

I suppose the proper way to begin a piece on the enjoyment of fear would be to prove that such a thing exists. Can fear be enjoyable? Or even pleasant? I was discussing this point with an old friend not long ago.

"Fear," he said, "is the least pleasant of all emotions. I experienced it when I was a boy, and again during both wars. I never want my children to experience it. I think it entirely possible, if I have anything to say about it, that they'll live their entire lives and never know the meaning of the word."

"Oh," I said, "what a dreadful prospect!" My friend looked at me quizzically. "I mean it," I went on. "The boys will never be able to ride a roller coaster, or climb a mountain, or take a midnight stroll through a graveyard. And when they're older—" my friend is a champion motorboat racer—"there'll be no speedboating for them."

"What do you mean?" he asked, obviously offended.

"Well, now, let's take the speedboat racing, for instance. Can you honestly tell me that the sensation you get when you cut close to a pylon, on rough water, with a boat riding close on one side and another skidding across in front of you, is anything but fear? Can you deny that a day on the water without fear, without that prickly sensation as the short hairs on your neck rise, would be an utter dead failure? It seems to me that you pay lots of money a year for fear. Why do you want to deny it to your sons?"

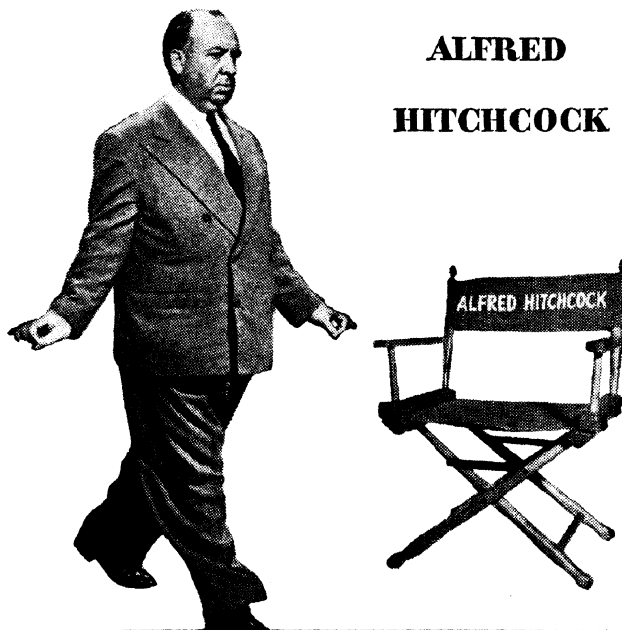
"I'd never thought of it quite that way," he said. And he hadn't.

Few people have. That's why my statement, made in all sincerity, that millions of people every day pay huge sums of money and go to great hardship merely to enjoy fear seems paradoxical. Yet it is no exaggeration. Any carnival man will tell you the rides that attract the greatest clientele are those that inspire the greatest fear. It is self-evident that the poloist, the steeplechaser, the speedboat racer, and the fox hunter ride for the thrill that comes only from danger. The boy who walks a tightrope or tiptoes along the top of a picket fence is looking for fear, as are the auto racer, the mountain climber, and the big-game hunter.

And that is only the beginning. For every person who seeks fear in the real or personal sense, millions seek it vicariously, in the theatre and in the cinema. In darkened auditoriums they identify themselves with fictitious characters who are experiencing fear, and experience, themselves, the same fear sensations (the quickened pulse, the alternately dry and damp palm, etc.), but without paying the price. That the price need not be paid—indeed, must not be paid—is the important factor. Take, for example, one of the classic fear situations: the legendary, though now sadly obsolete, circular bandsaw approaching the bound and gagged heroine. If this distressing contretemps were to exist in real life, the emotional experience of the helpless young woman as the saw approached would be anything but pleasant. Even if one merely viewed a real person thus jeopardized, it would be most displeasing. The suburban matron whose eyes all but pop out of her head with ecstatic excitement as she watches the cinematic blade approach the cinematic neck would no doubt faint dead away if she encountered a similar situation in her home. Why, then, does she enjoy it in the movies?

Precisely because the price will not be paid and she knows it. The saw will never reach its intended target. The plot may, and indeed should, indicate that the heroine's rescue is totally impossible. But deep in the subconscious mind of the spectator is the certainty, engendered by attendance at similar dramatic works, that the totally impossible will occur. The hero, though we have just been made aware that he lies unconscious at the bottom of a pit, surrounded by rattlesnakes, boiling oil, and (Continued on page 241)

BY  
ALFRED  
HITCHCOCK



# The enjoyment of FEAR

*Most people like to have the daylight's scared  
out of them. Actually, there's a reason  
for it. A Hollywood expert explains it*

## The Enjoyment of Fear

(Continued from page 39)

the smell of bitter almonds, will appear in time to reverse the action of the saw and trap the villain. Or the saw will break down. Or it will appear that the villain has carelessly neglected to sharpen it—or, if it is an electric saw, to pay his electric bill. Fear and fear not, that is the essence of melodrama. Fear: the saw may dismember the ingénue. Fear not: it won't.

Fear in the cinema is my special field, and I have, perhaps dogmatically, but I think with good cause, split cinematic fear into two broad categories—terror and suspense. The difference is comparable to the difference between a buzz bomb and a V-2.

To anyone who has experienced attacks by both bombs, the distinction will be clear. The buzz bomb made a noise like an outboard motor, and its chugging in the air above served as notice of its impending arrival. When the motor stopped, the bomb was beginning its descent and would shortly explode. The moments between the time the motor was first heard and the final explosion were moments of *suspense*. The V-2, on the other hand, was noiseless until the moment of its explosion. Anyone who heard a V-2 explode, and lived, had experienced *terror*.

Another example, one that has been experienced by most of us, may make the distinction more definite. Walking down a dimly lighted street in the late hours of the night, with no other people about, a person may find his mind playing strange tricks. The silence, the loneliness, and the gloom may set the scene for fear.

Suddenly a dark form thrusts itself before the lonely walker. *Terror*. It does not matter that the form was a waving branch, a newspaper picked up by a gust of wind, or simply an oddly shaped shadow unexpectedly coming into view. Whatever it was, it produced its moment of terror.

The same walker, on the same dark street, might have no inclination toward fear. The sound of footsteps coming from somewhere behind might cause the late stroller to become curious, then uneasy, then fearful. The walker stops, the footsteps are not heard; the pace is increased, so also the tempo of the thin sounds coming out of the night. *Suspense*. The echo of his own steps? Probably. But suspense.

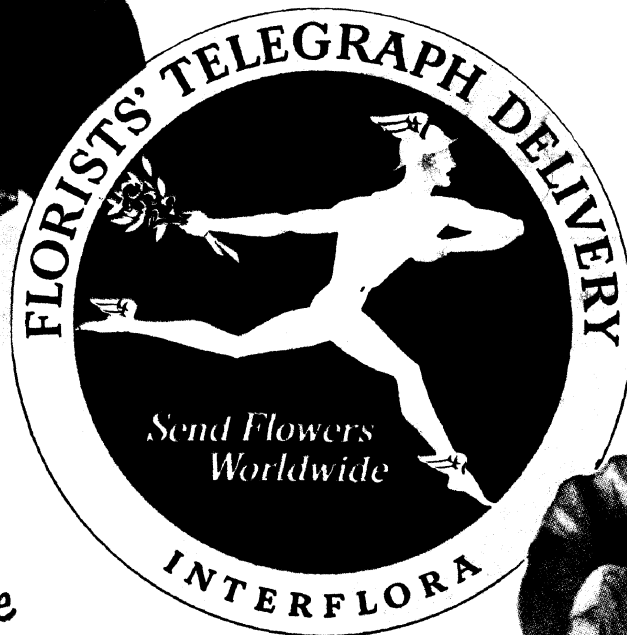
**O**N THE screen, terror is induced by surprise; suspense, by forewarning. Let us suppose, to make all this clear, that our plot is concerned with a married woman residing in Manhattan and engaged in amorous dalliance with a young cad.

The young cad learns that his inamorata's husband is in Detroit on business and immediately proceeds to the lady's apartment. The two are there engaged in activity as compromising as the censors will permit. Suddenly the door is flung open. There stands the enraged spouse, gun in hand. Net result: terror. There is no suspense whatsoever in the sequence, for the possibility that the husband might be in the vicinity was never hinted by the lovers, and the audience, identifying itself with them, must share their shock at the husband's entrance.

Now, how could we play that incident

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1 pound hamburger  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
1/4 tsp. black pepper  
1 (8-oz.) can tomato sauce  
1 cup water  
1 tps. chili powder

Add beans to 6 cups of warm water in a large saucepan and let soak several hours or overnight. Do not drain. Add 2 tps. of the salt, cover, and place over low heat to boil gently.

While the beans are cooking, take a good-sized skillet and put the oil or bacon drippings in it. Then add the chopped onion and fry for 5 minutes over low heat. Next, put the hamburger into the skillet along with the garlic and cook, stirring so as to break up the meat, until it browns lightly (this will take about 15 or 20 minutes). Add remaining 1 tsp. salt, pepper, tomato sauce, water and chili powder.

Now stir this mixture into the partially cooked beans. Cover and continue simmering 2 hours, or until beans are very tender and sauce is rich and thick; stir occasionally to prevent sticking. Makes plenty for 10 hearty servings.

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if we wished to create not terror, but suspense? Remember our rule: terror by surprise, suspense by forewarning. Very well, we begin with the two lovers in the hotel room. The husband, we learn from the less personal fragments of their conversation, is presumed by them to be in Detroit. Then we see the husband alighting from an airplane. But what is this? This is not Detroit, but New York! For the benefit of those who are not familiar with the two airports, we incorporate a significant glance at an identifying sign at the airport or, perhaps better, at the license plate of the cab as the husband gives the address of the hotel.

Now back to the two lovers. Note that, in this telling, the audience cannot identify itself with the lovers, because the audience knows what the lovers do not, that the husband is on his way and may trap them. But the audience cannot identify itself with the husband either, for the audience knows what he, poor fellow, only suspects: his wife is unfaithful. Now we go back and forth between the lovers and the husband. They continue their lovemaking. The husband alights from his cab. The cad straightens his tie and prepares to depart. The husband begins to mount the stairs. Will he arrive in time? Will the cad make good his escape? What will happen if he does not? These are the questions that the audience asks itself, and whether or not the husband arrives in time, a suspenseful situation has been created.

It is obvious from the above that suspense and terror cannot coexist. To the extent that the audience is aware of the menace or danger to the people it is watching—that is, to the extent that suspense is created—so is its surprise (or terror) at the eventual materialization of the indicated danger diminished. This poses a pretty problem for the director and for the writer of a motion picture. Shall the terror be diminished to enhance the suspense; or shall all suspense be eliminated by making the surprise complete and the terror as shocking to the audience as to the fictional participants?

The terror-suspense dilemma is normally resolved by compromise. There are several situations in a motion picture; the ordinary, and I think best, practice is to play most of the situations for suspense and a few for terror. Suspense is more enjoyable than terror, actually, because it is a continuing experience and attains a peak crescendo-fashion; while terror, to be truly effective, must come all at once, like a bolt of lightning, and is more difficult, therefore, to savor.

HOWEVER, one conflict in making pictures in which fear is a major element cannot be compromised. That is the conflict between the validity of the plot and situations and the implied guarantee given the audience that it shall not "pay the price" for its fear. To the roller-coaster operator this is a simple problem; it means that, although in appearance the ride must be as terrifying as possible, it must, in reality, be completely safe. The pleasant fear sensation experienced by a roller-coaster rider as the car approached a sharp curve would cease to exist if he seriously thought for one moment that the car might really fail to negotiate the curve. The audience at a motion picture is, of course, entirely

safe from that point of view. Though knives and guns may be used on the screen, the audience is aware that no one out front is going to be shot or stabbed. But the audience must also be aware that the characters in the picture, with whom they strongly identify themselves are not to pay the price of fear. This awareness must be entirely subconscious; the spectator must know that the spy ring will never succeed in pitching Madeleine Carroll off London Bridge, and the spectator must be induced to forget what he knows. If he didn't know, he would be genuinely worried; if he didn't forget, he would be bored.

What all this amounts to is this: as the audience-sympathy for a character is built up, the audience assumes that a sort of invisible cloak to protect the wearer from harm is being fitted. Once the sympathies are fully established and the cloak is finished, it is not—in the audience opinion, and in the opinion of many critics—fair play to violate the cloak and bring its wearer to a disastrous end. I did it once, in a picture called *A Woman Alone*. One of the characters was a small boy, with whom the audience was encouraged to fall in love. I sent the boy wandering about London with what he supposed was a can of film under his arm, but what the audience knew full well contained a time bomb. Under this set of circumstance, the lad is protected by his cloak from premature explosion of the bomb. I blew him up anyway, along with several other passengers on a bus he happened to be riding.

Now, that episode in *A Woman Alone* was a direct negation of the invisible cloak of protection worn by sympathetic characters in motion pictures. In addition, because the audience knew the film can contained a bomb and the boy did not, to permit the bomb to explode was a violation of the rule forbidding a direct combination of suspense and terror, or forewarning and surprise. Had the audience not been informed of the real contents of the can, the explosion would have come as a complete surprise. As a result of a sort of emotional numbness induced by a shock of this kind, I believe their sensibilities might not have been so thoroughly outraged. As it was, the audiences—and the critics, too—were unanimously of the opinion that I should have been riding in the seat next to the lad, preferably the seat he set the bomb on.

THE END

## What Breaks It Up?

(Continued from page 33)

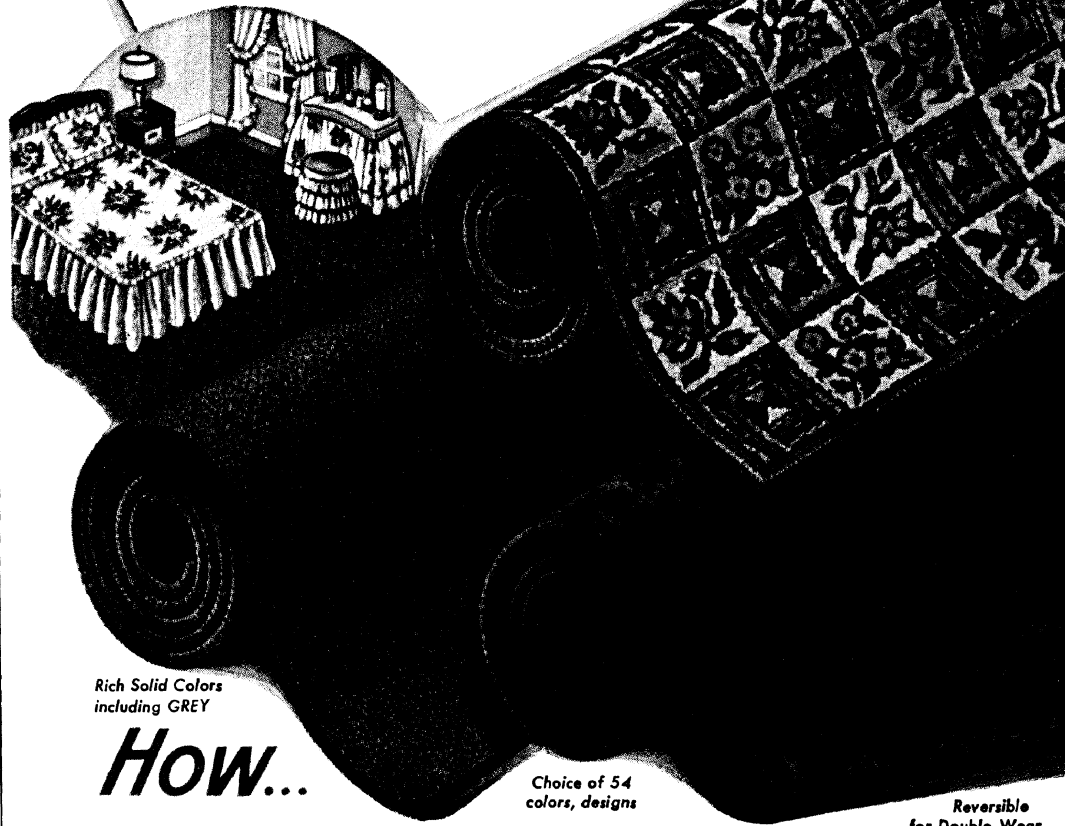
this magazine may be a handful who have something constructive to say. This is an invitation, extended at the suggestion of the Editors, to mail to me, in care of the magazine, any comment you'd care to make on the subject. The idea is to find some notions worth setting forth in these pages that will serve as a partial answer, at least, to the question that started this off.

American couples aren't so happy as they should be. For all our conveniences, our higher standards of living, we're not doing well emotionally. What will help youngsters now getting married to lead better adjusted, more satisfying lives?

Can you think of a problem that's more important to solve?

THE END

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