

CHAPTER 1

The Thirteen Lives of Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Joseph Hitchcock was born in London on the 13th August, 1899. The son of a poultrymonger, his early life was spent in North London, and he was educated at Saint Ignatius' College, a Jesuit school, until his declared interest in engineering induced his parents to send him to the School of Engineering and Navigation. Eventually he went to work for the Henley Telegraph Company, taking evening classes in art and moving to the advertising department.

From the age of 16 he had been sufficiently fascinated by the cinema to read, 'not just film and fan papers, but the professional and trade journals'. He remembers the impact made on him by American pictures rather than British, and recalls in particular Griffith, Murnau and Fritz Lang's *Der Mude Tod* (*Destiny*).

In 1920 he heard that Paramount-Famous Players-Lasky were opening an Islington Branch and submitted sub-title cartoons for a novel on which they were working. Thus he embarked on the first phase of his career, comprising initially graphic and then also editorial work (including rewriting of sub-titles) on the silent films listed in the filmography.

He designed, or rewrote, the titles for such silent films as *Call of Youth* and *The Great Day* (Hugh Ford, 1921), *The Princess of New York* and *Tell Your Children* (Donald Crisp, 1921) and *Three Live Ghosts* (George Fitzmaurice, 1922).

His first producing-directing initiative occurred when, in 1921, he embarked, in association with the actress Clare Greet, on a film whose subject was the ordinary people of London. It lived up to its title, *Number Thirteen*, being, according to Hitchcock, 'no good', even as far as it went, but it ran into money troubles and was never completed. In 1922 Hitchcock stepped in to complete *Always Tell Your Wife*, in

collaboration with its producer-star, Sir Seymour Hicks, when its director fell ill.

After Balcon-Saville-Freedman Productions took over the studio, Hitchcock found a variety of employments, from assistant director, art director, scenarist and editor, on a quintet of films directed by Graham Cutts.

The third phase of Hitchcock's life may be described as his 'scenarist' period (1922–25). Five films were produced by Michael Balcon and directed by Graham Cutts (*Woman to Woman*, 1922, *The White Shadow*, 1923, *The Passionate Adventure*, 1924, *The Blackguard* and *The Prude's Fall*, both 1925).

(4). 1925–27. For Michael Balcon at Gainsborough, Hitchcock directed *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), *The Mountain Eagle* and *The Lodger* (both 1926), *Downhill* and *Easy Virtue* (both 1927).

(5). 1927–33. For John Maxwell at British International Pictures, Hitchcock directed *The Ring* (1927), *The Farmer's Wife* and *Chamagne* (both 1928), *The Manx Man* and *Blackmail* (both 1929, the latter marking the transition to sound). Then followed an episode in *Elstree Calling*, *Juno and the Paycock* and *Murder* (all 1930), *The Skin Game* (1931), and *Rich and Strange* and *Number Seventeen* (both 1932). Hitchcock then produced *Lord Camber's Ladies* (directed by Benn Levy) and directed *Waltzes from Vienna* (1933).

(6). 1934–36. At Gaumont British, with Ivor Montagu or Michael Balcon producing, Hitchcock directed *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935), *Secret Agent* and *Sabotage* (both 1936).

(7). 1937–38. For Edward Black at Gainsborough, Hitchcock directed *Young and Innocent* (1937) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938).

(8). In 1938 Hitchcock was approached by David O. Selznick, and the years from 1938 to 1947 may loosely be described as the Selznick Period, although diversified by one-shot associations with other producers. Before his departure for Hollywood, he directed, for Ponner-Laughton-Mayflower, *Jamaica Inn* (1939). In Hollywood, he directed *Rebecca* (Selznick, 1940), *Foreign Correspondent* (Walter Wanger, 1940), *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* and *Suspicion* (both produced by Hitchcock at R.K.O.-Radio, 1941), *Saboteur* (Frank Lloyd-Jack Skirball, 1942), *Shadow Of A Doubt* (Jack Skirball, 1943), *Lifeboat* (Kenneth MacGowan at 20th-Century-Fox, 1944), *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache* (Ministry of Information, GB, 1944), *Spellbound* (Selznick, 1945), *Notorious* (Hitchcock at R.K.O., 1946) and *The Paradine Case* (Selznick, 1947).

(9). 1948–49. For Transatlantic Pictures, which he had formed with Sidney Bernstein of Granada, Hitchcock directed *Rope* (1948) and *Under Capricorn* (1949).

(10). 1950–54. For Warner Brothers: *Stage Fright* (1950), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *I Confess* (1953), and *Dial M for Murder* (1954).

(11). 1954–56. At Paramount: *Rear Window* (1954), *To Catch A Thief* (1955), *The Trouble With Harry* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (both 1956). *The Wrong Man* (1957) was a last film at Warners, followed by *Vertigo* (Paramount, 1958), *North-by-North-West* (at M.G.M., 1959) and *Psycho* (Paramount, 1960).

(12). From 1955 Hitchcock embarked on a parallel career as producer, presenter and occasionally writer-director of television films. Jack Edmund Nolan gives the total number of hour or half-hour films appearing under the Hitchcock banner between 1955 and 1963 as 353, and details twenty directed by Hitchcock himself.

(13). 1963–72. At Universal: *The Birds* (1963), *Marnie* (1964), *Torn Curtain* (1966), *Topaz* (1969), *Frenzy* (1972).

Hitchcock's creative shifts and turns bear some relationship to these producer periods. Although *The Lodger*, *Blackmail*, *Murder* and *Number Seventeen* had drawn attention to Hitchcock as a director of thrillers, it was his Gaumont British and subsequent Gainsborough periods which established him as 'the Master of Suspense'. It is to these films, together with the four thriller forerunners (the last two rarely revived) to which critics refer when they speak of the 'English Hitchcock' as opposed to the American Hitchcock. But, in fact, there are three, clearly distinct, English Hitchcocks. His first Gainsborough period stresses romantic subjects. His British International period abounds in adaptations of dramatic and literary subjects. His Gaumont British and second Gainsborough periods group the picaresque comedy thrillers. Of this characteristic genre, two further clear examples appear during the first three Hollywood years, but a series of visually somewhat 'enclosed' drama-thrillers, with 'women's film' production styles become the predominant style of the Selznick era, and culminate in the two Transatlantic films. Hitchcock remains aloof from the underworld *film noir*, a genre in which his work might have been sharper and harder. Quite possibly the influence of Selznick had sensitized him to themes and settings which enabled him to combine suspense with a middle-class 'women's angle'. The Warner Brothers period shows no clear direction, but one can see the first of Hitchcock's Paramount group as marking a gradual increase in the general

dramatic, visual and poetic complexity which can be accommodated around or within the suspense. In this respect his evolution is in line with Hollywood's gradually more adventurous spirit. After *The Birds*, however, Hitchcock appears as a Hollywood 'conservative', making a magisterial use of its traditional elements, without using new stylistic and thematic freedoms.

But any distinction into periods must remain schematic. Thus the devotee of chronological periods must wish that *The Wrong Man* had been made in 1954 instead of in 1957, when it would fit neatly into the Warner's era and pair with *I Confess*. But it doesn't, and there are so many possibilities, some purely to do with contract-making, that to attempt too detailed a spiritual evolution would be fruitless and unreal. Clearly one must also stream Hitchcock's work, vertically as it were, into genres and themes.

A. Romantic novels, e.g., *The Pleasure Garden*, dominate his first two Balcon periods. Much later, the three Selznick films represent a return to this kind of material, albeit at a suaver and swisher level, with an intensification of the sustained suspense and the moralising, more slickly deadpan rather than more profound. *Marnie* is obviously related to the same genre.

B. The B.I.P. films enabled Hitchcock to cast a wry and inquisitive eye over various facets of the British scene. The presiding spirit could be described as dramatic realism, and it is our contention that its infiltration of subsequent thrillers, as *against* their novelettish plushness, often accounts for much of their richness: as in *Shadow Of A Doubt*, *Rear Window*, *The Trouble With Harry*. The opening of *Blackmail* (which precedes virtually all the Grierson documentaries) and the first half of *The Wrong Man* qualify for the designation 'semi-documentary', as it was later applied to British films like *North Sea* and *San Demetrio London*.

C. The Hitchcock thriller had appeared before the Gaumont-British period (e.g., *The Lodger* for Balcon, *Blackmail* for Maxwell), but this period—in which Ivor Montagu's participation is perhaps important—introduces the classic thriller sextet. The last two suggest slackening creative tensions, and it might be argued that Hitchcock's best form reappears only when the general Hollywood climate becomes more sophisticated.

D. In contrast to the dramatic realism looming so large in the English film, the American Hitchcocks tend, for the usual Hollywood reasons, to centre on wish-fulfilment high life. But the picaresque odysseys (*Foreign Correspondent*, *Saboteur*), occasionally involve

ordinary people. Other films endow their glossy milieux with a certain poetic queasiness.

E. Many Hitchcock films take the form of a picaresque pursuit, which may at first seem the polar opposite of such claustrophobic, single setting films as *Lifeboat*, *Rope* and *Under Capricorn*. But often Hitchcock counterpoints the sealed situation (e.g., a hostile couple handcuffed to each other) against the chase. *Rear Window* plays the sealed against the kaleidoscopic (the various windows opposite) in another way. So the picaresque background provides a special form of that same isolation which inspires the enclosed films.

F. Hitchcock's films undoubtedly show a concern with moral values, although exactly which values are involved, and how simple, or single-minded, they are, has yet to be sufficiently debated. Of fifty-two major films two hinge on a specifically Catholic theme, while three hinge on and are moralised in specifically Freudian terms.

G. Hitchcock's work shares with the fiction feature genre a dramatic and thematic structure derived from the traditions of 19th-century narrative plays and novels. It is characteristic of these forms that interest in the fortunes of one or more individuals involves the interaction of dramatic, moral, social, philosophical, poetic, and any other matters arising, although the autonomy and interaction of each separate area is strictly subordinated to, sometimes even occluded by, the individualism emphasised by the dramatic perspective.

H. Aesthetic interests are not secondary in Hitchcock's work, and internal evidence supplies no reason to doubt his remarks to the effect that what interests him is the way of telling a story. Nonetheless, he must have a story to tell, i.e., sequences of human experiences to evoke. It is obvious that an interest in aesthetic form, whether primary or subordinate, may go parallel with a repetitive thematic, retained partly for reasons of personal preference and partly as popular with audiences.

All these Hitchcocks have produced sharp critical controversies. Through the '40s and '50s, English and American critics, and the older generation of French critics (like Jean-George Auriol of *La Revue du Cinéma*, 'father' of *Cahiers du Cinéma*) vastly preferred the English thrillers, for their visual speed, comic realism and varied social canvases, and their preferred American films were closest to that style (*Foreign Correspondent*, *Saboteur*, *Shadow Of A Doubt*, *Strangers On A Train*). Hitchcock's other American films struck them as clever, but sleek, slick and empty. A minor English artist, a major English entertainer, seemed to have become just a velvet glove on the leaden fingers

of David O. Selznick. *Notorious* suggested that, as his own producer, he had turned into another Selznick himself. André Bazin, the 'senior wrangler' of *Cahiers*, could not see Hitchcock as an artistic master, and nor did the French Left (*Positif*, *Premier Plan*).

So far as the Anglo-Saxon critics were concerned, their preference was fortified by aesthetic theories favouring fast and varied visual movement (as more cinematic), a realistic social atmosphere (as opposed to highlife glamour), and location settings. Hitchcock's strong points were seen as his pure cinematic style, which lifted his compound of melodrama and realism to a level of felt excitement roughly comparable with the chase across the salt flats at the end of *Stagecoach*. And for these critics that sort of thing was quite enough, since they felt that the cinema had its own lyrical way of redeeming material which might otherwise be considered banal. This can be described as the Manvell-Lindgren line. They inherited earlier comments about the 'Hitchcock touch', praising manipulations of the medium which some younger critics found rather gimmicky—like the distortions of a woman's voice saying 'Knife!' as the word rasps on the nerves of the guilty heroine (*Blackmail*), or the cut from a woman screaming to a whistling locomotive emerging from a tunnel (*The Thirty-Nine Steps*). These examples were part of the older generation's honouring of 'pure cinema', i.e., cinematic style, as against the literary approach, and Hitchcock in certain ways shared their aesthetic appreciation. For, given the rather different cinematic idioms obtaining during the '30s, they were far less extraneous than they may now seem. Far from being mere gimmicks, they were genuine climactic extensions of form. John Grierson's was a lone voice raised against this emphasis, when he argued that the critics' emphasis on the 'touch' was turning Hitchcock into a mere aesthete, that *Murder* and *The Skin Game* were thematic poppycock, and that Hitchcock's strong point was his feeling for everyday realism. This line was maintained by Lindsay Anderson whose *Sequence* articles implicitly reproached Hitchcock with staying at the Savoy. In other ways, however, Grierson's and Anderson's approaches come very near to the present writer's.

Quietly different from the Manvell-Lindgren and Grierson-Anderson lines alike was the *Sight and Sound* approach, identifiable from the early '50s. Being, as Tony Richardson remarked, 'anti-cinema', it satisfied itself with the most obvious and traditional literary qualities on the level of script, and a liberal humanism of a traditional middle-class kind. By these standards contemporary Hitchcock, of the '50s, was not only boring but often vaguely nasty. However, nostalgia, critical

politics and the inertia of habit prevented the—logically necessary—dismissal of English Hitchcock as nasty also. In contrast Hitchcock's French detractors were always ready to accept troubled views of human nature, and criticised Hitchcock for uninteresting accounts of human experiences.

The first radical reevaluation of Hitchcock came through the columns of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and in particular the work of Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol. To Hitchcock's moral preoccupations they were, perhaps, sensitised by sharing with him a Roman Catholic background or sympathies. In Hitchcock's films they felt that they discerned a consistent theme of a transference of guilt, such that the apparently innocent are also partly guilty, that curious affinities between heroes and villains appear, and that the villains incarnate temptations to which, on some secret or unconscious level, the heroes have yielded, and for which they must be memorably punished, or from which they must be purified, by some sort of trial, concluding in a chastening awareness.

This approach gave a much-needed new awareness of Hitchcock. Reservations about it form much of the substance of this study, and will be unfolded as it goes.

An analogous approach was made by Jean Douchet, for whom Hitchcock's real inspiration was an esoteric occultism, based on 'the duel between Light and Shadow, therefore of Unity and Duality'. Thus the opening long shot of *Psycho*, showing an entire town in daylight, is contradicted by the second shot, of one particular room, in semi-darkness. 'In two shots, Hitchcock expresses his subject . . . the eternal and the finite, existence and nothingness, life and dreams.' It is in line with Douchet's mixture of neo-Platonism and Manicheanism that his sentence structure equates the shot of the embracing couple with the finite, nothingness and death. But one might well object the meanings attributed to the two shots can be reversed. The two lovers are, successfully or otherwise, attempting to reach spiritual eternity, existence and life, while the opening shot suggests the *false* unity of a complacent, smothering society. Douchet's method is as fascinating as any delirium of interpretation can be, but overlooks too much to explain Hitchcock adequately. Thus he considers mealtimes as occasions of the absorption of substances (i.e., matter into mind), without so much as thinking of the importance of mealtimes in family and social life, of their *social* spirituality. And sometimes his schematisation is inaccurate, as when, on *Vertigo*, he writes that in Hitchcock 'every representative of the established order (policeman, judge,

statesman, etc.) is a representative of God'. What then of the detective who fakes the evidence and frames an innocent man in *Blackmail*? Or of the lecherous judge in *The Paradine Case*? Or of Castro in *Topaz*, whom all Hitchcock's heroes are supposed to be thoroughly justified in subverting? Is God a liar, a lecher, a Communist? Thus Douchet impoverishes Hitchcock, misreading his dramatic dialectic as simplistic allegory. One's suspicions are aroused also by Douchet's remark that 'All great artists say more or less the same thing.'

None the less, such interpretations possess their own creative fascination and influence such writers as Noel Simsolo and the contributors to *Études Cinématographiques*.

The rising generation of English critics saw things another way altogether, and contrary to a widespread English impression, the approaches of Ian Cameron and Victor Perkins in *Movie* bore no resemblance either to Chabrol and Rohmer's or to Douchet's. Refusing to equate cinematic style with the obvious aesthetic 'touch', or to remain content with script, they stressed instead the manipulation of audience attentions, sympathies and reactions. They emphasised, not a hidden symbolism, but an overt level of dramatic and moral experience. And this approach has subsequently been vindicated by its close relationship to the actual questions and answers which Hitchcock sets himself in working out a film.

The present writer would likewise insist that the real Hitchcock touch is a more diffuse affair than a moral schema, or points of style. It comprises a certain conjunction of elements, the absence of even one of which gives us a feeling of atypicality. The story ingredients include (1) violent death, (2) a physical or mental chase in which we identify with a pursued pursuer, so that (3) virtue appears menacing and indulgence deceptive, while (4) amorous badinage (or tormenting) proceeds and (5) hero and heroine are offered some dramatically plausible choices between good and evil and (6) 'greys are everywhere' (the remark is Hitchcock's, although Chabrol and Rohmer substituted for it a transference of guilt, which is quite a different thing). There is a sense of having penetrated from an apparently tolerant, even permissive, world, to a grimmer one, whose cruelties seem, confusingly, both amoral and morally unremitting. In the British thrillers, everyday worlds of familiar foibles and eccentricities momentarily part to reveal grimmer patterns. There is usually, however, an affirmative return to a normally comfortable world.

In *Movie* and in his book, Robin Wood worked out another interpretation of Hitchcock the moralist. Its basic co-ordinates were a mix-

ture of evangelical fundamentalism secularised, and an aesthetic whose theory, at least, if not its application, owed something to F. R. Leavis. Despite parallelisms with Chabrol and Rohmer, the moral tone was substantially different, the emphasis lying on individual responsibility and the consequences of its absence. It might have been so developed as to emphasise its basic contradictions with the French critics' Catholicism, as well as their idea of Jansenism. However, one's objections to Robin Wood's moral interpretations are parallel. He doesn't consider the possibility that any moral system other than one might be involved, and this assumption seems to me to risk depriving Hitchcock's films of much of their interest, as well as evading the problem, and possibilities, of comparing moral codes. None the less, Wood's attention to moral and dramatic detail, without benefit of metaphysic, aligns itself with the other *Movie* pieces in clarifying the level, form and nature of the films' contents. As in the case of the Chabrol and Rohmer approach, the present writer's divergencies and alternatives will become apparent as the analysis proceeds.

In general, those for whom Hitchcock was the master of the 'touch' preferred his English films to his American period. Conversely, those for whom Hitchcock was a moralist preferred his Hollywood period to his English period. Two critics for whom Hitchcock was finally an entertainer have adopted more consistent attitudes to his whole work. For François Truffaut, Hitchcock is above all the showman-manipulator; he refers to Hitchcock's moral vision as a kind of artistic credential, but he clearly has no interest whatsoever in finding out anything new about it. Truffaut, we know, loves (a) intimate movies and (b) movies as circus; Hitch's cat-and-mouse games with suspense fit both requirements perfectly. One might well be tempted by the theory that Truffaut's feeling for Hitchcock is a kind of nostalgia. The younger man, specialist in emotions of vulnerable passivity, desperately longs for, and hero worships, the slick, subtle mastery with which Hitchcock torments his audience. So far, too, Truffaut has depended on a childlike hero for his best inspiration (*Les Quatre Cents Coups*, *Tirez Sur Le Pianiste*, *Jules et Jim*), while his later films evidence a certain dryness. How professionally enviable, therefore, the wily aplomb with which the older man has varied his utterly reliable thematic! In Truffaut's search for Hitchcock's triumphs of manipulation, one can see the younger artist forgetting the silver and gold of his true inspiration, in the style of Renoir, for the sawdust and tinsel daydream of meticulous control over one's audience and one's professional destiny.

Chabrol's own films closely transpose the Hitchcock thematic into

the settings, style and terms that interest Chabrol. And critical paradox continues in an infinite regression, for Gavin Millar, who efficiently ferrets out all Hitchcock's artistic weaknesses, notably his reliance on certain popular stereotypes, is also English high priest of the Chabrol cult. Unfortunately, his dismissal of Hitchcock relies heavily on a selection of his least interesting moments which, abundant as they are, isn't the whole story. For the question remains of distinguishing what is valid in each director's work from what is less so or not so, and one might easily reverse Millar's preferences, by hazarding that if Chabrol is the more consciously schematic moralist it is because his characters have so little internal existence as to remain derisory caricatures of bourgeois habits, or merely symbols for metaphysical and theological diabolisms, all of which would contrast with Hitchcock's calculated and commonsensical view of human nature. Chabrol, then, would be a young and callow Hitchcock, unstably veering between the intellectual and the clownesque.¹

Given the variety of possible positions, it's curious, or perhaps it's only too typical, that one fairly obvious possibility was hardly argued. This is that Hitchcock has always been an entertainer whose work can, on occasion, and for one reason or another, reach a degree of sophistication and intensity such that his material takes on sufficient truth, urgency and challenge to qualify as a significant artist (and whether he's a minor or a major one is another matter again; but to be a minor artist is no mean achievement). It then becomes as impossible to try to discredit *Psycho* by ridiculing, however justifiably, a scene in *Foreign Correspondent*, as to suppose that all Hitchcock's films fall into one of only two possible categories: the major and the minor masterpiece. Just because of the thematic similarities, the distinction is, precisely, whether the screw is relaxed into banality or twisted towards the crunch, and how far the drama is false or felt.

¹ *Les Cousins* (as suggested in *Films and Feelings*) would be the one Chabrol film whose Hitchcockian schema is authentically felt through.