

## Document Citation

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there is the scene in the church to which Ashenden and the double agent go to contact the organist. As they reach the door, they hear the organ sounding a single note; when they get to the instrument, they discover that the organist has been murdered, and his body is pressing against the keyboard. There is also the scene in which a peaceful chocolate factory is suddenly shown to be an espionage center.

But *The Secret Agent* goes further still—perhaps too far. Hitchcock unhesitatingly makes use of one of his favorite methods: an abrupt change of tone. Here, as in *Rich and Strange*, the first part of the film is made up of “gags.” In it, espionage skirts parody. Peter Lorre, as a factitious Mexican general and double agent, flirts with every woman he sees, and, for the sheer pleasure of it, amuses himself by terrorizing a little girl on a funicular. The impression is conveyed that these people are entertaining themselves by playing at spy and living a high life in a sumptuous Swiss hotel. The tragic error—the murder of the innocent suspect—brings about a sharp intervention of morality, conscience, bad conscience, in this parlor game. Though the double agent takes the matter lightly, Ashenden and the young woman fully recognize their responsibility. They understand that this error makes murderers of them, turns them into something similar, or almost so, to those they are hunting.

This awareness is expressed in their relationship. *He* must win back his self-esteem; *she* tries to restore his confidence. The two scenes in which we see this at work are in Hitchcock's best vein and represent his considerable skill with actors as unspontaneous as John Gielgud and Madeleine Carroll.

Despite all its qualities, despite the exceptional assurance of the direction, *The Secret Agent* is somewhat less satisfying than *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. It was impossible to modify the so-successful dosage of the previous film without unbalancing the work. In once more attempting to add more of himself, to raise the level of the conflict, Hitchcock unbalanced the harmony. However, the film enabled him to consolidate his position with Hollywood by



Sylvia Sidney and Oscar Homolka in a scene from *Sabotage* (1936). Hitchcock's free adaptation of Conrad's *The Secret Agent* allowed him to remain faithful to his own temperament. (PHOTO FROM BRITISH NATIONAL ARCHIVE)

demonstrating that he was a director of “international” status. It was to push this demonstration even further that he undertook *Sabotage* (1936) immediately thereafter.

This work is certainly unique in Hitchcock's career. Having found a subject of the type best suited to inspire him, he deliberately chose to use it in a film whose sole purpose was personal prestige. He went about it with great care. After having sifted the critical articles about him, the faults found with him, the praises showered on him, he created a second personality that completely corresponded with the idea others had of him. He was

HITCHCOCK — ERIC ROHMER ?  
CLAUDE CHABROL