

Truffaut on Hitchcock

The definitive study of Alfred Hitchcock by François Truffaut
Revised Edition

A.H. I suppose so.

F.T. You generally avoid any politics in your films.

A.H. It's just that the public doesn't care for films on politics. How else would you account for the fact that most of the pictures dealing with the politics of the Iron Curtain are failures? The same applies to films about domestic politics.

F.T. Isn't it because they're mostly propaganda films, and rather naïve ones at that?

A.H. Yet there've been quite a few pictures on East and West Berlin. Carol Reed made one called *The Man Between*; Kazan made *Man on a Tightrope*, and Fox produced a picture with Gregory Peck, which involved a businessman's son captured by the East Germans. I can't remember the name. Then there was *The Big Lift*, with Montgomery Clift. None of them has been really successful.

F.T. It's possible that people don't like the mélange of reality and fiction. The best might be a straightforward documentary.

A.H. You know, I have an idea for a really good Cold War suspense movie. An American, speaking Russian fluently, is parachuted into Russia, and the little man who looks after him on the plane accidentally falls through the opening, so that the two men come down together on the one parachute. The first one not only speaks fluent Russian; he also has the necessary papers and could be taken for a Russian citizen, while the little man with him has no papers and doesn't speak a word of Russian. This is the point of departure from the story. Every second would be suspenseful.

F.T. One solution might be for the Russian-speaking man to pass the other one off as his deaf-mute kid brother.

A.H. Yes, that could be done at times, but the real value of this situation is that it enables you to do the whole dialogue in Russian all the

way through, with the other man constantly asking, "What did they say? What did they do?" His real purpose, you see, would be to serve as the means of narration.

F.T. It would be fun to work that out.

A.H. But they'll never allow us to do it!

F.T. We've already mentioned *North by Northwest* several times in the course of these talks, and you seem to agree with me that just as *The Thirty-nine Steps* may be regarded as the compendium of your work in Britain, *North by Northwest* is the picture that epitomizes the whole of your work in America. It's always difficult to sum up all the ups and downs in stories in a few words, but this one is almost impossible.*

A.H. That brings up an amusing sidelight of the shooting. You may remember that during the first part all sorts of things happen to the hero with such bewildering rapidity that he doesn't know what it's all about. Anyway, Cary Grant came up to me and said, "It's a terrible script. We've already done a third of the picture and I still can't make head or tail of it."

F.T. He felt the story was too confusing?

A.H. Yes, but without realizing it he was using a line of his own dialogue.

F.T. By the way, I meant to ask you whether you ever introduce useless dialogue in a scene, knowing in advance that people won't

* Here, then, is the broad outline, rather than the synopsis, of *North by Northwest*. The hero of the story is an imaginary agent created by a U.S. intelligence agency. Though he doesn't exist, he has been given an identity via the name Kaplan, a suite in a luxurious New York hotel, and a set of fine clothes. When an enemy espionage group mistakenly identifies advertising executive Cary Grant as Kaplan, he becomes a target for pursuit and is trapped in a web of circumstances so incredible that he cannot turn to the police. The harrowing nightmare is compounded by his perplexity over the confusing behavior of Eva Marie Saint, who works with the spies. After a series of adventures alternating between the ludicrous and the terrifying, the spies are exposed and the mystery is cleared up. Eva Marie Saint turns out to be an undercover agent for the U.S., and the picture winds up on a romantic note for the hero and the lovely adventuress.



pay any attention to it?

A.H. Why should we do that, for heaven's sake?

F.T. Well, either to allow the audience a breather between two moments of tension or else to sum up the situation for the benefit of those viewers who may have missed the beginning of the picture.

A.H. That practice goes back to the Griffith era. At some midway point of the picture he'd insert a few lines of narrative titles summing up everything that preceded, for the benefit of the late-comers.

F.T. You have the equivalent of that in the second third of *North by Northwest*. There's a dialogue scene at the airport in which Cary Grant tells Leo G. Carroll, the counterintelligence man, everything that's happened to him since the beginning of the picture.

A.H. That scene has a dual function.

Firstly, it clarifies and sums up the sequence of events for the audience, and, secondly, Cary Grant's account is the cue for the counterintelligence agent to fill him in on some of the missing elements of these mystifying events.

F.T. Yes, but we don't know what he's saying because his voice is drowned out by the roar of the plane propellers.

A.H. It wasn't necessary for that to be heard because the public already had the information.



The facts had been brought out in a previous scene, when the counterespionage men decide that to help Cary Grant might arouse the suspicion of the spies.

F.T. Of course, I remember now. The deafening sound of the planes also serves another purpose: it makes us lose all notion of time. The counterintelligence man spends thirty seconds in telling Cary Grant a story that, in reality, would take him, at the very least, three minutes to tell.

A.H. Exactly, this is part of the play with time. In this picture nothing was left to chance, and that's why, when it was over, I took a very firm stand. I'd never worked for M-G-M before, and when it was edited, they put on a lot of pressure to have me eliminate a whole sequence at the end of the picture. I refused.

F.T. Which sequence was that?

A.H. Right after the scene in that cafeteria where people look at Mount Rushmore through a telescope. You remember that Eva Marie Saint takes a shot at Cary Grant. Actually, she

only pretends to kill him in order to save his life. Well, in the next sequence he's taken to the woods to meet the girl.

F.T. When the two cars come together? But isn't that a key scene?

A.H. It's indispensable because it's truly their first meeting since Cary Grant has learned that she is James Mason's mistress, and this is the scene in which he finds out she is working for Central Intelligence. My contract had been drawn up by MCA, my agents, and when I read it over, I found that, although I hadn't asked for it, they'd put in a clause giving me complete artistic control of the picture, regardless of production time, cost or anything. So I was able to say politely, "I'm very sorry, but this sequence must remain in the picture."

F.T. It seems to me that there were many trick shots in that picture, lots of them almost invisible, and also many special effects, like miniatures and fake sets.





A.H. We had an exact copy made up of the United Nations lobby. You see, someone had used that setting for a film called *The Glass Wall*, and after that Dag Hammarskjöld prohibited any shooting of fiction films on the premises.

Just the same, while the guards were looking for our equipment, we shot one scene of Cary Grant coming into the building by using a concealed camera. We'd been told we couldn't even do any photography, so we concealed the camera in the back of a truck and in that way we got enough footage for the background. Then we

got a still photographer to get permission to take some colored stills inside, and I walked around with him, as if I was a visitor, whispering, "Take that shot from there. And now, another one from the roof down." We used those color photographs to reconstitute the settings in our studios.

The place where the man is stabbed in the back is in the delegates' lounge, but to maintain the prestige of the United Nations, we called it the "public lounge" in the picture, and this also explains how the man with the knife could get in there. Anyway, the locale was very accurately

reconstructed. I'm very concerned about the authenticity of settings and furnishings. When we can't shoot in the actual settings, I'm for taking research photographs of everything.

When we were preparing to shoot *Vertigo*, in which James Stewart plays an educated detective who's retired from the police force, I sent a photographer to San Francisco. His assignment was to dig up some retired detectives, preferably college graduates, and to take pictures of their apartments.

The same for *The Birds*. In order to get the characters right, I had every inhabitant of Bodega Bay—man, woman, and child—photo-





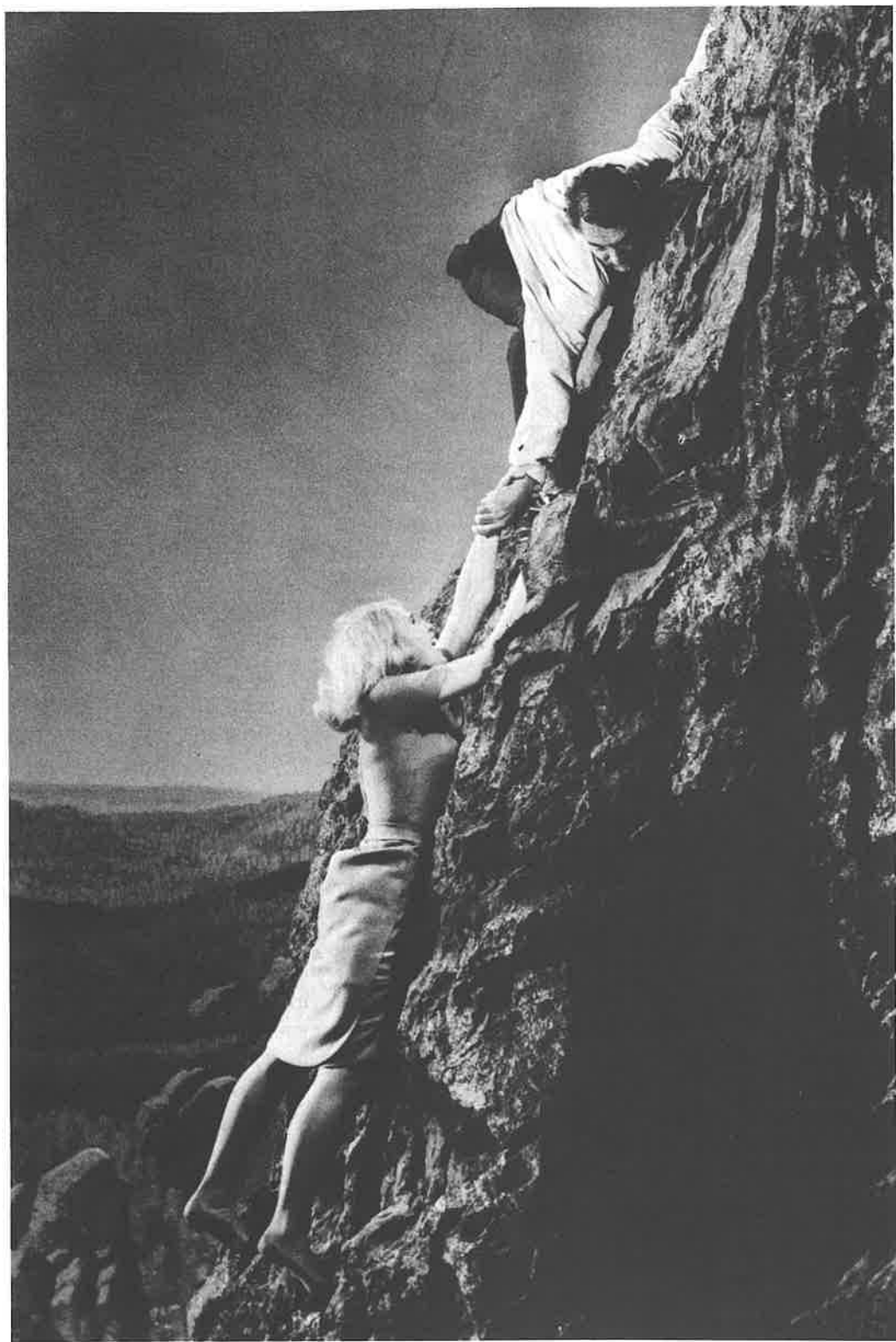
graphed for the costume department. The restaurant is an exact copy of the one up there. The home of the schoolteacher is a combination of a schoolteacher's house in San Francisco and the home of a schoolteacher in Bodega Bay. I covered it both ways because, as you may remember, the schoolteacher in that picture works in Bodega Bay but she comes from San Francisco.

The house of the farmer who's killed by the birds is an exact replica of an existing farm up there: the same entrance, the same halls, the same rooms, the same kitchen. Even the scenery of the mountain that is shown outside the window of the corridor is completely accurate. The house that's used at the end of *North by Northwest* is the miniature of a house by Frank Lloyd Wright that's shown from a distance. We built part of it for the scene in which Cary Grant circles around it.

F.T. I'd like to talk about that long sequence with Cary Grant in the cornfields which starts long before the plane appears overhead. The scene is completely silent for some seven

minutes; it's a real tour de force. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much* there is a ten-minute scene showing the concert at Albert Hall with no dialogue, but that scene is sustained by the cantata music and by the anticipation of an incident we're expecting. I believe the old way of handling this sort of thing was to accelerate the montage by using shorter and shorter cuts, whereas in *North by Northwest* all of the shots are of equal duration.

A.H. Here you're not dealing with time but with space. The length of the shots was to indicate the various distances that a man had to run for cover and, more than that, to show that there was no cover to run to. This kind of scene can't be wholly subjective because it would go by in a flash. It's necessary to show the approaching plane, even before Cary Grant spots it, because if the shot is too fast, the plane is in and out of the frame too quickly for the viewer to realize what's happening. We have the same thing in *The Birds* when Tippi Hedren is attacked in the boat. If the gulls are made to fly in and out of the picture in a flash, the audience



might think it's just a piece of paper that flew into her face. By doing that scene subjectively, you show the girl in the boat, you see her watching the dockside, and suddenly something hits her head. But that's still too fast. So you have to break the rule of the point of view. You deliberately abandon the subjective angle and go to an objective viewpoint, by showing the gull before it strikes, so that the audience might be fully aware of what is happening.

And we apply that same rule in *North by Northwest*, so as to prepare the public for the threat of the plane dive.

F.T. I believe the accelerated tempo is used in many pictures to get around a technical difficulty or to patch things together in the cutting room. Frequently, when the director hasn't shot sufficient footage, the editor makes do by using the outtakes of various shots and editing them as short takes, but it's never really satisfactory. They often use that technique, for instance, to show someone being run over by a car.

A.H. You mean that everything happens too quickly.

F.T. In most pictures, yes.

A.H. I had a car accident, as the basis for a trial, in one of my recent television shows. What I did was to use five shots of people witnessing the incident before I showed the accident itself. Or rather, I showed five people as they heard the sound of it. Then I filmed the end of the accident, just as the man hits the ground after his motorcycle has turned over and the offending car is speeding away. These are moments when you have to stop time, to stretch it out.

F.T. I see. Now, let's go back to the scene in the cornfield. The most appealing aspect of that sequence with the plane is that it's totally gratuitous—it's a scene that's been drained of all plausibility or even significance. Cinema, approached in this way, becomes a truly abstract art, like music. And here it's precisely that gratuity, which you're often criticized for, that

gives the scene all of its interest and strength. It's deliberately emphasized by the dialogue, when the farmer, who's about to get into the bus, points to the oncoming plane and says to Cary Grant, "Look, here comes a crop-dusting plane." And then he adds, "That's funny, there are no crops to be dusted!" And he's right, of course; that's the whole point: there's nothing to be sprayed! How can anyone object to gratuity when it's so clearly deliberate—it's planned incongruity? It's obvious that the fantasy of the absurd is a key ingredient of your film-making formula.

A.H. The fact is I practice absurdity quite religiously!

F.T. Since that scene doesn't serve to move the action forward, it's the kind of concept that would simply never occur to a screenwriter; only a director could dream up an idea like that!

A.H. I'll tell you how the idea came about. I found I was faced with the old cliché situation: the man who is put on the spot, probably to be shot. Now, how is this usually done? A dark night at a narrow intersection of the city. The waiting victim standing in a pool of light under the street lamp. The cobblestones are "washed with the recent rains." A close-up of a black cat slinking along against the wall of a house. A shot of a window, with a furtive face pulling back the curtain to look out. The slow approach of a black limousine, et cetera, et cetera. Now, what was the antithesis of a scene like this? No darkness, no pool of light, no mysterious figures in windows. Just nothing. Just bright sunshine and a blank, open countryside with barely a house or tree in which any lurking menaces could hide.

You'll remember my theory about using chocolate in Switzerland and windmills in Holland. Well, in that spirit, as well as because of my feeling for free fantasy, I thought up a scene for *North by Northwest*, but we never actually made it. It occurred to me that we were moving in a northwesterly direction from New York, and one of the stops on the way was Detroit, where they make Ford automobiles. Have you ever seen an assembly line?

F.T. No, I never have.

A.H. They're absolutely fantastic. Anyway, I wanted to have a long dialogue scene between Cary Grant and one of the factory workers as they walk along the assembly line. They might, for instance, be talking about one of the foremen. Behind them a car is being assembled, piece by piece. Finally, the car they've seen being put together from a simple nut and bolt is complete, with gas and oil, and all ready to drive off the line. The two men look at it and say, "Isn't it wonderful!" Then they open the door to the car and out drops a corpse!

F.T. That's a great idea!

A.H. Where has the body come from? Not from the car, obviously, since they've seen it start at zero! The corpse falls out of nowhere, you see! And the body might be that of the foreman the two fellows had been discussing.

F.T. That's a perfect example of absolute nothingness! Why did you drop the idea? Is it because it would have made the scene too long?

A.H. It wasn't a question of time. The real problem was that we couldn't integrate the idea into the story. Even a gratuitous scene must have some justification for being there, you know!