

# HITCHCOCK: THE CONCEPTUAL AND THE PRE-DIGITAL

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We generally assume that films are recordings of real physical spaces and actual people, that they are a performance-oriented art form dependent upon what plays out in front of cameras. While that may describe a fair amount of what we call movies, there have been a number of filmmakers who have contributed to what I think we can appropriately label “conceptual cinema.” It is conceptual in the important sense that it exists on a level removed from physical reality, and seems both to pre-exist as an idea apart from its manifestation on celluloid and to live on in our minds as more than recorded performances. Just as music doesn’t dwell in instruments or painting on canvas, conceptual cinema breaks the bounds of movie sets, actors, and locations. If one may dare say so, as Alfred Hitchcock observed, in watching conceptual film we are looking at what can be called “pure cinema”.<sup>1</sup>

It is in Hitchcock’s work we will look to locate most specifically the idea of conceptual cinema. Before doing so, we should note that it’s not only in Hitchcock’s work that we can see these explorations. Within commercial mainstream fictional cinema, as we have known it for almost a century, we can very crudely (but usefully) divide filmmakers between the conceptual on one side, and the performance or physically-oriented on the other. This is not to say that there isn’t overlap, or that one can’t find great performances or physical locations in the work of a conceptual director, but the general contours of this distinction are quite compelling.

As one quick example, let us take the late Stanley Kubrick. Like Hitchcock, he has had some reputation as an “effects” oriented filmmaker, a tyrant with actors (especially for getting them not to “act”), and for being overtly concerned with visual issues such as camera movement and lighting. Kubrick has comfortably ignored “real” places and re-created Colorado (*The Shining*), Vietnam (*Full Metal Jacket*), and futuristic locations (*2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Clockwork Orange*) without ever leaving England. (Do the locations of *Dr. Strangelove* exist as anything other than fairly evident constructions?) Actors in Kubrick films tend to be used visually, and often strike and hold arresting poses. They exist on film at the polarity either of extreme flatness (Ryan O’Neal in *Barry Lyndon*, the astronauts of *2001*, the criminals of *The Killing*) or of extreme loss-of-control (Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, Vincent D’Onofrio in *Full Metal Jacket*)—either way, conventional psychologically based performance is not what we are seeing. And Kubrick’s two films with Peter Sellers playing multiple roles, *Dr. Strangelove* and *Lolita*, are evident examples of what his films generally are:

elaborately mounted theses; complex conceptual arguments that operate on visual, narrative, and thematic levels.

The accusations that plague conceptual directors include obsessive attention to detail, and a reputation for shooting multiple takes to get things “just right” (i.e. quashing the accidental, unplanned, or the improvisatory). To mention a few others of this ilk, we can easily add Antonioni (for no other reason than his painting grass a particular shade of green, or for *Blow-up* [1966] alone, a landmark of conceptual cinema), and Sergei Eisenstein. Especially in his books *Film Form* and *Film Sense*, Eisenstein presents the case for a cinema of ideas, and the books are wonderful examples of the extensive pre-planning which makes Hitchcock’s storyboards in comparison look like quick haphazard sketches. To fill out the contours just a bit further, let’s add Max Ophuls, Alain Resnais (and probably Robbe-Grillet too), Chris Marker, Josef von Sternberg, and almost above all, in the pantheon of sublime conceptual filmmakers, Orson Welles. (Is there a film more conceptual than *Citizen Kane*, or a “place” more magnificently constructed, designed, and manifestly unreal than Xanadu?)

As we move from mainstream cinema, a special place must be saved for animation, and the case of Walt Disney will be especially important to us, for we will discover curious and unexpected collisions and overlaps between Hitchcock and Disney. In general, though, we can see animation as an expression of a non-realistic, conceptual tendency in cinema,<sup>2</sup> whether of a “pure” abstract sort (as in the case of the great Norman McLaren films in this vein) or the finest of Hollywood cartoon mayhem (in the works of Avery, Jones, and Tashlin). Jones’s *Duck Amuck* has long been recognized as a triumph of the conceptual, as Bugs Bunny’s pen creates a wildly inventive series of reformulations of Daffy Duck and his settings.

The split between the realism-performance-oriented and the conceptual filmmaker can easily be seen in the oft-cited contrast or competition between Chaplin and Keaton, which Keaton has been winning in recent decades because of his links to the modern. *Sherlock Junior* is of course a masterpiece in this tradition, as the sleeping projectionist/detective played by Keaton “dreams” a new cinema. The flatness of performance (“The Great Stoneface”) and the love of the intricately worked out construction (*Steamboat Bill Junior* is another Keaton masterpiece in this regard, among many) are a marked contrast to Chaplin’s relatively simple visuals and frequent moments of actor-emotion and performance based comedy. One doesn’t have to condemn this other tradition in order to elevate or make the case for conceptual cinema, but hopefully the general distinction is now clear.

It should be mentioned that there has long existed, of course, an avant-garde cinema that, true to its name, has been well ahead of the curve regarding conceptual cinema, and that European and Japanese cinema (amongst other national traditions) is full of examples of free inquiry into the nature of cinema.<sup>3</sup> What I am trying to argue here is that mainstream cinema has indulged the conceptual extensively and that such experimentation has not always been on the fringe.

Also, as cinema has evolved into an ever-blurring relationship with digital media, it is not surprising that one can see conceptual artists such as Hitchcock as full of anticipations of key notions in the newly emerging artforms. We will wind up this essay by briefly examining how closely Hitchcock's cinematic worlds resemble the contemporary digital one.

## HITCHCOCK'S STORYBOARDS

Hitchcock's usual working method—doing drawings of every shot greatly in advance of filming—is well-known but little examined in its implications. It is barely discussed in Truffaut's book about him, and mostly has been consigned to the gallery of oddities which have come to formulate the Hitchcock myth, adding to such nuggets as his claim that actual filming was very boring, because he had already created the movie in his head.<sup>4</sup>

Storyboards are commonly used in animation and television commercials, but are not extensively used in feature films to this day. The preferred Hollywood practice has been multiple coverage of a scene from a number of positions and angles, followed by selection during editing. Such a process favors a kind of classical style, that is a near-anonymous amalgam of master shots and close-ups, and, again, favors an actor-oriented cinema and the selection of shots based upon performance. To Hitchcock and others, the way to a more "pure" cinema was in conceptualizing first and filming second. In Hitchcock's case, storyboards were a method of moving from the former to the latter, from the idea to the image.

To actually see surviving examples of the storyboards, one must don white gloves at the Motion Picture Academy Library in Beverly Hills where the Alfred Hitchcock Collection is housed. A few others have surfaced here and there. The supplementary materials section of Voyager's laserdisc version of *North by Northwest*, for example, presents storyboards from the cropdusting sequence.

I have gone closely through the storyboards for *The Birds* (1963) as part of an experimental prototype I have been working on for using such materials in an electronic environment. As part of this project, now called "Digital Hitchcock," I have "re-animated" the storyboards in order to place them directly next to the film itself so as to compare them in detail. What the process most strikingly reveals (almost breathtakingly so) is how completely the film is "in" the storyboards. From there the next step is an easy one; to say that *The Birds* first existed "in" Hitchcock's head, not as a blueprint or rough series of ideas, but in the same way, again, as a symphony exists in a composer's head or a painting in an artist's. One comes to take without irony Hitchcock's boredom during filming—indeed the film was done already. Why this is important in terms of conceptual cinema is that a work so conceived is clearly of a different order than a conventionally filmed work. Preplanning to this extent is one form of evidence of an alternative and more elevated form of cinema. *The Birds* is an idea of a world, not a representation of it. And created in this manner, the film remains resolutely conceptual—an idea realized on celluloid, but which lives in a higher realm. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1 An example of a Hitchcock storyboard from *The Birds*. Arrow indicates a planned camera movement. Courtesy of the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.



Fig. 2 Bird's-eye view of Bodega Bay—as Hitchcock planned it in his storyboard. Courtesy of the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.



Fig. 3 Bird's-eye view of Bodega Bay (frame enlargement from the film). Courtesy of Universal Pictures.



*The Birds* is composed of (or it would be better to say, layered from) a great many special effects, drawn elements, matte paintings, and shots composited from real locations and studio sets. When, for example, we see an overhead shot (literally a bird's eye view) of Bodega Bay after a bird attack leads to a fire and explosion, we are not seeing a shot of the "real" Bodega Bay. In this case, we see mostly a matte painting which greatly resembles Hitchcock's original storyboard, together with some birds layered in, along with sections of the image showing the burning fire. (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) One point again, simply, is that the image, the sequence, the film itself, exist first in Hitchcock's mind and in a substantial way live on as an expression of his imaginary visual composition.

This may be the place to say something about another frequent Hitchcock criticism, that sometimes his stylization is so overly obtrusive as to appear quite fake.<sup>5</sup> A more productive way to view this tendency in Hitchcock is to say that there are those moments when he does—yes—blur the border, when he was taking chances, not just being sloppy. "It's only a movie," should be spoken with a stress on "only," in the sense that it is specifically a "movie" and not a copy or record of the real world.

As might be expected if one is looking for physical verisimilitude, Hitchcock's films come up short. They abound with "mistakes" or impossibilities—spaces that don't make physical sense, or objects, sometimes large, which move mysteriously from shot to shot. I show here one of my favorites from *The Birds*, in which an entire room disappears as a character turns a corner in a house, but many such examples are easily found. (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) The viewer inclined this way might note with some amusement the phone booth which stands outside the restaurant where Melanie witnesses the bird attack which leads to the gas explosion in the film. The phone booth appears, disappears, and moves about from shot to shot, up to the moment when Melanie runs into it to try to stay safe from the attacking birds. The phone booth, like so much in Hitchcock, seems better described as a state of mind than an actual object in physical space.

## DISNEY AND HITCHCOCK

We're probably more comfortable with the idea of an animator "making things up" than a fiction filmmaker. (In an animated work, we know everything is fake, in the sense it is all drawn. Such notions die harder in photographed cinema.) Otherwise, how to explain the frequent complaints about "cardboard" or "flat" characters in *The Birds* or about fakery and manipulation? Consequently, the odd overlaps between Hitchcock and Disney on at least three occasions are worth noting, because they situate Hitchcock within a context in which he isn't usually seen.

John Russell Taylor's biography of Hitchcock, *Hitch*, gives most of the details on the first story.<sup>6</sup> Its bare bones relate to Hitchcock's 1936 film *Sabotage*, in which a good chunk of the Disney cartoon *Who Killed Cock Robin?* is shown as a way to motivate a murder directly following its showing. Apart from its



Fig. 4 (Above) Mother about to turn the corner. Notice the dining room through the doorway (frame enlargement from the film). Courtesy of Universal Pictures.

Fig. 5 (Below) She has turned the corner and the room has disappeared (frame enlargement from the film). Courtesy of Universal Pictures.

negative consequences on Hitchcock's and Disney's relationship, which we will discuss in a moment, the sequence is an audacious bit of quotation and art-imitating-art. (The murder in the cartoon is itself an odd parody, as the bird characters in the story are "played" as if by well known movie stars—Hitchcock's first feathered murderers, but not his last). We see here still-British Hitchcock pushing the border of the conventionally cinematic, using film-within-film in a humorous-turned-quickly-serious manner. (He does this again just a few years later in his first American film, *Rebecca*, by using supposed home movie footage—even though it's shot on a tripod with professional zooms—to show how the couple's happy honeymoon feelings have given way to a quite different mood.) In the "Cock Robin" sequence of *Sabotage*, Hitchcock sees Disney to a logical conclusion, one Disney stayed angry about for many years.

If we fast-forward nearly twenty years we can condense another story in Taylor's book, that Hitchcock had a script called "Dead Man's Eyes" by Ernest Lehman (writer of, among others, *North by Northwest*) which was to star Jimmy Stewart and had key scenes which would need to be shot in the then-new Disneyland. When Hitchcock asked for permission to film, Disney—still mad about *Sabotage* and the perverse use of his cartoon—refused Hitchcock permission, which led to his shelving the film.

Apart from the amusement of seeing Disney still angry after all those years, one can again note the curiosity of Hitchcock wishing to tread directly on Disney's turf. His desire to get in on Disneyland was manifested again just a few years later in 1961 when he started making *The Birds*. The Hitchcock Collection at the Motion Picture Academy Library includes several documents about Hitchcock using Disney special effects, personnel, and for a time, actual Disney studio space, to film certain effects. While Disney permitted Hitchcock to hire one of his legendary animators, Ub Iwerks (who also designed many Disneyland attractions, including "Pirates of the Caribbean"), the restrictions placed on Hitchcock were amply spelled out in the contracts. Hitchcock was moving in on Disney—in a weird way we might see *The Birds* as a twisted answer to all those Disney nature documentaries full of lovable creatures. Maybe Disney wasn't so wrong to be wary. In terms of conceptual cinema, what's most interesting, however, is the degree to which Hitchcock saw the need to move film in this direction in the late 50's and early 60's, just as Disneyland came to stake its place in our culture. During this time, Hitchcock took an even greater interest in the more completely designed film, one which took its audience through a controlled roller coaster ride of virtualshocks.

Hitchcock was thought to be joking when he described *Psycho* (1960) in interviews as an "amusement park ride." My work demonstrates that we should take him seriously, and even follow his lead to fashion a little trilogy of game (or amusement park) construction and design out of *Psycho* and the two films with which Hitchcock bookended it—1959's *North by Northwest* and 1963's *The Birds*. *North by Northwest* would be the adventure game, getting the hero out of a series of tough situations through ingenuity and resourcefulness, as he careens his way from the UN to Mount Rushmore. *Psycho*, taking Hitchcock's

helpful cue, is the ride through the old dark house, hiding its basement secret until the end of the journey. And *The Birds* would be the horrific, most unexplainable series (in terms of simple motivation) of attacks by a near abstract foe—a series of assaults not only played out in many subsequent movies (*Jaws*, *Halloween*, etc.), but practically the prototype of popular digital shoot-em-ups like *Doom*. Disney wasn't the only one making environments and thrill-rides in the late 50's and early 60's.

## HITCHCOCK AND THE DIGITAL

Further light can be shed on Hitchcock's conceptual brilliance by situating him as a pre-digital artist, in that his work anticipates key concepts which continue to be important in new technologies since his death. While Hitchcock worked the old-fashioned way, by hand, his view of the medium was decades (at least) ahead. A couple of such key notions take us beyond Disney to today.

One we can refer to as the "walkthrough," to point us to the ways that digital media depend upon explorations of space and the means of moving through it. Whether it's a VRML web site, a 3-D architectural rendering, or a game like *Myst*, walkthroughs have become a common activity and a recognizable form of interface. Curiously, walkthroughs abound in Hitchcock films. Most typically, a character will go to a place which he (and the audience) have never been before, and will do a walkthrough to explore the space for us. A nice example occurs in *Strangers on a Train* (Fig. 6), in which one character wants another to kill his father, and so provides a map (resembling a blueprint) of the route to be taken to the crime, thus leading to a typical Hitchcock walkthrough scene. *Psycho* has a nice example when the detective makes his first and only visit to the house, making it partly up the stairs before bad things happen. In Hitchcock, typically such walkthroughs lead to death, either directly, for the explorer or for him or her (and us) to witness. Another example occurs in *The Birds*, in a scene mentioned earlier, in which the mother visits a neighboring farmer's house, only to discover his body. The point of enumerating these many examples is to say that the walkthrough is a device Hitchcock understood early—a way of representing conceptual spaces which has come to be relied upon even more as the spaces have come to be digitally constructed.

*The Birds* provides us a convenient clue to another key concept, in that it offers what we can call "the bird's eye view." The present day version of this is the map or overhead view relied on in digital media as a way of orienting oneself in (conceptual) space. We could, in contrast to walkthroughs, refer to these as "flyovers," and again we can find numerous examples in Hitchcock: *North by Northwest* features a literal flyover in the case of the famous cropdusting scene, but even more clear an example from that film is our high-in-the-sky vantage point earlier when Cary Grant runs out of the United Nations. Similarly, in *Vertigo*, at the time of the first murder, we look down from high above as Jimmy Stewart runs out and the body becomes visible on the roof. (Both the

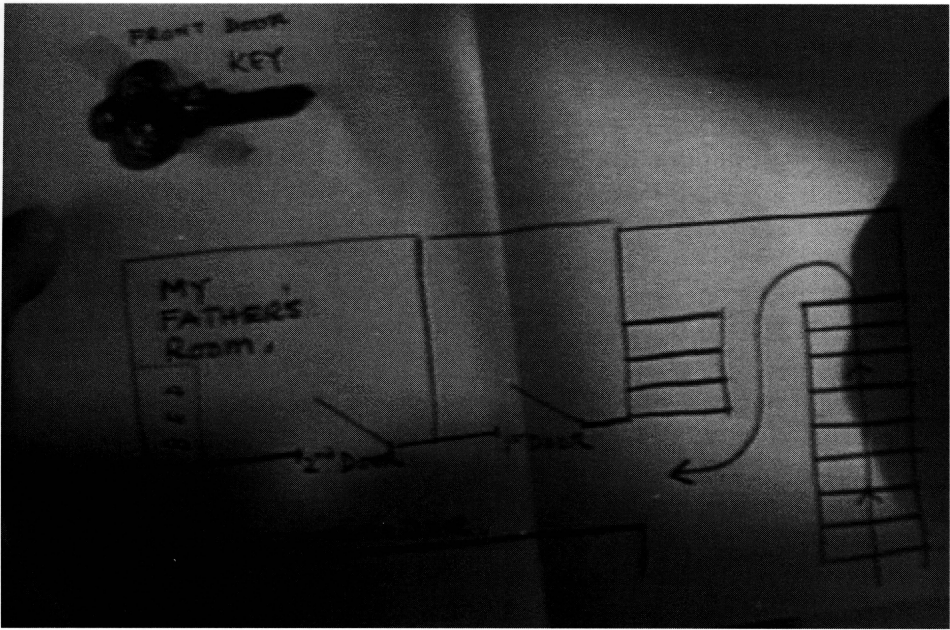


Fig. 6 A map and a key (from *Strangers on a Train*). Courtesy of Warner Bros.

UN and the mission very obviously look to be composited painted drawings, as well.) Once again, in laying out conceptual space, Hitchcock was developing techniques which would come to be widespread as the tools of the digital medium made such constructions a good deal easier.

## CONCLUSION

Hitchcock, then, serves us well as a prime example of a filmmaker striving to create a stylized and conceptual cinema with considerably less than physical-realistic underpinnings. The sometimes odd acting style of his works, the relentlessly visual complexity, the abstract sense of construction, the obtrusive special effects, all constitute a brilliant reformulation of what cinema can be—an idea of cinema similarly explored only by a select few. As cinema transforms itself in the face of new technology, it is interesting to see that the Master of Suspense still has tricks up his sleeve, from which we can learn a great deal.

<sup>1</sup> Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Lev Manovich. "What is Digital Cinema?", online at <http://www.heise.de/tp/english/special/film/6110/1.html>

<sup>3</sup> Noel Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), is a good source to consult on this subject.

<sup>4</sup> See Donald Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock* (NY: Hopkinson and Blake, 1976), 463-490 for a good sampling of storyboards from *Family Plot*.

<sup>5</sup> See Robin Wood on *Marnie* for an example. *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1989), 173.

<sup>6</sup> John Russell Taylor, *Hitch* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1978).