

DECODING HITCHCOCK'S "THE LADY VANISHES"

The regained logic, seated on the train of female command

1. PLOT

"The Lady Vanishes" is an Alfred Hitchcock film from 1938 shot in London.

It was made in a studio 90 f. long, Islington studios, with one coach and the rest in perspective.¹

The screenplay, written by Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launder, is an adaptation of the novel *The Wheel Spins* (1936) by Ethel Lina White.

Iris (Margaret Lockwood) is a young Englishwoman returning to London from Bandrika, a small mountain village in the Balkans, to rejoin her fiancé and celebrate their wedding. During her stay at the hotel and the subsequent train journey she comes into contact with an elderly lady, Miss Froy (Dame May Whitty), who mysteriously disappears during the trip. Iris searches for her persistently, despite the passengers, in a sort of collective gaslighting, denying they ever saw her and branding her a mad visionary. It later emerges that some passengers are in fact agents of an international espionage network who have kidnapped and gagged Miss Froy, who is revealed to be a British spy. In this resilient quest for the truth, Iris finds an ally in a young expert in folk music (Michael Redgrave). Together they follow the clues and trace Miss Froy, who had been gagged and hidden as a patient of a neurologist informant. After the discovery of the kidnapping an armed clash breaks out among English passengers, informers and border police. Taking advantage of a moment of confusion, the two succeed in freeing Miss Froy from the train. Once in London Iris flees with her new lover, leaving her fiancé at the station. The new couple immediately go to the Foreign Office and there discover that Miss Froy is alive and has already delivered the message that had been encrypted in a little musical motif.

2. CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

In 1925, with the opening of the first Paramount theatre in London and the founding of the London Film Society, British film culture experienced a crescendo of popularity and diffusion.

Well, first of all you've got to remember that the early days of english films, they were rather looked down upon by the english intellectuals and definitely no well-bred english would be seeing going into the cinema, very unusual for the lords and the ladies of the land to be seen in a movie house. You see there's a class consciousness, then eventually a few people started to emerge and go to the movies from London society when Paramount opened the Plaza theatre where they had a small four rows of seats in a mezzanine which was very expensive and they used to call it "Millionaires' row". Now, around the period of 1926, -25 when I first started to

¹ Alfred Hitchcock, *Hitchcock-Truffaut, Episode 7*: "Young and Innocent", 1937; "The Lady Vanishes", 1938; and "Vertigo", interview by François Truffaut, Hollywood, 1962, YouTube video uploaded by French Moviegoer, June 12, 2016, 19:12–19:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytrc-j4mww>. Transcription by author from audio.

direct, up to that point the english films had been very mediocre kinda of a rusted type of film they were made mostly for local consumption. They were very bourgeois people making them. Around 1925 or 26 the young men, certain young men from the universities, mostly Cambridge, began to take an interest in cinema, all the intellectuals began to take an interest in it, largely through the foreign films, the russian films, the way back when Clair made *The Italian Straw Hat* and so a cult grew up, from these young men from the universities who began to filter into the business.²

It is implicit that, in parallel, the awareness of the importance of this medium brought about the need to adopt codes capable of disseminating systems of national and strategic values and meanings.

In the United Kingdom, between 1936 and 1938, the policy of appeasement prevailed, aimed at avoiding a new conflict through concessions and negotiations with Nazi Germany. The period was also marked by the affair of the three kings: the death of George V (20 January 1936), the abdication of Edward VIII (11 December 1936) and the accession of George VI (12 December 1936). In that circumstance Princess Elizabeth found herself first in line to the throne, assuming a central role in the dynastic continuity of the British monarchy.

This frame returns us to the film's context, where an ambivalent but clearly conflictual gaze of the United Kingdom towards Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy is manifested. That tension concentrates in the fictitious territory of Bandrika, which in the film is plausibly assimilable to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

This deduction is based on the dialogue in which Miss Froy, at dinner with the two English friends who are cricket enthusiasts, alludes to the town's geographical location. The evocative image of the "snow hats," coupled with clearly defined family roles, seems to point to a hierarchy that more closely resembles the structure of a kingdom than that of a single state.

In the six years I've lived here, I've grown to love the country, especially in the mountains. I sometimes think they're like very friendly neighbours. You know, the big father and mother mountain with their white snow hats, and their nephews and nieces, not quite so big, with smaller hats, right down to the tiniest hill, without any hat at all.³

The film also contains ambiguous references to people who sing, probably alluding to espionage practices and mechanisms of secret communication (singing as confessing). The entire narrative is indeed constructed around the musical metaphor of the encrypted message, concealed in a simple, catchy motif. Singing, presented as a quotidian and joyful practice, creates a social cover that conceals confidential information; music thus becomes both mask and means of transmission.

² Alfred Hitchcock, *Hitchcock-Truffaut*, Episode 8: "Assessment of British Period: Cinema in England and the US" interview by François Truffaut, Hollywood, 1962, YouTube video uploaded by French Moviegoer, June 14, 2016, 11:30–15:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSTvnN_s4Ss. Transcription by author from audio.

³ *The Lady Vanishes*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (United Kingdom: Gainsborough Pictures, 1938), 14:47-15:06. Transcription by author from film.

Do you hear that music? Everyone sings here. The people are just like happy children with laughter in their lips and music in their hearts.⁴

The two codes, the sound and musical code of the motif and the code of the hat, the latter probably used here to underline the double role at the professional border between spy and cover, reappear at the beginning of the film, when the English cricket adventurers are lying in bed reading the newspaper. In this sequence, at the moment when the German maid enters the room to remove her hat, one of the two begins to whistle and, once she has left, complains about the lack of privacy. The allusion very likely suggests counter-espionage. In this way the film binds the code of the hat to the sound code of the motif, reinforcing the network of signs that point to the secret and political dimension of the affair.

3. FEMALE FIGURES AND DEVICES OF POWER

The character of the elderly Miss Froy can be read, in psychological terms, as the future mirror of the young Iris: not a mere generational counterpart, but an internalized model of responsibility and rationality. She is a desexualized figure in the cinematic register, represented as old and devoid of erotic connotations. This choice accentuates her role as guardian of the State and of the common good: her apparent fragility conceals a moral firmness that Iris progressively makes her own.

The transformation of the protagonist is therefore not only narrative but psychological: the young woman, thanks to her tenacity and lucidity, moves from private aspirations to a political subjectivity, internalizing the hierarchy of priorities that Miss Froy represents.

In dialogue with the masculine, the feminine configures itself as a device of rational power, while the masculinity of the companion assumes a more instrumental and protective function, linked more to material execution than to strategic direction.

The musician, played by Michael Redgrave, is the embodiment, in character, of the military apparatus, an executive and coercive function at the service of sovereignty.

Although, from the point of view of the film text, the camera lingers at several points on scenes of intimacy and of the gynaeceum, filming the friends in the hotel room and thus evoking the concept of voyeurism and Laura Mulvey's male gaze⁵, the primary narrative outcome is nevertheless not the protagonist's conjugal celebration.

Iris's objective, like that of the couple formed on the train, is achieved through the recovery of an international treaty. This outcome clearly distinguishes this film from the contemporary Hollywood screwball comedies, where the plot's higher-level plan is achieved predominantly through marriage or a private goal circumscribed by the domestic or familial sphere.

⁴ Ibid., 15:15-15:25.

⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>

While it is true that the screwball heroine usually enjoys sexual and social freedom, the narrative nevertheless develops within the precincts of marriage or remarriage (Cavell 1984) in an upper-class scenario (see Pravadelli 2007).⁶

On the subject of marriage Iris also explicitly comments in this brief monologue:

I've no regrets. I've been everywhere and done everything. I've eaten caviar at Cannes, sausage rolls at the dogs. I've played baccarat at Biarritz and darts with the rural dean. What is there left for me but marriage?⁷

This monologue functions as an ironic synthesis of screwball logic: marriage appears as the socially prescribed conclusion after an experience of freedom. In the film, however, that conclusion is called into question and ultimately overturned on ethical grounds: the narrative resolution does not confine itself to sentimental recomposition but shifts toward a public and political outcome: the recovery and transmission of a national interest, thereby invalidating the traditional function of marriage as the ultimate end of the female protagonist's story.

⁶ Veronica Pravadelli, "Cinema and the Modern Woman," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 15, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470671153.wbhaf033/full>

⁷ *The Lady Vanishes*, 09:42 - 10:00.