The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock
by Steven Jacobs

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To say that Alfred Hitchcock designed his sets to tell and not just support stories would be an understatement. Beginning as a set designer himself, this famous thriller *auteur* redefined the idea of filmic space. In his best-known one-set films (*Rope*, *Rear Window*, *Dial 'M' for Murder*), spaces are locked and unlocked, sometimes by hidden keys, sometimes by the glances and gestures. But, even in other films, much of the story takes place within single buildings that trap or challenge the subject. In *Rebecca*, the young second Mrs. De Winter (whose own name we never learn) finds herself in what Jacques Lacan would call a "treasury of signifiers"; the house becomes the tomb or, worse, the fragmented corpse of the not-totally-dead first wife. Similarly, the mission tower in *Vertigo*, the modernist Vandamm house, the urban courtyard in *Rear Window*, and other architectural constructs are not simply backdrops for drama. They are the body for the soul a filmic imagination that moves beyond the story's diagesis to speak directly to audience anxiety.

Steven Jacobs, an art historian who has been teaching film history and theory at various schools in Belgium and the Nederland and a former member of the Ghent Urban Studies Team carefully scoured such sources as the Hitchcock Archive in Los Angeles and the British Film Institute to create both a theoretical overview and detailed account of Hitchcock as an architect. The result is a handbook that compiles relevant Hitchcock scholarship, reconstructs key set designs, and offers useful critical advice.

Picky readers will take issue with the text's generous supply of misspellings and Euro-English phrases. And, although other critics have often made the same mistake, *Rear Window*'s main character "Jeff" Jefferies deserves to get his name spelled correctly after going to the trouble of displaying it on his leg cast early in the film. This will not mar the main usefulness of the book as a research tool. Although there are over three hundred articles and books that one could regard as essential Hitchcock reading, Jacobs is good at summarizing and comparing diverse views. His previous writing on the cinematic representations of architecture, cities, and landscapes enable him to situate Hitchcock within multiple, layered contexts.

The book's Achilles heel lies in its full embrace of Michel Foucault's idea of the gaze. This is the gaze of the subject who, even unconsciously, deploys vision as a means of power and control. Principally a male gaze, it is at its most notorious when reducing women to objects of desire or holding entire populaces hostage to the potentials of surveillance. Todd McGowan (*The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*, 2007) has argued that even "Lacanian" critics such as Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, and Laura Mulvey subscribed in some degree to the Foucauldian gaze, although Foucault's gaze was the exact reverse of Lacan's. Rather than a component of

subjective mastery, Lacan's gaze was objective, exterior. It marked the *limit* rather than the extension of the subject's illusion of mastery. Why would this matter?

Foucault's gaze pushes Jacobs to make false comparisons. For example, he is compelled to see *Rear Window*'s nearly spherical set as a one-point perspective and to cast the international news photographer Jefferies as a perverted snoop. Although a heat wave has forced everyone to abandon their "reasonable expectation of privacy," Jacobs compares the courtyard to Bentham's famous prison, the Panopticon. Deploying the Lacanian gaze as an external partial object would suit this lively New York space much better. What better way to show how this collection of artists and working families each struggle with personal limits, a main theme of the film's vignette stories? How else to describe the role of the wedding ring, or the fact that the *resistance* to surveillance constitutes the main discussion topic of Jefferies' girlfriend, nurse, and policeman-friend? Jacobs is no stranger to Lacan, since he even identifies the gaze correctly as the "scopic drive." He is familiar with the components of the Freudian uncanny and terms such as "maternal superego." So, how does he get the direction of the gaze exactly backwards?

Since the same question could be asked of Metz, Baudry, and so many others, it is unfair to single out Jacobs. Instead, a question immediately comes to the reader's mind: what would a Hitchockian architecture handbook be like if it corrected this key issue? Certainly, the famous Victorian pile in *Psycho* would have to be reframed in light of the Lacanian question that Nadir Lahiji wittily posed, "What do buildings want?" This engages the role of interpellation: the subject's volunteered intimidation in the face of architecture and landscape's perceived "mandates." (Remember Thornhill's remark in *North by Northwest* when looking at Mt. Rushmore: "I think Teddy Roosevelt is looking at me!") It would be even more refreshing to find the (Lacanian) themes that Hitchcock seems to have discovered first: the wrongly accused as being "between the two deaths"; the wrong man as a case of anamorphosis (as clearly indicated in a scene in *The Wrong Man* where Hitchcock morphs Manny's face with that of the real criminal); the metonymized "subject in pieces" that constitutes the hysterias of such famous Hitchcock characters as Richard Hannay (*The 39 Steps*), the second Mrs. De Winter, and of course Roger Thornhill — none of them voyeurs, all of them *not wishing to be looked at*. Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar, Michel Chion and others have in fact filled out most of this wish list; and, to Jacobs' credit, he has cited nearly all of them.

Jacobs' welcome details about scholarly sources, art directors, set designs, and historical notes possibly over-ride these issues. But, given that Jacobs is, in northern Europe at least, a television personality, the hope would be that even if the wrong man is in the wrong house, someone will get the gaze right.