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# Finally, a Hitchcock Clinker

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

When we think of Hitchcock, we think of terror. And not just the vague terror of amorphous threats and hidden dangers but a very specific terror, clearly defined and elegantly packaged in startling and nerve-shattering sequences: the murderer plunging his knife into the shower and at us in "Psycho"; the swallows suddenly swooping down from the attic eaves in "The Birds"; the dizzying, subjective views down the bell tower in "Vertigo"; the plane almost grazing the hero and his climb across the faces of Mount Rushmore in "North by Northwest."

Predictably, then, there is in Hitchcock's current film, "Family Plot," a new mo-

## On Film "Family Plot"

ment of thrills and chills that proposes itself for this kind of memorability. Our hero and heroine—hoping to earn a reward by tracing a missing heir—find themselves driving down a treacherous, winding mountain road in a car whose brakes have been tampered with. Yet contrary to what the film evidently intends and contrary to our expectations as well, this ride hardly excites in us any tension at all. And if we begin to examine just why this attempt at *tour de force* terror fails to invoke more than a tepid response, we can gain insight into what makes "Family Plot" as a whole not simply a lesser—but a very much lesser—Hitchcock.

For one thing, there is a staggering lack of visual excitement in this sequence. We have neither the sense of specific locale, the highly original situation, nor the strikingly imaginative camera angles that tend to characterize Hitchcock's most unsettling scenes. A car careening down a precipitous road is a cinematic staple. We have, after all, been taking such cinematic roller coaster rides at least since the days of "Cine-rama."

For another thing, the sequence's tone is out of whack, as is its tempo. Hitchcock's films have, of course, always been distinguished by a peculiar mixture of comedy and horror. Still, the comedy generally surrounds the frightening scenes—disarms us beforehand so that they can take us by surprise or relieves us afterwards. Here, the comedy is within the sequence itself and unfortunately works to undercut its tension. For as we watch the shrieking heroine fling first her feet and then her arms around the frantic driver in a slapstick set of gestures, we rapidly become distracted from the impending danger we are meant to dread. And it's a particularly profitless distraction, since the heroine's hysteria simply isn't funny.

And what is wrong with this sequence—its tonal unsteadiness, its commonplace visual texture, its overplayed humor and undermined terror—is wrong with the film as a whole. Take the treatment of the heroine. As a phony psychic named Miss Blanche, actress Barbara Harris might have given to this role some of her own distinctive charm and zaniness. But unfor-

tunately, the script by Ernest Lehman (who also wrote "North by Northwest") uses her seances for purposes of exposition, in the process dragging them to tiresome length. (It is one of Blanche's clients—Cathleen Nesbitt's wealthy Miss Rainbird—who instigates the search for the missing heir while chatting via Blanche with the dead.)

Worse, Hitchcock invites Miss Harris to play out her mystic meanderings in a variety of shrill and unpleasant voices which strips them and her character itself of any humor they might have had. And Blanche's only other salient trait—her hearty appetite for sex—comes off less as an amusing diversion than as a witless cliché.

Bruce Dern's actor-taxi driver-detective and boyfriend of Blanche is similarly shorn of potential humor and even interest. The contrast between his glorious aspirations and his penurious situation is never developed, remaining a mere aside, and his would-be comic sleuthing is never given a scene in which to play out its promise.

And if the protagonists are failures at humor, the antagonists are failures at terror. William Devane's jewel thief and missing heir is without either consistency or compelling motivation. Nor do we understand what his relationship is to Karen Black—girlfriend or wife—or how and why, living a respectable life as a jeweler, he has kept her existence a secret even from the employes in his shop.

Without a tight, logical plot and characters who can command some credibility and involvement, a thriller—comic or otherwise—has little chance of really absorbing us. Still, Hitchcock has always recommended himself to us less for his stories (even in its own fantastic terms, "The Birds" never did make good sense) or his people (think, among others, of Tippi Hedren's Marnie) than for his masterful use of the movie medium—of camera movement and angles, of editing and color—to control and manipulate our emotions. But it is in its unremarkable technique that "Family Plot" disappoints us most.

Aside from Hitchcock's clever—perhaps overly clever—personal appearance in the form of a shadow, he offers only two noteworthy visual moments in his entire film: one is the amusingly menacing first appearance of Karen Black who wearing dark glasses and blonde wig, in black hat, coat and boots, and with gun in black-gloved hand, marches determinedly and wordlessly into a police station to collect ransom; another occurs during one of several cemetery sequences when an overhead shot turns the burial ground into an obstacle course, investing what might have been an ordinary pursuit with a good deal of wit.

Individual sequences have been enough to sustain our interest in other of Hitchcock's films. Here, however, neither scene is powerful, clever, or important enough to justify sitting through the whole of "Family Plot." The only thing that can serve to recommend the film (and will, I suspect, serve to recommend it to many) is an abiding interest in Hitchcock—clinkers and all.