

By DAVID BORDWELL

ALFRED Hitchcock's *Notorious*

SURE, HE'S A SNOOPER," ALFRED HITCHCOCK remarked of a character, "but aren't we all?" Hitchcock's cinema enacts again and again a prying voyeurism, which often takes place beneath the surface of conventional dialogue. "Dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms." Next to *Rear Window*, the film that enacts this quality most purely is *Notorious*.

Notorious is generally considered inferior Hitchcock (except by François Truffaut, who likes it best of all his black-and-white films), and not without some justice. Ben Hecht's screenplay, witty enough in its time, has dated uncomfortably, and the film's *donnée* lacks the flashiness of *Rope* or *Lifeboat*. Yet, seen today, *Notorious* emerges as a remarkable, if unobtrusive *tour de force* of cinematic *point of view*, exhibiting kinship with Hitchcock's other markedly voyeuristic films, *Psycho*, *North by Northwest*, and *Strangers on a Train*; only *Rear Window* exceeds it in rigorous purity of point of view.

In *Notorious*, the *glance* carries the flow of the action, establishing and channeling the dramatic tension. Nearly every scene has at least one voyeur, and Hitchcock increases suspense and pathos by ingenious transferrals of viewpoint, interlocking glances from character to character. His voyeuristic method, drawn toward depicting extremes—snooping, drunkenness, nausea—questions the validity of visual experience itself and thereby gives dimension to the rather conventional spy plot.

Notorious, like *Psycho*, opens with an almost documentary scene-setting: "Miami, Florida, Three-twenty P.M., April Twenty-fourth, Nine-Hundred Forty-Six." The first three shots beautifully establish both mood and method: the camera pans from a cluster of Graflex cameras across a waiting line of reporters, to the courtroom sign; in medium-shot, a bailiff peeks through the doors; and then, from his point of view (the doors framing the shot) we see Alicia's (Ingrid Bergman) father sentenced to prison. Notoriety, crime, secret activities, spying—all are

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planted in the first minute of film. The doors open, the reporters press forward, and in a traveling shot Alicia is introduced as the spy Huberman's daughter; at the end of the same shot, we see a plainclothesman ordering an underling to tail her. Marvelously economical exposition: the threads of the action have begun.

At Alicia's party, the *mise-en-scène* is striking. Alicia and her guest, all facing the camera, are bathed in a harsh light; but Devlin's (Cary Grant) silhouette, screen center, his back to us, dominates the scene. He is the voyeur of the scene—his viewpoint is ours. Later, Alicia and Devlin go for a drive, and Alicia's recklessness is observed first through Devlin's eyes, then, more drunkenly, through hers. The morning after is rendered vividly from Alicia's point of view: first a glass of seltzer rests in the foreground as her eyes blearily open; then—in an outré Hitchcock gesture—we see a tilted Cary Grant cross the room, twist round the frame, and finally smile down at us—upside down!

After some uneasy romantic comedy, Alicia learns on the plane to Rio that Devlin is a spy whose plan is to insinuate her into the household of Alex Sebastian (Claude Rains), her father's friend and a suspected Nazi: Devlin's cynical indifference, we know, conceals a love for Alicia. The romantic balloon is deflated in a fine scene in their hotel. Alicia has burned the roast for their dinner; on the terrace, as the tension between them grows, they become more and more distant, until Alicia, saying, "It's cold out here," goes in to desperately down a drink; the transition from hot to cold mirrors the movement of their relationship. The final shot—Alicia inside, brightly visible through the window, Devlin in silhouette, leaning against the doorway and looking away—

has an Antonionian anguish, climaxed by Devlin's last line (which sets up a motif later to reappear): "I had a bottle of champagne for you... I must have left it somewhere."

Still linked by their mission, they test Sebastian on a riding path. They ride by him and his mother (Madame Konstantin)—whom we see, appropriately, from Alicia's viewpoint. When Devlin prods Alicia's horse to gallop off, Sebastian rescues her—observed through Devlin's eyes. This is a good example of how Hitchcock shifts the viewpoint for maximum dramatic effect—the Nazis first seen by Alicia, the potential double agent; then, the relations between Sebastian and Alicia given a dramatic overtone when seen by the jealous Devlin.

After a luncheon rendezvous (seen from Alicia's viewpoint), in which Sebastian presses his attentions, we shift to a more overtly voyeuristic scene. The camera focuses in closeup on a bunch of flowers addressed to Miss Huberman, then tilts up to a frowning Devlin looking out at us while his boss draws into the frame. Devlin turns away from us (his dark suit recalling his silhouette at the party) when Alicia enters (from his viewpoint), and while she and the boss talk over the plan for seducing Sebastian, Devlin's silent, motionless figure dominates the shot and adds dimension to the situation; again we and he are voyeurs.

We view Alicia's visit to Sebastian's home through her eyes. The camera tracks subjectively, duplicating the play of her glance, watching Sebastian's mother descend the staircase, meeting Sebastian's German cohorts, eyeing the dinner, and noticing the sudden fuss over the champagne bottles. Later, when the villains discuss the danger of Emile's nervousness, Hitchcock appropriately shoots the scene objectively: we are to identify with no one.

Next, at the racetrack, we see Sebastian and his mother in a box. He peers through his binoculars—and abruptly we are with Alicia and Devlin at the rail. There the viewpoint is hers: Devlin bitterly reproaches her for her growing attachment to Sebastian, even though he had engineered it. (Another joke—the horse race is reflected in Alicia's field glasses.) Suddenly, Sebastian appears, and we realize that he had spotted them through his binoculars. Afterward, a crucial scene takes place at spy headquarters: Alicia announces that Sebastian has asked her to marry him. For maximum impact, Hitchcock shoots this scene from Devlin's viewpoint. No other device could so sharpen the scene's pathos: she waits for him to refuse to let her go ahead, he waits for her to call a halt, and neither acts. It is one of Hitchcock's most sensitive scenes: for once the mordant cynicism is replaced by a genuine awareness of the complexity of human motives.

The return from the honeymoon generates a new impulse for the drama's flow—the pursuit of the key. As Alicia unpacks, she looks for closet space and asks Sebastian for the keys. She overhears an argument between him and his domineering mother, which ends in Sebastian's turning the keys over to Alicia (a fine touch—Mother replaced by Wife). But he

retains the key to the wine cellar. As they dress for the grand party, Alicia spots his key-chain and removes the key—just before he enters. There follows a clever sequence executed wholly in closeup, a precisely choreographed cinematic ballet. Alicia has the key in one hand (we're not sure which), and Sebastian comes to her, lovingly taking her hands in his. He turns one over, kisses it, and caressingly opens it.... We sigh; no key. But as he is about to repeat the action and inadvertently discover the key in the other hand—Alicia, as if spontaneously, embraces him, freeing her hand, and behind his back the camera discreetly follows the dropped key to the carpet, where her foot quietly kicks it under a chair. The snooping audience relaxes—temporarily.



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The party opens with a characteristic Hitchcock flourish—from a wide-angle shot from the top of the staircase, filled with movement, glitter, and music, the camera noses relentlessly down to a screen-filling closeup of the key in Alicia's hand: from the deceptive general scene to the real issue. In closeup, Alicia slips the key to Devlin; in long-shot, we view them from the suspicious Sebastian's viewpoint. Later, while Alicia and Devlin investigate the wine cellar, the suspense is paced by the rapid dwindling of the champagne supply upstairs. (Yet even here Hitchcock provides a voyeur—the butler who keeps glancing at the bottles.) In the cellar, Devlin and Alicia discover uranium in a wine bottle (an extra frisson—the bottle slips and shatters on the floor). Meanwhile, upstairs the champagne has run out and Sebastian comes down to the cellar. We see Devlin and Alicia in long shot, from his viewpoint, and then him from their viewpoint. Devlin seizes Alicia and kisses her (a well-timed embrace likewise saved the hero of *The 39 Steps*), concealing their real mission.

The drama is transferred to Sebastian. Suspicious, he investigates the cellar next day. From his viewpoint, we see stains on the floor, shards of broken glass, and a misplaced bottle. (In a wry Hitchcock joke, all the bottles on the row are dated 1934, except the one Devlin misplaced, dated 1940—the year the war began.) Sebastian confesses his doubts to his mother (she, in the foreground, dwarfs her diminutive son), and for this scene Hitchcock reserves a grotesque effect: the mother, whose

expression has been rigidly pleasant throughout the film, suddenly lights a cigarette, and her face takes on an almost jaunty malevolence as she once more assumes control of her wayward son. The next scene, admirably implicative, begins with a long shot of the breakfast table; then a closeup of Sebastian travels to a closeup of Alicia's coffee cup to a closeup of her face to finally settle on the grim face of the mother. Hitchcock displays great economy in tracing the effects of the poisoning process: Alicia falters and is given more "coffee"; her face, vulgarly glossy at the film's beginning, radiant during her affair with Devlin, is now wan and drawn. In one shot, the coffee cup rests hugely in the foreground, dominating the sick Alicia; contrasting with the glass of seltzer seen earlier, it establishes an ironic parallel to her drunkenness. Hitchcock neatly makes this transition from alcoholism to poisoning an active plot ingredient, for Devlin supposes the symptoms of her poisoning to be a return to her drunken ways—Hitchcock had to establish her alcoholism earlier to make the poisoning pass Devlin's notice. She discovers the Sebastians' plot too late, and in the most contorted visuals in the film, we see, through her blurred vision, the heaving room, her guilty husband, her attempt to escape. She collapses on the staircase and is put to bed.

Later, Devlin, worried because Alicia has missed an appointment, calls at the house. Sebastian is in conference, the butler tells him, and Mrs. Sebastian is very sick. As Devlin hears this piece of news, Hitchcock tracks ominously up to a closeup of him, thereby beginning one of his most virtuosic finales. The butler leaves, Devlin enters, and in traveling subjective camera, we approach the staircase. Slowly Devlin steals upstairs, until, from his viewpoint, we see Alicia in bed in long-shot. Abruptly we cut to her viewpoint—a lamp in foreground, Devlin in silhouette at the door; and the film acquires thematic density as we recall the contrasting mood of the earlier shot from her drunken viewpoint. At her pillow, the lighting briefly picks out Devlin as he confesses his love, then his face retreats into the usual shadow while she tells of the poisoning. After a long track around their embrace, the camera follows in closeup as Devlin lifts Alicia and carries her to the door.

Suddenly, from his viewpoint, we see the hall and Sebastian coming up the staircase. Devlin has a gun, but his real threat against Sebastian is that the Nazis downstairs will discover that Alicia is an agent. When Sebastian's mother hurries to the stair, everything is prepared for one of Hitchcock's most brilliant cadenzas. As the four descend the stairs in an ensemble and the Nazis emerge from the drawing room, Hitchcock cuts on the inexorable beat of their descent, step by step. But he raises the tension's pitch by *glance* and *viewpoint*—a flurry of closeups show Devlin glancing at Sebastian, Sebastian at his mother, his mother at the Nazis, the Nazis at Devlin, etc. The scene's pace is stunningly fluid, as cut follows glance with the speed of the characters' thoughts. The sequence is truly the capstone of the picture's style, embodying a

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7. Roger Maxwell, *The Film and the Public* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 202.
8. Ernest Lindgren, *The Art of the Film* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963), p. 156.
9. Gilbert Seldes, *Movies Come from America* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1937), p. 49.

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The escape from war's brutality seemingly accomplished, the boat's water supply runs out and Filip inconspicuously slips into the sea to drown. It is tragic irony that to protect his life a human being becomes a brute, but for the brute no human life is possible. Like Oedipus, Jan creates the condition from which he would escape.

This may or may not prove that modern tragedy is possible, but we can be sure at least of Bergman's anti-war attitude. The anguish of *Persona* over one self-destruction implies concern for all men, especially in the relative sequences of a Buddhist monk's self-immolation to protest the war in Viet Nam and of the Nazi eradication of the Warsaw ghetto. Both sequences appear in a medium other than film, one television, the other still photography. *Shame* takes these two visions of savagery, unites them entirely within the film medium, and expresses explicitly its creator's opposition to mankind's self-destruction.

Bergman's stand is political, but not partisan. For him as for Jan, there is no taking sides, except the sides of humanity against inhumanity. In a very traditional way the audience is bidden to learn from the hero, to avoid Jan's error.

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fusillade of glances, a crescendo of viewpoints: the theme played fortissimo in elaborate orchestration. Devlin gets Alicia into his car, shuts Sebastian out, and drives off. In the final shot, the Nazis are waiting in the doorway while Sebastian fearfully ascends the front steps of his house and is drawn in. As the film had begun with the opening of a door—we as voyeurs are let in—so it ends with the ominous closing of the mansion's door—we are shut out, our snooping is done.

In *Rear Window*, Hitchcock was to make voyeurism the moral as well as the visual theme, and indeed, the weakness of *Notorious* is that the dialogue and plot structure do not particularly reinforce the style of the visuals. Yet, aside from the idiosyncratic Hitchcock ironies (e.g., "Huberman" suggesting *ubermann*), *Notorious* attracts one today because of the remarkable rigor and beauty of its method. It remains a noteworthy technical experiment in viewpoint, an example of how Hitchcock can transform "just a spy story" into an engrossing exercise in suspense and style.