A HUNDRED years ago, on August 13, 1899, a boy was born. He was the son of a greengrocer from Leytonstone, a small town in Essex, which has since been swallowed by the sprawl of East London. Ten years earlier, another London boy was born; both would migrate, both would end up as knights of the realm they had vacated, and both would grow wealthy in the pleasurable purveying of their obsessions. Strangest of all, these two Englishmen would become the most recognized shapes in the history of cinema. The Essex boy would ripen swiftly in Falstaffian directions; the other would stay as trim and proud as a penguin. It is one thing to have your name known around the world, but to be identified by nothing more than your silhouette—well, that is an honor accorded to very few. If Alfred Hitchcock and Charles Chaplin have any peer in this regard, it is Mickey Mouse, who was hailed by Hitchcock as the most pliable of performers. “Mr. Disney has the right idea,” he once said. “If he doesn’t like them, he tears them up.”

That is the chord that Hitchcock liked to strike, and one that his admirers—especially those who watched him fronting TV dramas in the fifties and sixties—came to expect: an easy fusion of the sadistic and the sardonic, delivered with such dead-eyed relish that, like an outrageously pernicious toy, it could somehow be construed as benevolent. How on earth did we come to worship this portly and paranoiac figure, this anti-Santa with his funereal suit and tie and his sack of vicious toys, who liked almost nothing about us except our need to give him money in return for the promise of temporary distress? The outward refinements of a Hitchcock picture may be a delight, but they are frayed by emotional wear and tear; when Grace Kelly, in “Rear Window,” is hunting for clues inside Ray Bradbury’s apartment, and Burr appears in the corridor outside, James Stewart, watching from across the courtyard, looks genuinely aghast, and for a minute we forget the harmless pleasure of watching Grace Kelly in a summer frock. Indeed, it is a rule of Hitchcock’s cautionary tales that no pleasure can be wholly harmless—that the more needling the harm, the more pointedly the pleasure will be pricked into a thrill.

The Hitchcock centenary has been greeted with appropriate ceremony. Books such as “Hitchcock’s Notebooks” (Spike; $30) and “Hitchcock’s America” (Oxford; $17 in paper) have directed our gaze to unconsidered corners of his work, while the Museum of Modern Art organized a complete retrospective of his movies (fifty-three are extant), together with an exhibit of Hitchcockiana, which shows until August 17th. Among the highlights is a 1962 written exchange between the director and Grace Kelly, whom Hitchcock wanted for the title role in “Marnie.” In the event, it was decided that a European princess was not quite right for the part of a frightful kleptomaniac. Hitch was unmoved.

“Yes, it was sad, wasn’t it?” he noted. “After all, it was only a movie.” That shrugging dismissal is one that he tried on several occasions, but he could never make it ring true: movies were all he had.

The most suggestive commemoration I have found is the Hitchcock show at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England. This includes a mockup of James Stewart’s bedroom in “Vertigo”; a rear-projected, frame-by-frame screening of “Psycho”; and a beguiling series of looped montages by Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller, entitled “The Phoenix Tapes.” These are scraps of Hitchcock crammed with objects and actions that we have come to recognize as his imaginative property. One loop rifle through the following images: name cards, tiepins, monograms, letters, keys, locks, drains, the color red, spots, basins, washing, hair-cutting, hair-burning, fires, matchbooks, race cards, addresses, newspapers, music scores, telephone directories, phones, papers against a door, doorknobs, hands, cups, breakages, spills, rings on fingers, rosaries, handcuffs, bags, purses, guns, drawers, knives, forks, and back to name cards.

What struck me about these visual quotations is how much they reveal not about Hitchcock but about us; whatever the source of his undoubted fetishism, the more compelling fact is that he ended up making fetishists of us all. We come out of movies saying, “I liked that bit where . . .” and Hitchcock’s bits were simply neater than anyone else’s. Moviewgoers like that bit in “Notorious” where the camera glides down, as if in announcement, to discover a stolen key in Ingrid Bergman’s fist; I really like the bit just before that, when Claude Rains tries to kiss that hand, and she, thinking smartly, throws her arms around his neck, drops the key on the rug, and slides it aside with her foot. Critics like to damn the frenzied editing practices of current cinema, but Hitchcock reminds us that rapid cutting is not in itself a sin. There is a serenity in his speed; he is driving the action forward with such confidence that the emotional burden of the moment—which in Bergman’s case could not be more fraught—
Hitchcock, photographed by Irving Penn in 1947. For all the darkness, comedy is the natural blush under his thrills.
comes to feel almost weightless. Only a man who took no exercise whatsoever, and who once ate three steaks in a single sitting at “21,” could derive such bliss from the athletic possibilities of his art.

It is impossible to tell, with Hitchcock, where fear ends and fantasy begins; indeed, the two are twisted together for strength, like the cords of a rope. His cinema is one of compulsive repetition; from film to film, his characters are initiated afresh into rituals that Hitchcock alone can comprehend. If this was designed as a purgation, it failed beautifully; far from being broken, the spell of unease merely tightened its grip, as if the director were half in love not just with his actresses but with the perils they faced. He liked to claim, for instance, that he never drove a car—untrue, of course, like many of his claims, although he did employ a chauffeur in Hollywood. “If you don’t drive a car, you can’t get a ticket,” he explained, and a ticket—the stub of authority, stamped with trouble—was what Hitchcock dreaded most. And how did he mold and decorate his dread? He lingered on the tight-gloved hands of Tippi Hedren as she rested them lightly on the steering wheel, in “The Birds,” and gunned her green Aston Martin up to Bodega Bay; he had Barbara Harris’s brake cables comically snipped in “Family Plot,” with unstoppable consequences; and, best of all, in “To Catch a Thief” he had Grace Kelly drive Cary Grant around the bends until Grant was clenching his knees. Hitchcock’s pleasure was to dip his performers into precisely the type of quicksand in which he himself would have sunk without a trace; the ingenious bravado with which they hauled themselves free not only tickled him, as it did his audiences, but offered the comforting thought that our treacherous world could sometimes, by a whisker, be put to rights.

It is the whisker, the humming wire of suspense, for which Hitchcock is still most highly honored. When Martin Balsam climbs the stairs in “Psycho,” we want the bedroom door to open, but only by a couple of inches; the waiting spices the agony. This practice of procrastination began early, one gathers, and it was indelible from crime. At Hitchcock’s school, St. Ignatius College, in Stamford Hill, the form master would tell the pupil of his wrongdoing and the pupil would have to go before the disciplining priest. It was left to the pupil to decide when he would go for the punishment, and of course he would keep putting it off.

That Hitchcock could recollect this torture so plainly in 1973, sixty years after the event, suggests that the pain of indecision was undimmed. Hitchcock commentators have traditionally made merry over the fact that young Alfred was a scion of the Catholic lower middle class and, as one schoolmate described him, “a lonely fat boy who smiled and looked at you as if he could see straight through you.” On the other hand, we should beware the temptation to post-rationalize. The majority of boys who undergo a Jesuit education grow up as useful members of society, largely untroubled by the urgent desire to watch blond women in handcuffs. In tracing the trouble with Alfred, we require further particulars.

We know, for example, that as a boy, and even as a young man with a full-time job, Hitchcock would be summoned by his mother, Emma, to the foot of her bed and pressed for a litany of the day’s events. “It was a ritual. I always remember the evening confession,” he admitted to Tippi Hedren, who passed the information on to one of his biographers, Donald Spoto. According to Spoto, such maternal interest “inculcates guilt of a scrupulous and neurotic type.” Hitchcock fans have learned to be cautious of Spoto, who is always ready to pass briskly over the fruits of Hitchcock’s talent if there is a chance to check out the undergrowth; still, staring at the swarm of fearsome matriarchs who invade the Hitchcock corpus, you do wonder. There is the doting presence who files the nails of her wicked son, in “Strangers on a Train”; the entirely petrifying Nazi who cows Claude Rains in “Notorious”; the weariness of not loving that wears down the heroine’s mother in “Marnie”; and the hawkish Lydia, of “The Birds,” who resents her son’s billing and cooing with another woman. Lastly, there is old Mrs. Bates, a boy’s best friend.

The other woman who oversaw Hitchcock’s life was Alma Reville, who was one day younger than him, and whom he met in 1921 and married five years later. She was small and smart (“my severest critic,” he said), and was already skilled in editing and continuity when Hitchcock entered the movie trade as a dogsbody. (Professional pride forbade him to wed until he rose to the rank of assistant director.) He had trained as an engineer and worked at a telegraph-and-cable company, where (helped by an evening course in painting) he had

“Did you bring a duplicate copy of your ‘Times’ obit with you?”
ended up in the advertising department; he now took a portfolio to the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, an American film company that had arrived in London at the end of the First World War, and he was hired to design titles. “I’m American-trained,” he said. “As soon as you entered the studio doors you were in an American atmosphere.”

For the sake of convenience, Hitchcock-watchers like to split his career down the middle—between the English pictures, which began in 1925, with “The Pleasure Garden,” and ended in 1938, with “Jamaica Inn,” and the American period, which saw Hitch hit the ground running with “Rebecca,” and keep on running, with occasional stumbles, until “Family Plot” was released, in 1976. But the two halves of his achievement blur and bleed into one another. Hollywood allowed him to revisit and resuscitate performers and setups from his British days—and, in one case, to remake an entire movie, “The Man Who Knew Too Much.” Equally, the achievements of the young Hitchcock show an artist craning forward in excitement, as if from the prow of a ship. He was based in London, but his mind’s eye was elsewhere. He visited the vast U.F.A. studios in Berlin, learned German, and watched F. W. Murnau—who would also emigrate to Hollywood—shoot “The Last Laugh.”

For decades, British cinema was little more than a bad hangover from a night at the theatre; the only way to get the taste of sawdust out of your mouth was to watch movies from Germany, the Soviet Union, and, above all, America. “The Americans have shown themselves adept at this trick of switching from grave to gay. Why shouldn’t we do the same?” Hitchcock wrote. And elsewhere: “They have learnt, as it were, to put the nouns, verbs, and adjectives of the film language together.” The landscape of early Hitchcock could not be more British, from the Victorian fogs of “The Lodger” (1927), his first big hit, to the seaside dance hall of “Young and Innocent,” ten years on; but the grammar of these movies has lost any trace of starch. It is fluid, furtive, and as quick as a knife in the dark: “The Lodger” is silent, but, as the killer strikes, Hitch cuts away to a cat and a woman nearby, who whip around and listen to the soundless scream.

This takes us immediately not just to the heart of Hitchcock but to the vexed matter of film direction itself. It was the French—in the persons of François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, and others, most of them critics who would later cross the river into creativity—who eagerly proclaimed their faith in the theory of the auteur, and it was Hitchcock whom they took as their model. On the face of it, auteurism—the notion that a film bears the mark of its maker, the director, as unmistakably as a novel bears that of its writer—is either a cracked fancy or a crummy joke. Anyone who has seen a film being shot will be richly amused by the possibility that one person could impose a signature style on such a throng of innumerable disciplines, let alone lord it over the bear pit of cinematic egos, each of them chafing at its chain. Yet the stubborn fact remains that for more than fifty years Hitchcock delivered work that—for all his intensive collaboration with producers such as Selznick, writers such as Ben Hecht and Ernest Lehman, and composers such as Bernard Herrmann—could have bloomed from no other brain. Some of his easiest conquests are achieved by touches no heavier than the brush of wire on drumnskin, and his effects kick in absurdly fast, without blare or build-up. I once asked a friend who had never seen “Marnie” to guess the director. Skipping the opening credits, I started a stopwatch on the first shot—Tippi Hedren’s clutch bag under her arm as she walks along a station platform. “Hitchcock,” he said, and I checked the watch. Twelve seconds.

“Marnie” is, of course, a late work, made in 1964. But even a brief stroll through the high-humored films of his youth demonstrates that most of them already reeked of Hitchcock; at any rate, they helped to nourish the look that soon became both mystery and giveaway, like a paragraph of Kafka. “Sabotage” (1936) begins with bewitching speed: within two minutes, we have seen the lights of London fail, we understand what caused the blackout, and we know the grim visage of Verloc, the saboteur. The film then fans out into the chatter and bustle of city life: the detective goes under cover as a greengrocer (Hitchcock paying homage to his own father), the heroine sells tickets at a movie theatre, and a bomb is taken blithely onto a bus. In short, the film honors the democratic principles that Hitchcock proclaimed the following year, in an article on the failings of British cinema: Forgotten are the men who leap on buses, the girls who pack into the Tube, the commercial travelers, the newspaper men, the girls who manicure your nails, the composers who write the dance numbers, the city clerk and his weekend Rugger, the stockbroker and his round of golf, the typist and her boyfriend, the cinema queues, the palais de danse crowds...

This is the Hitchcock who grew up reading Shaw and Wells, who inherited their hatred of snobbery and their penchant for unextraordinary souls—and for the mantrap into which such souls can step. That observant litany could have been written by the young John Betjeman, another tubby addict of the suburban; Betjeman would have applauded the tidy English habits that the Hitchcocks maintained in Hollywood—back from work at six, cocktails, dinner, reading, and bed by half past eight. I would place Hitchcock among that small band of artists—W. H. Auden being the most distinguished—who found a new way to frame the drama of ordinary people. If human curiosity obliged you to usher the masses into your fictions, it was not enough to let them wander through, as if they were milling on a stage; the world of clerks and crowds could be hocked into shocking affiliation with the abrupt and shadowy angles of modernism. That is why “Sabotage” eventually quiets to a terrifying scene at the dinner table where Verloc and his wife, who knows he is a killer, eye the carving knife with fearful symmetry. The camera lingers on Verloc’s face while he walks around the table. “Instinctively,” the director said, “the viewer should be pushing back slightly in his seat to allow Verloc to pass by.” That is the essence of Hitchcock: nothing so drab as a meeting of form and content but, rather, a technical intensity so adamant that it forges fresh anxieties as it moves along, creating the need for a whole new etiquette of fear.

Whether England realized what it had on its hands is another matter. To Hitchcock, America was always more lucratively discerning; “The Lady Vanishes” won the New York Critics’ Best Director Award in 1938. Such a prize may sound solemn for so watchable an entertainment, but that is precisely the point; there were people in America who understood the powers of visual persuasion which were required to make people watch. You cannot tune in to
“The Lady Vanishes”—even on TV, and even if you happen upon it halfway through—and not stay with it to the end. No wonder David O. Selznick wanted Alfred Hitchcock for himself.

Otto Friedrich, in “City of Nets,” his study of the movie world in the nineteen-forties, describes Hitchcock as “one of the few people in Hollywood who could out-Selznick Selznick.” The producer, who signed him up in 1938, liked to keep tabs on his directors, and to cover his options by having them shoot each scene from numerous viewpoints, so that the ideal sequence could be pasted together in the editing suite. Hitch, on the other hand, framed only those shots that he knew he would need. He never looked through the viewfinder, and he definitely didn’t want a producer breathing down his neck. When Selznick visited the set of “Spellbound,” the camera inexplicably malfunctioned, and then righted itself, by sheer coincidence, when the producer left.

Their first project was supposed to be something called “Titanic,” but Selznick pulled the plug. In the event, they made just three films together: “Rebecca,” which, in 1940, won the Academy Award for Best Picture; “Spellbound”; and “The Paradine Case.” Only one of these, the first, is an out-and-out masterpiece, and even that has a heavy dose of Selznick about it. It could have been worse: he wanted the smoke that rises from the burning Manderley to form a giant black “R” in the sky—although, to be fair, Hitchcock wanted the picture to open with Max and his new bride being seasick on their honeymoon (Hitchcock had a lifelong horror of vomiting), so producer and director probably served as a good check on each other’s excesses. “Rebecca” introduced Hitchcock not just to the technical talent available in Hollywood but to the peculiar lustre that Hollywood alone could bestow upon the skin of a film and to the fleshly assumptions that lay beneath. The British films have a lankiness that fades from view as America looms large; “The Thirty-nine Steps” and “North by Northwest” tell comparable tales, but there is a stealth and purpose—a barely explicable air of universal intimacy—in the later picture, which even Robert Donat, Hitchcock’s most lovable leading man, could not have supplied.

“Spellbound” is an oddity, largely by comparison with “Notorious,” released a year later, in 1946. The two films share a director, a screenwriter (Ben Hecht), and a star (Ingrid Bergman). Both have a caressing texture, and I once heard an audience applaud Gregory Peck, on his first appearance, purely for being so good-looking. Yet “Spellbound” is a dud. Psychiatry was becoming chic toward the end of the war, and Selznick wanted to cash in on it; unfortunately, this meant involving Hitchcock in a Big Idea—never his happiest terrain. Hitchcock was not a thinker, and profundity is what we should prize most nervously in his work; the speech that he wrote for Joseph Cotten in “Shadow of a Doubt,” about the world’s being a “foul sty,” is little more than an adolescent rant, as is Norman Bates’s observation that we all live in our private traps. (Thanks, Norm.) The moments where Hitchcock does graze the profound are those where he is least bothered with it; “Notorious,” which boasts a daft plot about a man who keeps radioactive soil in his wine cellar, is one of the most provocative films ever made. When Grant and Bergman, both of whom are on his trail, descend to the cellar to find out more, they are disturbed by Claude Rains, who is married to Bergman. “I am going to kiss you,” Grant says, and Bergman obliges. Rains sees them, and his face falls with the sadness of betrayal; thanks to their pretense of passion, he does not yet suspect them of spying. But they are passionate; the deceit is true.

If I’m trapped at a party and asked to name my favorite films, I tend to duck under the drinks table, but I guess I would find life without “Notorious” unutterably bloodless and bleak. Come to that, Western civilization needs “Rear Window” just as badly as its heroine needs that pistachio suit with the pencil skirt and the halter-necked blouse. Then, there’s “North by Northwest.” When, a couple of hundred years from now, an alien federation finally pulls in for gas on planet Earth and asks to see one of those things called “movies,” we could do worse than offer it Cary Grant having cocktails on the train, or hanging off a ledge of Presidential rock, as an unsurpassed demonstration of what we mean by film—what it’s all about, what it can be made to do, what it is for. Hitchcock’s movie is no more substantial than one of those dining-car Martinis, yet there is something in its transparency and bite, something beyond the fumes of sophistication, that takes your breath away. When Grant stretches for Eva Marie Saint’s hand, swings her up off the mountain and into his marital berth, you realize how tenderly, with what careful shades of chivalry, the whole enterprise has reached out toward height and depth. (How sharply we share the trepidation of Cary Grant in the clean, Frank Lloyd Wright spaces of the villain’s hideaway, as opposed to the Gothic horribleness of the Bates house in “Psycho.”) “North by Northwest” is not a meditation on loneliness or madness (any more than it is a guide to smuggling microfilm), but it never ceases to gesture in its direction. Grant plays a man named Roger O. Thornhill, who is accused—falsely, of course, as is the rule in Hitchcock—of murder, and is forced to go on the run. At one point, he is asked what the “O” stands for. “Nothing,” he says, with a snap of satisfaction. The most soaring sentiment that Hitchcock has ever indulged—here, as in “Notorious,” and in countless other tales—is the suspicion that to slip from one identity to the next, with no more ado than a businessman changing his suit, will pull you further away from your tailor-made role in society and closer, if you can handle the irony, to the truth of your desires.

What this tells us about Alfred Hitchcock is a matter of debate. A split has opened up in recent years as the films beloved of film buffs, of theorists and therapists, have drifted apart from the more cheerful popular hits. The latter dreamscapes—“The Birds,” “Marnie,” and, above all, “Vertigo”—are now the prey of an analysis almost as obsessive as the mind that conceived them. If a film such as “Vertigo” disturbs us with its near-necrophilia, when James Stewart refashions a live woman in the image of a dead one, that is apparently because of similar storms within the humid mind of Hitchcock himself. As an adult, he said, he was too shy to walk across the lot at Para-
mount; and the man who found corpses funny also thought that the most horrible thing in the world was the smell of a hard-boiled egg.

It is tempting to read these manias as no more than foibles dressed up for the sake of P.R.—a vocation at which Hitchcock excelled even more than Cecil B. De Mille. He used eccentricity to deflect attention from what he considered his consuming concern: "pieces of film assembled," otherwise known as "pure cinema." This disdain for anything except style would be more convincing if it were not for the vampiric way in which he feasted on the same material over and over again. Or perhaps it was that very familiarity that allowed him to perfect his touch—perhaps the chase sequence was to Hitchcock what Mont Sainte-Victoire was to Cézanne. Hitch liked getting things right in advance, complete inside his head, and sitting with writers to iron out the wrinkles in the plot; he and Ernest Lehman spent a year on "North by Northwest" before filming began. But he saw the shoots themselves as a chore and a bore. Joel McCrea, the star of "Foreign Correspondent," told Donald Spoto he was surprised to find his director (who had drunk a pint of champagne at lunchtime) nodding off during a take: "He had fallen asleep. So I said, 'Cut!' and he woke up and said, 'Was it any good?' I said, 'The best in the picture!' and he said, 'Print it!'"

Needless to say, all of this may have been one more mask. As eager as any murderer to conceal his motives, Hitchcock laid a maze of false trails to confound his trackers. There was the occasion when, at the age of five, he was locked up in a prison cell, on his father's orders, for being a naughty boy: a story that Hitchcock repeated with such wearisome regularity that it began to resemble the Rosebud of "Citizen Kane"—the clue that solves everything and means nothing. There was the director's curt reply to the fan who asked why he made movies: "Money." There was his puerile love of practical jokes: pretty funny when he sent sixty kippers around in a taxi to Robert Donat's house, or a dray horse to Peter Lorre (an act reciprocated with three hundred canaries, delivered at three o'clock in the morning); less so when he chained a man to a camera, gave him brandy laced with laxative, and left him in the studio all night.

The charge of sadism rang louder when it came to "The Birds," and to Hitchcock's treatment of Tippi Hedren. For the attic scene, he put her through a week's torment that ended with a beak gashing her under the eye, and he took wax casts of her face, supposedly as part of the makeup process; for the filming of "Marnie," he chose all her clothes and forbade her to go out without asking his permission. Finally, something buckled: Spoto says that Hitchcock made "an overt sexual proposition," which she rebuffed; another, less heat-seeking biographer, John Russell Taylor, says that Hedren called her mentor fat. Big mistake. Either way, they didn't speak to each other for the rest of the shoot; he referred to her as "that girl."

Everything about "The Birds" sounds cruel until you actually see the movie: it is gracious, shrewd, and sunlit, glinting with flirtatious backchat, and lulling itself gently toward the apocalyptic. Most remarkable of all, Tippi Hedren makes it her own. The good-time girl from San Francisco may be bandaged and traumatized by the end, but she puts up a hell of a fight; Camille Paglia, in her short book on the movie, compliments the character on her "mesmerizing narcissism." It would be easy to cast Hitchcock as the demon misogynist were it not for the nagging sense that women are the guiding spirits of his movies; resourceful and redoubtable, all smiles in their sexual self-possession, they take the male gaze and stare straight back. Fellini thought that "The Birds" was a lyric poem, and, as in tribute to all those cunning gulls, it provides a bizarre sense of uplift; as with any good Hitchcock, from "The Lodger" onward, material that should leave you humbled and wrecked sends you out on a mystified high. Hitchcock was once asked why he had never made a comedy. "But every film I make is a comedy," he replied.

For once, I think Hitchcock was telling the truth. He did make an overt comedy—a screwball entitled "Mr. and Mrs. Smith," with Carole Lombard, whom he liked for her filthy jokes—but it wasn't funny. What is funny is the enduring mismatch between what the world pitches at us and the way we choose to hit it—between the stranger on a train who wants to be rid of his wife, preferably in the divorce courts, and the stranger beside him, who takes this as an invi-
tation to strangle her. On a less reckless level, you get seductive misunderstanding:

“Do you want a leg or a breast?”
“You make the choice.”

“Tell me, how long has it been?”
“How long has what been?”
“Since you were in America last.”

That is Grace Kelly offering chicken, among other things, to Cary Grant in “To Catch a Thief.” Sex becomes a sort of animated suspension; lovers in Hitchcock circle warily around each other, more like predators than like dancers, and even when their lips meet, the camera is likely to continue the waltz. (In “Rear Window,” Hitchcock double-printed the closeup of Grace Kelly’s face descending toward Jimmy Stewart, so that their kiss was self-shaking, with the orgasm built in.) Hitchcock is the only great director who mastered those elusive hybrids, the romantic comedy and the comedy thriller. In each instance, he sees that the comedy is not something you apply like lipstick, to brighten the tone, but something that is already there—a luminous natural coloring under the thrills, a blush in the very notion of romance. My favorite passage in Hitchcock begins with Kelly springing the catch on her dinky overnight bag in “Rear Window.” It’s no bigger than a briefcase, but out of it froths a Botticellian spray of lingerie. Before leaving to put it on, she shows the contents to Stewart, and says, “Preview of coming attractions.” Movie love is so hot that it sounds like a movie.

Such elegant self-reference, of course, can border on artistic vanity. I am cautious of those who praise “Rear Window” and “Vertigo” as films that are primarily about watching films, if only because Hitchcock strove to ensnare as wide an audience as he could get. That is why we should be grateful for the presence of Thelma Ritter as the bloodthirsty masseuse in “Rear Window” and for that of Barbara Bel Geddes as the underwear designer in “Vertigo”; they are comic choruses, spry and unfazed, letting a touch of fresh air into pictures that could otherwise thicken into the delirious or the unbreathable. Such women are the proper inheritors of the typists and manicurists whom Hitchcock wanted to summon into the British cinema. He was never so at ease amid the American masses (even the townspeople in “Shadow of a Doubt,” one of his favorites, are on the stiff and stagy side), and so he diverted his sympathies into supporting roles. Hitch himself trundled or popped into all his films, like a Renaissance painter glimpsed in a row of heads on the fringes of a fresco, but if you want his authentic voice listen to Thelma Ritter as she gazes across the courtyard at Raymond Burr’s apartment: “He better get that trunk outta there before it starts to leak.”

What is at work here is something more intricate than comic relief; Hitchcock is not merely relaxing the viewers before he cranks them up again. One of the disarming morals of his movies—even of such a grim and hunted work as “The Wrong Man”—is that it’s fun to be cranked; to watch someone take a wrong turn or to see Vera Miles glance curiously at the cell door in “Psycho” is not to congratulate yourself on your own safe path but to get into your imaginative stride, to follow the victim or the sucker as far as you conceivably can. Film has eroded the stony Aristotelian principle that pity and terror become tolerable at a decent distance—say, at twenty yards from the stage. The movie screen flattens that aplomb and sucks the viewer in; what is more, as Hitchcock knew, we can even be invigorated by our helplessness. If Aristotle had ever checked into a motel and taken a shower, he would have felt the same.

Hitchcock himself was an inveterate traveller, and his movies take us along for the ride. He even maintained a sturdy devotion to the monumental (Mt. Rushmore, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, the British Museum), though whether that makes him a corny tourist or an imperturbable satirist is hard to tell. The finest way to travel in a Hitchcock picture, however, is not by car or plane, or even, as with Robert Donat, on the outside of a train, but by staircase. Stairs are a beginner’s guide to vertigo; they lead to the nursery and the cell alike, and they show how far the heart and the nerves can stretch within your own home. In Hitchcock’s case, they lend grandeur to his fretful loftiness; his first film, “The Pleasure Garden,” kicked off with chorus girls descending a staircase, and his penultimate film, “Frenzy,” left a murderer at work and politely withdrew downstairs and out into the Chaplinish hubbub of London streets. Is that retreat an evasion of the tragic, or does it sport a sinister comedy of its own? Is a devotion to the cause of pure cinema a way to grace the world with order, or a flimsy front for the privately perverse? “Nothing leads more certainly to perfect barbarity,” wrote the poet Paul Valéry, “than an exclusive attachment to the pure spirit.” A hundred years after his birth, we have yet to decide whether Alfred Hitchcock held the sufferings of others in contempt or whether the amused cool of his gaze makes him as indispensable a modern artist as de Chirico, Bacon, or—the director’s own favorite—Paul Klee. Our only reliable evidence is the movies; beyond that, the lonely fat boy disappears from sight.