

FILM ART

An Introduction/Second Edition



McGRAW-HILL INTERNATIONAL EDITIONS
Film Art Series

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The Man Who Knew Too Much

1934. Gaumont British Pictures, Great Britain. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Script by A. R. Rawlinson, Charles Bennett, D. B. Wyndham Lewis, Edwin Greenwood, from an original idea by Charles Bennett and D. B. Wyndham Lewis. Photographed by Curt Courant. Edited by H. St. C. Stewart. Music by Arthur Benjamin. With Leslie Banks, Edna Best, Peter Lorre, Frank Vosper.

Like *His Girl Friday*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* presents us with a model of narrative construction. Its plot composition and its motivations for action contribute to making the film what a scriptwriter would call “tight.” Moreover, the film also offers an object lesson in the use of cinematic style for narrative purposes. Finally, the film illustrates how narration can manipulate the audience’s knowledge, sometimes making drastic shifts from moment to moment.

Our analysis may begin by noting the obvious. The film belongs to the international intrigue genre, one in which Hitchcock has often worked (recall *Sabotage*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *The Lady Vanishes*, *North By Northwest*, *Topaz*). Following conventions of this genre, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* builds its narrative around flights and pursuits, mysteries, and assassinations, both accomplished and thwarted. What we should consider is how these familiar elements of the genre are treated in the film’s unique narrative pattern.

We have seen in Chapter 4 (p. 86) that a narrative built around a mystery demands that the plot (the order and duration of events as they are presented to us) omit or delay revealing many important events which occur in the story (the causal-chronological series of events). Often a mystery in a narrative occurs when the plot withholds important events from our knowledge. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* contains such a mystery: what is the plan of the spy ring headed by Abbott? It is not until far into the film that we learn that the spies plan to assassinate a foreign minister during a concert at the Albert Hall. What occupies our interest before this revelation is the couple Bob and Jill Lawrence, whose daughter, Betty, is kidnapped by the spy ring in order to prevent the parents from telling the police what they know. The plot follows Bob and Jill in their investigation and search for Betty, delaying the information about the assassination until Bob learns of it. When the mystery is solved, plot interest shifts to whether or not the assassination will succeed.

It is instructive to observe how the narrative’s three major sections smoothly link plot events together. The beginning of the film gains its unity primarily through following the family on vacation in Switzerland. As the family participates in various sports (skiing, skeet shooting) and relaxation (the dance), the major spies are introduced: the leader Abbott, Nurse Agnes, and the rifleman Ramon. The plot abruptly shifts when Louis is shot on the dance floor and Bob runs to his room. There Bob finds the mysterious slip of paper in Louis’s shaving brush (Louis has been a British spy trailing Abbott’s gang). When it is evident that Bob also “knows too much,” Ramon kidnaps Betty.

A rising sun and “Wapping G. Barbour Make Contact A. Hall March 21st”—the code of Louis’s message—becomes a “map” for the second major portion of the plot, guiding Bob and Uncle Clive in their search for Betty in London (Fig. 10.1). As in *His Girl Friday*, each scene leaves a cause dangling at its end, which the next scene hooks into and continues. In Wapping they find George Barbour, the dentist, and while there Bob sees

Fig. 10.1



Abbott and Ramon. Bob and Clive follow the spies to the Tabernacle of the Sun (decorated with the sun symbol on Louis's note), where Bob notices a ticket for the Albert Hall (the "A. Hall" of Louis's note) and Clive escapes to phone Jill. Thus Louis's note functions as a narrative device to unify the investigation section of the plot.

The final portion of the film resolves the two major narrative issues: the assassination and the kidnapping. At the Albert Hall, Jill thwarts the assassination attempt. At the gang's hideout in the Tabernacle, the shoot-out between police and spies culminates in the recovery of Betty. All mysteries are solved, all issues resolved; with the death of Abbott the plot is completed.

To the conventional pattern of spy films, though, is added another line of action: that of family unity broken and restored. In Switzerland the Lawrences are already an uneasy group: Jill and Bob both playfully threaten Betty; Jill calls Betty Bob's "brat" and teases him with remarks about her "other man," Louis. But when Betty is kidnapped, the family is thrown into genuine turmoil—best presented by Jill's swirling mental subjectivity before she faints. The plot now gains *two* complementary protagonists, Bob and Jill. The moment Louis is killed, they begin to cooperate. The dying Louis whispers, "In the brush . . ." to Jill; she relays the message to Bob, who goes to search Louis's room. Early in the investigation Jill's role is passive (she waits by the phone), while Bob, with Clive's help, searches for Betty. But after Bob is captured by the gang, he occupies the passive role, and Jill goes to the Albert Hall to thwart the assassination. By the end of the film, Bob and Jill cooperate in saving Betty. Bob frees Betty and leads her onto the roof, and from across the street Jill's rifle bullet saves Betty from Ramon. The final shot of the film appropriately shows Betty lowered from the roof into her parents' arms: an image of the reunified family. The presence of two protagonists here should remind us that a narrative's hero is less a single character than a functional *role* that can be filled by one or more characters. (Hitchcock seems fond of this pattern; in *Psycho* different characters at one point or another occupy the role of the inquiring protagonist.)

The unity of the plot of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* is also enhanced by more specific devices of motivation, narrative balance, and closure. Actions are motivated by characters making appointments that forward our interest to subsequent scenes or (as in *His Girl Friday*) by the establishing of deadlines; Louis's note names a specific date for the visit to Barbour's dentist office, and even the assassination of Ropa must be executed at precisely the right moment. The forward drive of the plot is also enhanced by Hitchcock's abrupt but functional (and motivated) transitions. A mention of Ramon leads to a cut to Ramon in the next scene. The word "kidnapped" propels us into a shot of a train, a toy belonging to Betty; her uncle plays with the train as he discusses the kidnapping with Betty's mother.

A web of more specific motifs also holds the film together. Betty is identified with the little skier pin that her mother gives her, so that at the Albert Hall, Ramon can remind Jill of Betty's danger simply by giving the pin to her. Barbour is associated with the spies' activities by the tooth image; Betty says of Ramon: "He has many too many teeth," and the first shot of the sequence outside Barbour's office shows us a huge row of teeth in close-up. Characters are tagged by repeated motifs, so that Hitchcock can obliquely suggest the presence of a character: Ramon is associated with his sleek, slicked-down hair; Abbott, with his pocket watch and its chiming tune.

Finally, it is worth paying attention to the careful paralleling of events. The most outstanding examples involve the shifting relations between Jill and Ramon. In Switzerland, when she competes with him in the skeet shoot, Abbott's well-timed watch chimes distract her and she loses the match. But this loss is compensated for in two parallel scenes. In the Albert Hall Jill's scream shakes Ramon's aim, and he merely wounds the ambassador. She is thus "paid back" for the match. And, in the final shoot-out, when the police dare not fire at Ramon for fear of hitting Betty, it is Jill who snatches the rifle and with a single well-placed shot kills him. This last scene is a superb example of a unifying narrative device: it depends on the Switzerland scene (which establishes Jill as a crack shot); it parallels that scene (Jill gets the second shot she should have had at the match); and it resolves the major issue (Jill's marksmanship saves Betty). Such tidy narrative construction is surpassed only by the *very* neat echo between the film's first and last lines of dialogue. At the ski match, Bob asks, "Are you all right?" and in the final scene, Jill tells Betty, "It's all right . . . it's all right."

Such unity is worth looking at microscopically, if only briefly. The most celebrated scene in the film is the aborted assassination in the Albert Hall, for here editing, camera work, and sound function to present and withhold crucial narrative information. The narration alternates between giving the audience a greater range of knowledge than the characters have and making the audience less knowledgeable than the characters. Here we cannot analyze in detail the 90 shots in the scene; we shall simply point out some features which we hope will tease the viewer into closely examining this very instructive bit of cinema.

Narratively, the sequence operates on two levels. First, it juxtaposes what is happening during the Albert Hall concert with the gang's listening to that concert over the radio. Here, the familiar technique of crosscutting functions efficiently; shots of the concert are juxtaposed with shots of the gang listening in their hideout. We start, then, in an omniscient position of knowledge. Moreover, the presence of the radio permits the sound of the concert (the "Storm Cloud Cantata") to continue over each spatially discontinuous cut, so that continuity of duration is maintained and the momentum of the music is allowed to build. We know that Ramon is to assassinate Ropa at a *fortissimo* passage in the piece (earlier, Abbott "rehearsed" the climactic portion for us and Ramon with the aid of a phonograph). The gang, like ourselves, constantly expects the *fortissimo* to come, but only Abbott and Ramon know the exact moment. Thus editing and sound, which juxtapose the gang with the hall, increase our suspense as to when the shot will be fired.

Around Jill inside the Albert Hall, though, Hitchcock constructs another point of narrative interest. Here film style and narrative form seek to present her growing awareness of the assassination attempt through *subjective* devices. Hitchcock presents both perceptual and mental subjectivity; he depicts only what Jill can see or know, and he externalizes Jill's thought by means of cutting and cinematography. For example, eyeline-match editing and subjective or point-of-view camera position inform us when she is scanning the hall, watching Ropa or the police, and thinking of Betty (in the latter case, we get this series: a shot of her looking down/shot of the little skier pin in her palm/shot of Jill looking up).

As the sequence approaches its climax—emphasized by more rapid rhythms of music and editing—Hitchcock boldly begins to play with the image through shifts of focus. Jill looks up through her tears (Fig. 10.2); then the blur (Fig. 10.3) fades to white (Fig. 10.4), and the muzzle of a rifle



Fig. 10.2



Fig. 10.3

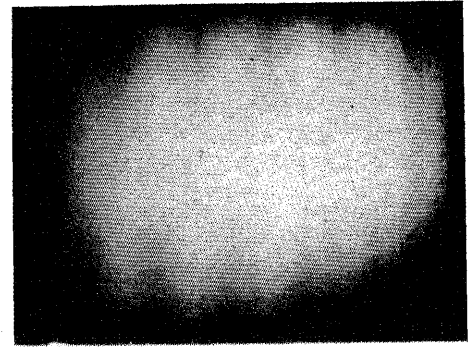


Fig. 10.4

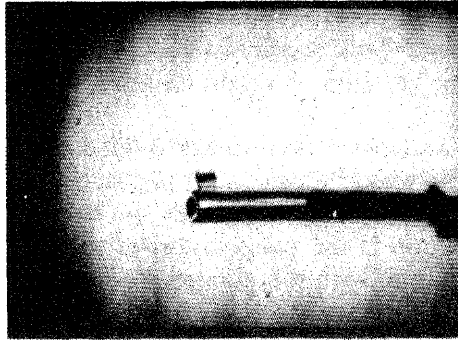


Fig. 10.5



Fig. 10.6



Fig. 10.7

pokes into the shot (Fig. 10.5). The series closes with Jill's new knowledge of the situation, registered by her looking across to Ropa's box seat (Figs. 10.6 and 10.7). The dissolving of the blur to a white background for the rifle represents both the optical and mental movement of Jill's attention at the very moment that she realizes what is to happen in the Albert Hall. These shots bring to maximum intensity the sequence's attempt to present the action through Jill's eyes and mind. (Contrast this with *His Girl Friday*, which seldom utilizes subjective techniques.)

But this is not yet the climax of the sequence. After presenting Jill's realization that the assassination is about to occur, Hitchcock cuts very rapidly among Jill looking, Ropa's box, the gun muzzle, and instruments of the orchestra poised for the *fortissimo* passage. Hitchcock now postpones revealing crucial narrative information. He cuts back to the gang at the Tabernacle, Jill's scream continuing over the cut (just as the concert had at earlier moments). Then, while we are still watching the spies listening to the radio, we hear the crucial *fortissimo* chord that was to conceal Ramon's shot. By showing us the gang, Hitchcock momentarily delays our learning the outcome of Jill's action. Our superior range of knowledge has vanished. A few shots later, we see Ropa wounded in the arm, but it is not until the next scene that we learn that Ramon's aim had been shaken by Jill's scream. In this climactic moment, then, editing and sound have worked together to keep us in suspense as to the outcome of the action.

Almost every scene in the film repays this kind of scrutiny. Other important instances of sound, camera work, and editing in relation to narrative occur in the scene of Louis's death and the final shoot-out. The visit to George Barbour makes remarkable use of silence and unbalanced compositions for narrative suspense, and in the Tabernacle scene an old woman amusingly uses the sound of the organ to drown out the din of a fistfight. In such ways *The Man Who Knew Too Much* remains a model of narrative and style working smoothly and economically together.