

INTRODUCTION

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

“Our voyage was very prosperous,” Jonathan Swift writes in *Gulliver’s Travels*, “but I shall not trouble the reader with a journal of it.” Trouble? Well, reader, you weren’t there. Here, to trouble with pleasure, I hope, is not a journal but a series of meditations, not even about the specifics of voyages along which Hitchcock escorts us so much as about his penchant for making narrative a voyage, and his even stronger penchant for putting his characters to voyages they sometimes recognize and sometimes do not. Journeys from placidity, from surety, from complacency, from stability, from the enforced orders of the civilized. Voyages away from silence, from indication, from certainty, from the past. Voyages of discovery, of embarrassment, of terror, of delirium. And voyages to . . . ? To further doubt, to further uncertainties? To illuminations? To the trouble of illuminations that are accompanied—as illuminations must be—by shadows.

Alfred Hitchcock knew what T. S. Eliot knew when he wrote that iconic line, “We shall not cease from exploration.” He knew it young and he knew it old, he knew it framing a scene and he knew it effecting transitions forward and summoning recollections from the past. Those who have treated themselves to serious consideration of his films have repeatedly been stunned by the variety and magnitude and number of explorations he invokes and shares. While it is fair enough to claim that all his films—for that matter all films—are types of exploration, there are in truth some particular films where the problem of the voyage, call it moving forward, is articulated with express contrast and deeply affecting light. There is no claim to be made that the six films I write about in the following pages are

the Hitchcockian voyage pieces. Only that each of them nobly, brilliantly, and with great evocation brings a voyage into our consciousness. That they are metaphors through which we can come to a new understanding of the voyage and its meaningfulness, and a new understanding, one hopes, of Hitchcock.

The analyses here work through: *Psycho*, a voyage into mystery, doubling, innocence, justice, horror, and . . . and supremely, mystery, mystery, mystery. No one understands *Psycho*, one tries in vain to cut all the way into it and see the way the blood flows. In opening it, my sensibility finds repetitions, one after another, and the chapter tries to convey the tonal quality of repetition deeply implicit in the film. And the eerie quality of repetition talked about. *The 39 Steps*, a voyage about a voyager, trapped by circumstances that would never have befallen him had he stayed home, wherever home is, but that now hurl him forward into confrontation with the elements, with distrustful strangers, with nefarious agents, and with a culture he can only take as alien. Here is a film of loneliness and sadness, bleakness and exposure, and the chapter works to recreate that atmosphere as well as to reach for an understanding of what a secret might be. *The Birds*, about a young woman piqued by attraction and following her sensibilities by chasing a young lawyer to the California seaside where a cataclysm is on the verge of happening. Is she the cause of the cataclysm? Is he? Is anyone? And do the legion birds, who constitute the chaos, speak of it, plan it, intend it? Bird flying here, bird flying now, then later, then spontaneously, then after a warning, bird flying, bird dispersing; the chapter is written, as Gromek in *Torn Curtain* says, "strickly fer da boids." *Dial M for Murder*, stringing us along as accomplices to a cagey husband's almost perfect plan to get his wife's money. A voyage with echoes, a voyage in the present and the past simultaneously, and a voyage into the London middle class, but a voyage made with words more than movement. *Rich and Strange*, bringing the promise of freedom and the taste of promise, exit from a routine choreography, the exoticism of the self, all of which arrive through invocations of the East. Here, an analysis couched in mysteries, as such voyages were for western Europeans in the 1930s. And lastly *Suspicion*, a sweet waif's odyssey into terror, and a bizarre man of whom we may voyage toward faulty perceptions. In writing about this I wanted to touch on the tender strings of doubt. All six are well-known films, *Rich and Strange* least of them and

Psycho definitively most. In every case the analysis here takes us on a voyage that departs from the quay of accepted readings, heads out to sea, and does not exactly return. There are other Hitchcock films expressly invoking travel, such as *The Lady Vanishes* and *The Trouble with Harry* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*,¹ but in order to suggest its contours and tastes one need not sketch the complete universe.

The voyage is central to both contemporary culture and cinema, the telltale art of modernity. Not only is cinema inherently traveling, frame to frame, scene to scene, but one participates in the experience of watching by way of a personal odyssey, a leaving behind of what is familiar and customary and an openness to encountering the strange and wonderful. This is one very good reason for going into a film with as little detailed knowledge as possible, so that the film can, itself, do the work of introduction and solicitation. The culture is obsessed with travel, movement, voyaging. Of the *Fortune* 500, all are principally devoted to the movement of goods, services, information, ideas, representations, reflections. But this is not to suggest that in the six films examined here there is nothing but voyaging, for surely there is a great deal more. The voyage is a metaphor for carrying us across the empty gulf of pure confrontation, a path toward reception.

Regarding Hitchcock's stories: it is sometimes regarded as a healthy challenge to take the Hitchcockian plot, in all its turns and twists, with the greatest seriousness, but in these chapters my principal regard is for the relationship between events and aesthetic context, the story's voyage into form. Hitchcock was a master of cinematic form, which goes far beyond contriving an elegant frame composition—always the case here—to include such elements as preparations, nuances, foreground-background relations, play with realism, rhythmic pattern, and tickling reiteration, not to mention reverberations, color nuances, manifestations of size, alarming choreographies, and twistings of time. The reader might consider it useful to watch each film before reading the relevant chapter, only so that the screen visions—as discreet from the narrative events—will be fresh in mind. Or, on another itinerary, to read each chapter as an analogue to the film, something of a stand-in. The text reaches to express details of the image.

There is a tradition of scholarship and analysis within which this writing stands. The close reading of V. F. Perkins asks for open-hearted and perceptually extensive attention to film in its details and its passages. The

philosophy of Stanley Cavell asks for a fully devoted relation of perception to the perceiver's true experience. The aesthetic analysis of Abraham Kaplan asks for acceptance of the critical moment as ongoingly balanced by the creative one: in short, to attend not only to what is said by a piece but also to the challenges involved in making it. The criticism of Bill Krohn is a model of background analysis, most specifically of script versions and technical adaptations. The considerations of William Rothman extend themselves broadly over the space of each film he examines, demonstrating boldly how a discussion will suffer if it is curtailed too abruptly, how every movement of the film is essential. And there is ongoing reference here to a series of considerations of the filmic moment, as opposed to the lonely shot. I would openly disclaim any attempt to be definitive about these six films, hoping instead that my observations might tickle the reader into wanting further contact with Hitchcock by way of his work. Many of those who actually did have contact with him, who were involved in making at his side, have given me guidance along the way.

No voyage takes the voyager everywhere in a territory, no voyager discovers the universe. In this voyage, which these pages intend to incite, the voyaging reader will most happily avoid assuming I have a predilection for making a complete, total, and uncompromising map of the pictures of Alfred Hitchcock. For instance, with any film there are certain moments I choose to dwell upon and others I may seem to casually neglect, but the intent, I humbly affirm, is to make the dwelt-upon moments richer and more seductive, not to skip over what is essential. To put this another way: there is so very much in any Hitchcock film it is quite impossible not to skip over something, just as, crossing the great ocean, one can count only so many waves. . . .

Each chapter here is a kind of voyage.

This volume is intended as a follower of two others. *An Eye for Hitchcock* (Rutgers University Press, 2004) dealt with *North by Northwest*, *I Confess*, *Marnie*, *Torn Curtain*, *Spellbound*, and *Vertigo*. *A Dream of Hitchcock* (SUNY, 2018) addressed *Strangers on a Train*, *Rear Window*, *Saboteur*, *Rebecca*, *To Catch a Thief*, and *Family Plot*. The structures of all three volumes are identical and make the same kinds of assumptions about this filmmaker's brilliant intent as marriageable with the reader's committed love. In the books so far, quite evidently, some quite provocative and wonderful films have been

left to the side, and in apology I can say only that there must be a time for exploration and a time to cease from exploration with every project, and with every breath. The culminating volume of this Hitchcock Quartet, *A Silence from Hitchcock*, is on the drawing board. Hitchcock is a very great force. And he will repay our eyes.

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