

Leytonstone by Stephen Volk
Afterword by Stephen Gallagher

Way back, even if you were indifferent to the workings of cinema, you knew Alfred Hitchcock. With the possible exception of Cecil B DeMille, for decades he would be the only director that an average picturegoer could name. Chaplin and Keaton were comedians, Griffith quickly forgotten, John Ford a studio journeyman. The auteur theory was as yet unborn. But like a DeMille spectacular, a Hitchcock picture was a brand. And like every brand, it came with a defining image.

If you believe the biographers, Hitchcock was sensitive about his ungainly appearance. Yet he exploited it to the full – ruthlessly, you might say. In his signature dark blue suit and tie, he put himself in trailers, in TV spots, on posters. His recognisable silhouette graced a book series, a weekly TV show. Have you seen that unflattering minimalist chubby-faced sketch into which his shadow moved, beginning the opening credits of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*? That was by his own hand (it was through art skills that he got his first break into motion pictures, designing intertitle cards for the silents).

The show put him into my consciousness long before I saw a Hitchcock film. Like the ghost-edited anthologies that also bore his name and image, the TV stories were twisted tales with a common thread of darkness. Though he only directed a handful out of the hundreds of episodes, the production company was his own and he put his mark on every one. His on-screen introductions and epilogues conveyed the persona of that entertaining childless uncle you once had, a straight-faced humourist, a master of the light macabre. The humour was morbid but it was Charles-Addams morbid, essentially safe, perfectly mirrored in Gounod's solemn and witty *Funeral March of a Marionette* which served as the show's theme.

He was one of the first of our 'household names'. Yet I don't believe we were seeing the real Alfred Hitchcock at all.

I do think I glimpsed him once. The person behind the persona, I mean. There's a short clip from the set of *Blackmail* (1929) which served as a voice test for Polish-Czech actress Anny Ondra. It was never meant for public consumption. Hitchcock appears with her on camera, feeding her lines, winding her up, making her shriek with laughter and hide her face as he ditches the improvised script and accuses her of 'sleeping with men'.

(Ondra comes out of it rather well, but she'd been cast in a silent picture to which the production company had decided to add sound sequences. Rather than work around her accent, they'd go on to shoot the dialogue scenes with her live lip-synching to

lines from an offscreen Joan Barry. Does it work? Let's just call it brave. The silent version did better business.)

There's a moment in the clip as the camera starts to roll. It's fleeting, but it's there. Perhaps it's my imagination, but for just a few frames I sense that I'm looking at the real man before the mask goes on.

The hard part lies in defining what I think I see. Let me try to explain. In an old Nativity video from my daughter's schooldays there's a boy, slightly bigger than the rest, who stands there in his hedgehog costume squarely in the middle of the shepherds and the robins. He never sings, never joins in, never reacts to anything onstage, never changes his expression at all. He just looks out into the audience all the way through, a chubby moon face with eyes like little dark buttons. It's as if we're here for his entertainment, not the other way around.

As the jumpy VHS runs and the show unfolds around him, his stillness grows increasingly conspicuous. In family lore his nickname is 'future serial killer'. Though as far as I'm aware, he hasn't lived up to it. Yet.

What do I see in those few frames of the Ondra voice test? Perhaps I imagine it. But I believe I see something like that look.

The taunting of Ondra that follows could be seen as impish, but it's quite possible that if Hitchcock wasn't the director, if it wasn't his set, then he wouldn't be getting away with any of this. While looking online to revisit the clip I came across a *Blackmail* outtake, featured in Matthew Sweet's excellent *Shepperton Babylon* documentary, in which 'Hitch' sneaks into a scene while the camera's running and disrupts it by hoisting up Ondra's dress to look at her underwear.

Again, it's a tease. Show folk are not known for their aversion to mischief and daring. But again, you sense an edge. He's taking advantage. Because he can.

Despite the well-documented pranks on and off the set, and despite Hitchcock's inarguable and lifelong fascination with cool blondes in distress, I don't go the full Spoto on this. By which I mean, I don't think a complex personality can be solved by pointing at its darker traits and shouting 'monster'. Donald Spoto is a celebrity biographer who wrote a 'dark side of genius' study that gave its subject no quarter at all, a portrait of a psychopath driven by sexual obsession with no redeeming features. The biography was a bestseller, and its author would return to the well for at least two further books.

The downside of Spoto's form of 'enlightenment' is that it effectively takes the films away from you. You're left feeling that Hitchcock was a bad man, and appreciation of his art makes you a bad person. You liked those films? Look how wrong you were.

Dare I say it, but I think that in *Leytonstone* we have a more effective psychological key to both the artist and the art.

Hitchcock claimed to be afraid of everything. He saw it as the secret of his success. The story of young Fred's jail cell experience is one that he told often; it appears at the beginning of the famous series of interviews that he gave to French critic and filmmaker Francois Truffaut. It was his suggested explanation for a lifelong apprehension of police and authority. I've heard the story many times, but can't say I ever felt its impact until I lived through it in this dramatized and extended form.

It's impossible to read these pages without a growing sense of outrage at the cruelty and injustice involved, while feeling the child's lack of any power to resist or even make sense of his plight. This is what stories are for. To feel, as well as to know. Only then can we really begin to understand. You come out of the incident with a head full of scenarios for retribution, for revenge on the police sergeant, with a yearning for some earned repercussion that will punish the father for his act. In Fred's place, you think, I would surely have something to say. I wouldn't take such treatment lying down. I'd make them sorry.

And yet.

He's six years old. While showing us what a profoundly distressing experience this would be, Stephen Volk slots it into the context of the boy's world. Yes, locking Fred into a police cell is a harsh act that's incomprehensible to a child. Yes, these parents are shown to be flawed in their different ways. Yes, authority is inexplicably unjust.

But small children's lives are filled with punishments that seem unfair, in situations they can't understand. So much of life at six years old is spent learning to avoid or appease the anger of adults. Childhood is a rough sea, where the waves don't stop to listen.

Fred was handed over to be 'taught a lesson', though in later life he could never remember what he was supposed to have done to deserve it. So often the lesson that's absorbed is not the lesson that was intended. And the child's priority is not so much to appeal or seek redress, as to work out how to prevent a recurrence without unwittingly making things worse. Usually that means, shut up and keep your head down. Meanwhile the misery will settle. Perhaps it will be dealt with; perhaps it will seep out somewhere else.

It's clear that Fred's imprisonment of Olga Butterworth in an empty house is an act that both springs from his own prison cell experience and prefigures his life's work, which will involve a career spent inflicting psychological distress in the name of art. Fred doesn't want Olga to be hurt, but he does want her to be scared. He feels no conscience at her suffering, and no compunction when he later sees all blame turning onto the victim. It actually gives him pleasure. This is shocking to the reader and while we may continue to sympathise, we like him less and less. It's not even as if Olga had rejected him; this is what she gets for her kindness.

He's found his mojo. Olga is, in effect, the first Hitchcock female lead. She plays in his fantasies, long before he can begin to put those fantasies on celluloid. It's true that Hitchcock had a 'thing' about ice-maiden blondes. He explained it to Truffaut thus: "You know why I favour sophisticated blondes in my films? We're after the drawing-room type, the real ladies, who become whores once they're in the bedroom."

But somehow that doesn't quite cover it. His obsession seemed to be more with the underlying archetype than the individual. It could lead him to cast mediocre talents just because they had the right bones, often to be outshone on the screen by their supporting actresses. For every Madeleine Carroll or Grace Kelly there was a Kim Novak or a Tippi Hedren.

Hedren's testimony provides most of the material for the 'monster' angle on Hitchcock. She considered herself ill-used by the director. First cast in *The Birds*, she was called on again when Kelly backed out of his next project. Hitchcock had acquired the rights to *Marnie*, a novel by British author Winston Graham (also known for his Cornwall-set *Poldark* series). It's about the unravelling of a chameleon-like thief trapped into marriage by a man who's fascinated by her. But something feels broken, here. In Hitchcock's hands, the *Marnie* story became one of cod psychology and perverse sexuality.

Second-time writer-for-hire Evan Hunter reported that the scripting went pretty much to plan until they reached the marital rape scene that takes place on the wedding night of Marnie and Mark Rutland. It's there in the novel, where it's well handled. But Hunter was troubled by the sequence dictated in detail by Hitchcock, which was graphic and brutal. He argued against it, and found himself replaced by Jay Presson Allen. She told him, "You got bothered by the scene that was his reason for making the movie. You just wrote your ticket back to New York."

However, it wasn't the subject matter that caused Hedren a problem. As she tells it, Hitchcock's response to a personal rejection was to take professional revenge, firstly in the form of sadistic treatment on the set of *The Birds*, and later by sitting on her contract to block offers of A-list projects. Though she was clearly cast above her weight in both of her roles, she believes that Hitchcock ruined her career.

On the rejection claim, I can say nothing. I wasn't there. We've evidence that the younger Hitchcock was known for his horseplay, and one man's horseplay is many a woman's tolerated harassment. I can believe that somewhere inside the dapper English gentleman lurked a creep in a cage. It would explain so much.

But, professionally? Many of the stories that have been used to depict him as a monster – using freezing water to make Janet Leigh scream in the *Psycho* shower sequence, forcing Kim Novak to multiple takes of a plunge into a studio tank for his own pleasure, endangering Hedren with real broken glass to achieve a shot – have been refuted by those actually involved. Some stories only persist because Hitch

himself saw the publicity value in encouraging them. On *The 39 Steps*, was it a mean prank to 'lose' the handcuff key and leave Madeleine Carroll shackled to Robert Donat for several hours on their first day of working together? Or was it, as Donat himself believed, a clever move to create the rapport that was directly responsible for their subsequent onscreen chemistry?

Let's have some perspective, here. No one on a Hitchcock production was ever drowned, burned to death, blinded, decapitated by a helicopter, or run down by a train while shooting without a permit. He never raped an underage teen in a Jacuzzi. He didn't cripple horses or bully young women into simulating hardcore lesbian sex. The strongest drug on a Hitchcock set was a glass of champagne at the end of a shoot.

In the modern parlance, Hitchcock certainly had issues. But they were in his head, where they belonged, and where he could make good use of them. Take out the yearning, the fantasy, and the unreasonable obsession from a film like *Vertigo* and you're left with the husk of a story that neither compels nor makes much sense. While with them, you have haunting magic.

(I've a director friend who puts on the *Vertigo* DVD when he's working at home. Not to watch, because he knows the film inside out – he uses it like background music. For ambiance, for tone, and as a reminder always to be stretching for something that's just out of reach.)

Leytonstone is about the roots of that genius, the source of those issues. If you don't care to see them, don't lift the rock. But without them a Hitchcock film would be an empty puzzle box, the most common clay of genre unanimated by any spark. Stephen Volk's first-rate novella shows its subject both at the beginning of his life and at its end, still grappling with the duality of love and punishment.

A life built on the stuff of fear and horror, subverted by artifice into something that can speak to us all.

Everyone's story has to begin somewhere. Alfred Hitchcock's began in *Leytonstone*.