

Document Citation

Title	Skeleton keys
Author(s)	François Truffaut
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	61-66
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Hitchcock, Alfred (1899-1980), Leytonstone, London, Great Britain
Film Subjects	Rebecca, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1940 Under Capricorn, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1949 Shadow of a doubt, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1943



Skeleton Keys

By Francois Truffaut

When *Cahiers du Cinema* decided to devote an issue to the films of Alfred Hitchcock, I planned that my contribution would be an article on Criticism with relation to Hitchcock's Films. But from the start of my research I was so put off by the amount of nonsense written about him that I gave up the idea, since I still have a few friends in the profession! For instance, one critic found fault with the happy ending of *Suspicion* and, in another article, he was indignant that Cotten had been made to die at the end of *Shadow of a Doubt*. In both cases he accused the censor without realizing that he was definitely wrong in one of the two cases. Besides, and I'll prove it further on, he was wrong in both.

I prefer therefore, to give the readers of *Cahiers* some general reflections on a cinéaste who, according to my personal hierarchy I place only after Renoir, Rossellini and Hawks. However, what I find more serious—perhaps because of the very esteem which almost always accompanies it, is the misunderstanding of which he is the complaisant victim. Placing hardly any value on what one calls "keys," since closed doors should be battered open with crowbars, and revolving doors don't count since they have no locks, I opted from then on for this "bunch of skeleton keys."

André Bazin was fortunate enough to have had two long meetings with Alfred Hitchcock, and I must quote here the most important passage of his article: "I made him (Hitchcock) realize that one theme at least kept recurring in his major films . . . that of the identification of a weak character with a stronger, held in moral captivity by the fascination exercised very deliberately over him . . . as in *I Confess*, when the transference of personality finds in the sacrament of penance a kind of theological confirmation."

"When he finally understood my meaning I saw, for the first and only time in that interview, that he was struck by a sudden and totally unforeseen idea. I had found the chink in that armor of humor. He smiled delightedly and I could follow the path of the idea on his face. Clearly, the more he thought about it, the more pleased he was to discover its accuracy, and it was from within himself that he found his confirmation—in the scenarios of *Rear Window* and *To Catch a Thief*. It is the only incontrovertible point made by Hitchcock's enthusiasts, but if this theme really exists in his work, he owes it to them for having discovered it."

I will attempt to prove to you, my dear André, that Hitchcock, while he remained silent, was thinking only

of ways of making you believe that you had just revealed to him a secret of which he was unaware. I will not give it up: Hitchcock lied to you and if you will only read this attentively, I hope you will admit it, because I am well aware of your unfailing good faith.

André Bazin's extreme kindness incites him to reassure us: in effect, what he is telling us is not to worry, that he himself recently experienced a similar disappointment with Wyler, and that my idea, though false, is good because it is ingenious.

So one must conclude that we are bad bedfellows, or that our pride is inordinate since we wish to admire not the idea that we have of Hitchcock, but Hitchcock himself; we do not want a genius unaware of himself. I claim that Alfred Hitchcock is more aware than Renoir and Rossellini and perhaps—as far as I am concerned—less great than they because of the total absence in his works of that which Gide called the "share of God."

In 1940 Hitchcock's lifelong dream was realized: he landed in America. The first film that he shot there is *Rebecca*, and it is essential that I give a brief resumé of its action. Haunted by the death of his wife Rebecca, mysteriously lost at sea, Maxim de Winter falls in love with a young woman, and marries her. From the moment of her arrival in the family mansion Manderley, the new Mrs. de Winter is harassed by the governess Mrs. Danvers, who was devoted body and soul to Rebecca. At a fancy-dress ball Mrs. de Winter appears in front of her husband dressed in a costume which she had made in great secrecy with Mrs. Danvers' advice. When he sees the costume Maxim becomes violently angry; this dress was the one Rebecca had worn, and the maneuver of Mrs. Danvers would have succeeded if the circumstances of Rebecca's death had not finally been revealed—finally to restore order.

Thus in Hitchcock's very first American film the theme of the transference of identity appears with a psychological force greater than the use of the double which one finds in several of his English films, among them *The Lady Vanishes*, and also *Foreign Correspondent*, which follow *Rebecca* in chronological order. *Foreign Correspondent* tells the story of a young journalist who unmasks a Nazi spy (Herbert Marshall) and marries his daughter (Laraine Day).

In 1942—*Suspicion*, where Joan Fontaine believes that her elegant and charming husband, whom she knows definitely to be a gambler, a liar and a swindler, wants to poison her. Few spectators notice that from Lina's first suspicions the direction, objective as it was, becomes subjective and that from there on, sharing her anguish, it is normal that we begin to dramatize the least event with her. (Cary Grant loves his wife, he is not a murderer, and has no desire to kill her). That is why the end of the film is the best possible end for it, since there are innumerable films where the husband is guilty and dies (*Gaslight* of Cukor, re-

make of *Gaslight* by Dickinson taken from a play by Hamilton, *Undercurrent* of Vincente Minnelli, etc.)

I will pass quickly over *Saboteur* which, like *Foreign Correspondent*, is nothing but an excellent detective story, but I should like to mention that Priscilla Lane, prisoner of German spies, believes that they want to poison her with a glass of milk, as in *Suspicion*. ("Where there is an antidote, there is poison," said the detective in *Bizarre, Bizarre* . . .)

And so we come to *Shadow of a Doubt* which is (after *Suspicion*) Hitchcock's second important film. Here a sequence of 16 frames taken from the film itself would express perfectly what I want to say, but since that is impossible, words will have to replace it, inadequate as they are.

1. A furnished room; pensive, fully-dressed, stretched out on the bed, is Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten). Important point: the head is towards the right of the screen, and the door at the back is on the right side of the wall.

2. Two men are looking for Cotten; he comes out of his house; he is followed, but manages to fool the two policemen.

3. In a little American town. Pensive, fully-dressed, stretched out on the bed is Charlie Newton (Teresa Wright), Uncle Charlie's niece. The direction of this sequence is identical with that in which Cotten was first presented to us, but it is reversed: Teresa Wright's head and the door at the back are on the left of the screen.

4. A sort of moral confusion takes possession of the Newton family. Charlie suggests inviting Uncle Charlie to spend a few weeks with them; she leaves for the post office to send the telegram, but just then a cable arrives for the Newtons; Uncle Charlie announces his arrival.

5. Uncle Charlie arrives; the whole Newton family is waiting for him on the platform at the station.

6. Uncle Charlie has been the guest of the Newton family for some days, and all seems to be going well; it is only the audience which has guessed that Uncle Charlie is that murderer of rich widows whom the police are looking for.

7. Two young men who claim to be journalists, but who the audience as well as Cotten guess to be policemen, come twice to the house, question the family and photograph Uncle Charlie, in spite of himself.

8. One of the two "journalists," Jack Graham, takes Charlie to the cinema. On the way back, they sit down on a public bench. Charlie refuses to believe in her Uncle's guilt, but promises the police to say nothing to him.

9. The investigation continues. Uncle Charlie commits two blunders which arouse and confirm Charlie's suspicions.

10. One morning, in front of the Church, the police tell Charlie that they will have definite proof in a few

days: the police are following in the East, another suspect whose comings and goings in the towns where the murders were committed correspond to the dates on which they were committed.

11. Then follow two attempts to murder Charlie, under the guise of accidents. (We are shown Cotten saving a step in the stairway, opening the exhaust of the car and locking the garage). But one evening Uncle Charlie announces his departure. The man the police were following in the East, the second suspect, fled as they were about to arrest him at an airfield and died, crushed by the propellers of a plane.

12. Convinced now of Uncle Charlie's guilt, his niece still hesitates to denounce him. "Your mother would die if you did," he says: but she entreats him to flee: he refuses.

13. The dossier for the investigation is closed, but will Charlie speak? Second scene at the station: the Newton family accompanies their dear Uncle Charlie to the train: the children want to get in also. Charlie goes in with them. The train starts, the children descend, but Cotten prevents Charlie from getting off with them, and as soon as the train picks up speed he tries to push her out: but she struggles and it is he who falls out, and is crushed by a train coming from the opposite direction.

14. Last sequence. Second scene in front of the Church: only Charlie and Jack who are to be married, know the truth. From the Church one hears the funeral eulogy for Uncle Charlie, the benefactor. But this same Church later on will reverberate to the strains of a wedding march: Charlie will become Jack's wife, she will become a woman.

To the theme of identity, which I have difficulty in believing is unconscious here, must correspond an obsession with the number Two. It is in fact in this manner that the extraordinary rhythm of the film is constructed.

Identical presentation of the two Charlies, two scenes at the Church, two scenes in the garage, two visits by the police, two scenes of the Newtons' at the dining table, two murder attempts, two scenes at the station, framing the action and, above all this which is admirable, two suspects, one in the West, the other in the East, who are both crushed to death, carrying their secret with them.

For the rest, nothing prevents us from thinking that the other suspect, on his side, had murdered some of those widows.

In *Notorious* as in *Foreign Correspondent* the heroine is the daughter of a spy. The opening of *Notorious* shows us Alicia, a high-society wreck, with a life disrupted by alcohol, who becomes a spy because of her undeclared love for Devlin. Her mission leads her to marry the Nazi spy Sebastian. When, without her realizing it she has been found out, and Alicia's husband starts to poison her slowly, Cary

Grant finally admits his real feelings for Alicia and arrives just in time to save her.

In *Under Capricorn*, whose scenario Jean Domarchi describes in detail elsewhere, Lady Henrietta will follow the same road as Alicia, the road which leads from alcohol to poison. Accustomed to the effects of alcohol Alicia, as well as Henrietta, do not suspect that they are being poisoned, and it is only the fear of this poisoning that is able to reveal to them the horror of their past life, and efface it forever. One does not pay enough attention, when speaking of *Under Capricorn*, to the fact that Sam Flusky payed for the murder that his wife committed. Henrietta, having killed her brother to defend Sam, accomplished in fact Sam's murder, i.e. the murder that Sam could have committed.

It is the same situation in *Strangers on a Train*. Robert Walker offers to get rid of the tennis champion's wife for him in return for which he, Farley Granger, has only to rid him of his father, a stupid old man. It is the same idea of murder-exchange outlined in *Under Capricorn*. But there are no Hitchcock couples without the idea of domination, and if Judith Anderson, Cary Grant, Cotten, Madame Konstantin and Margaret Leighton terrorize respectively Joan Fontaine (Mrs. de Winter), Joan Fontaine (Linda), Teresa Wright (Charlie), Ingrid Bergman (Alicia), and Ingrid Bergman (Henrietta), Robert Walker and Farley Granger in *Strangers on a Train* as John Dall and Farley Granger in *Rope*, offer us a sinister variant on the abject union of a madman and a coward. Make no mistake about it: Hitchcock condemns the heroes of *Strangers on a Train* as unequivocally as those of *Rope*.

I Confess, and those who can read between the lines will understand Jacques Rivette's excellent criticism of this film in *Cahiers*, takes up again this basic theme of exchange: the priest lets himself be judged for a crime he has not committed. But the criminal sacristan is more innocent than the priest because, taken by surprise while stealing, he kills in self-defense. The crime, then, was not his but the priest's, since the victim was blackmailing Anne Baxter because of the priest, whose fiancée she had been long ago.

Dial M for Murder, like *Strangers on a Train*, deals with a perfect crime through an intermediary. I know very little about *Rear Window*, but the subject of *To Catch a Thief* deserves to be described in detail in that it renews with great ingenuity the theme of identification: Cary Grant is the chief of a gang of thieves whose activities take on an international and quasi-official standing, which saves him from being bothered by the police. Then follow, on the Cote d'Azur, a series of robberies which bear the mark of Cary Grant, of his pride and his glory. They imitate, in a sort of way, his hold-up technique. Naturally the police are powerless and because of the harm caused, Cary Grant

decides to set himself to catch the imitator, and arrives at the conclusion: "Since he imitates me and plagiarises from me, I can guess his intentions by asking myself what I would do if I were me, that is if I were he trying to be me."

One sees how faithful Hitchcock has been to the themes with which he has never ceased to deal since *Rebecca*, enriching them from film to film by divesting them of their earlier irrelevancies. It is without doubt in *Under Capricorn* and *I Confess* that that which I dare, without laughing, to call the message of Hitchcock, finds purest and proudest expression. One cannot demand of Hitchcock that each year he offer us a film of equal importance — particularly since these two were the least commercial and least appreciated by the critics.

One does not realize clearly enough the inferior position in which we critics find ourselves when face to face with the creator of a film. We spend two hours watching a film, seeing it badly because if the story sets us thinking about one image, the rest rush past a vacant stare. But on leaving the film we still demand to know as much as the director who prepared his film, shot it, supervised the editing of it. All directors, even Marcel Blistene, know their films shot by shot, and the sound-track by heart. The homage that one can pay to an author or film-maker is to attempt to know and understand his book or his film as well as he does himself.

When, on seeing Hitchcock's films over and over again one realizes that in spite of the variety of sources and script-writers, the themes, the situations, are always the same, it becomes obvious that when Hitchcock says, "Well! It is true, but I never noticed it," he lies deliberately. Because one cannot work for years (since 1947), on the scenario of *I Confess* without being aware of its similarity to *Rebecca*, *Suspicion*, *Notorious*, *Under Capricorn* and *Strangers on a Train*. It is not due to the machinations of the Holy Ghost that the films are so perfectly fitted together. One does not improvise the construction of a scenario such as that of *Shadow of a Doubt*.

Why Does Hitchcock Lie?

1. He was brought up by Jesuits.
2. Its secret, because secret there is, is so simple and based on so few words and so many images that it is from them that the simple formula emerges. And moreover, the secrets of its making are not divulged. Hitchcock revels in being misunderstood, more so because it is on misunderstandings that he has constructed his life. Whereas a Graham Greene for example aspires to be a Catholic novelist and his novels to be metaphysical, Hitchcock prefers to remain in front of one's eyes, the master of suspense. In the same way, the intellectual Hawks makes westerns and comedies, while Yves Allégret "dabbles in the intellectual cinema." Alfred Hitchcock is modest. He is

not interested in festivals, with a jury to discuss the prize he should receive. He does it better himself. He has always told journalists "My only good film is the one I have just finished." Since he has made this announcement 18 times, he must like all his films, and yet, to Chabrol who asked him: "Which is your worst film?" he answered: "All." Lies.

3. Hitchcock is a Hitchcockian character; he loathes having to explain himself. He must realize, however, that one day he will have to behave like his characters who assure their salvation by admitting this. But to



admit that he is a genius is difficult, particularly when it is true.

We can never dispute the formal genius of Hitchcock, even though we are still squabbling over his responsibility for the scenarios that he shoots.

It is evident that this permanence of themes whatever, so very rare in the history of cinema, is not irrefutable proof of his genius. In another this would reveal an "idée fixe" and an incapacity for self-renewal. Since Hitchcock has been a Hollywood filmmaker for 15 years now, let us remain in the field of American

cinema.

In 30 years of silent films, Hollywood has produced some masterpieces among which Griffith's *True Heart Susie* and Murnau's *Sunrise* appear to me to be the purest. In the same way that I am incapable of seeing *True Heart Susie* without thinking of *Sergeant York* of Hawks, I cannot see *Sunrise* without thinking of Hitchcock. If in Murnau's film the country woman is Hawksian, it is the same stylization of acting as when Milly dances perfidiously around Sam Flusky. The gag of the straps could be Hitchcock. There is again,



Dial M for Murder (1954): Ray Milland, Grace Kelly. Conscience through collage.

65

the beauty of ideas, their finesse, their rarity, behind the image which they create.

In its persevering mediocrity, French cinema offers the advantage of presenting us with touching fidelity, the image of what one must never do.

—An Idea from the French Cinema

In *Les Orgueilleux*, Michèle Morgan, newly-widowed, at the end of her resources, sends a telegram to her family, asking for money. The employee at the Post Office counts the number of words and tells her the amount, to which she replies, "Take out 'love'."

And that is typical of the ideas one finds in almost all French films. It is not an idea of the director Yves Allégret, but of the script writer Jean Aurenche. It has the double merit of being impressive and of giving Geneviève Agel something to think about. It has, on the other hand, the triple inconvenience of being base, of making each spectator an intellectual, and of affirming the superiority of authors over their characters since Michèle Morgan is unaware of the cruelty of her "mot d'enfant" (child's word).

—And Here, an Idea of Alfred Hitchcock's

My well-known impartiality led me to pick two films which have a common subject — the downfall of a woman, and her salvation.

In *Under Capricorn* Ingrid Bergman is at the height of her downfall. In order not to see the reflection of her moral ugliness in her own eyes, she removes all

mirrors from her home. Michael Wilding who has taken on the self-imposed task of making her come alive again, evokes for her the beauty of his native Ireland where "the gorse still grows on the top of the hills." He takes off his jacket, holds it behind a window-pane and forces Henrietta-Bergman to look at her still-intact beauty, as in a mirror.

Since the job of dialogue-writers is to write dialogue, one knows better than to attribute this idea to them. This is an idea of Hitchcock's, like the glass of water on the forehead of the Attorney General in *I Confess*. These are directorial ideas. A very good idea!

Renoir and Rossellini are the greatest contemporary directors, because they frequently transcend the barrier of sound, and it is thus that their genius is affirmed. In this penetration of the barrier of sound they pass from the false to the more real than real. With the idea of the window-pane in *Under Capricorn* I was seized by a similar vertigo, and that is why, as long as I am not able to find a similar idea in other directors, I will continue to insist on placing Hitchcock above them. On the other hand, it is only normal that we would admire Hawks and Hitchcock, the only cinéastes who appear to have absorbed the heritage of Griffith and Murnau, with something added. For, since *The River*, *Monkey Business* and *Under Capricorn*, the cinema has entered what we can well call "The Phase of Intelligence."



Strangers On A Train (1951): The transfer of guilt from Robert Walker to Farley Granger.

66