

# What Is This Thing Called Film?

## What do Alfred Hitchcock Movies Disclose About the Nature of Film?

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### *I. Thinking about Hitchcock*

Obviously there are all sorts of things to notice and say about a movie, especially a movie as “constructed” as most of Hitchcock’s films were. Hitchcock’s films, whatever else might be said for or against them are “thoroughly made,” by which I mean Hitchcock thought about each and every detail, about what his actors were wearing, what furniture was in a room, what kind of flowers were in a vase, what “song” was playing, etc.

We are in good hands, when it comes to a Hitchcock film. A Hitchcock film “bears” thinking about because Hitchcock thought about it, thought about every last detail; so if we wonder why this or that is “in” a Hitchcock film, we can be confident that Hitchcock thought about it, too, well before it even occurred to us to think.

Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird are often twelve too many for most philosophers, but a great film, like works of literature to which we return again and again, works like *Hamlet*, *Don Quixote*, *Pride and Prejudice* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, may be viewed from a variety of perspectives, different angles of vision, each leading to the disclosure of another aspect of the work lurking in the work itself. Much the same can be said of a Hitchcock film. Some words on Hitchcock may be more helpful than others, just no final word.

It’s often most conducive to noticing something, anything, anything at all, not to have too much in mind beforehand.

Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing.

So if we are driving cross-country and it is late in the day and we enter a small town in the mid-west and everyone is hungry, we tend to notice all the restaurants that are closed and miss the “no vacancy” signs and the shut gas stations.

But if we enter the same small town in search of gas or a place to sleep, the restaurants tend to pass us by and all the “no vacancy” signs and closed gas stations leap out at us and smack us in the eye.

This is no less true of looking at a photograph or viewing a film.

Although I am inclined to think that the less said about a movie, especially a Hitchcock movie, at the outset, the better, let me suggest a few things to keep in mind while you watch these films, allowing the majority of your thoughts to occur once and only when the lights come back on.

In thinking about Hitchcock's films I am going to focus on a particular way of looking, at them.

One way of looking at Hitchcock, especially the films -- *Rear Window* (1954) and *North by Northwest* (1959) -- resides in looking at them in light of what they have to "say," to "tell," to "teach" about the medium itself, about what film is, about what it can and cannot do, about its special way of "viewing" the world.

You are, of course, invited to look at each film and see for yourself.

If his way of looking at Hitchcock helps to bring things in his films explicitly to light that we might not otherwise have seen, that we might otherwise overlook, then this way of looking at Hitchcock will have been vindicated to a degree: it will have opened up a world.

## ***II. Hitchcock's Mastery***

Hitchcock enjoyed distracting critics from attributing too much significance to any of his choices in his movies. He made fun of the term "film" and the even more high-sounding, "cinema," preferring to call whatever he was working on a "movie."

Two of his favorite phrases for dismissing grand analyses of his films -- oops, sorry, movies -- were "That's ice-box talk" and "It's only a movie."

What Hitchcock meant by the latter is clear enough, but the other may sound strange. The one word "ice-box" dates Hitchcock. We call them refrigerators, but when Hitchcock was growing up, they were ice-boxes. Hitchcock began his career well back in the last century. He met his wife, Alma, on the set of the silent film, *Woman to Woman*, in 1923.

"Back then," one might say, there were no refrigerators.

"Ice-box talk" was indeed a fairly common phrase, much as "gather around the water cooler" was in the 1950's. People returned home after an evening of theatre or film, and went to the ice-box, and, while nibbling on a drumstick or piece of fruit, talked about the movie or play they had just seen.

This was never very deep talk, but idle chatter, and Hitchcock loved to make fun of complex analyses of his films, (movies), by a wave of his hand, and the words: "That's ice-box talk." He cultivated this attitude, and it became part of the Hitchcock persona.

It went hand in hand with another favorite posture: his affectation of boredom, of being bored by filmmaking, and bored by his actors.

But don't let that fool you, at least not completely. Hitchcock is a master filmmaker.

To my mind, and the minds of many he was a master of the art of filmmaking in the twentieth century, as Shakespeare was a master of theatre in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in London.

It is easy to forget that *Rear Window* was made more than fifty years after Hitchcock completed his first film. It is not generally remembered that Hitchcock was already Britain's top film director when he first came to the United States in the 1930's.

Today there are more film conferences, more symposia on Hitchcock than any other American film director. He is studied more widely and examined more closely in film programs around the country than any other film director.

Hitchcock has also had a profound influence on the many directors who began their own filmmaking careers after the great Hitchcock films of the 1950's.

Francois Truffaut, who made *400 Blows* and *Jules and Jim*, as well as Martin Scorsese, who has made such films as *Taxi-Driver*, *Goodfellas*, *Gangs of New York*, and, yes, *The Departed*, are both deeply indebted to Hitchcock and his work, and have commented at great length on this fact. Indeed Scorsese oversaw the restoration of the print of *Vertigo* that is now available to the public. Here's Scorsese on *Vertigo*:

Whole books could be written about so many individual aspects of *Vertigo* — its extraordinary precision, which cuts to the soul of its characters like a razor; its many mysteries and moments of subtle poetry, its unsettling and exquisite use of color; its extraordinary performances by Stewart and Kim Novak . . . And that's not to mention its astonishing title sequence by Saul Bass or its tragically beautiful score by Bernard Herrmann. . . ."

Scorsese's phrase "whole books" in reference to what might be said about *Vertigo* is not so easily dismissed as "ice-box talk." In addition to his own movie-making Truffaut did write a "whole book" about Hitchcock after interviewing him about his entire career. Before becoming a maker of films himself, Truffaut was a film critic for the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema*. As he reports, when he was in New York in 1962 for the premiere of his film *Jules and Jim* he "noticed that every journalist asked [him] the same question":

Why do you critics of *Cahiers du Cinema* take Hitchcock so seriously? He's rich and successful, but his movies have no substance.' In the course of an interview during which I praised *Rear Window* to the skies, an American critic surprised me by commenting, 'You love *Rear Window* because, as a stranger to New York, you know nothing about Greenwich Village.' To this absurd statement, I replied, '*Rear Window* is not about Greenwich Village; it is a film about cinema, and I do know cinema.

I wanted to quote this remark of Truffaut, no ordinary filmmaker himself, because it confirms my instincts that Hitchcock's films are not only, or merely, about digging up bodies and solving crimes, they are about filmmaking itself.

Hitchcock was consumed by filmmaking.

It was his life and, despite his off-hand remarks to critics, he went about it in such a deliberate, thoughtful way that the films themselves function as miniature essays on the question: "What is film?" As a fellow filmmaker, Truffaut knew this, and asked Hitchcock if he would be willing to be interviewed for a book because he (Truffaut) could see that the films themselves were exercises in thoughtfulness.

Here is Truffaut on Hitchcock's playful dismissal of those who are inclined to take his work seriously:

It was obvious that Hitchcock, whose genius for publicity was equalled only by that of Salvador Dali, had in the long run been victimized in American intellectual circles because of his facetious response to interviewers and his deliberate practice of deriding their questions. In examining his films, *it was obvious that he had given more thought to the potential of his art than any of his colleagues.* (italics added)

### ***III. What Makes a Hitchcock Movie a Hitchcock Movie?***

**A. Attention to Detail:** As I've suggested thinking about a Hitchcock film can be rewarding because Hitchcock himself thought about what he was doing, paid close attention to the smallest details and had a hand in virtually every aspect of each film's making. So Hitchcock involved himself not only in the casting and in the writing of the screenplay, but in the choice of the songs and music, in the shoes and dresses and coats his actors wore, and in the sets and the color of the walls.

During the filming of *Rear Window*, for example, Hitchcock is reported to have spent a disproportionate amount of time trying to get a close-up of Grace Kelly's shoes, a shot he never used in the final version of the movie. It is tales such as these that confirm Hitchcock's obsession with minute particulars and help to underwrite the conviction that attention to a detail in one of his films is not likely to go unrewarded. Thus, it is fun to notice the titles and words of songs that accompany various scenes in a Hitchcock movie and to think about the implications such links might have.

So, for example, to choose *Rear Window* again, there is a scene where Jimmy Stewart watches a woman, dining alone in her downstairs apartment, a woman he nicknames "Miss Lonely Hearts," as the song "To See You Is To Love You" plays in the background.

**B. The World Inside the Frame (Open v. Closed Filmmaking):** Obviously there is more than one way to make a movie, but insofar as a filmmaker is in the least bit conscious about movie making, there are two choices the director must make. Some decision must be made about where the world is in relation to the camera.

Think of a photograph.

Photography is the basis of the medium of film, and a photograph, a single photo, has an edge, a frame, and this edge or frame more often than not conveys the impression of being "cropped," as if the world before the camera continues to the left and right of its frame, of its edge. "Cropping" in turn conveys the impression of something "cut-out" and photos often look as if they themselves were cut-outs -- bits and pieces cut out of the world.

In a film, however, the camera is, or can be, “on the move.” It can pan from left to right, zoom in and zoom out, or it can be placed on a “dolly” and moved about. These techniques make the edge or frame less pronounced than it is in a photograph. But the impression of the edge is still there.

Some filmmakers make something of the fact that the world might be seen as continuing beyond the frame of the camera, and use this impression to inform their own vision. Thus Jean Renoir, the French filmmaker, who made such films as *Rules of the Game* (1939), and *Grand Illusion* (1938), will often let his characters wander in and out of camera range, in and out of the frame, a style, if I can call it that, which implies that there is more to the world than what is directly in front of the camera.

Renoir makes his “take on the world in relation to the camera and its relation to what the camera frames quite dramatically at the end of one of his earliest films, *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932), where Boudu slips into a river and loses his hat and the camera stays focused on Boudu while Boudu’s hat floats down stream and out of the frame. Here we have a gesture that seems to say (if hats could speak) “life goes on” or “there is more to life than meets the camera’s eye,” or, to borrow a line from Shakespeare, “there is a world elsewhere” (a world “beyond the frame”).

I mention Renoir’s film “style” and go on about it at such length because it serves as a contrast to Hitchcock’s own cinematic instincts, which is to squeeze our view of the world inside the frame.

Hitchcock seems to be bent on conveying exactly the opposite impression: that what we experience as taking place inside the frame of the camera, as unfolding within it, is all there is to the world.

Hitchcock is drawn to enclosed spaces and will often plunk us down inside one or another enclosed space without showing us how or where we might locate an exit.

Indeed, to compound this sense of enclosure, Hitchcock seems to seek out especially tight or confined spaces.

Thus, Hitchcock appears to take no small amount of pleasure in squeezing Cary Grant in *North by Northwest* into the upper berth of a sleeper car. Indeed, the frame of Hitchcock’s camera functions like a container of sorts; it, quite literally “contains” its subject.

And Hitchcock, as if to bring this “style” of filmmaking home to us, will often place his actors in spaces that resemble containers. Take, for example, to choose *North by Northwest* again, the moment near the beginning of the film where Cary Grant finds himself at the wheel of a car, whose brakes have been tampered with, that is careening down a steep (winding) road at the edge of cliff above the sea.

The car, containing Grant, functions here as a metaphor for what it is like to be “in” one of Alfred Hitchcock’s pictures, inside its frame and subject to its controlling vision, as the car, with Grant in it, hurtles “out of control” down a winding road.

Unlike that hat - remember the hat? - in Renoir’s *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, the hat that drifts listlessly out of the frame, Grant is caught inside the frame of the car, “trapped” within it.

I surely do not need to add that we often have feelings of claustrophobia while we are watching a Hitchcock movie, as if we ourselves were caught up in its action, spellbound by it; there is none of the breathing room, the expansiveness suggested by the viewing of a Renoir film.

This has led some film critics to speak of two cinematic styles: open and closed. Renoir would be an example of open filmmaking; Hitchcock of closed filmmaking.

In light of this contrast, you might notice or keep at the back of your mind while you are watching a Hitchcock film those moments in the film where you detect a bit of an opening, an opportunity for escape into a world beyond the frame. And then watch how quickly Hitchcock will close that opportunity off, will shut that opening down.

One of the more dramatic examples of the closing down of just such an opening is the scene, again in *North by Northwest*, in the cornfield, where there is a stretch of highway and a flat, depressingly flat, landscape, and yet there is a large expanse of open sky.

If you think for a second you will realize that you have not seen so much sky in the film before this moment, and you may, just may, for another split second, find yourself wanting to take a deep breath, just to breathe in some of that air and light.

But then just as abruptly, and perhaps before you can get that whole breath in at the very top of the frame a crop-duster appears, swooping down into the frame "dusting" the flat landscape below, shutting down and closing off the opening that second's before greeted your eye.

Cary Grant dives for cover, suddenly contained, enveloped by the spray from the dusting of the low-flying plane.

No more openings. No more breathing room.

We are back in the enclosed space of Hitchcock's world.

**C. The Camera's Singular P. O. V. (Point of View):** In addition to the closed nature of his filmmaking, Hitchcock will often assign the camera position to one of the main characters, usually the protagonist, and so what we "see" is a world viewed by that character, by the protagonist, from his particular angle of vision.

The world we see is the world he sees, and that can have the result that we often know only and as much as the protagonist knows, and this limitation tends, in turn, to enhance that sense of claustrophobia we often feel in the course of our viewing a Hitchcock film. Our vision of the world is enclosed at both ends, as it were. It is enclosed, both within the frame and within the point of view of a single character.

So, in *Rear Window*, for an example, what we see is what Jimmy Stewart sees.

Barring a few shots at the end of the film and the scene with the dead dog, the camera adopts the point of view of someone inside Jimmy Stewart's (Jeffries') apartment,

What we see, we see from Jimmy Stewart's (Jeffries') point of view.

The assigning of the camera to a singular point is not necessarily unique to Hitchcock. We see it in the hands of other directors, too. But it is typical of Hitchcock.

#### ***IV. Thinking about Rear Window (1954)***

One way to think about Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, to have at the back of your mind while viewing it -- although I would like to think that it is best if you store it way, way back -- is to view the movie as a metaphor for the cinema itself.

Jefferies (James Stewart) might thus be seen to occupy the position of a movie-goer and the events that unfold in the apartment block opposite as corresponding to the images on a screen.

Or, Jefferies might be thought to be in the film-maker's position, to occupy the role of its director (Jefferies as "author" of the film).

Or he might be seen to occupy the camera's position: what he sees, he sees from its peculiar angle of vision, its unique "take" on the world, and the events that unfold in the apartment block opposite might be regarded as the world viewed from the eye of a camera.

#### ***V. Thinking about North by Northwest (1959)***

So, too, Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* might be viewed as a meditation on the role of the director in film.

There are two characters in the film in particular, if one does not count Hitchcock, himself, who seem to "stand in" for directors of a sort.

There is Vandamm, played by James Mason, and the Professor, played by Leo G. Carroll. Both these two men play roles in the film, roles in fact that are quite different from one another, but roles nonetheless that put them in a position of a director who views the world with a "director's eye."

One thing, among others, that a director does is direct actors.

So, not unsurprisingly, there is, in this film, too, a good deal about acting in film and, more specifically about what it might be like to "appear" in a Hitchcock film.