

Chapter One

Hitch and His Public

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A reading of this article is forbidden to those who have not yet seen *Psycho*.¹

Which does not mean that others are obliged to read it. It is, however, impossible to study the film without unveiling its secret. And to know that would deprive the reader, as a future spectator, of a major part of his pleasure. I know this from experience. During his last interview, Hitchcock told Domarchi and myself about his film, and he mimed it to us from one end to the other, in an extraordinary fashion.² For more than one hour we watched *Psycho* being born, sequence by sequence, and at times shot by shot. I truly say *being born*, since this took place in October of 1959 and Hitchcock did not begin to shoot until November. And now, in his screening room at Paramount, we had the impression of seeing the film for a second time. We were cut off from part of the terror that seized the other spectators.

A Magical Art

But this terror is the primary, if not the ultimate goal pursued by Hitchcock. Even in his most inconsequential interviews he likes to reveal to what extent, for him, creation depends on an exact science of the spectator's reaction. Not for financial reasons (he was even quite sure that *Psycho* would be a failure), nor even for promotional reasons (though he admirably uses publicity, and we know, since *North by Northwest*, what he thinks of it), but because he attributes a mission to "suspense." And this mission is cathartic. The spectator has to "undo his repressions" in a psychoanalytical sense, confess himself on a logical plane, purify himself on a spiritual level. Hitchcock depends therefore on the active participation of the public.

The proof? *Rear Window*. It is there that Hitchcock elaborates his very concept of cinema (that is to say of cinema in cinema), reveals his secrets, unveils his intentions. James Stewart, a news photographer, is before everything else a spectator. This is one of the reasons why he is seen bound to his wheelchair. Through him, Hitchcock intends to define the nature of the spectator and, especially, the nature of a Hitchcockian spectator. The latter is a "voyeur." He wants to experience (sexual)

pleasure (*jouir*) through the spectacle. What he looks at on the screen (in other words, what Stewart watches in the building on the other side of the courtyard) is the very projection of himself. Only the latter is capable of interesting him. In one way or the other, it is himself that he comes to see. A spectacle which, after all, would quickly become dull if some special matter, some mystery, would not happen to capture his attention entirely. From then on, his understanding is fixed on this idea which becomes an obsession. Reasoning and deduction are subordinated to subjectivity, to feelings of desire and fear. The more he desires or fears, the more his expectation will be rewarded and beyond all his hopes. Stewart so ardently desires that a crime take place that the crime does materialize and approach him. In a Hitchcock movie, the spectator creates the suspense. It does nothing but answer his own summons. (Remember, too, Doris Day, the spectator, in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.) In other words, Hitchcock first excites vile and low feelings in his public and authorizes it through his spectacle to satisfy these urges. The impression of horror the spectator then feels brings forth other feelings in him, noble and pure, which alone are capable of destroying the initial urges. More than a therapy, cinema, here, is a truly magic art.

The Three Realities

All of which sends us back to the intention of the author. Hitchcock intends to unveil reality and have us discover it in three ways. Three, like the three blinds which go up, one after the other, in the very first shot of *Rear Window*. The first reality, evidently, is that of the everyday world which is immediately recognizable by the spectator. Hence the care which Hitchcock accords it. Because it functions as a stable basis for his construction, the filmmaker has not ceased to depict reality with a great deal of truth. For him, the fake is intolerable. Even less the arbitrary. (We are far from Clouzot's *Diaboliques*.) Never, ever, does Hitchcock deceive the spectator. At times he lulls, sometimes willingly, the spectator's attention (the way he lulls Stewart at the moment the crime takes place in *Rear Window*), but he always leaves him information enough. The spectator can, if he desires it, reconstitute in his thoughts the events which have taken place. This observation is of the utmost importance for *Psycho*, where everything, to the least detail, is explained clearly. Nothing is therefore less justified than the accusations of implausibility that some direct toward Hitchcock.

The second reality, the second set of blinds, opens onto the world of desire. It is thus that the building on the other side of the courtyard appears. Everything that takes place in the everyday world of Stewart's apartment inscribes itself there, projects itself as if on a screen. The apartment itself is shown in multiple examples, each populated by forms and animated by the forces which have brought them into being. These form-forces personify secret thoughts, mental attitudes, and especially the desires of our hero. And in this world they possess a real existence and an active power. Like an immense mirror, put up in front of the quotidian reality, the world

of desire inverts situations as well as thoughts. Thus, the Kelly–Stewart couple (paralyzed) and the other, Raymond Burr and his bedridden wife. Thus also the existence of Stewart’s latent desire to rid himself of Kelly, a desire which Raymond Burr acts out. These form-forces of desire constitute the primary element of any Hitchcock movie. A psychoanalyst will see in it the figure of culpability. However, never before *Psycho* had our filmmaker made it so evident. Here, the form is endowed with a terrifying force.

Finally, the third reality, the intellectual world. The latter is the main support beam of the Hitchcockian *oeuvre*, the perpendicular which links the two parallel universes and thus allows them to communicate. It is on this beam that the filmmaker relies for all his films. It is therefore via this intermediary world that Stewart, confined in his quotidian universe (and that is the reason why we do not leave his living room throughout the movie), is able to see through to the world of desire. As spectator, what does our hero see? What he believes to be the quotidian world, though it is only his own reflection. But the world of desire soon unveils his true nature. A horrible action takes place in it, one which the hero has not seen but suspects. From then on his attention is awake, his intellect at the service of his self-interest. If Stewart, on the basis of the slightest clues, leads his investigation according to the logical process of induction and deduction, it is not that he pursues a noble goal. To the contrary, he seeks less to reveal the light than to penetrate the darkness, the darkness in which the murderer envelops himself, though his presence is nevertheless betrayed by a cigarette. In brief, he examines the objective givens (*les données objectives*) only to please his own subjectivity, or even better, to satisfy an even sicker curiosity. (Understood from this perspective, the publicity about *Psycho* imagined by Hitch becomes a chief element in the movie: the public must want to feel fear.) Once this happens, the audience deprives itself of its most important weapon, lucid understanding. The audience is as unprotected as a savage, subject to great ancestral fears. Its reason voluntarily loses itself in the irrational, surrenders itself without defense (like Janet Leigh under the shower) to the almighty power of the occult.

In front of the menacing Shadow of the murderer, who, having come from the world of desire, suddenly invades his quotidian universe, the flashes of the camera seem to Stewart laughably ineffectual. This purely material light cannot suffice to protect him. “Each is caught in his own trap,” we hear it said in *Psycho*. The Hitchcockian spectator more than anyone else. Because of this intellectual distance (represented by the courtyard), Stewart, at the height of curiosity, wants Kelly to cross it. He then releases what occultists and magicians fear the most: the blow in return. Now, if the reader is willing to be convinced that *Rear Window* illustrates the very concept of Hitchcockian cinema, then he can summarize what precedes in these terms: Stewart is like the projector; the building opposite like the screen; then the distance which separates them, the intellectual world, would be occupied by the beam of light. If the reader also remembers that Stewart is first the spectator, he can conclude that the hero “invents his own cinema.” But is that not the very definition of a “voyeur,” the very core of morose gratification?

From Contempt to Complicity

So? We have to push our investigation of this intellectual world even further. First of all, the more this investigation concentrates on an object of desire or fear, the more intense it becomes, the more the force of this intensity animates the form which it brought into being. At the same time, the force becomes more precise and grows stronger. Thus in *Psycho*. Assume that Stewart has descended from the screen of *Rear Window* to take his place in the theater, that he has become each one of us, a spectator. His voyeur's appetite finds nourishment in the opening of *Psycho*. Indeed, the camera penetrates indiscreetly into a room with lowered shades, in the middle of the afternoon. And in this room there is a couple on a bed, embracing, kissing, demonstrating a great physical attraction. From then on, he feels frustrated. He would like "to see more." Even if John Gavin's bare chest could possibly satisfy half the audience, the fact that Janet Leigh is not naked is hardly tolerated by the other half. This awakened desire must logically find its conclusion at the end of Janet's journey. She will be naked, completely, offering herself entirely. The sexual act which will be perpetrated on her will also be extreme – therefore, a wish fulfillment beyond all hopes.

But let us get back to the beginning of the movie. The spectator's feeling toward Janet is one of envy and contempt at the same time. A woman who accepts a sleazy hotel room in the middle of the afternoon in her own provincial town is not worthy of esteem. He may therefore ascribe to her his worst instincts – among others, his unconscious desire, which he does not dare to act out in real life, that of theft. Indeed, back at her desk, Janet witnesses an important transaction of cash. The spectator, who is beginning to get bored by these banal business scenes, wishes for something to happen. And precisely – why not? – that Janet Leigh take the money for herself. Since the transaction is irregular, there would be no proof, and the owner of the money is truly loathsome. Luckily, her boss has her carry the money to the bank. The amount is \$40,000. In addition, the events take place on a Friday: the theft will not be noticed until the following Monday. So Janet takes the money. And here she is, on the road.

A cop stops her: a simple verification of identity. A disquieting feeling overcomes us. This feeling increases. The cop follows her. What does he want from her? Has the theft already been discovered? But from now on we ardently desire that she succeed. We are with her with all our heart. But this altruistic thought covers our very own crime, which Janet Leigh has to assume. Under the guise of sympathy, it hides a vile desire – a desire which will be realized: the cop abandons his pursuit.

(Why did he abandon her? There are, of necessity, three explanations. One, psychological: this woman seems distraught; moreover, she is pretty. It is normal that a cop – who is nevertheless a man – hopes that she will ask him to help her. But she does not ask. Another logic: as a highway patrolman, the state of fatigue of Janet Leigh intrigues him. Professional reasons oblige him to observe her behavior for fear that she may provoke an accident. But, she provokes none. Finally another, an occult, reason. The very appearance of the cop, similar to that of the cops in Cocteau's

Orpheus, belongs to the domain of the fantastic. He is both conscience and Angel of Order, sent for a last attempt at salvation. But he cannot save that which does not want to be saved. If the reader-spectator imbues himself with magical ideas, he understands that the hostile flow from the audience prevents the Angel from accomplishing his mission. Hence, in Hitchcock, the extreme importance of the call, the appeal, often symbolized by the telephone. That is how, in *Rear Window*, Stewart, seeing Kelly at the murderer's place, at the same time provokes and calls the latter. Inversely, the murderer calls Stewart before coming. In *Psycho*, the fact that the sheriff calls Bates in the second part of the film strangely illuminates what such calls represent in the occult order. One can converse only between equals, from man to man, from angel to angel, or from God to Satan (*North by Northwest*). By contrast, man may appeal to superior powers, whether good or evil. Teresa Wright in *Shadow of a Doubt*. Farley Granger in *Strangers on a Train*.)

Salvation being rejected by us, and therefore by Janet Leigh, she is given up to nocturnal powers, is incapable of enduring the radiance of light; from now on she falls prey to any delirium. Her state of fatigue makes us wish that she would stop. Hence our relief when she comes to a motel. But the unusual and mysterious aspect of the place and of its host provoke in us a mute anguish. We have the premonition of a danger, the more so as Janet Leigh is alone in this sinister place, alone in her room, with the window wide open, while she tries to hide her money (our money). And can't she find a better place to hide it than in plain sight, on the nightstand? From then on, we fear the worst. We fear that while she has dinner someone will steal the bank notes. And because we fear everything, her conversation with Perkins seems too long to us. We wish to see this fear verified. Our desire *to see* will increase even more: Perkins, like ourselves, is a voyeur and watches his client undress. Is there going to be a rape or a theft (*viol ou vol*)?

Neither one nor the other, but worse. Because our desire and our fear do not know yet in which object to invest, because they are still vague in our mind, the form they take is also vague – a kind of shadow, an ectoplasm. But, exacerbated by our long wait, they are at the height of their intensity. Also, the force we have transmitted to this form will be of a terrifying power. The form-force then accomplishes its crime.

(Let no one tell me that I extrapolate. On the one hand, I describe only what one sees and what each spectator may have felt. On the other hand, I point out that *Psycho* was shot in forty-one days. But this scene itself, which lasts only forty-five seconds on the screen, took six days to film. Hitchcock has carefully explained the difficulties he and Russell, his director of photography, had in rendering this indefinite form. He wanted no special effects but insisted that the effects be the result of lighting itself. In short, he had a very precise idea about arriving at this indefinite form. Let us give him the benefit – which he claims vigorously elsewhere – of knowing what is needed and of not shooting anything that is not rigorously necessary.)

A crime at one and the same time hallucinating and fascinating. A crime which Perkins tries to efface out of filial devotion. And while he does so, we enter completely into his thoughts. We witness his sordid household chores; we accept that Janet Leigh, wrapped in a transparent shower curtain, really becomes what she represented for us, a form. We are simply anxious for this operation to be over. Moreover,

we fear that another driver, lost on this little-frequented road, will discover the crime. A fear heightened even more when Perkins, having made a rapid inspection of the room to see if he has not forgotten an object belonging to Janet, does not see *our* money.

(Which shows that Janet had found the best hiding place for it. “To appreciate *Psycho*, one needs a great sense of humor,” states Hitchcock. Especially some Hitchcockian humor, which consists, as we know, in reversing wishes, that is to say in realizing them in a way contrary to our expectations. Besides, is not inversion our filmmaker’s favorite system?)

But Perkins retraces his steps, sees the package, and takes it. We hope that he will see the money and keep it, in short, that the murder will have its material justification. But, since he also throws it into the trunk, together with the corpse and the other belongings of the victim, we feel at the same time relieved. Perkins pushes it all into the viscous, sleepy waters of a marsh. The car sinks halfway in. “Let us hope that it disappears,” we think. At last it sinks completely, definitely. We utter a sigh of relief. Darkness – or our subconscious – has swallowed forever, we think, our complicity in the theft.

Return to the Everyday World

But to arrive at that, we have become accomplices in a crime. We have gone up one step on the ladder of culpability. I do not think that it would be useful to summarize the rest of the film in detail. What is important to perceive above all is the process of Hitchcock’s creative faculty: how Hitch uses the spectator for the internal progression of the film, how he plays on his desires and fears. To understand this, one need only analyze his own reactions at the moment when the private detective arrives. The viewer understands why the form-force, when it surges for the second time, will have become very precise, though it still remains mysterious. After this test, he has one desire only: to flee. To flee the motel and its inhabitants. But the machinery he himself has set in motion cannot be stopped. From now on, paralyzed, riveted to his chair, he reaches the limits of fear. The more so as he learns that the presumed murderer has been dead for ten years. This is the utter rout of his logical mind, the disturbance of his intellectual world. Henceforth, for the spectator, everything becomes a terrifying business. It is enough for him to see some simple thing, be it the most banal, to become afraid. Each new shot is an instrument of fear. He is left with one attitude only: that of prayer and blind faith. He hopes with all his might that Vera Miles, Janet Leigh’s sister, come in search of her, will be saved. These noble and disinterested feelings, together with his fear, which has reached the height of its paroxysm, make it necessary that the form-force be revealed at last, its true face in the light. It is vanquished.

Hence the necessity, after this trying incident at the end of the night, at the end of the world of desire, of returning to our quotidian world. This task may be incumbent only upon the intellectual world, but devoid of any passion, detached from subjectivity, freed of all unhealthy curiosity. In short, a task for scientific reasoning.

This is the reasoning of the psychiatrist's discourse. From then on, freed, the spectator can contemplate the object of his fear, this form-force, which seems like a nocturnal bird, to be stuffed and fixed upon a wall. And then, it excites in him an immense compassion. Compassion which the form-force attempts to refute by making believe that he wants to provoke it. ("I am not going to move. They all look at me. This fly is going to continue to walk on my hand. And they will say, he is not even capable of harming a fly.") And our pity is perhaps the only chance for salvation for this form-force which appears to be forever damned, its possibility of returning from the dark, like the car that a huge chain pulls out of the black waters of the marsh.

The Ideal Vehicle

Thus, after the example of *Psycho* and by adopting solely the point of view of the audience, it becomes easier to understand the multiple relations which exist, in Hitchcock's *oeuvre*, between the three realities. If the spectator belongs to the everyday world, it is evident that the screen unveils the world of desire. Is it not the screen's very property to be populated by forms animated by forces? These forms, though untouchable, possess a reality. So, if the spectator finds on the screen the exact reflection of his quotidian universe, he immediately communicates with the latter. If he feels that appearances have not been falsified in order "to get" him, he cannot "pull away." He is carried off in a fatal movement. The more so as, on this screen, Hitch wants to provoke what the spectator does not dare to do in his everyday reality. The spectator participates more and more intensely in these forms charged with assuming his impulses and secret dreams. He no longer looks objectively at the appearances of everyday reality but receives them subjectively. However, these appearances do not change intrinsically. It is the spectator who transforms them, who changes their lighting. To the point where, at last, the screen becomes for him the sole reality. His ultimate goal is to penetrate it.

The ultimate vehicle which links those two worlds and allows them to communicate (the spectator with the screen, the quotidian world with the world of desire) is evidently the intellectual world. In fact, for Hitchcock it is a question of giving it a function of transmission. And the term "vehicle" seems to be the only one to account for all the trains, planes, automobiles, skis, boats, bicycles, wheelchairs, etc., which haunt his universe. We receive them not only as a sign of passage from one world to the other but especially as a sensation. A sensation of being carried off, of a skidding that nothing will be able to stop anymore. They give the very impression of fatality. The reader will have been quick to remember the multiple variants which Hitch loves to introduce into this theme which is so dear to him. But never, perhaps, has he so completely and so well "dreamed" of it as in *Psycho*. The slow and wonderful drive of Janet Leigh allows for the material and intellectual passage from one world to the next. From objectivity to pure subjectivity. In general, in Hitchcock the human body is the first vehicle. (Hence the condemnation of dancing, which allows the body to slide and to be carried off – the Stork Club in *The Wrong Man*, the dance at the afternoon tea in *Vertigo*, as well as the waltzes of the merry widows in *Shadow*

of a Doubt.) By extension, any vehicle which contains a body becomes for the latter a new body. This is why Janet Leigh, when changing cars, expresses her profound desire to change bodies, personalities. She wants to save a love, pure in itself, from the sordid material circumstances which accompany it. But, far from wanting to struggle to achieve noble conditions for this love, she looks only for purely external expedients. Far from trying to change herself, she believes that by changing the material wrapping her wish will be granted.

A World of Harshness

If I believe truly that the occult is at the basis of Hitchcock's universe, it is not that I am impassioned with the esoteric nor even that I think that it is fundamental for the director. But, simply, it is a way of understanding which permits the artist's imagination the greatest possibilities of revery. In addition, as this doctrine does not contradict other systems of knowledge, it allows for an extremely varied vision of the world adapted to the real temperament of the creator. It is certain that one can content oneself with psychoanalysis in order to comment on Hitchcock. I do not, however, believe that psychoanalysis suffices to explain the invention of forms and their internal dynamics.

Hitchcock's work has always depicted in a certain manner the duel of Light and Shadow, therefore of Unity and Duality. The very first shot of *Psycho*, which follows the abstract credits by Saul Bass, uncovers a large plain surrounding a banal city in a very raw light. It seems that everything here is immutable and must give a feeling of eternity. Subtitles specify the place, the time, and the date. Opposed to this light, from the second shot on, is the absolute darkness of a room into which we penetrate with the camera to discover a bed and lovers in embrace. In two shots, Hitchcock expresses his purpose: *Psycho* will talk to us about the eternal and the finite, of existence and of nothingness, of life and of death, but seen in their naked truth. Nothing can please in *Psycho*, which is the inverse of *Vertigo*. The latter was built upon seduction, hence upon makeup, appearances, the joining of images, in short, upon attraction. Here, everything is based on crudity (and we are spared no detail in that regard), on faces without makeup, on the clash of montage (a montage, cutting like a knife). This trip toward death must produce only fear, and it must produce that fear through its harshness.

Notes

1. This article is the last in a series begun under the title: "The Third Key of Hitchcock," *Cahiers du cinéma*, nos. 99 and 102.
2. *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 102.