

DEAN FLOWER

Some Refrigerator Talk About Alfred Hitchcock

WHEN FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT BEGAN HIS MARATHON INTERVIEW with Alfred Hitchcock in the summer of 1962, he expected to encounter an elusive and calculating man, secretive about his art and himself. Instead he found him “genuinely self-critical” and “completely sincere.” After more than fifty hours of taped conversation, Truffaut concluded, “Under the invariably self-possessed and often cynical surface is a deeply vulnerable, sensitive, and emotional man who feels with particular intensity the sensations he communicates to his audience.” Hitchcock’s biographers—not to mention innumerable other memoirists and critics—have seldom been so lucid as this. John Russell Taylor, who wrote *Hitch: The Life and Work of Alfred Hitchcock* in 1978, found him a bundle of contradictory personae, running from dignified professional to “shameless publicist,” and from devoted married man (“the epitome of English virtues”) to sexually-obsessed fantasist, a man who could sometimes be a “grinning schoolboy” and at others a “connoisseur of slightly ghoulish jokes and deadpan outrageousness.” Taylor decided he was all of these things and none of them—an engima, finally, an artist who simply disappeared into his work. He is “not so much in his films,” Taylor wrote, “he *is* his films.”

Then came Donald Spoto’s *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* in 1983, which the *New York Times* described as “the picture of a severely repressed, even twisted, Victorian gentleman” and *Time* called a “portrait of a man whose character was as strange and shadowed as his films.” Spoto found Hitchcock in his films all right—in his charming wife-murderers, sadistic misogynists, deranged voyeurs, and psychotic killers. Spoto emphasized Hitchcock’s apparent cruelty on the set: his perversely repeated dunking and drenching of Tallulah Bankhead in *Lifeboat*, his relentless pressure on Vera Miles, the suffering housewife in *The Wrong Man*, his cruel domination of Tippi Hedren in *The Birds* and *Marnie*. In his wit and charm wasn’t Hitchcock like the psychotic Bruno (Robert Walker) in *Strangers on a Train*? Or in his throttled sexual inhibitions akin to Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in *Psycho*? Or in his need to control and direct the sexuality of women very like Scottie (Jimmy Stewart) in *Vertigo* and Mark (Sean Connery) in *Marnie*? Spoto appealed to those who readily assume guilt by association—Poe must

have been a madman, Nabokov a pervert—so eager are they to explain the author by the work. Then too Spoto never misses a chance to depict Hitchcock's overweight as grotesque, and his huge appetite as proof of deep distress. His chronicle of Hitchcock's "Gastronomic Life" is relentless, with its most memorable item a description of the director rapidly consuming, at New York's elegant 21 Club, three complete steak dinners, followed each time by an ice-cream parfait. Surely this signalled desperation? But Hitchcock explained his behavior afterwards, quaffing a brandy with reporters: "I find contentment from food. It is a mental process rather than a physical." Truffaut would have understood this candor, but the ever-suspicious Spoto had to call it "uncharacteristic honesty."

The most recent Hitchcock biography, by Patrick McGilligan,¹ does much to correct Spoto's excesses, without being quarrelsome. Only after 750 densely-packed pages of his own does he suggest why Spoto's portrayal has remained the popular one: "perhaps because it is easier to imagine a manipulative egoist and monster, a shriveled soul inside a grossly fat man, than to understand the practical artist who gave his life to film." It turns out that Tallulah was not sadistically or lasciviously used on the set of *Lifeboat*. The whole cast suffered three months of all-too-realistic rolling and pitching in a studio setup; everyone was wet and cold, and needed anti-seasickness pills, said Hume Cronyn, who endured two cracked ribs from the experience himself. If anyone was lascivious it was Tallulah, whose exhibitionism on the set was notorious. "Every day," said Walter Slezak, "three, four, or five times, she showed she wasn't wearing panties." While she complained she was "black and blue from the downpourings and the lurchings" and did come down with bronchial pneumonia for a time, she was hardly anyone's victim. Her snobbery, cruelty, name-dropping, and foul mouth set everyone's teeth on edge—except the director's. Hitchcock, says McGilligan, "liked her diva personality—her imperial style of acting . . . her lack of inhibition." And it suited her role, "the toughest person in the lifeboat, who intimidated all the others."

As for Spoto's claim that Hitchcock gratuitously tormented Vera Miles in filming *The Wrong Man*, putting the actress through "the poignant scenes of her breakdown over and over until she was nearly sick with exhaustion," McGilligan argues that it was a strategy which "worked wonders" before with Joan Fontaine in *Suspicion* and was justified by the script. Besides, Miles was "a free spirit" who knew how to fend off the director's "hovering attention." He might have argued too that the suffering portrayed by Miles—the anguish of a wife who takes on the guilt of her wrongly accused husband, magnifying it to the point of her own mental annihilation—is the most moving and compassionate element of the film.

Tippi Hedren was another actress Hitchcock discovered and a more

¹ ALFRED HITCHCOCK: A Life in Darkness and Light, by *Patrick McGilligan*. Regan Books/HarperCollins. \$19.95p.

vulnerable one than Miles. According to McGilligan there is no evidence whatever that Hitchcock “treated her with deliberate cruelty” in filming *The Birds* or that he was unnaturally “obsessed” with her. But she clearly did suffer, sometimes nightmarishly. One scene, comprising a minute of film, took an entire week to shoot, using live birds because “the terror had to be real.” Reluctant gulls had to be thrown at her, and one bird loosely tied to her costume clawed her in the eye. When Cary Grant visited the set one day, he told Hedren, “You’re one brave lady.” By the end of that week, Hedren remembers she “sat down and cried.” She knew it was not an ordeal that Hitchcock would have put Ingrid Bergman or Grace Kelly or Kim Novak through. What justified it, McGilligan argues, was Hitchcock’s own desire, “reaching for something unusual, something daunting—something even he was groping to express.” In fact, he seems to have dreaded shooting the film, telling Truffaut about “pouring myself into ‘the Girl,’” and enduring a wholly unaccustomed “state of distress.” Yet this very “emotional seige . . . seemed to spark an extra creative thing in me.” Anyone who doubts that apparently self-serving claim should read Lee Edelman’s 1999 essay, “Hitchcock’s Future,” which demonstrates how the apocalyptic hatred of the birds reflects a repressive society driven by its fear and hatred of sexuality.² If Hitchcock was guilty of anything here, it was serious art.

It is not surprising that actors often felt abused, treated as “cattle,” or reduced to “a look” by a director who so clearly knew—even before scripting and casting—exactly what he wanted. As the miffed saleslady in *Vertigo* says to Scottie Ferguson, who is costuming Judy back into Madeline, “Well! The gentleman certainly knows what he wants.” Tippi Hedren knew it too: Melanie Daniels in *The Birds* was “his character,” she said, never hers. He “gives his actors very little leeway. He’ll listen, but he has a very definite plan in mind as to how he wants his characters to act.” Hitchcock was of course critiquing his own directorial compulsions in *Vertigo*. But most of his actors knew his tactics were not personal, and often he left them entirely alone. Barbara Harris, who played the wacky clairvoyant in *Family Plot* (1976), called it “Brechtian-type directing” because he seemed to ignore the “subjective emotional intent” of a scene and asked her to focus instead simply on its “business.” Henry Fonda said he “loved working with Hitch” in *The Wrong Man* because “he blueprinted every scene” so carefully that anyone could have “lined up the shot and shot it.” Method actors like Paul Newman had big problems with this, wanting to debate motivation and feeling in every big scene. Newman halted progress on the set of *Topaz* (1969) to ask the director how he should be “relating” to Julie Andrews. Hitchcock replied,

“Well, Mr. Newman, I’ll tell you exactly what I have in mind here. Miss

² *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays*, ed. by Richard Allen and S. Ishii-Gonzales (London, 1999).

Andrews will come down the stairs with the package, d'you see, when you, if you'll be so good, will glance just a little to the right of camera to take in her arrival; whereupon my audience will say, 'Hulloh! What's this fellow looking at?' And then I'll cut away, d'you see, and show them what you're looking at."

That might have been scathingly ironic, but it was also perfectly clear. More than once Hitchcock said that what he wanted his actors to do was nothing. Let the camera and the editing—and the audience's imagination—generate the interpretation. He had learned the Kuleshov effect in the 1920s and never forgot it.³

McGilligan shows that for every actor who battled Hitchcock or ended up feeling abused, exploited, or injured by him, there were many more who understood and reveled in his authority. Among the most famous of these were Fonda, Jimmy Stewart, Grace Kelly, Vera Miles, and Ingrid Bergman, whose performances in *Spellbound* (1945), *Notorious* (1946), and *Under Capricorn* (1949) clearly attest to a deep, even sensuous response to her director. McGilligan suggests that Hitchcock's love for Bergman was no mere fantasy and might well have been requited physically—a story the director told more than once. (Spoto took it as pure fantasy, "the delusion of a repressed personality.") Clearly there was a real basis for their intimacy. They shared feelings of being outsiders in Hollywood, imprisoned by their contracts with Selznick, cut off from Europe, and ambivalent about America. They also shared, in their civilized way, a bawdy sense of humor. Whatever happened between them, or didn't happen, it was a romantic friendship that could only have occurred because Hitchcock was, as Truffaut said, a deeply vulnerable, sensitive, and emotional man. Lest all those notions about the director's twisted obsessions get out of hand, with "glacial blondes" generating *his* "vertigo" and *his* "frenzy," it is well to keep in mind the example of Ingrid Bergman.

McGilligan sees Hitchcock's sexuality as largely sublimated in his work, with only an occasional sad desperate lapse. The director frankly admitted impotence for most of his life. "I'm a celibate, you know," he told Jay Presson Allen, a writer he worked with on *Marnie*. She said, "I don't think it bothered him that much." He did develop strong feelings for Brigitte Auber on the set of *To Catch a Thief* (1955), who understood his attentions as entirely fatherly, sensitive and caring. Auber was the gamine who played the real cat burglar in the film. When Hitchcock suddenly lunged at her, during an intimate evening conversation, she was deeply shocked and hurt. "It was an enormous disappointment for

³ Lev Kuleshov's famous experiment was to shoot a blank-faced actor intercut with a bowl of soup, a dead woman in a coffin, and a little girl playing with a toy, producing different audience reactions with each. Hitchcock did his own version on "Afred Hitchcock Presents" in 1965, showing himself with a suggestive smile, and intercutting first with a mother-and-child and then with a sexy young woman in a bikini.

me,” she said. “The quality of our relationship was entirely different.” Hitchcock was apparently mortified and tried to repair the damage. But for Auber their friendship was ruined. Hitchcock felt himself to be ugly, she said later, and that had become a permanent barrier between him and women. She found a nice French way to sum it up: “The poor cabbage had a wonderful soul, I know.”

While Spoto looks hard for Hitchcock’s perversity wherever he can find it, McGilligan takes a hard look at the actual production of every Hitchcock film. What emerges as the most vexed and interesting issue is how each film got written. Hitchcock never took any screen credit for writing his films, yet if ever there was an *auteur* it was he. He “liked to get close to his writing partners,” McGilligan shows, spending evenings and weekends with them, not just hashing out the plot but winning their friendship, telling funny stories, and plying them with food and drink—virtually getting “married.” His wife Alma participated in these conferences from the start—she was an experienced editor and scenarist when they met in 1920 and a kind of *éminence grise* in the making of all his films. She said very little, usually, but to Hitchcock her criticisms were final. He liked to have “three Hitchcocks” in the room, triangulating the discussion. His phrase, like Nabokov’s reference to ideal readers as “little Nabokovs,” tells much about the surrender of self that Hitchcock required in these “marriages.” Many a later writer who felt uniquely necessary to Hitchcock—like John Michael Hayes (who wrote *Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief*, *The Trouble with Harry*, and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*)—was shocked to find himself divorced. Others were used, proved wanting, and cast aside. John Steinbeck, who wrote a script for *Lifeboat*, could not produce visual material and was sacked (he still got a credit). Raymond Chandler was hired to adapt *Strangers on a Train*, found intractable, and fired. Leon Uris was lured into adapting his novel *Topaz*, felt honored, then frustrated, then furious, and was dropped. Writer after writer was charmed and befriended, worked very hard, then found himself dished. Many of them discovered the film they wanted to invent was already in Hitchcock’s head. He had visualized and worked out most of its production design. He just needed script—continuity, enough dialogue to suggest motivation, apt words to fill out the scene.

No wonder writers felt used by Hitchcock, he frankly used so many. He had a sardonic word for professional scenarists, one that seemed to spill over at times to include his other, more distinguished writers. He called them “stooges.” The successful English playwright Charles Bennett, who wrote scripts for five Hitchcock films, starting with *Blackmail* (1929), got called ironically “the world’s finest stooge.” But many well-known writers were happy to serve. Both Dorothy Parker and Maxwell Anderson worked, at different stages, on the script for *The Wrong Man*. MacKinlay Kantor and Robert E. Sherwood contributed to the Selznick-Hitchcock-DuMaurier script of *Rebecca*. Thornton Wilder and Sally Benson worked on *Shadow of a Doubt*, with Wilder’s contribu-

tions becoming especially important: he seemed to thrive on dreaming up a dark alternative to *Our Town*, inventing the whole opening sequence with Uncle Charlie as a *film noir* fugitive. Wilder clearly delighted in the collaboration, writing to a friend, “we think up new twists to the plot and gaze at each other in appalled silence: as much to say, ‘Do you think an audience can bear it?’” Ben Hecht was another famous stooge (*Spellbound* and *Notorious*) who thrived on the experience, but so were Brian Moore (*Torn Curtain*) and Evan Hunter (*Marnie*) who did not.

Well-known writers who did *not* work with Hitchcock are revealing as well. Ernest Hemingway turned down Hitchcock’s offer to write *Lifeboat*, but the fact that he was asked is suggestive. Graham Greene, who was on record as loathing Hitchcock’s films in the 1930s, and who had collaborated so effectively with Carol Reed in *The Third Man*, was asked to work on *I Confess* (1950), but he refused, saying he didn’t write pictures for hire, “even for Hitchcock.” V. S. Pritchett, an old friend who was now famous and whose stories had been televised on “Alfred Hitchcock Presents,” was invited to help with *The Birds*. But Pritchett avoided writing any material himself, offering instead a critique of Evan Hunter’s script. It turned out that Hitchcock adopted many of Pritchett’s suggestions, including advice about how the film should end—something the director (who did not *always* know exactly what he wanted) could not decide for himself. In a long letter to Vladimir Nabokov in 1965, Hitchcock proposed collaboration on either a political thriller (an elaborate plot was sketched) or a story about an innocent young woman whose family is a gang of crooks operating a big international hotel like the Savoy in London. Nabokov wrote back, surprisingly, “Your second idea is quite acceptable to me,” and offered Hitchcock two other story ideas he had in mind. This time Hitchcock said no, claiming time was short. Perhaps he sensed that, with two such tyrants, it would have been an impossible marriage.

Another film ending that troubled Hitchcock was *Vertigo*’s. Its script was based on *D’Entre les Morts*, a novel by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac. Truffaut surprised Hitchcock during their 1962 interview by informing him that the two Frenchmen had written the book expressly for him. What better proof could there be that, by this time in his career anyway, Hitchcock was the *auteur* from the start? In effect, the novel’s authors were his unhired stooges. Hitchcock got excellent writing help from Samuel Taylor, a Broadway playwright who had attended Berkeley and lived in the San Francisco area for several years. The film’s brilliant use of *mise en scène*—Nob Hill, Ernie’s, The Argosy Bookshop, Mission Dolores—could not have worked so well without Taylor’s intimate knowledge of San Francisco’s past and present. But the critical scripting change came when Hitchcock decided to let the audience in on the film’s secret: Judy Barton *was* Madeline, hired to impersonate the villain’s wife. All his writers and advisors said no, it would spoil the mystery, except for Taylor, who agreed but “always felt it was a weakness

that we had to do it that way.” It was “a Hitchcockian thing,” he said, to let the audience discover the hoax beforehand. What the film conveys that Hitchcock perhaps also knew (but never articulated) is that, after Judy’s revelation, the suspense becomes much more complex. It involves love, her risk of a virtuous deceit, not Gavin Elster’s trickery. Can Judy continue to impersonate Madeline and yet be loved for herself? Can she, out of love for Scottie, grant his obsession yet still hope to transform that into love—if she’s a good enough actress? And can Scottie see that she, not a dead woman, loves him?

Still, Hitchcock had second thoughts about his script change. A public preview in San Francisco on May 9, 1957 included the critical revelation scene. Then Hitchcock took it out and screened it for his closest advisors, including the trusted Joan Harrison, who had been his personal assistant for many years, and she liked it better without the revelation. And Jimmy Stewart agreed to it, simply because he thought Hitch preferred it and he knew best. Others disagreed violently—and, as everyone now thinks, rightly. Still Hitchcock was not sure and resisted their pressure. McGilligan quotes recent scholarship to show that the final decision was very likely Alma’s.⁴ The decision was delayed, Alma came home from the hospital, and then it was made. So it seems both likely and fitting that the sudden intrusion of Judy Barton’s point of view—invented entirely by Hitchcock himself, of course—was defended and preserved by his wife.

Last minute changes, including bad choices, happened often in Hitchcock’s films, and often concerned basic plot issues, changed motivations, and reversals of significance. Again Hitchcock’s writers suffered, seeing their essential ideas betrayed, ignored, or obliterated. But he, as the film’s ultimate author, never seemed to mind that much. The best known example is *Suspicion* (1941), where the husband (Cary Grant) may or may not be planning to murder his wife (Joan Fontaine)—it’s her point of view, with brilliant use of subjective camera. The intended ending was that he give her a poisoned glass of milk, but not before she would write a letter saying that is exactly what she suspects. She drinks the milk, and he innocently posts the letter. Box office worries about Grant’s image, however, forced a rewrite—husband and wife are reconciled in an utterly unconvincing and anticlimactic happy ending. Less crucial glitches and gaps in his plots concerned Hitchcock even less. When Peter Viertel, writing the script for *Saboteur*, couldn’t figure out how to extricate the hero from a locked room, Hitchcock solved the problem implausibly. Wouldn’t the audience object? “They’ll never ask!” said the director gleefully. Anthony Shaffer, who wrote much of the script for *Frenzy*, endured similar aggravations. He nearly talked himself out of a job, he said, by “accusing the great man of being illogical and leaving holes in his plots between the famous set pieces.” Hitchcock replied,

⁴ Dan Auiler, *Vertigo: The Making of a Hitchcock Classic* (New York, 1999), pp. 160–161.

“Dear boy, quite obviously you’ve never heard of the icebox syndrome. . . I leave holes in my films deliberately, so that the following scenario can take place in countless homes. The man of the house gets out of bed in the middle of the night, and goes down stairs and takes a chicken leg out of the icebox. His wife follows him down and asks what he’s doing. ‘You know,’ he says, ‘there’s a hole in that film we saw tonight.’ ‘No there isn’t,’ she says and they fall to arguing. As a result of which they go to see it again.”

It was a favorite response. Elsewhere Hitchcock called it “the icebox trade” and “refrigerator talk.” Being funny of course deflected criticism, and it could be taken as tongue-in-cheek practicality, as if the inexplicable “holes” were good box office. More subtly, the story conveys the idea that, after watching all that rear-window excitement, everyone feels hungry. (Discovering the murder in *The Trouble with Harry* whets everyone’s appetite.) But “refrigerator talk” has surely a deeper significance, pertaining to the nature of film itself. There are *always* gaps and holes in edited film which the viewer must decide how to understand. Even when the inference seems clear—L. B. Jeffries thinks he sees a murder from his rear window—he has to construct it himself, piece it together, and fill in the gaps just as the viewer does. Kuleshov demonstrated how subjective, even how arbitrary, that process is. We infer that Hitchcock’s smile is a leer if he is watching a bikini-clad girl, but he only smiles. In watching film, as Robert Scholes once said, we experience a kind of “licensed and benign paranoia” in which we suppose that everything shown to us has logic, design, purpose, or significance—like all good paranoiacs we *know* it has a plot for us. Scholes’s idea—he calls it *narrativity*—is that the film and its director may generate the materials of a narrative, but it’s the viewer who actually invents it. Nobody understood this better than Hitchcock. *Rear Window* is an essay on the subject. But think of all the extraordinary gaps and holes in his other great films, *Vertigo* for example—how did Madeline-Judy disappear from the McKittrick Hotel? How did Scottie not fall to his death at the beginning? What happened after he rescues Madeline from drowning and before they talk in his apartment, with all her wet clothes and underwear hung up to dry? And what in heaven’s name goes through his head at the end, with Judy dead and his vertigo cured? Hitchcock’s best films are replete with refrigerator talk. Come to think of it, even the biographer—who interviews everyone alive who knew Hitchcock, reads all the interviews of others, plus biography and scholarship, letters and diaries, and who synthesizes everything he can about the director’s personal history, career, working methods, and personality—must resort to refrigerator talk half the time, because he can only conjecture what Hitchcock really felt, or really thought, or who he really was. But that’s what all of us do who think we know the great film artist from his extraordinary films.