

Hitchcock's Lives

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The appearance of Donald Spoto's *Spellbound by Beauty* (2008) marks a turning point in Hitchcock studies, though hardly for the reasons the author indicates. The dust-jacket description of the book as "the final volume in master biographer Donald Spoto's Hitchcock trilogy" will not be taken seriously by anyone who has read *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*, the formal and thematic study of Hitchcock's films distinguished from other film-by-film surveys largely by Spoto's access to the production of *Family Plot* (1976), or *The Dark Side of Genius* (1983), the full-dress biography that cast Hitchcock as a tormented loner who delighted in sadistically teasing and sometimes torturing audiences and colleagues alike. Despite publisher claims of a volume "[r]ich with fresh revelations based on previously undisclosed" testimony or with materials offering "important insights into the life of a brilliant, powerful, eccentric and tortured artist," Spoto's new book, accurately subtitled *Alfred Hitchcock and His Leading Ladies*, does not complete a trilogy because it is neither a sequel nor a complement to his earlier volumes. It is something altogether more interesting.

Spoto is admirably direct in explaining the reasons he returned to Hitchcock after *The Dark Side of Genius* launched his career as a celebrity biographer whose subjects have included Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana, Joan of Arc, and Jesus of Nazareth. Several of the collaborators he interviewed in preparation for the earlier volume asked him "to omit certain comments either for some years or until after their own deaths" (xxi). So much of Hitchcock's conduct toward his actresses "can only be called sexual harassment" that "his biography remains a cautionary tale of what can go wrong in any life" (xxi). Spoto felt particularly obliged to respond to legions of Hitchcock fans "who will not hear a syllable spoken against" him (xx). For Spoto, however, "the craft of biography requires that the shadow side of subjects be set forth and comprehended" (xx). Armed with previously withheld

confidences and a more comprehensive sense of Hitchcock's life, Spoto intends by focusing on the most problematic aspect of the director's professional life – his relationships with the actresses “for whom he had a strange amalgam of adoration and contempt” (xviii) – to rescue Hitchcock in all his dark complexity from a horde of uncritical admirers by offering “new insights into Hitchcock the filmmaker – in particular, how he understood the element of collaboration” (xxiii).

But these claims ring just as hollow as the publisher's claim that *Spellbound by Beauty* completes a trilogy. The new material at Spoto's disposal is of five kinds: new interviews he conducted with Alida Valli, Gregory Peck, Ann Todd, Diane Baker, and especially Tippi Hedren; previously withheld comments from interviews with a somewhat wider array of sources; the interviews with and writings by Hitchcock that Sidney Gottlieb collected in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock* and *Alfred Hitchcock: Interviews*; critical studies of Hitchcock's life, films, and working habits by Leonard J. Leff, Bill Krohn, and Ken Mogg published since *The Dark Side of Genius*; and intervening biographies of Hitchcock by Patrick McGilligan and Charlotte Chandler, as well as Patricia Hitchcock O'Connell's biography of her mother, Alma Reville, Hitchcock's wife.

All but the first two of these, of course, have been equally at the disposal of other commentators for years, but Spoto treats them as if they were his own private preserve. It is sadly ironic to see an author who so regularly castigates Hitchcock for his well-known inability to credit any of his collaborators for the success of his films – he shrewdly suggests that Hitchcock resented his screenwriters because “he wanted to write the script entirely on his own but could not” (50) – display an equal lack of generosity toward his own sources. Chandler is never identified by name outside Spoto's notes, for example, while John Russell Taylor is referred to by name only thrice in Spoto's text. Though Spoto cites McGilligan a dozen times in his notes, the only time he mentions McGilligan by name in his text is in his disapproving reference to McGilligan's account of a sexual liaison between Alma Reville and screenwriter Whitfield Cook, the single most salacious revelation in McGilligan's 864-page biography.

Just as he takes pains to correct the title of the 1936 film *Secret Agent* (57) – though this error has not appeared in Hitchcock commentary for years – Spoto treats Leonard J. Leff's long-ago-published revelations (*Hitchcock and Selznick*, 1987) about Hitchcock's bullying treatment of Joan Fontaine on and off the set of *Rebecca* (1940) and Bill Krohn's more recent account (*Hitchcock at Work*, 2000) of Hitchcock's often serendipitous collaborative working methods as if they were breaking news. Though biographers commonly depend on the work of earlier biographers and interpreters and scholars, it is surprising to see Spoto, who certainly was under no obligation to return to the subject of Hitchcock after 26 years, offer so little new material of his own. Apart from repeated denunciations of Hitchcock's misogynist cruelty and toilet humor, the most substantial additions Spoto makes here to the portrait of the director he presented in *The Dark Side of Genius* are a series of supplementary portraits, interpolated biographical sketches of leading ladies from

Virginia Valli to Madeleine Carroll to Ingrid Bergman to Tippi Hedren. In order to flesh out the Sardou motto – “Torture the women!” (xix) – that Hitchcock applied to plot construction and Spoto to Hitchcock’s life in *The Dark Side of Genius*, he adds a catalog of variously vulnerable young actresses Hitchcock either adoringly sought to dominate (Ingrid Bergman, Grace Kelly, Vera Miles) or tormented (June Howard-Tripp, Lilian Hall-Davis, Jessie Matthews, Madeleine Carroll, Joan Fontaine, Kim Novak) or both (Tippi Hedren), while passing hastily over his collaborations with actresses who fell into neither category (Isabel Jeans, Betty Balfour, Anny Ondra, Norah Baring, Joan Barry, Edna Best, Sylvia Sidney, Nova Pilbeam, Margaret Lockwood, Maureen O’Hara, Laraine Day, Carole Lombard, Priscilla Lane, Teresa Wright, Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich, Ruth Roman, Shirley MacLaine, Eva Marie Saint, Janet Leigh, Julie Andrews, and Barbara Harris, the last of whom Spoto curiously fails to mention even in passing). The obvious conclusion, that Hitchcock tormented all his actresses except for the ones he didn’t, adds nothing compelling or new to the case Spoto documented so persuasively in *The Dark Side of Genius*.

In the years since Spoto’s influential biography was first published, many commentators, as he accurately notes, have taken exception to its portrait of Hitchcock as dominated by dark fantasies he felt compelled to play out onscreen. Except at book signings, however, it is hard to imagine where Spoto has run into fans quite as obtuse about either Hitchcock or sexual harassment as his description of “the consensus” would indicate. In *The Dark Side of Genius*, Spoto had revealingly noted the labored attempts of “Hitchcock’s admirers (this author among the most defensive of them)” to justify the “sloppy technique” of Hitchcock’s 1964 film, *Marnie* (476). In *Spellbound by Beauty*, his principal antagonist still seems to be the Spoto who wrote *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*. On the whole, however, he redirects his unhappiness with uncritical defenses of Hitchcock onto other targets, like Patricia Hitchcock O’Connell’s reticence about her childhood in England, her relation to her father, and her mother’s contribution to Hitchcock’s films. Of O’Connell’s early days, he concludes that “her life sounded thumpingly dull – nothing stands out at all” (75). He disputes her recollection of her parents as “ordinary people. I know a lot of people insist that my father must have had a dark imagination. Well, he did not. He was a brilliant filmmaker and he knew how to tell a story. That’s all” (76).

Most characteristic of all is Spoto’s response to O’Connell’s claims that “her father ‘made all the important decisions with Alma as his closest collaborator’ and that ‘Alma’s participation was constant’” (89). These claims would seem to support Spoto’s view of Hitchcock, based on Bill Krohn’s research, as “a senior supervising collaborator” rather than “the sole creative force behind his pictures” (84). But Spoto remains curiously unconvinced: “The idea may provide a tender revisionist history in praise of a supposedly underrated wife, but it does not stand up to scrutiny, and Alma herself would swiftly have deflected such hyperbolic praise (indeed, she did when it was implied over the years)” (89–90). More curious yet is the fact that the contentious issue of Alma’s collaboration with her husband surfaces in

Spoto's discussion of *Rebecca*, where Alma's participation in the scripting process is frequently attested to, despite the lack of a formal screen credit. And the evidence Spoto does adduce to discount Patricia Hitchcock's suggestion that Hitchcock depended on his wife's collaboration seems just as ephemeral as Patricia Hitchcock O'Connell's familial perspective.

In fact, so few verifiable details are available concerning the extent of Reville's influence on Hitchcock's films that commentators are unlikely to reach a consensus on the subject anytime soon. Attempting to rise above this debate rather than entering into it, Spoto mostly reiterates the position he had taken in *The Dark Side of Genius*. So it is throughout *Spellbound by Beauty*. Although Spoto's avowed purpose in returning to Hitchcock is to set the record straight, he offers no compelling new evidence that would refute the biographers, critics, or scholars who have the temerity to present Hitchcocks different from his own. In the end, his decision to revisit Hitchcock produces nothing more than another visit, an invitation to reconsider Hitchcock directed toward a politically insensitive, art-for-art's-sake audience that in all likelihood no longer exists.

Even so, *Spellbound by Beauty* is much more interesting than a more successful book would have been because its very failure suggests a remarkable possibility: the depletion of Hitchcock's biography. Just because Spoto cannot find anything new to say about Hitchcock's life, of course, is no reason to conclude that there is nothing new to be said. But *Spellbound by Beauty* seems to mark a point of exhaustion in the course of Hitchcock biography. When it appeared in 1978, Taylor's authorized biography, *Hitch: The Life and Times of Alfred Hitchcock*, had presented an official, public life that focused on the director's career, larded with the sorts of anecdotes Hitchcock had been sharing with interviewers for years. Taylor's Hitchcock was an inveterate practical joker, but his pranks – inventive, good-humored, and often enough repaid in kind by “like-minded friends” (121) who knew that “if Hitch felt he had gone a little too far ... he always made generous amends” (121–22) – simply “kept his units cheery and ready for anything” (122) and incidentally provided leavening for a blow-by-blow chronicle of his public life, since Taylor provided little insight into Hitchcock's private life except the tacit implication that it was not eventful enough to be worth examining. Taylor's Hitchcock was neurotically fearful and obsessive in his professional habits, but urbanely, even comically so.

Five years later, Spoto, taking his cue from interviews with Hitchcock's collaborators rather than restricting his point of view to the director himself, portrayed a dramatically different Hitchcock in *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock*. This filmmaker was still a practical joker, but in Spoto's telling the jokes did not provide relief from the tedious routine of filmmaking. Beginning with a prophetic childhood prank in which he and “an accomplice” dragged their younger schoolmate Robert Gould to the basement boiler room at St. Ignatius College, pinned “a string of firecrackers ... to his underwear and ignited” them (32), Spoto charts the way Hitchcock's pranks became “carefully controlled antisocial gestures”

(112) that revealed “a cruder and crueller streak” (111) even as they “exterioriz[ed] his own deepest fears” (112) in the same way Hitchcock’s films did. Spoto’s Hitchcock, an intensely private person, was sexually repressed, voyeuristic, possessive, defensive, often sadistic, ungenerous and mean-spirited to collaborators, and addicted to playing Svengali to a series of ingénues he sought to mold into Hitchcock blondes, especially Joan Fontaine, Grace Kelly, Vera Miles, and Tippi Hedren. Like Edmund Wilson, whose 1941 study *The Wound and the Bow* had posited a generation earlier “the conception of superior strength as inseparable from disability” (468), Spoto presented a Hitchcock who could shape the nightmares of so many filmgoers because of his success in putting his own private torment onscreen. The result was to recast Taylor as remaining on the surface that Spoto dared to go beneath. The genial raconteur whom Taylor had taken to be the author of Hitchcock’s films became in Spoto a public mask that concealed dark dreams of lust and power, dreams that became more explicitly rendered onscreen with the eclipse of the 1930 Production Code and the director’s advancing age, so that the climactic attack on Melanie Daniels in *The Birds* (1963) and the murder sequences in *Psycho* (1960), *Frenzy* (1972), and the unproduced *The Short Night* became “the last expression of the darkest desire that had occupied Hitchcock’s imagination for decades” (544).

If Spoto’s controversial biography – was it true? and if it was true, should it be published? – posed an antithesis to Taylor’s Hitchcock, Patrick McGilligan’s *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light* (2003) might have been expected to provide a synthesis. And in some ways, that is exactly what it did provide. McGilligan’s Hitchcock had all the dark complexity of Spoto’s. En route to terrifying audiences around the world, he deceived scriptwriters, humiliated technicians, and tyrannized actresses. He never outgrew an adolescent sense of humor, and professional success only accentuated his mania for complete control over his films. But the public behavior Spoto dismissed as a mask McGilligan took to be equally authentic, representative of the radically divided nature indicated by his subtitle. McGilligan’s Hitchcock was a devoted son, a faithful if undersexed husband, a tender and affectionate father, and a colleague as capable of unexpected generosity as of cruelty. If Spoto’s Hitchcock struggled his whole life to repress a sociopathic side that sprang to life in a series of films that chart the return of the repressed, McGilligan’s Hitchcock, whose weight fluctuated wildly throughout his adult life, struggled as well to balance the conflicting sides of his nature.

According to Hegelian dialectics, McGilligan’s attempted synthesis of Taylor and Spoto should have led to a new antithesis. But neither of the biographies produced more recently by a pair of professional journalists revealed anything like a new Hitchcock. Despite lengthy and sometimes revealing quotations from many interviews with Hitchcock’s surviving colleagues, Charlotte Chandler’s aptly titled *It’s Only a Movie: Alfred Hitchcock: A Personal Biography* (2005), which reads like an extended magazine profile, retreats into Taylor territory. Chandler’s gossipy tone, virtually indistinguishable from that of her interviewees, normalizes the anecdotes

and revelations about Hitchcock's working habits but works against integration. She offers no new insight into Hitchcock's private life, no rationale of his career, and no explanation of how the witty, mischievous Hitchcock his colleagues describe, voluble yet withdrawn, came to make the films that made his name. The result is that although almost everyone Chandler quotes attempts to encapsulate Hitchcock's life or work – from Ronald Neame's "Hitchcock wasn't ever ruffled by anything" (73) to Melanie Griffith's "He was a motherfucker. And you can quote me" (272) – she never does. Nor does Quentin Falk in *Mr. Hitchcock* (2007), which begins with a guileless warning not to "expect ... anything startlingly new in terms of original research" (2). Like Chandler's montage of interviews, Falk's brisk survey of Hitchcock's career, framed by new interviews with Hitchcock's collaborators on *Frenzy*, uses that career as a familiar story that can be retold with charm and profit.

Both Chandler and Falk, like Spoto in *Spellbound by Beauty*, invite their readers to revisit Hitchcock rather than offering any major new revelations about him. In doing so, they present Hitchcock's life as a known quantity that can still give pleasure even after repeated doses if it is repackaged or approached from a slightly different angle or with new details filled in. In retrospect, they suggest that McGilligan's Hitchcock was not so much a synthesis as a compromise, his biographer less interested in presenting a new Hitchcock than in judiciously correcting the record. McGilligan gets Robert Goold, who "entered St. Ignatius a full term after Hitchcock departed," to admit that "he 'was wrong in ascribing the [firecracker prank] to him [Hitchcock]'" (20). He corrects Peter Bogdanovich's report that "Hitchcock 'taught' photography" to Jack Cox on the 1927 film *The Ring* (95). He disputes "the myth that Hitchcock ate up inordinate time" in filming *Rebecca*, whose "most taxing delays weren't the director's fault" (252). He notes that Czenzi Ormonde, who with Barbara Keon wrote the final version of the screenplay for *Strangers on a Train* (1951), "wasn't aware of the slightest homoerotic undercurrent between Bruno and Guy; Hitchcock certainly didn't mention it, and in her opinion it didn't exist in the script or the film" (449). He quotes Ron Miller, a Pulitzer-winning reporter who interviewed Hitchcock as a student journalist just before the release of *Psycho*: "Hitchcock was 'far from boastful and, in fact, suggested that many of the innovations he was credited with on screen were not original with him'" (638). He challenges Spoto's assertion that after she refused his demand for sex, "he refused to address Tippi Hedren personally. He never even uttered her name, referring only to 'that girl'" (*Dark* 476). Instead, McGilligan suggests, "the record is far from clear. Hitchcock had always referred to Hedren, outside her own presence, as 'the Girl' (it was how many silent-film directors referred to the leading lady's role, and it was the established nickname of the character Hedren had played in *The Birds*)." In addition, "his logbook indicates that he met with Hedren several times over the next year, trying to bridge the gulf between them" (648–49).

McGilligan's differences with Spoto have done nothing to discourage the proliferation of Hitchcock biographies, but they have not yet had the power to generate

new Hitchcocks. If Taylor presents a smiling public Hitchcock, Spoto a tormented and tormenting private Hitchcock, and McGilligan a Hitchcock somewhere in the middle, then all possible positions concerning the director's life would seem to have been taken. Apart from filling in the details, there is nothing new to say.

This curious exhaustion would seem less curious if commentators on Taylor, Spoto, and McGilligan did not focus so intently on their differences, which are indeed striking, that they overlooked their similarities, which are much more fundamental. The essential premise shared by all biographers of Hitchcock is that Hitchcock's life *matters*, that it is interesting and important enough to attract at least a significant proportion of the vast audience for his films, and that knowing the facts of his life allows readers to watch his films in new and better informed ways. The director's life is assumed to serve a vital function for a significant reading public: It is valuable because it helps them do things (in this case, watch Hitchcock's films) better.

Taylor, the one biographer to make a point of disclaiming this intention, defines it better than any of the others when he observes that "for one so enormously publicized and so aware of the value and uses of publicity he has managed to remain [so] astonishingly private...[that] in an important sense the dictum of another film-maker who has known him well for forty years is true: "There is no real Alfred Hitchcock outside his movies.'" Because "Hitchcock is not so much in his films: he is his films," Taylor concludes, whatever autobiographical motifs have found their way into his work "have been precipitated into art which needs no external explanation.... So ultimately it does not matter what sort of man Hitchcock is" (17–19). Although he is convinced that Hitchcock's life is too private, too unknowable, to illuminate his films, Taylor proposes a more modest goal for his own exploration: "[E]ven if such questions make no noticeable difference to our appreciation of the films, there is still human curiosity that impels us to unravel the puzzle. And puzzle Hitchcock undoubtedly remains" (19–20). So instead of treating Hitchcock's life as a source of privileged information about his work, Taylor treats it as a work itself, a puzzle to be unraveled.

The truism that artists' lives inform their work and its corollary that their lives raise questions that can best be answered either by recourse to their work or by treating the life as if it were a work of art have been at the heart of biographies of writers and artists since Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779–81). As the creator's art reflects his or her life, so a study of the life can inform a study of the art. But three distinctive features of Hitchcock's life and work complicate this apparently self-evident model in ways Hitchcock's biographers, who all take it for granted, have not considered.

The first of these complications is that Hitchcock's life was not especially eventful. He was born into the family of an East End greengrocer and educated by Jesuits. He attended the Slade Art School, worked as a clerk at the W.T. Henley Telegraph Company, designed advertising copy, and wrote stories. When Paramount opened British operations under the name Famous Players–Lasky, he

applied for a job with the studio, where his industry and mastery of several different technical aspects of filmmaking – scriptwriting, set design, intertitle design – advanced him to the rank of assistant director and then, under the auspices of Michael Balcon, director. The success of his third film, *The Lodger* (1926), was followed shortly by his marriage to Alma Reville, a continuity supervisor and editor, and the birth of their daughter in 1928. The rest of Hitchcock’s story is largely a record of artistic achievement – *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The 39 Steps* (1935), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Rebecca*, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Notorious* (1946), *Strangers on a Train*, *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho*, *The Birds*, *Frenzy* – and expanding commercial success (the launch of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* in 1955 and *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* in 1956, Hitchcock’s decision to finance *Psycho* himself and to trade his rights in the film and his television ventures for a substantial block of shares in Universal Pictures), punctuated by the occasional commercial failure – *Waltzes from Vienna* (1933), *Lifeboat* (1944), *The Paradine Case* (1947), *Under Capricorn* (1949), *Topaz* (1969) – and the even more occasional personal milestone.

Even these milestones – his family’s immigration to America in 1939, his purchase of a home on Bellagio Drive in Bel Air, his daughter’s appearance, among her roles as an actress, in three films that he directed and ten segments of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* that he did not, his reception toward the end of his life of numerous awards that evidently did not console him for his failure to win an Academy Award for Best Director despite five nominations – all turn out to be professional. Already during his lifetime Hitchcock was well-known for the extreme reserve of his private life, which posed such a contrast to his prodigious and well-advertised fondness for food and drink. On the set he was noted for his obsessive advance preparation – although Bill Krohn’s *Hitchcock at Work* has gone far to dispel the belief that Hitchcock was “a control freak who pre-planned every shot” (9) – for the monosyllabic composure, very much at odds with his behavior with interviewers, that made him unlikely to get into arguments with performers, and for his obligatory dark blue suits and neckties. He socialized exclusively with professional colleagues and had no close friends outside his family. He went home every night to the same wife, whose sixty-year relationship with him seems to have been less amatory than professional. As Taylor put it: “He did not go to parties, he did not have affairs with glamour stars, he did not really do anything but make pictures” (18). Or, as Spoto might add, Hitchcock’s life apart from his work sounds thumpingly dull – nothing stands out at all.

In short, Hitchcock seems an unusually unpromising subject for biographers because his public life was so routine and his private life so private. An enterprising biographer might accept the opacity and apparent narrowness of Hitchcock’s private life as a tonic challenge. Indeed, that is exactly what Spoto does in *The Dark Side of Genius*. But it is difficult, as Taylor acknowledges, to maintain the enabling assumption of all biographies of artists, that there are intimate and revealing connections between the artist’s life and work, in the face of a public life that is so

resolutely inexpressive and a private life that is so jealously guarded and perhaps so boring. Unlike so many other directors – Robert Siodmak, Nicholas Ray, Roman Polanski – whose more apparently eventful lives have failed to attract more biographical interest, Hitchcock's extreme personal reticence makes him something of a black box for biographers, who have fallen back to a great extent on either recycling and expanding the anecdotes with which the director had long regaled interviewers, especially in the case of Taylor, Chandler, and Falk, or plumbing the presumed depths beneath those anecdotes, as Spoto and McGilligan do.

A second complication for biographers pursuing a life-and-work approach to Hitchcock is the shape of filmmakers' careers as opposed to those of writers and artists. "Write what you know," aspiring novelists are repeatedly enjoined, and that is how authors from Jane Austen to F. Scott Fitzgerald have begun their careers, leaving a plainly marked trail of autobiographical concerns strewn throughout their early work for biographers to follow. But novice filmmakers who are assigned to projects willy-nilly rarely have the luxury of filming what they know. In this regard Hitchcock's early work, very typical of fledgling directors, is hard to rationalize under a life-and-work approach. Only four of his first sixteen films – *The Lodger*, *Blackmail* (1929), *Murder!* (1930), and *Number Seventeen* (1932) – could be called thrillers. The others include love stories (*The Pleasure Garden* [1925], *The Farmer's Wife* [1928], *The Manxman* [1929]), drawing-room dramas (*Easy Virtue* [1927] and *The Skin Game* [1931]), odysseys of variously beset adventurers of both sexes (*The Mountain Eagle* [1926], *Downhill* [1927], *Champagne* [1928], and *Rich and Strange* [1931]), a tale of the Irish troubles (*Juno and the Paycock* [1930]), the "musical without music" (Truffaut 85) *Waltzes from Vienna*, and *The Ring*, a boxing film that marked the only time in Hitchcock's career when he took screen credit for writing a script. Only with *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *The 39 Steps*, it seems, did Hitchcock find a congenial métier, the serio-comic thriller, which he gradually developed and deepened, with occasional diversions like *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (1941), for the rest of his career.

Biographers and analysts alike have pronounced the thriller not only the genre that brought Hitchcock his greatest commercial success but also the one that best expressed his abiding psychological preoccupations. The assumption of an autobiographical congruence between Hitchcock's life and the genre toward which he eventually gravitated has left them free to neglect his early non-thrillers except to the extent that they could be mined for supporting evidence of those concerns (the leavening of melodrama with farce in *The Farmer's Wife*, the stifling effects of family ties in *Downhill* and *The Skin Game*, the guilty pleasures of the male gaze in *The Pleasure Garden*, *Easy Virtue*, and *Champagne*). Commentators have retraced the steps Kenneth Burke once discerned in critics of T.S. Eliot:

In his early "Prufrock" days, when Mr. Eliot insisted that even quite personal lyrics were to be viewed not as in any sense self-portraits but as dramatic postures adopted professionally by the poet, the critics in the quarterlies generally abided by these

rules. But later, when he began writing such poems of religious devotion as the *Quartets*, the rules somehow became altered; and the attitudes in these later poems were treated ... as a sincere personal interchange between Mr. Eliot and his God.

(30)

The assumption of a close autobiographical connection between Hitchcock's private obsessions and his chosen genre has led to a third complication. Because no director has been more closely identified with a given genre, the aptly named Hitchcock thriller, commentators mining Hitchcock's films for revelations about his life and vice versa have felt free to treat all his films, or at any rate all the thrillers they consider true Hitchcock films, as different versions of a single text. It is as if Hitchcock's greatest work were not *Rear Window* or *Vertigo* or *Psycho* but the grand narrative of his career. This tendency first blossomed in Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol's *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films*, which found such unity in his films through *The Wrong Man* (1956) that the authors defined their method as "observ[ing] an order, a gradation, as in piano exercises," that "work[s] toward the depths slowly, hoping that our final insights will inevitably illuminate earlier commentary, just as Hitchcock's films throw mutual and instructive light on one another" (x). In other words, once Hitchcock's non-thrillers were discounted as apprentice work undertaken at the behest of others, the thrillers could be read as a single homogeneous master text for the purposes of both interpretation and biography.

This is an odd assumption because it draws such a sharp distinction between early projects that are presumably impersonal in their diversity and later, more consistently commercial projects that are held to be more expressive of their creator. In treating Hitchcock as his movies' only begetter, this autobiographical model overlooks, or at least downplays, the contributions of longtime collaborators like Eliot Stannard, Charles Bennett, Bernard Knowles, Jack Cox, Joan Harrison, Robert Boyle, Cary Grant, Ingrid Bergman, James Stewart, Grace Kelly, Robert Burks, George Tomasini, John Michael Hayes, and Bernard Herrmann. But perhaps the oddest implication of all is that Hitchcock's biography is valuable because it throws new interpretive light on a body of films that for a long time did not seem to require interpretation at all.

Although reviewers recognized from the beginning the paradoxical nature of Hitchcock's appeal, his consistent success in producing films that were brilliantly disturbing, Hitchcock was pigeonholed for many years as a successful entertainer largely because his films were so immediately accessible on a first viewing. Not until the early 1970s did the establishment of auteurism as "the dominant aesthetic discourse among journalistic and academic film critics" (Kapsis 70) change the image of Hitchcock – whom Universal had marketed as "the real star of *The Birds*" (Kapsis 83), the first Hitchcock film to pose interpretive problems for a mass audience – into that of a filmmaker whose work might actually have significant latent content beneath the darkly gleaming surface. Suddenly the obviousness that had

made Hitchcock's films so successful with such a large audience became an invitation to plumb depths that were off-limits to all but the cognoscenti.

What is most notable about these potential obstacles to mapping Hitchcock's life and art onto each other is that they have all been resolved by recourse to the same authority: Hitchcock himself. The revelation of unsuspected depths in what might have seemed merely exceptionally proficient genre films was facilitated by the groundbreaking series of interviews Hitchcock gave François Truffaut at a crucial moment in his career. Although Hitchcock's responses to Truffaut's questions were as usual resolutely technical and anecdotal rather than interpretive, his emphasis on his obsessive pre-planning and storyboarding, his habit of glossing over the contributions of collaborators from Madeleine Carroll to John Michael Hayes, and his concomitant presentation of himself as the sole creative force behind his films provided compelling evidence in support of his position as the ultimate auteur. No one remembers the device Truffaut used to conclude his original series of interviews – Hitchcock's description of a dream project he hoped to complete someday – because Hitchcock never attempted the project, a film covering twenty-four hours in the life of a city. Indeed, if Hitchcock were defined by his deepest aspirations, he would be best remembered as the man who dreamed for years of directing an adaptation of J.M. Barrie's spectral 1920 drama *Mary Rose*, a property his Universal contract specifically forbade his adapting (Hitchcock, "Surviving" 62; McGilligan 652–53). But everyone remembers the device Truffaut used to begin his first interview – an invitation to Hitchcock to confirm the oft-told story about his father sending young Alfred down to the police station with a note that caused the police to lock him up for "five or ten minutes" with the admonition, "This is what we do to naughty boys" (25) – because it so economically establishes an autobiographical basis for the fear of the police and institutional authority that runs throughout his films. Despite his parsimony in revealing details of his private life, Hitchcock succeeded in establishing his biography as a key to uncovering a new dimension of films that had never seemed in need of higher criticism.

Contemporaneous commentators who identified Hitchcock with the thriller as both a vehicle of commercial success and the expression of his most personal fears and desires followed Truffaut in identifying *The Lodger* as "really the first Hitchcockian picture," echoing the director's own characterization of it: "[Y]ou might almost say that *The Lodger* was my first picture" (Truffaut 47, 44). The tendency to see Hitchcock's later films as more personal, more self-revealing, than his earlier films was fueled by Robin Wood, even though Wood's Leavisite perspective was moral rather than biographical. Inverting the preference of Lindsay Anderson and Penelope Houston for Hitchcock's British films, Wood argued so passionately in defense of the American thrillers that a generation of filmgoers, especially in America, agreed in marginalizing or dismissing his earlier films, which were a good deal harder to find. Although Maurice Yacowar devoted an entire volume to explicating the British films, it was not until Charles Barr's *English Hitchcock* (1999)

that anyone took a life-and-work approach toward Hitchcock's first fifteen films. By emphasizing Hitchcock's national identity, his Englishness, and his dependence on his literary sources and his collaborators, especially "English literary figures" (8), Barr made available a much broader view of Hitchcock's biography even as he maintained the importance of Hitchcock's life to his work.

For over forty years, then, from the early 1960s to the present, Hitchcock's example provided the impetus to read his films biographically even as he kept his private life private. But Hitchcock's influence on later biographers and critics did not only extend beyond the grave; it extended nearly a generation back in time, to the earliest interviews the director gave. The director was as adept a storyteller with interviewers as with film audiences. Invited to discuss his forthcoming production of *Rich and Strange*, he summarizes the story of Dale Collins's novel at length before launching into a series of general rules for film production (Hitchcock, "Half" 7-9). Interviewed by Norah Baring, the female lead in *Murder!*, about the success of *The 39 Steps* and his plans to make *Secret Agent*, he begins by announcing that "Scrubby Carroll is in it again" and then proceeds to ground the outrageous epithet by telling the story of how he "made up [his] mind to present her to the public as her *natural self*" (Hitchcock, "Man Who Made" 11). In the 1936 series "My Screen Memories," he presents himself as a witty, relaxed, and voluble raconteur who praises performers like Peter Lorre, Robert Donat, Madeleine Carroll, and John Gielgud largely to the extent that they provide good material for anecdotes and who describes his ordeals directing *The Pleasure Garden* (8-12) with equal or greater relish. In the series "Life Among the Stars" the following year, he is not only equally generous in acknowledging the contributions of performers from Nita Naldi to Benita Hume to the success of his films but characteristically alert to the opportunity to repeat anecdotes about *The Pleasure Garden* from the earlier series (28-33) and to generalize from these anecdotes in a concluding quasi-narrative section titled "How I Make My Films."

Even before he left England for Hollywood, the publicity center of the universe, Hitchcock had mastered the art of self-promotion. His high-profile performers may have been the hooks that gave these recycled stories currency, but Hitchcock was indisputably the star who made an effortless transition from the comically beleaguered novice of *The Pleasure Garden* to the benevolent dictator who inspired Benita Hume and Norah Baring to new heights and released the force of Madeleine Carroll's natural personality. Though Hitchcock may not have had a particularly interesting life, he marketed himself from the beginning as an interesting person, a celebrity raconteur who excelled at treating and presenting stars like "Scrubby Carroll" as down-to-earth people. In the process of demythologizing such larger-than-life figures, Hitchcock succeeded in mythologizing himself as a giant-killer equally capable of launching the screen careers of Benita Hume, Ian Hunter, and Gordon Harker and of cutting stars like Donat and Carroll down to size.

By the time he arrived in America, Hitchcock had succeeded in establishing himself as the hero of the prophecy he had delivered in "Films We Could Make"

in the 16 November 1927 edition of the *London Evening News*: "When moving pictures are really artistic they will be created entirely by one man" (quoted in Spoto, *Dark* 103). In *Spellbound by Beauty*, Spoto accurately identifies this pronouncement, and its apparent fulfillment in a series of films of which Hitchcock was "the sole creative force," as "the central element in his self-promotion and in the creation of the Hitchcock myth" (84, 86). It is, in other words, a hypothesis treated as a fact by agents and institutions (Universal Pictures, journalists conducting interviews, academic programs in film studies, Hitchcock himself) that have a vested interest in its factual truth.

Hitchcock's status as the sole creative force in his films is not the only product of the director's ceaseless self-mythologizing. Perhaps Hitchcock's most cherished myth about his career was that he longed to make personally satisfying movies but was forced to bow to commercial exigencies. "There's the constant pressure," he told Frank S. Nugent in 1946. "You know: people asking, 'Do you want to reach only the audiences at the Little Carnegie or to have your pictures play the Music Hall?' So you compromise. You can't avoid it. You do the commercial thing, but you try to do it without lowering your standards" (Hitchcock, "Mr. Hitchcock" 18). Indeed, he confided in Gerald Pratley, "[I]t is harder to make a film that has both integrity and wide commercial appeal than it is to make one that merely satisfies one's artistic conscience" (Hitchcock, "Credo" 37). At a stroke, this last remark not only places the desire to achieve both integrity and commercial appeal above mere integrity but assumes that Hitchcock has an artistic conscience, that his films express something deep and true about himself irrespective of their commercial appeal.

It is this last myth that Spoto, for all his latter-day revulsion against the myth of Hitchcock the sole creative force, remains most deeply invested in: that Hitchcock's films are personal in the specific sense of being autobiographical. In his discussion of *Vertigo* in *Spellbound by Beauty*, Spoto quotes Kim Novak, James Stewart, and screenwriter Samuel Taylor (226) in support of his earlier argument that *Vertigo* was Hitchcock's "ultimate disclosure of his romantic impulses and of the attraction-repulsion he felt about the object of those impulses: the idealized blond he thought he desired but really believed to be a fraud" (*Dark* 395). Spoto's more general assumption is that *Notorious*, *Vertigo*, *Marnie*, and *Frenzy* must be not merely personally expressive of Hitchcock's emotions, even though he is a supervising collaborator rather than a sole creator, but autobiographical, because they are about men who watch women, transform women, capture women, and consume women.

In support of this proposition Spoto contends that "the artist ... has no other raw material with which to work than his own inner life, however much it is to be treated and transmuted" (*Spellbound* 227). Despite Spoto's assurance, this romantic view of artistic creation is a heresy passing for the whole truth. Roberto Rossellini created his best-known films by drawing on his sociological observations of war-torn Italy, Jean Renoir his by drawing on his psychological observations of other

people, Cecil B. DeMille his by shrewdly gauging the vagaries of the market, and countless filmmakers theirs by drawing inspiration from the novels and plays and stories they adapted. Theorizing that extroverted filmmakers like Rossellini and Renoir draw their inspiration from the world around them, introverted filmmakers like Hitchcock and Fritz Lang from the world within them, Leo Braudy concludes that “Lang teaches us about ourselves; Renoir teaches us about the rest of the world” (50). Even to categorize a filmmaker as extroverted or introverted, of course, is already to speculate, and to argue that introverts create not only personal but autobiographical cinema because they have no other choice is to mythologize on a grand scale, a scale worthy of Hitchcock himself.

But Spoto’s romantic myth of Hitchcock as involuntary autobiographer, which follows Hitchcock in its assumption that all films are and must be reflections of their director’s personal views, is a response to an earlier myth that also takes its cue from Hitchcock. When Taylor emphasizes Hitchcock’s “exemplarily conservative, private private life” (18), he is simply expanding on Hitchcock’s own revealingly unrevealing remarks about his wife and himself:

[F]or a thriller-movie-making ogre, I’m hopelessly plebeian and placid. ... [I]nstead of reading mysteries at home I’m usually designing a built-in cupboard for the house; ... I wear conservative clothes and solid-color ties; ... I share her tastes for modest living, but ... my tendency to utter terrible puns makes me a trial to live with.

(Hitchcock, “Woman” 52)

Recast in the third person, this comically bland self-portrait would be familiar from countless television interviews with citizens whose neighbors have run violently amok: “He seemed like such a nice man ... quiet ... kept to himself.” Both the myth that fuels Taylor’s authorized biography – that although the director’s private life may be a curious puzzle, it deserves to remain private because it is insulated from a body of work it neither explains nor is explained by – and the countermyth that inspires Spoto – that the director cannot help drawing on his most personal fears and fantasies to create autobiographical films – are fueled by Hitchcock himself, who remains, thirty years after his death, by far his most influential biographer. McGilligan, unable to move beyond these enabling myths, has simply steered a middle course between them; Chandler and Falk have been content to recycle them with the different emphases indicated by their titles. Falk’s amusingly decorous *Mr. Hitchcock* implicitly promises to keep the director’s private life private; Chandler’s ruefully self-deprecating *It’s Only a Movie* is yet another allusion to Hitchcock’s mythology of the non-relation between life and art.

The iron control the posthumous Hitchcock exerts over his own biography has been costly in more ways than one. David Thomson, whose entry on Hitchcock in his *Biographical Dictionary of Film* is resolutely unbiographical, suggested in conversation that Hitchcock’s penchant for self-mythologizing had consequences in his own life that paralleled Ernest Hemingway’s. Both men were aggressively talented

and aggressively self-promoting. Beginning with trademark stories they told about themselves and a public image they carefully crafted even before their publicists saw its commercial potential, they created personal mythologies that a vast audience found more potent than their work. Just as more American readers knew Hemingway as the virile, anti-literary writer who sought to purge his prose of humbug and insisted that writing about grace under pressure was a craft best rooted in intimate knowledge of the pressures of war, bullfighting, or big-game hunting than ever read *Men Without Women* (1927) or *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), more moviegoers were familiar with Hitchcock's ghoulishly cherubic profile, deadpan way with outrageous puns, and reputation for putting audiences through it than ever saw *Psycho* or *The Birds*. In the end, both men, like *Citizen Kane*, fell victim to self-created myths grown more powerful than them. The aging Hemingway, the strength and mental stamina he had mythologized fading under the onslaught of injuries he had sustained in the pursuit of authentic physical experience, killed himself with a shotgun when he was unable to live up to his own ideal. The aging Hitchcock, convinced by interviewers, acolytes, and his own insulation from the world that he was indeed the supreme ruler of his films, carried over his highly ambivalent fantasies of sexual domination – what Spoto calls “attraction and repulsion, the almost idolatrous gaze of his camera and the concomitant compulsion to tear [his heroines] apart” (*Spellbound* 59) – from the screen to the set with scarcely less disastrous results.

Hitchcock's tendency to mythologize himself eventually grew so powerful that it created a split between the idealized self he had created for the press, the fans, and his own gratification, and the self his collaborators, his commentators, and the world at large were willing to recognize. The personal myth he authorized of darkly unfettered imagination countered by all-consuming professional commitment, a puckish sense of humor, and a decorously veiled private life has been equally powerful and even more durable. Indeed it has offered a highly influential model for biographers of other filmmakers. Michael Curtiz was more prolific than Hitchcock. Howard Hawks directed a more varied body of work. And Victor Fleming's life was by any measure more interesting. But the directors who have received the most attention from biographers are those who supported a personal mythology the biographer could either record (Fritz Lang's determination to buck the Hollywood system, Stanley Kubrick's obsessive control over his projects) or create (Martin Scorsese's decision to leave religious life for a Hollywood career, Quentin Tarantino's life lived wholly through the movies). Filmmakers interest biographers to the extent that their lives can be mythologized in the Hitchcock mold.

It is possible that Hitchcock's biography is exhausted because there really is nothing new to add. What then are the possibilities for new lives of Hitchcock? When long-dead authors attract new biographers, there is usually a specific reason. Richard B. Sewall's *Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974) draws on a wealth of new material about Dickinson's family and her relationship with the men outside it. Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* (1987) rehabilitates a writer maligned during the

final years of his life as a prophetic hero for a new generation. Fred Kaplan's *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius* (1992) sheds a new light on James's work by recasting the novelist's troubled sexuality as the wellspring of his fiction.

None of these scenarios seems likely for Hitchcock. Bill Krohn is surely correct in his assertion that "[b]ecause film-making generates an incredible amount of paperwork, it is a better documented creative activity than composing, painting, or even writing" (10). Yet the vast amount of production material on Hitchcock's films is not complemented by any significant private documents, letters to loved ones from whom he was separated or even a stack of memos like David O. Selznick's to collaborators he saw every day. And the professional acquaintances whose confidences to interviewers have driven all his biographies to date are passing away. As a filmmaker the value of whose work was subject to intense debate during his lifetime and whose personal habits have been debated with equal intensity since then, Hitchcock is not an obvious subject for radical reevaluation precisely because the battles along these lines have already been fought for so long. Only a professional analog to Kaplan's private approach – not a reappraisal of Hitchcock's sexuality, but a new approach to his work in the context of production material concerning his collaborations, his relationships with particular studios, or the more general institutional powers of the British and American film industries – holds out anything like promise to future biographers. Whoever they are, their first task will be to exorcise the myth of Hitchcock, the leading force behind all his lives to date, and the most formidable obstacle to any new ones.

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