INTRODUCTION

ON THE ISLAND

The presence of music, Alfred Hitchcock wrote in a 1965 contribution to the *Encyclopedia Britannica,* "is perfectly in accordance with the aim of the motion picture, namely to unfold an action or to tell a story, and thereby stir the emotions" (in Gottlieb 222). Elemental for him was the link between musical form and the stir of emotion, between the felt and the recognizing response to an aesthetic moment. Hitchcock's films have always struck me as musical, essentially. Not, surely, in that they are full of tunes or that their challenging musical scores provide a central avenue toward understanding, but that as organized works, as forms, the films follow some fundamentally musical principles of construction. They involve not only statements but also recapitulations and inversions; the anticipation and the reprise are crucial to the structure. The films contain, inevitably, a full-fledged harmonic logic, and a harmony for the eye that plays on color, spatial definition, and the riddles of perception. In their scenes, episodes, and moments, and as entireties, they have phrasing, preparation, and cadence. And of course, like the greatest music, Hitchcock's films are unforgettable.

This book, a discussion of six Hitchcock films, is a sequel to my earlier book, *An Eye for Hitchcock*, in which I explored *North by Northwest, Spellbound, Torn Curtain, Marnie, I Confess,* and *Vertigo*. That volume, the reader should be assured, need not be read as a preface to this one, though it might bring the pleasure of illumination—or the illumination of pleasure—to anyone interested in Alfred Hitchcock or in the appreciation of cinema altogether. In *An Eye,* I explored some of Hitchcock's repeating variations of verticality: physical, social, economic, mythical, philosophical. Here, I am interested in the recurring motif of the dream—dreamscapes, dream processes, the dream effect, the otherworldly, the unknown and

unknowable, the feelingfulness of experience, the nightmare of history. I certainly do not mean to offer here a theory of dreams or dreaming; or a watertight compendium of dream moments—for instance, *Marnie* contains some of the most startling evocation of dream experience to be found in cinema, but it gets no discussion here; or even to set forth an argument that Hitchcock wanted to tell us something about the dream process. Perhaps he did. But we can find our lessons at any rate, and my readings of the six films included here—*Strangers on a Train, Rear Window, Saboteur, Rebecca, To Catch a Thief,* and *Family Plot*—mean only to dance through the filmic structures in a respectfully musical way, echoing my curiosity and, I would hope, the structures Hitchcock has given us.

Six and only six films: which is to say, no claim will be found here that I uncover the deeper meaning of Hitchcock the personality, or a blueprint to his vast oeuvre. The films are too rich, too much overflowing with ambiguity, for one thing, and I am too wrapped up in my commitment to responsiveness, for another. The act of watching a film is part of our living experience, vital, fleeting, deeply provocative. At its very best—and Hitchcock doesn't fail to stand at the apogee of cinema—films are troubling and wonderful for being vital and provoking in that way. Yet, while numerous scholarly volumes and critical appreciations have worked over Hitchcock's films, there has been a sad superfluity of dependence on what I would term canonical readings: simplistic repetitions of the surface structure of his plots, in effect the publicity materials according to which the films can easily be typed, classified, sold to a public hungry for escape. These chapters aim toward close readings, and also toward refreshment, often themselves moving forward with a kind of dream twist. In working my close readings, I follow an important and well-established scholarly path that began in Michel de Montaigne, worked its way through Henry James and Walter Benjamin and Norman O. Brown, and became the tight-focus technique of V. F. Perkins, Stanley Cavell, Bill Krohn, William Rothman, and many other scholars inside and outside cinema studies whose attentions have been caught and nurtured by the sorts of riddles that perplex Hitchcock as well. The eye and mind move in rather than standing back, look beneath the surface, derive sense from the architecture of the film as a complex—in Hitchcock's

case riddling—assemblage of articulate moments. Within some delimited space, one allows for meditation upon what one sees (instead of just following the superficial story), for trying to live in the world of the film, to know the beings one meets in their own terms, and to take them as seriously as Hitchcock did. As in dreams, there may be passages on these pages that seem to wander in strange, circuitous paths, but that is because beneath the surface of his films Hitchcock himself wandered in strange, circuitous paths to illuminate questions about life as he knew it. I wish at the very least to hint at how that can be seen in the films. These essays are written for any engaged and eager reader, and do not presume familiarity with any particular lingo or analytical approach. Perhaps light will be thrown not only on these six films but on films altogether, how we can more patiently and more dreamily watch and become absorbed in them.

THE HITCHCOCKIAN MODE

Born and raised in a post-Victorian ebbtide, Alfred Hitchcock had benefit of (that is, was subjected to) a classical education, certainly as regarded literary texts and the English language. He will never permit himself to be cheerily ungrammatical, in the way that nowadays we find so often in speech and film: markedly abbreviated, fliply casual, brutally curt, ambiguously elliptical, careless about syntax and vocabulary. His shots are sentences, fully spelled out and very frequently interspersed craftily with interior modifying clauses, virtually in the Latinate manner. When one looks at a Hitchcockian shot (see Pomerance, "Shots"), especially noting the amount of visual information he includes and the elegant and balanced way in which he uses his camera to include it, one finds a great richness of expression, sometimes what could be described as forestial density. It is typical that the material in the Hitchcockian shot refers back, often to more than one previous moment, and also anticipates what is to come, since Hitchcock is a master of not only expressivity but also preparation, and is conscious of the passage of time. We live in a world of such violent spontaneity now that time is contracted; and preparation, as a form in itself, has gone by the wayside. Artful modification seems a useless discardable excrescence in the face of information, the only thing many

people think language is devised to hold and transfer. For Hitchcock the idea of a snap shot (say, less than one second's duration onscreen) is anathema except for the purpose of causing alarm, alarm, one must note, carefully arranged in a context: the finale of *Spellbound* with its flash of red; the shower scene in *Psycho*. In order more generally to contain surprising, disturbing, aggravating, or stimulating movement in his frame, Hitchcock conceived very elaborate camera movements (often movements difficult for his team to execute). Always for him the grammar of articulation is a paramount concern.

Hitchcock's work has invited and entertained commentaries both deeply moving and shockingly facile, from fans, critics, and serious scholars. Many have certainly thought it effective to take a glib approach, as even the brilliant François Truffaut—typically very perceptive about this body of work—does near the end of *Hitchcock* (1985), when he comments that the director films his murders like love scenes and his love scenes like murders. It's a fabulous tag line, ringing in the ears with the charming tinkle of a cocktail glass in a toast. But we must struggle some, I think, to arrive at what could be meant by Truffaut's words. Perhaps that there is always something of the subterranean erotic even in Hitchcock's summative violence: in *Frenzy* we see this explicitly; and in *Torn Curtain* there is a marvelously suggestive murder, ending in a kind of corporeal embrace. But surely Hitchcock knows love, and when he shows it—when he films an authentic "love scene" (Melanie Daniels bringing Lydia Brenner tea in *The Birds;* Fred and Emily Hill reunited back home after the daunting experience of their sea voyage in *Rich and Strange;* the dining car lunch in *North by Northwest*)—he is not fooling with violence, nor, interestingly, is he fooling with sex. (There is comparatively little sex in Hitchcock. The most revealing scene, early in *Psycho,* is staged backward as a joke, and in *Family Plot,* as we will see, sex is talk.) The more one penetrates Truffaut's summative comment about love scenes and murders, the less it helps one to see. Yet a simpler truth is evident: Hitchcock is interested in both murder and love, not as forms of one another and not necessarily in some convenient formulaic relationship. Should we not beware, at least a little, of vastly popular and too easily accepted bromides about Alfred Hitchcock's work?

Can we, for another instance, seriously maintain that he was obsessed by blondes simply because we can adduce some particular case studies—blonde women who were already, Hitchcock notwithstanding, established as major screen figures of their time and thus available to him, as to other filmmakers, for lead roles (in part exactly because they were blonde standouts)? And he has plenty of non-blonde female characters who are treated with the greatest sensitivity and the most telling eye: Teresa Wright in *Shadow of a Doubt,* Joan Fontaine in *Rebecca* and *Suspicion,* Barbara Harris in *Family Plot,* Karin Dor in *Topaz,* Shirley MacLaine in *The Trouble with Harry*, Ruth Roman in *Strangers on a Train,* to name some. Hitchcock loved to tell interviewers how exciting the buried (sexual) passions of apparently "icy" blondes could be, but he certainly loved to drum up publicity—this little revelation could not fail to help—and knew how to favor misconceptions already entrenched with his public.

Followers of popular culture, and of Hitchcock's reception and acceptance there, jump to label him the "Master of Suspense," an epithet he willingly abided, since it did nothing but help promote his work. But when Hitchcock himself spoke of "suspense" he did not mean by it what most people interpret: the chilling, gripping, terrifying, exciting, charging, shocking, debilitatingly sharp uplift of attention and expectation that comes with rainy dark streets, shadowy strangers, grimacing faces, shrieks of mortality—"suspense" as fear or shock. Speaking with Truffaut and numerous others, he was particular to distinguish suspense from surprise, and to make clear that for him *suspense* involved situations where the audience is given access to some information that a crucially important character does not have. The issue is, when will the character learn what we already know? And the turn to illumination for a character may be slow and deliberate, even casual and fragmentary. There is a *kind of* suspense at play in this book, quite differently. It involves levitation, a removal from earthly grounding, a flotation above the practical, the everyday, and the rationally explicable. When we suspend judgment we pass into the zone of wonder, speculation, curiosity, doubt, and perhaps emotional involvement of a deep and perduring kind. Neither Hitchcock's films nor the discussions a reader will encounter here work according to formula. One must spend the time—the time of one's life—in moving through the composition, in wondering and struggling to remember.

DREAMS

This pathway is philosophical in aiming at illumination, not economic in aiming at profit, and is also, therefore, the dream. Hitchcock as philosopher? But surely any serious consideration of his scenarism, his vision, the motion and intensity of his camera, his characters, his sense of place—any serious consideration could find him nothing other. Of philosophy, we learn from reading a "decent-looking elderly man" named Edwards, quoted by Boswell: "Philosophy, like religion, is too generally supposed to be hard and severe, at least so grave as to exclude all gaiety" (955; 957); and Hitchcock is philosophical in exactly a gay and enchanting way, eschewing the hard for hardness's sake and the severe for severity's, never putting aside the thought of harmony while at the same time being riddled by mortality. He is thus fully alive. As to the dream, why should we not follow the line of James M. Barrie's observation (Barrie, the author of *Mary Rose,* the film Hitchcock did not live to make), quoted pungently by Bill Krohn in his *Hitchcock at Work*: "To be born is to be wrecked upon an island" (277). What, on an island, but a dream life? And can we not claim—or at least carefully suppose—that in his filmmaking Hitchcock was living out a life of the mind?

The idea of the dream, as invoked here, offers a way of traveling to the "unearthly," notably irrational quality in Hitchcock's work. One film, *Rebecca,* revolves around the problem of memory, nostalgia, and history, moving us backward as a way of progressing; almost everyone in the film, almost all the time, is obsessed with what happened *before.* Another, *To Catch a Thief,* circles around uncertainty, since at its heart is a vital question to which no moment seems to afford an answer. A third, *Saboteur,* expresses the pungent aspiration for an American utopia. A fourth, *Rear Window,* queries the expanse of intellect as bounded by the limits of imagination. A fifth, *Strangers on a Train,* celebrates a delirious madness. A sixth, *Family Plot,* invokes and reinvokes intuition and its peculiar logic. Memory, uncertainty, aspiration, intuition, imagination, madness—all of these are dreams. I think it signally important to warn that Hitchcock uses various means of invocation, not merely spoken dialogue. Often the quality of an image—its lighting, its positioning, its framing, its juxtaposition with other images—bespeaks the oneiric, and often we must be prepared to leave behind simple,

rational calculation—following the "map"—in order to grasp what he means to give. Thus, in thinking about Hitchcock, one really mustn't overattend to the storyline alone. Every creature needs its form, and in these films the storyline functions nicely enough as a skeleton, but it is not the thing itself. And further, attention to plot tends to privilege spoken dialogue, and Hitchcock works as a pictorial artist, picturing not speaking his narrative world. A picture is both a theory and a recounting, and it is certainly an idea. And pictorial riddles—philosophical riddles in pictorial form—are surely as pressing to Hitchcock's concerns as unfolding tales.

My own method for thinking through Hitchcockian work has for its mantra a simple, yet challenging, directive, that the film should inform the theorization; not the other way around. Too often, it seems to me, critical appreciation is attached to the toolkit of theory, entirely independent of a film as a work of art. The critic is pleased to import his toolkit to the viewing experience, which is to say, the toolkit preexists the film. For me, the best approach is to empty the mind as much as possible and let the work flow and operate, before working to think it through: indeed, *thinking it through* is only one (perhaps too tactical) method of approach. One must see and see again; and live with what traces emerge in memory, so that recollection and musing overtake opinion. The film preexists consideration. Canonical dicta are more often than not restricting distractions, indeed, a typical approach of Hitchcock's is to openly assert, and then dismiss, the predictable canonical reception of his work: in *Rear Window,* for example, he opens and sharply closes a conversation between Jeff and Stella about Peeping Tomism, its moral implications, and its offense to propriety; the film is *not* about a Peeping Tom. One should let the Hitchcockian images resonate. One should give the eye room and time—the outer eye and the inner eye—to observe the continuities and linkages that are graphed onscreen. I watch Hitchcock's films directly, and what theory I use finds its way into my approach only afterward, often very long afterward. If, by contrast, one took only the canonical approach, one would be tied to the conventional reading of Hitchcock's plots, a reading that almost invariably skips over, elides, neglects, or forgets something vital and fascinating that is as much on the screen as everything else. Six examples, from the films I write about here, of what is often forgotten: that at a moment in *Strangers*

on a Train Bruno escorts a blind man across a street; that in *Rebecca* the camera focuses persistently on an absence; that in *Rear Window* we watch a man in agony; that in *Saboteur* we are in California in wartime; that in *To Catch a Thief* Cary Grant's sweater is difficult to look at; and that in *Family Plot* there are many kinds of family, many kinds of plot.

The typical Hitchcock film is set in a real social space, that is, a world and set of locations that actually existed at the time of filmmaking, and that actually signaled particular class and cultural references. He is obsessive in his detailed depiction of social reality, and worked intensively with his designers, his research team, and his camera team to represent objects and spaces tellingly. At a flashing moment in *The Wrong Man* (1956), Henry Fonda walks up to the door of an insurance company, the name of which is etched in the glass: Associated Life of New York (Since 1897). This happens so perfunctorily in the film that viewers might be shocked to learn that the research team came up with dozens of potential names for this "company," each of which could represent an insurance firm in New York City in the mid-1950s. Or, reflect that the tennis match in *Strangers* takes place not in a constructed set but at the Forest Hills (New York) stadium, which was at the time *the* prestigious home of professional tennis in the United States (as Wimbledon was, and is, in the UK). The game we see played there has all the attributes of a real championship contest. Or, in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), the Albert Hall concert scene takes place, in actuality, in the Royal Albert Hall, London, which seats more than three thousand people: watching this part of the film, we are attending a real concert. In *To Catch a Thief*, we visit the real flower market in Nice. In *Family Plot* we enter the sanctum of Grace Cathedral. In *Saboteur* we climb the Statue of Liberty, all the way to the topmost top, with studio sets built after carefully detailed research on the proportions and design of the real place. Further, the characters who interplay in these settings are drawn from the real precincts of everyday life, too. They know what real people in their positions would know. They have come out of a real past, which is to say, if not an actual past then one that actual people could have experienced. In Hitchcock's "drawing" style, the lines, spaces, distances, surfaces, textures, and points of focus all make sense as parts of a social world that could be actual, whether or not it happens to be. If we look at screwball comedy, for

example, but leave out his own contribution, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (1941), we find something radically different: a dramaturgical space that is entirely fabular, entirely caught up in the surface of design.

HITCHCOCK'S ARCHITECTURE

Any serious consideration of Hitchcock's films must take architectonic design as the heart, must understand that more than recounting tales this artist was interested in designing a show: of event, of condition, of happenstance, of monument. From the start he builds his pictures, less with flamboyance than with old-fashioned, long inherited construction skills. He builds an architecture, and according to the soundest principles that have guided English builders for centuries. Here is the guidance of Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1778: "The regular progress of cultivated life is from Necessaries to Accommodations, from Accommodations to Ornaments" (qtd. in Brackett 125). The appurtenances of cultivated life are built up, then, in three tiers. Nothing can supersede the foundational character of "Necessaries"—support for the covering, framing for enclosure. Next may come "Accommodations" to the human need for organic existence, nourishment, access to water, sanitation of some kind, warmth. And only when these are all in place does one seek "Ornament," the beauty and relish that make life worth living or, as in the case of Hitchcock—whose work is nothing if not densely ornamental in this respect—that signal, about people and their actions, the conditional motivation that opens the gates of understanding. Reynolds's structural positioning of ornament allows us to see how it is not decoration. Decoration covers, distracts; but ornament graces and reveals. In watching Hitchcock one must never attribute to him a decorative intent. He is constantly filling out the pictorial space with informative design, indeed all the design in Hitchcock tells us something important, about either the character and her intent or the scene in which that intent can have realistic meaning. For example, in one of the essays here I make very brief mention of Barbara Bel Geddes's character Midge in *Vertigo*, at the moment we meet her. She happens to be wearing a lovely banana yellow cashmere two-set, which if it glows prettily against her blonde hair more crucially states her social class and sense of decorum, her

professional composure at work in her private space, her desire for physical comfort. To listen to the dialogue in this scene or watch the action without noting details like this one is to miss a great deal of what Hitchcock intends to show. At the conclusion of *The 39 Steps,* we attend a variety performance in company with a large audience: but this takes place at London's Palladium, not any random theater. There is a rich history of vaudeville and musical performance underneath the scene, and a class story as well, since the Palladium was top-of-the-line for variety showmanship in England at the time. In *North by Northwest,* Roger sneaks into Eve's berth on the Twentieth Century Limited en route to Chicago: this isn't just a sleeping compartment, it's a high-style sleeping compartment of the most expensive kind, on the most expensive train in America; Eve is being kept by Vandamm as his girl, but in the most sumptuous luxury possible. This tells us about her, but even more about him. Luxury always offers telltale data about social structure: in *To Catch a Thief* and *Rebecca* we visit the wealthy of the Côte d'Azur; in *Saboteur* the *haut monde* of Fifth Avenue; in *Family Plot* the palaces of Pasadena; in *Strangers on a Train*, a palace of Maryland; and in *Rear Window* we vicariously dine at 21.

Hitchcock's ornamentalism is a case in point of a broader and deeper endeavor in his work, one with significant philosophical implications. Following an approach originated and publicized by Alexander von Humboldt and then the Comte de Buffon late in the eighteenth century, he works in scene after scene to lay before the viewer what, in writing of Frederick Church's *Heart of the Andes* (1859), Jennifer Raab calls a "catalogue of . . . wonders, all part of one great cosmos" (51). Humboldt's travels had taught him the exceptional value of being "awake to the charms of nature" (127), especially the delight and utility of carefully noting the vast array of telling details which, in synthesis, could lead to a grasp of natural reality. What this scholar—in the 1850s, as Stephen Jay Gould observes, "Humboldt may well have been the world's most famous and influential intellectual" ("Art" 93)—undertook with geology and vegetation (he "collected sixty thousand plant specimens, drew countless maps of great accuracy" [95])—Hitchcock undertakes in the social depictions of his films. What Humboldt undertook writing as a naturalist—"A few bushy euphorbiums, the cacalia kleinia, and Indian figs (cactus), which are

become wild in the Canary Islands, as well as the south of Europe and the whole continent of Africa, are the only plants we see on these arid rocks" (Humboldt 123)—Hitchcock undertakes as a portraitist, meticulous always as to the way bodies hold and configure themselves, how they disport through dress, how they are positioned vis-à-vis one another in action, how personalities design living spaces and cultivate their environments in order both to affiliate and to distinguish themselves. Raab mentions sensory invocations (in Darwin's work), which "make a case, at the level of language, for the 'beauty and infinite complexity' " of the natural world (54); consider in light such as this, Hitchcock's variegated portrayal in *Rear Window* of an urban-centered, highly sophisticated, variate, delicate, evocative social world. Or the way that by using locations with intense specificity, not only as to their selection but as to the angle and lens through which he shows them, Hitchcock creates a topology of powerful subtlety and nuance in *Family Plot*.

The metaphysical conundrum Raab poses in relation to Church's painting and to the "struggle to define the function and significance of detail during the mid-nineteenth century" applies as well, and with even more charge, I think, to Hitchcock:

> Were details, like "Nature," proof of God, and science "the progressive disclosure of His soul," as James Jackson Jarves stated in *The Art-Idea* (1864)? Or were the minutiae of the physical world fundamentally different from the divine, governed by different laws and shaped by different forces . . . ? (61)

In *Rebecca,* is the rococo design of life at Manderley a divine intervention on some level, or is it mere mechanism, mere contrivance of power and puissance? But to put this question more baldly is to see Hitchcock's real insight. Is the organization of our life fully, but only, an effect of socially formed power and cultural pressure, a resultant of the forces of social or psychosexual development adumbrated by such powerful thinkers as Marx and Durkheim, Freud and Sombart? Or, the ideas of all these thinkers (and more) being taken with full seriousness, might there be, still, another order of being to be considered, a world residue accessible only through vague traces of the past and of intuition?

And this is why it has seemed to me not only important but also wholly involving (a dearer virtue) to think, here, through the possibilities of Hitchcock's dream world, by which I mean to point not only to fantasy in his work, and to improbability, but also to doubt and disconcertion, hope and memory, intuition and belief, all the details of our real and cinematic worlds that don't simply answer queries into practical reality. The oneiric comes to the center of waking life.

Always, the pieces of the Hitchcockian puzzle must be seen to fit. "Coherence is the prerequisite of meaning," writes V. F. Perkins. "It is the means by which the film-maker creates significance. The *spectator* employs a continuous coherence-test in order to recognize meaning at all levels. It is the means by which he *makes sense* of the images, the means by which he adjusts both his visual and his mental focus" (116). Assenting to this, I would take a further step: the visual images being entirely primary, a good deal of the viewer's "adjustment" concerns artfully resisting the pressures of language—which vie for placement in our interpretation—and learning again how simply and fully to see. To see and hear what the screen offers without translating it all as story, in a purely verbal language of thought—as though on its own, without definition and categorization, a sound is not a thought; a picture is not a thought; an experience is not a thought. Our attention must be relentless. Hitchcock is a strictly classical artist. Every cadence is prepared. And the work is pared and pared again, until nothing is left but the vital essence.

A warning. In our age of mega-popularity, Hitchcock has become mega-popular and mega-famous, a virtual meme unto himself. Everyone has something to say about him (much of it gleaned from publicity releases he caused to be made about himself). It is notable, and salutary, that Gould recognizes about Church's *Heart of the Andes* how, as rumors spread of the painting's immense monetary value, "public interest . . . veered from the sublime to the merely quantitative" (91). A kind of quantitative appreciation has fallen to Hitchcock's work, too, in the rapturous consideration of his mischievous plots and repetitive themes, his films' relationship to prevailing cultural issues of powerlessness or identity or control, and his position, always methodically calculated by adjudicators and detractors alike, in the pantheon of directorial greats. All these appreciations sum to magnitude,

but not necessarily to depth. Some who have studied Hitchcock again and again have found the sublime. The sublime, itself a kind of dream, may be our grail. Not merely bloodiness, or mere darkness, or fear, or villainy need code Hitchcock for us if we can see the poetic light in his shadows.

On our voyage into Hitchcock, we must not lose the Hitchcockian sublime, the grace and intimation that riddle his films and bring us, as we watch and wonder, close to our own most confounding selves where, as Deleuze saw, we "speak in our own name only" (xiii), speak while wrecked on an island. It is from my own island, as yet not fully explored, that these pages emerge to be sent across the waters to you.