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# Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews by Sidney Gottlieb

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*Book Reviews*



*Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995. xxiv + 339 pp. \$29.95.

by Angela DiPace

Soon to be published in paperback and translated into Chinese, French, Italian, and Japanese, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, edited and with introductory essays by Sidney Gottlieb, succeeds as a readable/informative book because Gottlieb dares to tread the path many scholars/academic writers fear (fail or refuse) to tread. Gottlieb assures the text's readability by avoiding the use of esoteric or technical jargon that would have come between his text and the reader, thus making the text accessible to a large audience without alienating the specialist. This volume, writes Gottlieb, "is not only or even primarily, for scholars and critics," noting that even though "Hitchcock was an uncommon director, . . . he always imagined himself as playing for what he might have called the 'common viewer'" (p. xxii). Following the footsteps of the master, and familiar with the ground broken by Virginia Woolf, Gottlieb complements Truffaut's "Hitchbook" (p. xx) by editing the first Hitchcock "Common Reader."

The fact that Gottlieb keeps his editorial sights/cites simultaneously on Hitchcock and the reader also adds to the book's popularity. Acknowledging his irrepressible admiration for his bigger-than-life subject, Gottlieb never loses sight of his dual objective: to allow the master to speak/write for himself — even if through the medium of ghostwriting — and, thus, create a complex and mystifying public persona; and, to direct the reader's gaze (be it that of a connoisseur or neophyte) toward Hitchcock, "director *extraordinaire*" (p. 104).

Three additional strategies enhance the book's readability and popularity.

Strategy 1. Profitable is Gottlieb's acute sense of audience analysis, a talent discerned in Hitchcock's long and successful career. Film students (undergraduate and graduate), independent filmmakers, scriptwriters, would-be-directors and/or producers, moviegoers, videophiles, as well as Hitchcock *aficionados*, all are targeted to gain insight from Gottlieb's take on Hitchcock (including scholars and

critics).

Contrary to the arrogance/ignorance (or is it Generation X candor?) exhibited by some whose knowledge of the film industry may be traced all the way back to the seventies," and who quickly dismiss previous achievers – for example, "Hitchcock? Who cares about him?" says John Pierson in *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes* (1995) – Gottlieb posits that there are many who want to know about Hitchcock. Informed of the history and cognizant of its pathfinders, Gottlieb thus implicitly poses a question his implied viewer/reader might ask for paying the price of going to a movie, renting a video or, for that matter, buying this book: what does an engaged reader need to know in order to make sense of Hitchcock and his role in the film industry and relation to contemporary culture?

Strategy 2. Keeping this question in sight, Gottlieb leaves several issues associated with the director to the scrutiny of others: "the dark side of genius" for Spoto, misogyny for Modleski, directorial status for Truffaut, critical reputation for Kapsis, and so on. Not only would these problematic issues have diverted the reader's gaze from his objective, but also this strategy enables Gottlieb to distance himself from contemporary critical debate, wherein some situate the director's chair in the S 'n M camp. He disengages himself from this debate, as he puts it, "to soften the current critical emphasis on Hitchcock's impulse to torture and manipulate" (p. xviii).

Not so blithely, however, since Gottlieb does zoom in and foreground two troublesome issues: misogyny and ghostwriting. Ultimately, it seems to this reviewer that Gottlieb is troubled by Hitchcock's "reputation as a misogynist," a charge that Hitchcock does not so much deny as rationalize" (p. 70). Tacitly, Gottlieb concurs with Modleski and others by reprinting such pieces as "Women Are a Nuisance" (1935), "Nova Grows Up" (1938), and "Elegance Above Sex" (1962) which implicate rather than exonerate the director.

Clearly, Gottlieb is less disturbed by the problem of ghostwriting. Relying on the indeterminacy of authorship, Gottlieb devotes several pages to the differences between the "authorizing process [as] (distinguished from, although related to, the authoring process)" (p. xiv). To the puzzling question – "Are Hitchcock's writings ghost-written or heavily edited?" – Gottlieb answers, "Yes and no" and proceeds to discuss the problematics of collaboration associated

with this *auteur*:

Although he concedes that some readers may want to know what critics have to say about all of these issues, Gottlieb asserts that the majority would rather read/hear what Hitchcock had to say, albeit through the voices/writings of others. Taking control of his material, retrieved from several Hitchcock and film archives in England and America, Gottlieb adjusts his editing lens and directs the reader to the filmmaker and filmmaking.

Well-written and insightful, Gottlieb's essays, as he admits, are not intended to break new critical ground; instead, they are designed to elucidate his threefold thesis: (1) that Hitchcock was a pioneer, an artist well-versed in film, the industry, and the economy, one who "like Picasso (especially as seen by such critics as John Berger) and so many other great twentieth-century figures . . . must be understood as an artist in and of the marketplace" (p. xvi); (2) that he possessed a genius for audience analysis, as well as the uncanny "desire to educate his audience" (p. xviii) in regard to the art and craft of cinema; and (3) that he adamantly loved his work, as indicated by his "irrepressible delight" (p. xviii).

Strategy 3. This threefold thesis is fleshed out in the selected writings and their arrangement. Rather than adopting either the *mise-en-scène* or the film-by-film organizational structure, Gottlieb opts for the more resourceful *mise en abîme* strategy. In other words, Hitchcock's writings are nested between Gottlieb's introductory essays, which, as secondary material, reproduce or duplicate the primary material. The selections are, then, arranged chronologically and in the following thematic/topical clusters: "A Life in Films"; "Actors, Actresses, Stars"; "Thrills, Suspense, the Audience"; "Film Production"; and "Technique, Style, and Hitchcock at Work" (the last reinforced by the excellently selected illustrations, including the jacket-cover).

Controlling both topic and chronology allows Gottlieb constantly to reposition and readjust the reader's gaze to the selection before her/his eyes: how Hitchcock never lost sight of mistakes early in his career that cost him money in the editing room; how he met his wife, Alma Reville, his one-time assistant director; and how *The 39 Steps*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and other early classics were made.

Having made fifty-three films in fifty years, by 1977 Hitchcock

knew a great deal about film history and filmmaking in England, America, and elsewhere (especially Germany), yet he repeatedly professed not to have "had too much taste for philosophizing" (p. 60) about his metier. Despite this disclaimer, Hitchcock speculates a great deal and anecdotally discloses much pertaining to theory and practice, thus qualifying Gottlieb to see him as a concrete theorist, stating: "Hitchcock was indeed a theoretician but for the most part, concretely rather than abstractly, and the challenges and problems that most engaged him were practical ones" (p. 233). Creative and technically gifted, Hitchcock's views are grounded in innovative problem-solving and in-depth understanding of the general audience. His propensity toward Poe's poetics is illuminating, as is his reworked definition of catharsis, pity, and fear as applied to the genre of the thriller.

Apropos is the piece entitled "The Enjoyment of Fear" (1949) where Hitchcock pays less attention to catharsis and pity and appropriates fear, asserting that "fear in cinema is [his] special field" (p. 118), and then proceeds to enunciate his influential and pithy formulas on terror, suspense, and surprise. This particular piece and others in the section "Thrills, Suspense, the Audience," notably "Why 'Thrillers' Thrive" (1936), "Let 'Em Play God" (1948), "The Core of the Movies" (1950), "Master of Suspense" (1950), and "Murder — With English on It" (1957) function as required reading for those interested in both his early and later thrillers.

In these writings, the supreme "genre artist" (p. 104) speaks out on the importance of skillful editing; of knowing what is "permissible for a film to be horrific, but not horrible" (p. 111); and of allowing the viewer to collaborate in the crime to experience "the enjoyment of fear." Seated in darkened theaters or rooms, millions vicariously watch "with ecstatic excitement . . . the cinematic blade approach the cinematic neck," but "without having to pay the price" (p. 117). This paradoxical and heightened "enjoyment of fear" could not be sustained without two crucial techniques used in all of his thrillers: his prescient use of comic relief and the chase, especially the "double-chase" (p. 131), as deployed in *Sabotage*, where he states that "the audience can run with the hare and hunt with the hounds" (p. 130). Of particular interest also are the writings on film production. Such pieces as "Stodgy British Pictures" (1934), "More

*Cabbages, Fewer Kings*" (1937), *Old Ruts and New Ruts*" (1939) clearly show Hitchcock's startling innovations, his daunting ability to solve technical problems and arrive at solutions (worked out in his films) that have had far-reaching effects, and his fearless break through many barriers that would have stonewalled the industry had he not surmounted them.

Particularly in *Director's Problems*" (1938), Hitchcock is at pains to catalog the numerous obstacles a director needs to confront, such as stars, the star system, censors, censorship, as well as what he deems to be unnecessary literary/cinematic quarrels, such as the separation between stage and screen. In *Much Ado About Nothing*" (1937), for instance, he argues against the formidable Harley Granville-Barker, a powerful man of the theater and Shakespearean scholar, who advocated the split between British stage and screen. Here Hitchcock asserts that "cinema has come to Shakespeare's rescue" (p. 179), not an easily refutable assertion given the number of successful adaptations since 1937.

Whereas the writings on film production construct the paradigm of the "one-man-pictures," those in the concluding section — *Techniques, Style, and Hitchcock at work* — tend to demystify the master and make the collective process of filmmaking somewhat accessible to the reader. Here Hitchcock is seen "on the job, in collaboration, meticulously planning, and otherwise deeply engaged in his lifelong activity of turning the ordinary into the extraordinary" (p. 339). Also important is the fact that these pieces are artfully arranged to form an invaluable manual of how a film is imagined and created, "designed, produced, and shot" (p. 238); how each component — music, camera, lights, direction, and so on — is used to create the desired effect for his thrillers, inclusive of his unique and stunning "celluloid whims" (p. 249).

In *On Music in Films*" (1933-34), for instance, Hitchcock focuses on the use of music to sustain the heightened emotional impact of the experience. His interest is on "the psychological use of music" to create atmosphere, excitement, and intensity, thus achieving "its desired effect without the audience being aware of how that effect was being achieved" (p. 243). And, although Hitchcock frequently worked with the most gifted writers in the industry, he repeatedly argued for the supremacy of the image over the word, as in *Close*



Your Eyes and Visualize!" (1936). In this typical Hitchcockspeak, he complains that "there is not enough visualizing in studios, and instead far too much writing" (p. 247). To redress this situation, he offers the following pragmatic advice: "the young men of America and Britain who strike out in the film game should just go through a course in silent film technique" (p. 247).

Throughout the selected writings and interviews, Hitchcock, as Gottlieb maintains, downplays his art to emphasize his craft, leading Gottlieb to conclude that for Hitchcock "much of his art is in his craft" (p. 238). Yet the artistic voice is heard in such statements as the following: "I try to do without paper when I begin a new film. I visualize my story in my mind as a series of smudges moving over a variety of backgrounds. Often I pick my backgrounds first and then think about the action of the story" (p. 247).

Gottlieb's *Hitchcock on Hitchcock* familiarizes the reader with both Hitchcock's art and craft, and returns one to the films with new insights and interests. (Personally, I am going to rent *The Birds* and wait until someone is home to watch it with me).