Hitchcock Truffaut

The definitive study of Alfred Hitchcock by François Truffaut

Revised Edition

The scene in which the spies listen to the record of the cantata in *The Man Who Knew Too Much:* left, the 1934 version; right, the 1956 version.

the action by herself in Albert Hall and till the end of the picture.

F.T. The second version was better because the husband's arrival on the scene during the playing of the cantata made it possible to extend the suspense. He sees his wife from a distance, and she explains the situation in sign language, pointing first to the killer and then to the diplomat who is his prospective victim. Stewart must take action, so he tries to make his way to the ambassador's loge. The sequence through the corridors, in which he tries to explain what is happening to the policemen stationed there, who keep on referring him to one of their superiors, is played out in pantomime. That pantomimed performance strengthens the suspense and also points up the irony of the whole situation. The humor is much subtler than in the British version. Another advantage is that instead of interrupting the mood of the sequence, the humor actually heightens the drama.

A.H. That's true. But aside from this difference the scene in the Albert Hall is quite similar in both versions, don't you agree? The cantata is the same . . .

F.T. But the second orchestration by Bernard Herrmann is far superior. And isn't this scene longer in the second version? In any case, there's a three-hundred-meter reel that's entirely musical, with no dialogue. All static shots, I think. In the original version the shots were often mobile. There were several panning shots, for instance, when the camera moved from the killer's face to the heroine's, and from hers to the face of the ambassador. In the construction as well as in the rigorous attention to detail, the remake is by far superior to the original.

A.H. Let's say that the first version is the work of a talented amateur and the second was made by a professional.

F.T. With the success of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, I imagine you were given a free hand in the choice of stories. The one you chose was *The Thirty-nine Steps*, about a young Canadian who leaves London and makes his way to Scotland in pursuit of a spy ring that has stabbed a woman to death in his flat. With the police thinking he's committed the murder and the spies out to get him, there are snares and traps wherever he turns. After a series of hair-raising, narrow escapes, the picture winds up

with a happy ending. The screenplay was based on a John Buchan novel. He's a writer for whom you have great admiration, I believe.

A.H. In fact, Buchan was a strong influence a long time before I undertook *The Thirty-nine Steps*, and some of it is reflected in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. He had written *Greenmantle*, a novel that was probably inspired by the strange personality of Lawrence of Arabia. Korda bought this novel, but he never made the picture. At first I considered this book, but on second thought I chose *The Thirty-nine Steps*, which was a smaller subject. Probably for the very reason we mentioned in connection with Dostoyevsky—my respect for a literary masterpiece.
What I find appealing in Buchan's work is his understatement of highly dramatic ideas.

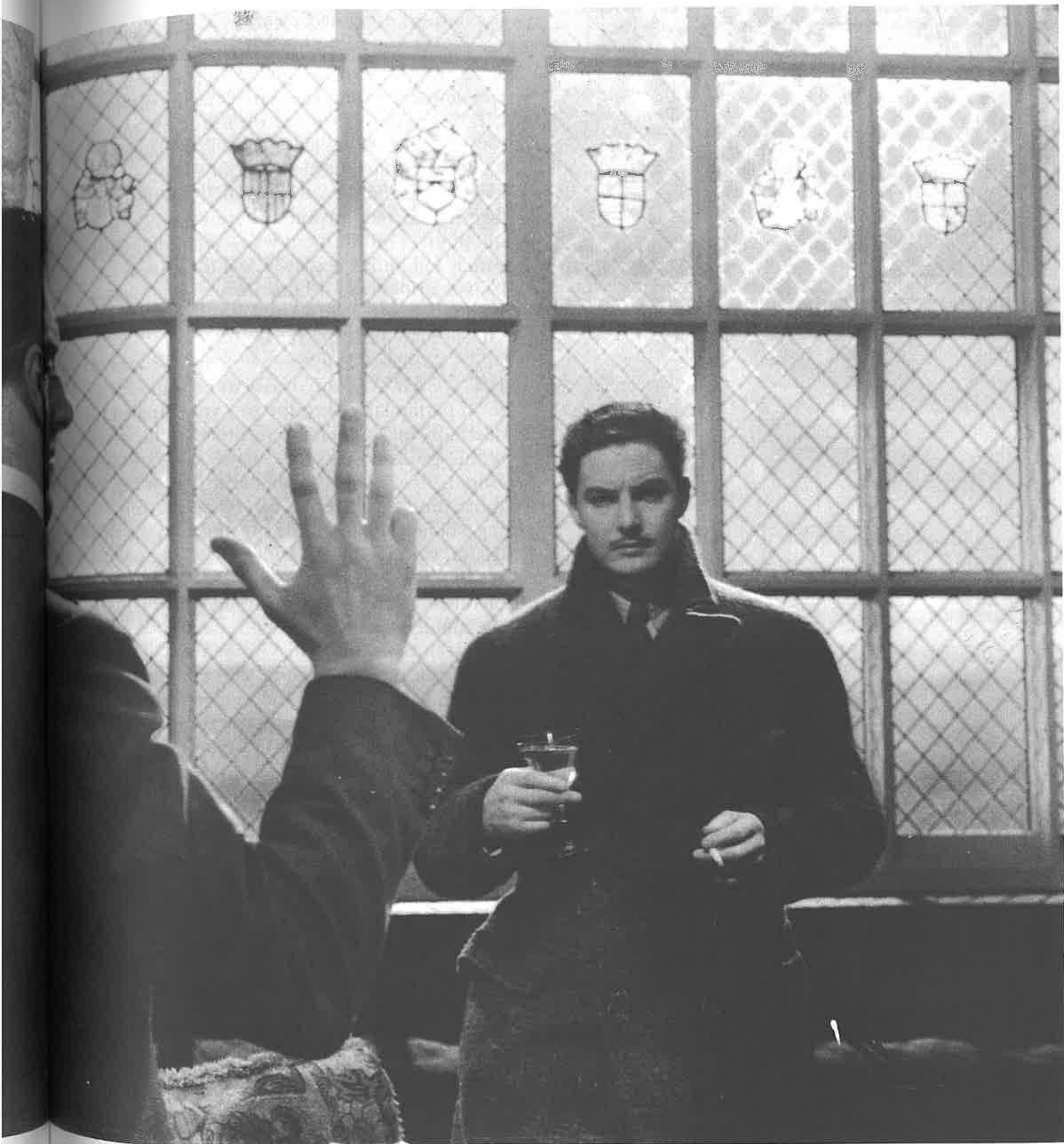
F.T. *The Trouble with Harry* has that same quality of understatement.

A.H. That's right. Understatement is important to me. At any rate, I worked on the scenario with Charles Bennett, and the method I used in those days was to make a treatment complete in every detail, except for the dialogue. I saw it as a film of episodes, and this time I was on my toes. As soon as we were through with one episode, I remember saying, "Here we need a good short story." I made sure the content of every scene was very solid, so that each one would be a little film in itself.
Anyway, despite my admiration for John Buchan, there are several things in the picture that were not in the book. For instance, the scene in which Robert Donat spends the night with the farmer and his wife was inspired by an old story about a South African Boer, a black-bearded man, very austere, with a very young, sex-starved wife. On his birthday she kills a chicken and bakes a chicken pie. It's a very stormy night and she hopes that her husband will be pleased with her surprise. All she gets for her pains is an angry husband, who berates her for killing a chicken without his permission. Hence, a grim birthday celebration. Suddenly there's a knock at the door, and there stands a handsome stranger who has lost his way and requests a night's hospitality. The woman invites him to sit down and offers him some food,

but the farmer, feeling he's eating too much, stops him and says, "Hold on, there. This has got to last us the rest of the week."
The woman is hungrily eying the stranger, wondering how she can get to bed with him. The husband suggests that they put him out in the barn, but the woman objects. Finally, the three of them go to sleep in the great big bed, with the farmer in the middle. The woman is trying to find some way to get rid of her husband, and finally, hearing a noise, she wakes him up, saying, "I think the chickens are out of the coop." The husband goes out to the yard, and the woman shakes the stranger awake, saying, "Come on. Now's your chance." So the stranger gets out of bed and quickly gulps down the rest of the chicken pie.*

F.T. The story is good, but the episode in the picture is better. The mood reminds one of Murnau, probably because of the faces, and also because the characters are at once bound to the earth and to religion. Though that scene is a brief one, the personalities are striking and they emerge forcefully. The prayer sequence is really remarkable. While the husband gives thanks, Robert Donat notices that the newspaper on the table carries his picture. He turns to the woman, who glances down at the picture and then looks at Donat. As their eyes meet, it is clear that she is now aware that he is a wanted man. In reply to her unsmiling, unspoken query, his eyes voice an eloquent appeal. And the farmer, noticing this exchange of looks, clearly suspects a romantic understanding between the two, so he goes outside to watch them through the window.
The whole scene is a beautiful illustration of silent filming, and the characters are admirably well drawn. The husband, for instance, is clearly a fanatic, a man who is possessive, jealous, and excessively puritanical. And this trait of his character has a specific bearing on a subsequent development: the wife gives Donat the farmer's coat, and when he is shot at, his life will be saved because the bullet hits the Bible

* The same story was filmed by Carlo-Rim, in 1951, as the sketch on gluttony in the picture *Seven Capital Sins*.



Robert Donat has taken refuge in the mansion of a Scotch nobleman (Godfrey Tearle). He explains to him that he is in pursuit of a master spy who is missing a finger on his left hand. "Are you sure it isn't the right hand?" asks Tearle (*The Thirty-nine Steps*).

the farmer carried in one of the coat pockets.*

A.H. Yes, that was a nice scene. There was also another interesting character in the film, Mr. Memory. He's based on a true-life music-hall personality called Datas. The audience would ask him questions about major events, like: "When did the *Titanic* sink?" and he would give the correct answer. There were also trick questions. One of them was: "When did Good Friday fall on a Tuesday?" And the answer was: "Good Friday was a horse running at Wolverhampton race track and he fell at the first hurdle on Tuesday, June 21, 1864."

F.T. Mr. Memory was a wonderful character. I particularly liked the way you handled his death, by making him, quite literally, the victim of his professional conscience. When Robert Donat, in the music hall, asks him what the thirty-nine steps are, he can't help blurting out the whole truth about the spy ring, and the ringleader, who's in the audience, shoots him dead. It's this kind of touch that gives so many of your pictures a quality that's extremely satisfying to the mind: a characterization is developed to the limit—until death itself. Within a situation that goes from the picturesque to the pathetic, the incident is handled in the light of a relentless logic that makes the death seem ironic and yet grandiose, almost heroic.

A.H. The whole idea is that the man is doomed by his sense of duty. Mr. Memory *knows* what the thirty-nine steps are, and when he is asked the question, he is *compelled* to give the answer. The schoolteacher in *The Birds* dies for the same reason.

F.T. Recently, I saw *The Thirty-nine Steps* in Brussels, and a few days later in Paris I went to see the remake that was done by Ralph Thomas, with Kenneth More. The remake was poorly directed and rather ridiculous, but the story is so fascinating that the audience was interested anyway.

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* Fritz Lang's *The Spy*, made in 1928, also showed a book breaking the impact of a bullet, but in the Lang picture the life-saving book was not the Bible.

At times the breakdown followed your own very closely, but even these parts were inferior. And wherever there were changes, they were mostly all wrong. For instance, at the beginning of the movie, when Robert Donat is locked up in a flat in which a woman has been stabbed, he notices from the window two spies pacing back and forth in the street. You showed those spies from *his* viewpoint; the camera was *in* the room and the spies were *outside*, on the sidewalk. They were shown from a distance. But in the remake Ralph Thomas has two or three close shots of the spies in the street. Because of this the scene loses its whole impact; the two men are no longer strange and sinister and there is simply no reason to feel afraid for the hero.

A.H. It's really too bad; they miss the whole point. It's obvious that you can't change your viewpoint in the midst of a situation of that kind.

F.T. Incidentally, on reseeing your version of *The Thirty-nine Steps,* I realized that it's approximately at this period that you began to take more liberties with the scenarios, that is, to attach less importance to the credibility of the plot, or at any rate, whenever necessary, to sacrifice plausibility in favor of pure emotion.

A.H. Yes, that's right!

F.T. For instance, when Robert Donat is leaving London, on the train, he runs into a series of disturbing incidents. At any rate, that's the way he interprets what he sees. He thinks the two persons sitting opposite him in the train compartment are watching him from behind their papers. And when the train stops at a station, through the window we see a policeman standing at attention and staring straight at the camera. There are indications of danger everywhere; everything is seen as a threat. The deliberate build-up of this mood was a step in the direction of American stylization.

A.H. Yes, this was a period when there was greater attention to detail than in the past. Whenever I embarked on a new episode, I would say to myself, "The tapestry must be filled here" or "We must fill out the tapestry there."
What I like in *The Thirty-nine Steps* are the swift transitions. Robert Donat decides to go to the police to tell them that the man with the missing finger tried to kill him and how the Bible saved his life, but they don't believe him and suddenly he finds himself in handcuffs. How will he get out of them? The camera moves across the street, and we see Donat, still handcuffed, through the window that is suddenly shattered to bits. A moment later he runs into a Salvation Army parade and he falls in step. Next, he ducks into an alley that leads him straight into a conference hall. Someone says, "Thank heaven, our speaker has arrived," and he is hustled onto a platform where he has to improvise an election speech.
Then there's the girl who doesn't like him because he kissed her on the train. She comes in with two chaps who are supposed to take him to the police station, but who in fact, you will recall, are the spies. And Donat, handcuffed to the girl, manages to escape with her, thanks to a traffic jam caused by a herd of sheep. Still handcuffed to each other, they spend the night in a hotel, and so it goes.
The rapidity of those transitions heightens the excitement. It takes a lot of work to get that kind of effect, but it's well worth the effort. You use one idea after another and eliminate anything that interferes with the swift pace.

F.T. It's a style that tends to do away with anything that is merely utilitarian, so as to retain only those scenes that are fun to shoot and to watch. It's the kind of cinema that's extremely satisfying to audiences and yet often irritates the critics. While looking at the movie, or after seeing it, they will analyze the script, which, of course, doesn't stand up to logical analysis. So they will single out as weaknesses those aspects that are the very essence of this film genre, as, for instance, a thoroughly casual approach to the plausible.

A.H. I'm not concerned with plausibility; that's the easiest part of it, so why bother? Do you remember that lengthy scene in *The Birds* in which the people are talking about the birds? In that group there is a woman who is precisely

A cleaning woman discovers the body. Her scream dissolves into the whistle of the train carrying Robert Donat on his investigation (*The Thirty-nine Steps*).

a specialist on the subject of birds, an ornithologist. She happens to be there by pure chance! Naturally, I could have made up three scenes just to give that woman a logical reason for being there, but they would have been completely uninteresting.

F.T. Not to mention the waste of time for the public!

A.H. Aside from the waste of time, they make for gaps or flaws in the picture. Let's be logical if you're going to analyze everything in terms of plausibility or credibility, then no fiction script can stand up to that approach, and you wind up doing a documentary.

F.T. I agree with you that the ultimate of the credible is the documentary. As a matter of fact, the only kind of films that are, as a rule, unanimously endorsed by all the critics are such documentaries as *Naked Island*—pictures that require craftsmanship but no imagination.

A.H. To insist that a storyteller stick to the facts is just as ridiculous as to demand of a representative painter that he show objects accurately. What's the ultimate in representative painting? Color photography. Don't you agree? There's quite a difference, you see, between the creation of a film and the making of a documentary. In the documentary the basic material has been created by God, whereas in the fiction film the director is the god; he must create life. And in the process of that creation, there are lots of feelings, forms of expression, and viewpoints that have to be juxtaposed. We should have total freedom to do as we like, just so long as it's not dull. A critic who talks to me about plausibility is a dull fellow.

F.T. It's sometimes said that a critic, by the very nature of his work, is unimaginative, and in a way, that makes sense, since imagination may be a deterrent to his objectivity. Anyway, that lack of imagination might account for a predilection for films that are close to real life. On seeing *The Bicycle Thief,* for instance, he's likely to think this is just the sort of thing he might have written himself, but that thought couldn't possibly occur to him in connection with *North by Northwest*. This being so, he's bound to attribute all kinds of merit to *The Bicycle Thief* and none whatever to *North by Northwest*.

A.H. Since you mention it, I might tell you that *The New Yorker* critic described that picture as "unconsciously funny." And yet I made *North by Northwest* with tongue in cheek; to me it was one big joke. When Cary Grant was on Mount Rushmore, I would have liked to put him inside Lincoln's nostril and let him have a sneezing fit.
By the way, since we're being so critical of the critics, what line were you in when we met for the first time?

F.T. I was a film critic. What else?

A.H. I thought so. You see, when a director has been let down by the critics, when he feels that his work has been passed on too lightly, his only recourse is to seek recognition via the public. Of course, if a film-maker thinks solely in box-office terms, he will wind up doing routine stuff, and that's bad, too. It seems to me that the critics are often responsible for this attitude; they drive a man to make only so-called public-acceptance pictures. Because he can always say to himself, "I don't give a damn about the critics, my films make money." There is a famous saying here in Hollywood: "You can't take a review to the bank!" Some magazines deliberately select critics who don't care about films, but are able to write about them in a condescending way that will amuse the readers. There's an American expression; when something's no good, they say, "It's for the birds!" So I pretty much knew what to expect when *The Birds* opened.

F.T. Napoleon claimed that the best defense was attack. Wouldn't it have been possible to steal their thunder through some slogan in the advance promotion?

A.H. It's not worth the effort. I was in London during the Second World War when a picture by John Van Druten opened. It was called *Old Acquaintance*, and it co-starred Bette Davis

and Claude Rains. The critics of two London Sunday papers both used the same tag line at the end of their reviews. What do you think it was? "Auld acquaintances should be forgot." In other words, even if the picture had been good, they just couldn't resist that line.

F.T. Well, in France they do the same whenever a film title ends with the word "*nuit.*" *Les Portes de la Nuit* is automatically labeled *Les Portes de l'Ennui*, and *Marguerite de la Nuit* is invariably referred to as *Marguerite de l'Ennui*. Even if the picture is fascinating, there are bound to be puns around the word "*ennui.*" Incidentally, one play on words I rather like is your own saying: "Some films are slices of life. Mine are slices of cake."

A.H. I don't want to film a "slice of life" because people can get that at home, in the street, or even in front of the movie theater. They don't have to pay money to see a slice of life. And I avoid out-and-out fantasy because people should be able to identify with the characters. Making a film means, first of all, to tell a story. That story can be an improbable one, but it should never be banal. It must be dramatic and human. What is drama, after all, but life with the dull bits cut out. The next factor is the technique of film-making, and in this connection I am against virtuosity for its own sake. Technique should enrich the action. One doesn't set the camera at a certain angle just because the cameraman happens to be enthusiastic about that spot. The only thing that matters is whether the installation of the camera at a given angle is going to give the scene its maximum impact. The beauty of image and movement, the rhythm and the effects—everything must be subordinated to the purpose.