a device wherein the camera performs the visions and the psychological emotions of a character's mind. In *Marnie*, as in Hitchcock's other films the method is the vehicle for the thesis. By substituting the camera for one's mind, the creator can achieve instant audience communication and ergo empathy. No matter to what degree the protagonists are perverted, audience identification will always be present through this albeit deceiving though brilliant device. This is the immense Contempt that erupts from Hitchcock's major works. By having disturbed individuals for heroes, casting these parts with attractive and established stars and by deliberately using this technique for identification, Hitchcock's scorn for the false values

of his audience cannot be more clearly exemplified. It is now that arises the question should we honor an artist with such a derisive attitude towards his audience? The answer is an emphatic yes for Morality is the catalyst of Hitchcock's art.

In *Psycho*, Janet Leigh steals a large sum of money. En route from her escape she stops at a motel. She is murdered there for purely unmercenary reasons. The killer tosses her in the trunk of her car, along with the stolen money of which he knows nothing and sinks the whole mess in the backyard quagmire. Hitchcock's calculated camera is arranged as to literally shame the audience, for they are more concerned with the waste of the money than with the death of a human being.

And in the final scenes of *The Birds* (1963) when the characters are executing their escape Hitchcock meticulously frames menacing compositions, over-emphasizes every otherwise casual incident, and builds to such a pitch of expectation that when "nothing" happens and the picture just ends, many people hiss and boo and others feel disappointed. Those who are dissatisfied are unknowingly condemning themselves. For what did they want to happen? They wanted the thousands of birds to swoop down and savagely massacre the characters. For a director to reduce his audience to bloodthirsty sadists, to ferocious patricians awaiting the kill by just using the tools of the cinema in juxtaposition to his morality is an immense artistic achievement.

Now in *Marnie*, Hitchcock has provided an intentionally absurd denouement complete with facile character revelation and personality adjustment through exorcism, and a conventional happy ending in which the two leading monsters end up together. This climax is so banal, so vile that if we accept it without being offended by its immorality we have fallen into Hitchcock's most outrageous trap of his entire career. This artist had purposely flawed his work in order to stress his disdain for a listless, apathetic public who are willing to accept the degeneracy of our society. Hitchcock condemns complacency.

The principal theme of Hitchcock is the exchange of guilt and identity between passive and dominant individuals. In every major work it is evident. In *Lifeboat* (1944), a desolate group of survivors from a torpedoed ocean liner take refuge on a raft. These Americans vary in degrees of wealth and education but they share the dubious distinction of being thoroughly inept in keeping alive. However through everything, they maintain their dignity and respect for each other and therefore humanity. The captain of the German submarine that sank their ship then joins the crew since his vessel has also gone down. He then

proceeds to subversively assume complete rule. His skill saves them from drowning in a storm. His control saves them from starving. His strength keeps them from destruction and despair. But because all of Hitchcock's dominants must demoralize the passives, the captain kills one of the characters and what follows is pure Hitchcockian morality. Instead of preserving their humane ideals and resisting the temptation to sink to the level of this animalistic dictator who has saved them over and over, they savagely descend en masse upon him and cannibalistically devour and mutilate him. The dominant still reigns over the weak for even in death the Nietzscheist reduces those around him into degenerates. They are as guilty of murder as he is.

In *Rope* (1948), two homosexuals give a dinner party for some friends. Right before the guests arrive, they strangle a college buddy in a carefully detailed experiment in murder. The motive is simply to see if they can get away with it. The premise of their crime is that superior individuals have the right, if not in fact the duty, to destroy the inferiors in order to stimulate and preserve their intellectual domination. Their former teacher (James Stewart), one of the guests, inspired them to do this macabre deed with his countless fascist tracts on the desirability of eliminating many lowly members of the human race. The killers are delighted and proud that their mentor will at last have a chance to see his theories put to effective use. Yet once this crippled pedagogue is confronted with the horror of an actual deed based upon his perverted ideals, he recoils with self-disgust and guilt. He realizes that it is really he that is responsible for the murder executed by those who are stronger than he is. Again there is the exchange. *Rope* is also one of Hitchcock's most dazzling technical achievements. The film is presented without cuts, reel-long takes in one continual flow of camera movement matching the grace and elegance of Max Ophuls. It is a tour-de-force of style, suspense, and theme.

In *Strangers on a Train* (1951), two men meet Bruno (Robert Walker) and Guy (Farley Granger), are sexually attracted to each other, and begin to toy with the idea of "swapping murders." Each has someone he wants to kill, but they would be caught because of the obvious motive in each case. Bruno, the active homosexual is neurotically insistent and serious, while Guy, his passive companion, believing it a joke kiddingly agrees to the plan. But when Bruno carries out his side of the deal by killing Guy's wife, Guy acts outraged and is unwilling to reciprocate. Although Bruno is the actual murderer and a madman, he emerges as the dominant and the metaphysically moral figure of the two since he performs the task for which

Guy should have been committed to. Hitchcock damns Guy for his moral impotence and evasion of responsibility.

code from his audience, thrust at them so despicable an entourage of characters, and tempt them with the easy out of conforming to his camera's tortuous authoritative permissiveness. Hitchcock is one of the cinema's most irritating and important artists.

No other director will demand so high a moral

7 Feb
1956

SUVEYETTA HOUSE
ST MORITZ

mon cher Gideo Bachmann

J'ai toujours considéré le
cinématographe comme un véhicule
de poésie - un moyen unique de
rendre objectif le subjectif, réel
et irréel - le discutable, indiscutable.

Je ne raconte plus un phénomène, j'
le montre. Je le prouve.

mais le vrai style d'un film, sa
syntaxe - ce par quoi il nous dénonce
c'est le montage.

Oryel est un homme. Il est ^{copié avec} d'encre de
rouge que si on écrit plus ^{visiblement} ~~visiblement~~ ^{luminie}
jamais. ^{l'été} Jean Cocteau