

Hitchcock's Notebooks

An Authorized and Illustrated Look Inside the Creative Mind of Alfred Hitchcock

By Dan Auiler. New York: Avon Books, 1999. \$30.00.

Everyone knows movies are collaborative, polyvalent, and multiform; it's only in our stubbornly powerful experiences of them that they can seem autonomous, homeostatic, or singly begotten. *Hitchcock's Notebooks*—a tantalizing, frustrating glimpse through a narrow chink in the thick door of a hallowed vault—will not doom the myths of the auteur to their final resting place, but the book tellingly reveals the many negotiations, improvisations, sleights-of-hand, and slipknots that went into the crafting of Hitchcock's exacting, austere precisionist films. To that extent, it contributes some compelling new information to both the meanings of the films and the image of their maker.

The standard version of Hitchcock as an impish sadist, reveling in the Dark Side of Genius, is regrettably entrenched by now; maybe it is only because of that reputation, but the pictures from the archive that show Hitchcock as a figure of foreboding are the ones that stand out most strikingly here. Consider a shot from the set of *Dial M for Murder*: there he is, inclined in the director's chair like a malignant toad, face twisted with rancor, stern hand sweeping across the photograph's blurry foreground, blunt finger extended in the lordly demand the whole picture declaims—*Get lost!* But there's enough of Hitchcock in dialogue with his collaborators in the book to offset the image of the neurotic, magisterial potentate jealously guarding his creative dominions. Especially in contacts with his writers, Hitchcock could be gracious, personable, sometimes downright oleaginous—until, as we'd already learned from *Me and Hitch*, Evan Hunter's recently published account of his work with Hitchcock on *The Birds*, he thought they'd crossed him.

At times, at least in Dan Auiler's selections for *Notebooks*, these transactions appear to be decidedly, if suggestively, unilateral. Samson Raphaelson's letters regarding his own work on the script of *Suspicion* address Hitchcock with intimacy and affection (“Dear Hitch . . . blessings on you and Alma”), but though no replies are included from Hitchcock, potentially unfavorable ones are implied by the fact that nearly all of Raphaelson's suggestions are ignored in the finished film. And a good thing, too. Here's Raphaelson on an early scene: “When Lina overhears her father and mother calling her a spinster—if, before Johnny is discovered, we could see him walking toward her, we would not have the feeling he has overheard. . . . I don't think that is good. If she thinks he has heard her parents calling her a spinster, she wouldn't be likely to kiss him.” But in the film, Hitchcock goes in exactly the opposite direction, *heightening* the ambiguity: a quick, blithe pan reveals Johnny standing at the window beside Lina, where we had no idea he was, and he smirks with what could be pity, derision, conspiratorial sympathy, or just plain acknowledgment—and that is exactly what gives the desperate, impulsive kiss its

perverse poignancy. “I don't think she should say the line about ‘Is it a painful death’ [at the dinner party],” Raphaelson cautions elsewhere. But Hitchcock keeps the line—indeed, underscores it—and in Joan Fontaine's exquisite delivery, hesitant but direct, it becomes one of the film's unforgettable moments, transforming a Gothic melodrama into a complex, moving study of human vulnerability.

Raphaelson objected to the line because he thought it denied the character's volition: “That [line] comes from a supine, licked woman.” A similar omission in the finished film from Thornton Wilder's script for *Shadow of a Doubt* begins to suggest a pattern. In the script, as excerpted in *Hitchcock's Notebooks*, during the final confrontation on the train, when Uncle Charlie tries to push Charlie from the moving vehicle, Wilder has her repeat, “You won't! You won't!” and suggests that Uncle Charlie “weakens” because of her expression of determination and resolve. In the film, there is no such implication, and the mordant, breathtaking scene evokes Hitchcock's dark poetry of helplessness—his alternately forlorn and corrosive chronicles of the power of the precarious in human experience—far more strongly than it does Wilder's lyric celebrations of the indomitable pluck of the small-town spirit.

The tension in Hitchcock's reputation between popular entertainer (the “master of suspense”) and serious artist is repeatedly visible in the material gathered in this collection, though it seems to have caused only passing anxiety on Hitchcock's part. He prided himself on perfectionism, the evidence here suggests, but did not, at least until very late in his career, fret over mistakes beyond the next “project,” and though he welcomed the nod of posterity, he nursed a showman's faith in the public's receptiveness and, at times, its gullibility. We see him paying some attention to reviews on occasion, but he's always willing to write them off in exchange for the audience's favor. At the same time, he doesn't appear to have lavished any excessive respect on the public; when his assistant, Peggy Robertson, noticed a crew member standing in the background of one of the long takes in the finished print of *Under Capricorn*, “Hitchcock didn't seem at all disturbed. He said, ‘Peggy, we've seen this film countless times and we've just noticed it. All we're concerned with is getting it by the audience once—they'll never notice.’”

Hitchcock worried about being typed as only a director of suspense thrillers, but turned down the chance to direct *Anastasia*, among other projects that might have demonstrated greater range. Working in popular forms such as melodrama and the thriller, the director must have felt himself beset by philistinism at every point in his career, and some of his impatience registers here, though most often in relation to underlings who fail to follow his orders, or toadies who work to enforce the demands of labor unions. We can only imagine Hitchcock's response to the surpassing idiocy of George Schaefer's suggestion for the ending of *Suspicion*: “‘Low as I have sunk,’” Johnny says to Lina in Schaefer's fervid imaginings, “‘realizing that you would die for me in this way makes me know that I am not fit to live’—With

which he puts the glass to his lips and empties it, falling on the bed unconscious.”

Lest one conclude, however, that Hitchcock himself always dependably exhibited personally the artistry so amply visible in his films—the highbrow sheep among lowbrow goats—turn to a document like his revised treatment for *Marnie*, reprinted here. The treatment reveals a lot about the development of that project, but what is mainly on view, rather painfully, is a sensibility fraught with penny-dreadful sentiments and dime-novel clichés, complete with wildly melodramatic plot revelations and suggested dialogue of Schaeferesque awfulness: “She was leading a double life, Marnie. When the baby came, it knocked the lid off that make-believe world of hers.”

Part of the point here, of course, is that Hitchcock’s artistry is visual, not verbal, and *Hitchcock’s Notebooks* reminds us over and over again, as did Hunter’s memoir, exactly how, and in what ways, this is the case. The neo-expressionist ardor of *Marnie*, for instance, overwhelms the trite romance-novel conceptions of the film’s origins on paper. Indeed, Auiler errs in dispersing the materials across separate chapters with headings like “Building the Screenplay” and “Preparing the Visual,” because doing so fails to emphasize, or even to suggest, the crucial interdependency of these phases in the construction of Hitchcock’s films. John Michael Hayes (scriptwriter on *Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *The Trouble with Harry*) emphasizes this interdependence in a quotation included here: “Hitchcock taught me how to tell a story with the camera and tell it silently.” Hitchcock’s own most important preproduction contributions were shot lists accompanied by visual sketches. Consider in particular one for the Ambrose Chapel scene in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, where the shot breakdown is accompanied by a visual conception of the space, its symmetry and imposing vertical construction anticipating the set later designed for the film itself.

The chapter on building the screenplay shows Hitchcock’s involvement in the writing process to be more intricate than many could have supposed, but it does so, most often, by juxtaposing variant drafts without providing much guidance or even speculation on the editor’s part regarding how to interpret the changes. One of the real finds of the collection is certainly the excerpt from Wilder’s handwritten script for *Shadow of a Doubt* (though this is sometimes illegibly reproduced in the book), but Auiler’s brief comment on it that “the film has only the slightest variations on what’s excerpted here” is puzzling at best. If that were the case, then why not devote the 25 pages these excerpts occupy to some material that diverges more significantly from the finished film?

In truth, though, the differences should certainly enrich viewers’ sense of the film’s intentions and meanings. In the script’s dinner scene, many of Emma’s key lines from the film are simply not there, and the tone of Charlie’s outburst at her father in the scene is completely different from its counterpart in the film. In the script’s climax, Federal agent

Jack actually witnesses Uncle Charlie’s death, a major variation on the film’s action, and the final speech, though admittedly subtle in its differences from that of the film, yields large implications for the key critical problem of the film’s ending, its relation to the conventions of the traditional Hollywood “happy ending.” Readers will decide for themselves how “slight” such variations are, but such comments often suggest that Auiler is not sufficiently attuned to Hitchcock studies to know what the big critical issues really are.

Readers should also be aware in general that it is best to approach Auiler’s commentary with caution. Its weaknesses range from outright mistakes to seeming misrepresentations to arguable errors of judgment that mar the selection and arrangement of materials in important ways. There is also a certain insensitivity to nuance, which can come in more literal ways, as when Auiler, transcribing a production conference on *Marnie* and apparently missing Hitchcock’s musical metaphors, transcribes “leitmotif” as “light motif.” It’s also clear that Auiler has decided overall to try to keep a low editorial profile, and the reader welcomes the points where he steps aside to let the material speak for itself. Too often, though, Auiler’s cryptic or inaccurate comments on the selections obscure rather than clarify principles of inclusion, and his self-effacement tellingly gives way to baffling bouts of self-promotion. Auiler’s modesty is further undermined, too, by the fact of his identifying himself as the “author” of this book, rather than its editor, though his written contributions make up considerably less than one-tenth of the text, and selection and arrangement clearly constitute the bulk of his labors.

Because so much material inevitably had to be left out, the reader must trust the editor of this book as a guide to an unusual degree. Auiler does little to build such trust. He doesn’t tell us enough about what has been omitted, or describe the logic of his choices, as if they were somehow self-evident. He does not include postproduction materials on *Under Capricorn*—that least appreciated among Hitchcock’s great films—because, he tells us, they seem “innocuous,” but that’s a word one could use to describe much of what *has* been selected often merely to corroborate already well-known facts. Nor does Auiler provide the compelling personal responses to Hitchcock’s work that might have lent resonance or conviction to his editorial presence behind the project. His take on Hitchcock’s work is rather ordinary, apart from some quirky chronology (the “golden decade” of Hitchcock’s career is said to run from 1954 to 1962, *Rear Window* to *Psycho*, a pretty slim decade at a mere eight years, even padded with that extraneous two, giving the impression that Auiler thinks *Psycho* was released in 1962).

In the last analysis, then, this is a book that largely confirms rather than revises our notions about Hitchcock. We come to the end with a keen and not unexpected sense of Hitchcock’s occasional pettiness, frequent glibness, and consummate professionalism. The Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences holds enough material on Hitchcock, no doubt, to fill dozens of books like this one. Maybe another book, and another editor, will

someday help us to trace the exact moment—some time before the camera begins to whir or after the lights go down—when that professionalism turned into visual artistry, the glibness into depth, the pettiness into poetry.

James Morrison's book *Passport to Hollywood* (SUNY, 1998) was selected as a *Choice Outstanding Academic Book in Film* for 1999. His next book, *Broken Fever*, a memoir, will be published by St. Martin's Press.

Italian Film

By Marcia Landy. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000. \$64.95 cloth; \$22.95 paper.

Marcia Landy is a leading figure in Anglo-American Italian film scholarship, having been one of the first American scholars to elaborate the richness of Italian film production during the Fascist regime in her book *Fascism in Film: The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-43* (1986). She returned to this subject in her recent text, *The Folklore of Consensus: Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930-1943* (1998). Her latest book is a synoptic history of Italian film, titled, simply, *Italian Film*, and is part of Cambridge University Press's new series, "National Film Traditions," edited by David Desser.

Landy's boldest step in this work—and the one that most clearly distinguishes hers from other histories of Italian film—is also her most problematic: she has organized her book thematically rather than in the linear, historical framework used by historians like Peter Bondanella in *Italian Cinema, From Neorealism to the Present* and Mira Liehm in *Passion and Defiance, Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present*. Landy seems to be defending this crucial decision when she writes in her preface:

My examination is primarily concerned with exploring the narratives, images, and sounds and their relation to other cultural forms through which this "fictive entity" known as Italian cinema has been disseminated and recognized as national. The book explores the persistence of various styles and motifs and the differing ways these have been expressed in Italy from the silent cinema to the present. (xiv)

The themes range from the representation of gender to the use of landscape to the role of the family in Italian film. In many ways such an approach is refreshing. Too often histories of Italian cinema rely on a teleological template that casts everything in the silent period as a harbinger of Fascism and everything after *Rome, Open City* (1945) as a recoil from the same. Oddly enough, such histories rarely say anything substantial about films produced during the Fascist period. As Landy claims, *Italian Film* "does not gloss over or underestimate films from the years of Fascism" (xiv), and her passages on films made during the 20 years of the Fascist regime are some of her most compelling. Her sensitive reading of a rarely-discussed Fascist period satire, *Sorelle Matrassi* (Ferdinando Poggioli [1943]), a film which she argues

"makes visible the grotesque and theatricalized character of dearly held values," suggests that this period of filmmaking merits the attention she has given it here and elsewhere.

Two chapters in particular are the book's most original: "The Landscape and Neorealism, Before and After" and "Gramsci and Italian Cinema." The subject of landscape is a central issue that has received scant attention in Italian film studies. Certainly location is an important feature of films produced in every part of the world, but in Italian film the issue of cinematic location assumes a special density due to its participation in a centuries-old art-historical tradition of representing the Italian landscape, and especially the cityscape. Landy's discussion of the landscape covers films from every major period of Italian cinema (for example, *Napoli d'altri tempi*, by Amleto Palermi [1938] and Federico Fellini's *Roma* [1972]), but the chapter's forcefulness is vitiated by omitting several key films (Roberto Rossellini's *Paisa*, Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione*, and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Il Grido*) whose representation of the landscape are much more crucial and complex than the examples Landy has chosen. Nonetheless, Landy's focusing on the question of landscape goes far in drawing attention to this under-researched area of Italian film history.

The chapter on Gramsci redresses a blind spot in Liehm's and Bondanella's histories in which he is referenced only fleetingly and almost exclusively in connection to Visconti and Pasolini. In *Italian Film*, Landy gives the patron saint of the Italian Communist Party his full due, arguing that "No other figure's ideas played such a large role in the development of the post-World War II Italian cinema" (149). Landy supports this claim with analyses of films by Mario Monicelli, Ermanno Olmi, the Taviani brothers, as well as Visconti and Pasolini. Landy demonstrates that these filmmakers' relationships to modernism and modernity are inflected by a Gramscian consciousness that resists romanticizing history and sentimentalizing the working class.

Landy's thematic chapters do produce some disconcerting effects. While the organization by motif manages to avoid the evil of teleology, it runs the risk of invoking the specter of synchrony. The book's organization, in fact, makes it difficult to get a sense of the developmental trajectory of Italian film history. The historical contexts of individual films are rather hastily sketched, a method of economy which, to be fair, is forced on any general national film history. But in a history that is not arranged chronologically, the effect is that the precise historical distinctions between films begin to break down. Films from different periods seem to be frozen side by side in the same amber.

Italian Film is a book for a broad readership, and should be read alongside one of the standard histories of the field as a provocative conceptualizing tool. It will encourage students of Italian cinema to draw connections across periods and genres; in the hands of inquisitive and historically informed students, Landy's book could do much to help them move beyond the prosaic *données* of Italian film history.

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