First Experiments with Sound: Blackmail and Murder

Hitchcock's use of sound in Blackmail and Murder is important in three respects. As historical documents they represent Hitchcock's first major experiments in combining sound and image in ways that would not subordinate pictures to dialogue. As films that extend Hitchcock's expressionistic interests into the sound era, they reveal Hitchcock's earliest efforts to use aural techniques to convey a character's feelings. In addition, Blackmail already establishes Hitchcock's predilection for integrating music and sound effects with plot and theme, and it introduces most of his favorite aural motifs. Both films are interesting historically, but Blackmail is the more successful work of art because its aural techniques and motifs are an integral part of a stylistic whole.

Blackmail's aesthetic integrity is all the more remarkable given the uncertain circumstances under which it was produced—circumstances that are frequently misreported in film histories. Despite its reputation, Blackmail was not technically the first British sound feature, although it was immediately hailed as such.¹

Another frequent misconception about Blackmail is that Hitchcock had the honor of being assigned specifically to make the first sound film for Britain. In fact, the situation nearly paralleled the production of the first American full-sound feature, Lights of New York (1928), which Bryan Foy secretly directed as a 100 percent talkie and then handed to Warner Brothers before they wanted to commit themselves to a full-length talkie.² British studio executives were as uncommitted as their American counterparts about converting to total synchronism. According to Rachel Low, "In April 1929, B.I.P. announced that they had a temporary sound studio fitted up with R.C.A. Photophone and that their forthcoming film Blackmail would have a dialogue sequence." Hitchcock's assignment was to synchronize only the last reel for speech. Once again a director took a chance that studio executives would not have authorized. "It began as a silent picture, but I had made preparations so that dialogue could be added. The completed product proved a great surprise to the late John Maxwell, who was then head of the company. He had expected the dialogue to be confined to the last reel, as a 'special added attraction.'... I like to remember all the studio executives were pleased. They advertised it as a '99 per cent talking picture.'³

It is still not certain how much Hitchcock was able to plan in advance for sound scenes. His own versions of the story vary from telling to telling. He told Truffaut that, anticipating that Blackmail might be releasable in full sound, he shot it silent in such a way that a minimum number of synchronized talk scenes would have to be reshot when he did indeed get permission to add sound. "We utilized the techniques of talkies, but without sound. Then, when the picture was completed, I raised objections to the part-sound version, and they gave me carte blanche to shoot some of the scenes over.⁴

That explanation differs from one he gave a reporter in 1950: "I shuffled the script a bit, saving the good scenes until the last, and then shooting them all in sound. That way, the sound sequences were spotted all through the film, like raisins in a bun, and the company didn't realize what I was doing."⁵ Neither description does justice to how well the dialogue sequences are integrated into the film as a whole. To appreciate his achievement one need only compare Blackmail with other films to which sound was added after they were first filmed as silents. These are called "goat-gland" talkies because the addition of dialogue sequences was expected to give them a shot of new vitality. Typical of the disastrous results of adding static synchronous sound sequences to otherwise fluidly shot silent pictures is Paul Fejos's Lonesome (1928), which juxtaposes nonsynchronized passages of Murnau-esque lyricism and
fluidity with embarrassing patches of superfluous, static dialogue. There is some unevenness but no such equivalent schizophrenia in *Blackmail*.

Hitchcock’s descriptions of the filming do not explain how he was able to conceive a shooting plan that produced a film that was highly effective in the silent version that was also released and yet was also so exemplary in its use of sound that its knife sequence (discussed below) is still, over half a century later, the most often cited example in film history of the use of nonrealistic sound in a narrative film. Chabrol and Rohmer, who had both silent and sound versions available for comparison, have said that the only sequence completely different in each version is the seduction. In the silent version the artist simply approaches the girl slowly and leaps at her. The sound version replaces that approach with the more gradual excitation of the artist after he initiates the seduction with a provocative song.7 For all of the other sequences Hitchcock was able to retain much of the silent footage.

It is in part the makeshift and transitional circumstances of the filming that allowed Hitchcock to use sound with a flexibility and creativity that distinguished it from other early sound efforts. *Blackmail* was not only a popular hit but it was immediately claimed as a *succès d’estime* for both Hitchcock and the British film industry to the extent that, as Rachel Low puts it, “for a while any criticism of the British film was expected to collapse at the mention of *Blackmail*.”8 It even won over many of the numerous film critics of the period who were still arguing that a film should be seen and not heard, that sound would kill the art of film. Admiration for *Blackmail* is expressed in nearly every theoretical essay on the possibilities of asynchronous sound written throughout the thirties by leaders of the British documentary movement.9

Yet, famous as it is for its use of sound, *Blackmail’s* admirers have rarely mentioned any specifics except the expressionistic tours de force—the knife sequence, the overloud doorbell, or the merging screams. From a historical viewpoint, however, *Blackmail* is just as unique in its treatment of dialogue. A close look at the dialogue sequences shows that the film belies almost every truism written in standard histories about the use of sound in the transitional period from 1928 to 1930. For example, whereas films of the period supposedly always showed the speaker because producers thought that the audience must see the source of sound, Hitchcock very often has the speaker offscreen. Whereas films were supposed to have been photographed in long master shots (because sound could not be cut), Hitchcock only does so three times. Whereas cameras and people were supposed to have remained immobile, Hitchcock moves his characters and his camera during synchronized sequences.

To be sure, the truisms, though not completely accurate, do describe the normal techniques of synchronized shooting in the first two years of sound. It is true that exceedingly bulky cameras were placed in stifling hot soundproof booths, sardonically called “ice boxes.” It is true that multiple cameras were used because it was not possible to edit sound and picture separately. Film histories rarely acknowledge, however, that it was possible, for almost any given technique, to achieve the effects possible now.10 The limitations were of time, money, and imagination even more than of technical capability. It was possible to move the camera (by putting the booth on wheels), to substitute voices for the characters who appeared to be speaking (as Hitchcock did in *Blackmail* by substituting Joan Barry’s voice from offscreen for the thick-accented Anny Ondra’s), even to edit sound after it was recorded (although this process resulted in a loss of fidelity because it required an extra loss of one generation from the original footage). In most cases primitive shooting methods were used because the more elaborate measures needed to circumvent them would have slowed down production prohibitively—unless they were restricted to cases of great need. Moreover, the primitive techniques—the mere sound and sight of people talking—so delighted audiences with their novelty that to go to any special trouble was an artistic indulgence not required commercially. If historians offer different versions of who first invented the microphone boom or put the “ice box” on wheels, that is partly because innovations in technique often occurred simultaneously in several studios (in Hollywood and England). Contrary to legend, innovations often spread overnight from studio to studio. The early directors and technicians were
discovering new technical possibilities and solutions every day in their field, and most of them openly shared their discoveries at first.

Blackmail is almost a compendium of the silent and sound styles of shooting dialogue. In the first reel, the only one to remain unsynchronized, there are two interrogations of an arrested man. The first is cut using a master shot and a few cutaways. The second makes use mostly of reverse angles of the antagonists. The phrases are articulated so clearly in the latter sequence that lips can be read and there is no need for titles. The first two synchronized scenes—a conversation between three people in the police station lobby and an argument scene at a restaurant—are also filmed primarily in master shot, with a few unsynchronized reaction and insert shots. These are the exceptions, however. Most dialogue scenes move the camera away from the speaker, either by dollying in on a detail or by panning to a listener. (Blackmail has several pans of up to thirty degrees in synchronized scenes. Although these are also not supposed to have been technically feasible until blimps were invented, limited pans can be seen even in the first program of Vitaphone shorts publicly screened in 1926.)

Certainly, Blackmail has its stilted moments, especially in speech delivery. Even the better actors at the time were hampered by the need to speak distinctly for the relatively insensitive microphones. However, Hitchcock also includes several scenes where dialogue is intentionally incomprehensible—a daring device at the time. In the first-reel scene when two policemen come off duty, dialogue is added for the first time, but not synchronization, and we are supposed to get merely the gist of their conversation. Surely, the fact that one actress had to mouth the words perfectly while another delivered them offscreen affected the rhythm of the heroine’s dialogue. Durgnat suggests that this accident of production added vulnerability to the girl’s character: the “sparse, faint restraint of delivery expresses lostness rather than stiff upperlip.” There is also a classic moment of stilted character movement parallel to the infamous barbershop sequence in Lights of New York (1928), in which one is able to identify the location of the microphones. The artist (Cyril Ritchard) pours a drink at one location and, while speaking, moves to the center of the room, where he pauses artificially to wipe his hands as he delivers another line to a concealed microphone. However, Hitchcock follows this shot with a clever ploy. When Ritchard continues across the room Hitchcock switches to a reverse angle of the shot so that we hear the artist speaking as we follow behind him. John Ford in the same year (The Black Watch) had also discovered the advantages of having speakers walk away from the camera in order to add motion to a dialogue sequence.

It might be argued that Hitchcock’s avoidance of “talking heads” is not a virtue, but a necessity prompted by the desire to add sound after the silent version was made, while reshotting as little as possible. Yet Hitchcock uses offscreen sound that is relevant to his content. Furthermore, although he may not have worked out all the sound details in advance, he did have to anticipate where he would need extra shots when he was not showing the speaker. Primarily, he appears to have concentrated on filming extra shots of the heroine, Alice. (These shots cannot properly be called cutaways; they are much better integrated graphically than most cutaways.) The decision was appropriate inasmuch as most of the film is designed to reveal her feelings. One frequent purpose of offscreen dialogue is to contrast the girl’s emotions with the unawareness of other characters. This contrast occurs in the knife sequence, and later when her boyfriend (Frank) and her harasser (Tracy) blackmail and counterblackmail each other. Showing the girl while the man’s conversation continues offscreen emphasizes her emotional exclusion from the other characters. Hitchcock also begins here a use of nonparallel cutting to create tension between characters. For example, Hitchcock’s villains often confront their victims in public locations where nonparticipants can hear, but under circumstances in which the villain has some hold over the victim so that he cannot outwardly object. In Blackmail, Tracy, having first revealed his possession of Alice’s glove to Frank and Alice, continues to threaten them by having Alice’s father find him a cigar. Hitchcock makes certain that we do not miss the significance of this first extortion—Tracy has Frank pay for the cigar—by cutting most of this scene to emphasize the helpless glances of the couple, Frank’s confidently neutral expression, the father’s obliviousness. The father asks the girl to climb a ladder to return the cigar box to
its shelf, and the girl leaves the frame she shared with the blackmailier. The camera stays on him long enough for him to start saying, “Pity about the poor man around the corner having died last night,” and before he has finished the sentence the camera has panned over to the girl up on the ladder. She climbs down and moves toward him as he finishes speaking, and the effect of the timing of his offscreen words and her onscreen actions is to suggest his power over her, as if she is drawn back to him by his words.

If Hitchcock conquered the dialogue problem in *Blackmail*, he did not even bother to put up a fight in his next film, *Sean O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock* (1930), in which he directed the prestigious Irish Players. Hitchcock probably felt inhibited by the effort of reproducing a distinguished production of a famous play. Although the film was well received at the time, Hitchcock himself felt unenthusiastic about it because he “could see no way of narrating it in cinematic form.” Critical consensus has since concurred with Hitchcock's opinion that it reveals little of the director's personal style. By 1930 the technicians in charge of recording generally had dominated the entire filming process, and Durgan suggests that Hitchcock, like most directors then, suffered from a lack of creative control: “For once Hitchcock the redoubtable technical thinker was unable to impose himself.”

Later in 1930, Hitchcock filmed another adaptation, *Murder*, which was based on the play *Enter Sir John* adapted from the novel of the same name by Clemence Dane. Although Hitchcock was again working on an adaptation and facing great technical limitations, *Murder* is clearly a personal work, which in every scene shows the director's efforts to work creatively with sound despite the abundance of dialogue. Because Hitchcock had to adapt *Blackmail* for sound after much of it was shot and he felt inhibited by *Juno and the Paycock*, *Murder* can be considered the first feature in which he had the freedom to experiment with the problem of avoiding “canned theater”—René Clair's derogatory term for the religiously filmed literary adaptations so prevalent at this time.

Hitchcock was working against difficult odds. He was filming simultaneous versions in German and English, and he was still facing great technical limitations. Cameras were placed in booths, and it was not yet possible to mix sound (except while shooting).

He told Truffaut, “We shot with four cameras and with a single soundtrack because we couldn't cut sound in those days.” The property he was filming also had disadvantages. The subject involved little action, in part because the murder takes place just before the story begins. Nor is there much suspense. As Hitchcock himself has pointed out, *Murder* is a whodunit, a film working toward an intellectual solution, rather than a suspense story provoking the emotional involvement of the spectator. In short—the film is mostly talk. It concerns a famous actor (Sir John Menier) who sits on a jury that convicts an actress (Diana Baring) of killing another member of her company. Sir John becomes convinced retrospectively of her innocence, and he tries to solve the murder himself. Eventually, he finds out that the girl has been protecting her fiancé by withholding the evidence that he was a “half-caste.” Hitchcock injects emotional involvement into the screenplay by developing the suggestion in the original novel that Sir John is acting more out of an unacknowledged love for the girl than for any purer motives of seeing justice triumph. However, except for a short coda, there is really only one scene in which Sir John and Diana confront each other, and his growing involvement with the girl—and consequent jealousy of the unknown man she is protecting—must be established indirectly.

The script requires a trial (which Hitchcock condenses through a complicated montage of sound and image) and jury deliberations that entail a thorough analysis of the issues. Because the deliberation scene is the longest and talkiest scene (much of the dialogue is taken verbatim from the novel), it was also the most challenging, and the viewer can sometimes feel Hitchcock straining to enliven it. One scripting solution was simply to try to make each juror come alive in the short time onscreen, a technique Hitchcock would more successfully utilize in *The Thirty-nine Steps* (1935), wherein he clearly and amusingly delineates character-types just from the nature of their questions to Mr. Memory in the opening music-hall sequence.

The deliberation scene is a first statement of three major techniques that Hitchcock would use to minimize the shooting of talking heads during the rest of his career: camera movement, non-parallel editing of dialogue, and deep-focus sound. The scene is
set up so that the jurors are seated on the outside arc of a table that forms two thirds of a semicircle, with the foreman in the center chair and Sir John at one extreme. At the start of the scene the camera pans past eleven of the jurors while the foreman summarizes the arguments. Later the camera pans away from the foreman in one direction and then swings past him and pans the other way. In neither case does the camera movement work. The jurors are not quite distinctive enough visually for us to learn something new by watching them one by one. Furthermore, Hitchcock deliberately stops short of revealing Sir John. (If this is a game Hitchcock is playing with his viewers, then Hitchcock can be accused of cheating.) There are some remarkably expressive camera movements during dialogue sequences elsewhere in Murder, but here in the deliberation scene they are belabored.

Much more successful is Hitchcock's nonparallel cutting of dialogue and image. He rarely ends a shot of a person speaking at the precise moment that the person's dialogue ends; he more usually cuts to a second speaker before the first has quite finished speaking. In parallel cutting the simultaneous aural and visual cuts reinforce each other so that we notice them; thus shock is generally created through parallel cutting, whereas smoothness and continuity are created by overlapping. The nonparallel editing of aural and visual tracks is thus a crucial general principle for the cutting of all sound film. It is now quite common to anticipate a visual cut by a few frames while a line of dialogue is ending, in order to avoid the static feeling created when sound and image are cut simultaneously. However, today's choices can be made in the cutting room, whereas Hitchcock had to make decisions before shooting. The preparation of the next shot took a special effort on Hitchcock's part because the sound and the image had to be recorded on the same piece of film. It is possible in watching Murder to distinguish between those nonparallel transitions Hitchcock deliberately filmed in separate shots and those in which he chose to move to another camera's view of the same take. There is usually a change in tone quality between different shots because the art of sound had not advanced to the point of matching voice tone or room tone from shot to shot. In either case, once Hitchcock has identified voices with the faces of those who speak, he feels no need to cut back to a

speaker later in the scene. What might have been considered a mere expedient in Blackmail is thus confirmed here as a deliberate choice.

Hitchcock's experiments with nonparallel cutting anticipated by half a decade a technique that did not become popular in the industry until the mid-thirties, once editors were fully comfortable with sound Movietoneas, "rubber numbers," and re-recording techniques. The viewer can see in the films of the late thirties rival schools of thought between editors who believed in nonparallel cutting and those who preferred the cleaner if more static parallel style of cutting. In 1937 Hitchcock himself wrote: "This overrunning of one person's image with another person's voice is a method peculiar to the talkies; it is one of the devices which help the talkies to tell a story faster than a silent film could tell it, and faster than it could be told on the stage." The viewer can see in the films of the late thirties rival schools of thought between editors who believed in nonparallel cutting and those who preferred the cleaner if more static parallel style of cutting. In 1937 Hitchcock himself wrote: "This overrunning of one person's image with another person's voice is a method peculiar to the talkies; it is one of the devices which help the talkies to tell a story faster than a silent film could tell it, and faster than it could be told on the stage."20

Murder's deliberation scene ends with a form of deep-focus sound that completely eliminates talking heads. The camera stays in the deliberation chambers after the jurors exit. We hear the verdict, the death sentencing, and the defendant's last words while we watch a janitor cleaning up after the jurors. The effect is to lessen our interest in the reaction of the accused girl and to heighten our awareness of the responsibility of the jurors for her fate. The decision to stay outside of the room when a verdict is read emphasizes the impersonality and heartlessness of the trial, and Hitchcock uses the technique for similar effects as late as Frenzy, when another innocent defendant is sentenced to death.

In contrast to this important visual evasional, Hitchcock's use of aural deep focus elsewhere transforms what might have been a pedestrian piece of exposition into the densest scene of the film. As the police interrogate the manager and cast backstage during a performance, we can hear and sometimes see bits and pieces of the play being performed. All the plays and references to productions in Murder are connected to the "actual" events of the film. Indeed, a basic thematic issue is the connection between life and art and the question of which imitates which. (There is a play within the film called "Nothing but the Truth," and Sir John's method for revealing the truth is to have the man he suspects as the murderer act out a murderer's role in a supposedly fictitious play Sir John has
partially written on the assumption that the play will reveal the conscience of this particular villain.) In the backstage scene, while the police conduct their investigations, we hear clapping and laughing for the farce being presented onstage that parallels and comments on what is happening offstage. We also learn that many of the characters are playing roles in the farce that have their correlates in the actual lives of the troupe. In *The Thirty-nine Steps*, Hitchcock also uses aural and visual deep focus to present offstage and onstage actions simultaneously. As Mr. Memory lies dying in the wings, we hear and see a chorus of female dancers onstage. In the later film, however, the deep focus is used more for contrast (the show goes on while one performer dies) than for parallels.

Whereas in later films Hitchcock would continue to use camera movement, nonparallel editing, and deep-focus techniques to enliven dialogue scenes, he soon rejected two other sound innovations that he first tried in *Murder*: a rhythmic chorus and improvised dialogue. Hitchcock uses the rhythmic chorus near the end of the deliberation scene to suggest how the other jurors pressure Sir John as the last holdout for the defendant’s innocence. Hitchcock creates a sense of their steamrolling by shooting as if from Sir John’s point of view and turning the jury into a chorus whose rhythm accelerates as the opposition unites. Sir John answers the objections of the various other members of the jury until a pattern starts to set in both in the cutting and in their language: their words are eventually reduced to the question: “Any answer to that, Sir John?” Hitchcock builds in phrases and shots of three as the jurors gradually gang up on the actor, and finally even the question is tripled to: “Any answer, any answer, any answer to that, Sir John?” Such contemporary directors as Lubitsch, Clair, and Mamoulian were using similar rhythmic choruses, but only in fantastic genres. Hitchcock’s use of the rhythmic chorus to express a character’s point of view is an unusual application of the trope. But the stylization is so extreme that there is little sense of audience identification with Sir John.

The improvised dialogue in *Murder* is a particular surprise coming from a director whose method calls for the utmost control over every element of the production, with every aspect preplanned before shooting begins. In retrospect it is easy to understand why he was unhappy with the results: “I also experimented with improvisations in direct sound. I would explain the meaning of the scene to the actors and suggest that they make up their own dialogue. The result wasn’t good; there was too much faltering. They would carefully think over what they were about to say and we didn’t get the spontaneity I had hoped for. The timing was wrong and it had no rhythm.” One sequence that is most likely improvised is that in which the theater company first find Diana and the victim and try to explain to a policeman what they know. As Hitchcock says, the rhythm is awkward. However, as a result there is some overlapping dialogue in the sequence. (Overlapping dialogue—the merging of one character’s line before a prior speaker finishes—is a sound practice that *Citizen Kane* is supposed to have popularized but that can be found in many newspaper and gangster films of the early thirties.) It feels quite naturalistic in *Murder*; in a few other scenes where characters start to speak at the same time, they actually acknowledge the overlapping, as one of them defers verbally to the other. Hitchcock used overlapping dialogue in later films—but in more controlled situations. In *Shadow of a Doubt* the mother’s introduction amid the overlapping voices of her family helps characterize her lack of control over events and people.

The technique for which *Murder* is most often remembered is the interior monologue, which Hitchcock claims is the first in film history. (No one to my knowledge has disputed his claim.) In Hitchcock’s career it is important as a manifestation of the director’s desire to move inside a character’s mind and reveal his thoughts and feelings. Hitchcock’s expressionistic impulses are somewhat stymied in his English films by the limitations on technical resources, which force him to become minimally dependent on mise-en-scène. In his American period the use of lavish tracking shots somewhat furthers his wish to explore physical depths that correspond to psychological depths. Meanwhile, in the thirties he is more dependent on inexpensive means of penetrating surfaces; sound is a chief device of creating subjective experiences—a device that reaches its height of development in *Secret Agent*.

By the time Hitchcock had made *Murder* he had already experimented with his two main options for using sound subjectively: the
interior monologue, as in Murder's shaving sequence, and the distortion of exterior sounds to suggest how they impinge on a character's consciousness, as in Blackmail's knife sequence. He would eventually settle on the impingement of the external world as the preferred choice, and even that technique would soon become subtler, less of a stylistic flourish, less expressionistic. Ultimately, by switching from the distortion to the intrusion of exterior sounds, he would find ways of creating the same effect in the more realistic style of his American films.  

Both Hitchcock and his critics seem to have forgotten that Murder has two interior monologue scenes rather than one. The forgotten scene takes place in the heroine's jail cell. The camera moves inside Diana's cell as a small door rises like a curtain going up. Then, as the camera stays on the face of the actress, we hear her imagining the play's performance and the stage manager's giving instructions to her absence. This situation, in which a character's stream of consciousness is presented as a series of voices, prefigures the projection of voices by a person driving alone in Psycho and One More Mile to Go. In the later two films the interior monologues are necessary to the characterization of the persons doing the thinking. In Murder, Diana's interior monologue, though fascinating historically, is gratuitous aesthetically because Hitchcock otherwise shows little interest in exploring the heroine's character or motivation. Perhaps that is why the scene has universally been forgotten.

By contrast, the interior monologue in the shaving sequence further Hitchcock's central point in Murder that Sir John is acting more out of amorous than moral motives when he becomes newly convinced about Diana's innocence and decides to find the real murderer. To prepare us for the penetration of Sir John's psyche Hitchcock gives us a series of stills that progress inward architecturally. The sequence is the first at Sir John's lodgings, and it begins with five establishing shots, three of doors, which not only suggest the actor's wealth and his isolation from the outside world but progressively move us into the most private part of his house, the bathroom. From there the only more interior location is within his head. The scene is photographed so that we see the back of Sir John's head as he shaves, his face in the mirror, and a radio to his right. His lips do not move. At first he hears speech on the radio, an announcement about a police SOS that prompts him to associate the phrase "Save Our Soul" with Diana. This intellectually initiates the stream of consciousness. From then on the radio is used as a form of scoring (in a film that is ostensibly limited to source music). An orchestra plays the "Liebestod" from Tristan und Isolde, and Sir John's thoughts have been carefully timed so that Wagner's high points emphasize the emotional highs of the interior monologue, the love motif suggesting that Sir John's motives involve feelings for the girl that he does not yet admit to himself. Herbert Marshall as Sir John delivers the monologue in his distinctive, characteristically passionate, rhythmic phrases. Sir John leaves the radio music going when he finishes shaving and moves into an adjacent room for the next scene, in which he speaks to an assistant. Because the love theme is still playing, we realize that during these transactions he is thinking more about Diana than about the business at hand. It might be expected that interior monologues would represent Hitchcock's filmmaking at its most subjective because what we hear is a character's stream of consciousness. There is no suspicion that the thinker is editing his thoughts as there might be if he were narrating them (narration implies a listener for whom the speaker might be distorting the truth for emotional or aesthetic reasons). But oddly enough, Hitchcock's monologues usually serve as exposition (albeit of a person's thoughts). Although the monologues do represent a character's exact thoughts, they do not convey his feelings. In Murder we hear Sir John's thoughts about saving Diana, but it is the radio's performance of Tristan und Isolde that conveys the emotions. Similarly, in Psycho an interior monologue presents conscious thoughts while unconscious motivations are suggested through other means. As Marion drives away with stolen money, she imagines the reactions of her employees and sister when they discover the crime the following Monday. The voices are a reasonable representation of what might occur; Marion's thoughts are quite rational. But her behavior (her continuing attempt to escape after her flight has been witnessed) is irrational. Her paranoia is conveyed less by her thoughts than by the shots of rain on the windshield through which we can see successively closer
and more intense shots of her eyes. Similarly, in *Four O’Clock* thoughts are presented through an interior monologue while feelings are presented through editing and sound effects. For most of this television film the protagonist is alone, gagged, and tied to a pipe—while waiting for a bomb to go off. During the man’s interior monologue, the emotional intensity is conveyed most strongly through the rhythm of the shots and the intensifying close-ups and ticking of the clock to which the bomb is attached. Even in the television film *Breakdown*, whose totally paralyzed hero communicates to us through an interior monologue for most of its twenty-three minutes, the most intense communication is reserved not for language but for a tear. Hitchcock simply does not trust language as a major way of conveying feeling; the need for more honest means of communicating feelings is both the message and the method of *Breakdown*. Thus, the Hitchcockian interior monologue is paradoxically a counterpoint to rather than an expression of feeling.

The interior monologue in *Murder* also has a visual analogue. While Sir John is conducting his investigations he occasionally thinks of the meals he is missing, and on such occasions Hitchcock provides a shot of a table set with food. In later films Hitchcock would avoid this holdover from silent films—the depiction of a thought removed in time and place from the main action. To be sure, Hitchcock would come to depend greatly on subjective shots, but not on such physically displaced ones. His discarding of the displaced visual is analogous to his discarding of the interior monologue. Both are subjective extremes so disruptive to narrative continuity, that although they are intellectually clear, they cut off emotional involvement; like the rhythmic chorus, their presence distances us emotionally, and that is not the kind of subjectivity Hitchcock sought in the long run.

The interior monologue as a means of getting inside a character’s mind in *Murder*, then, is not altogether satisfactory on three counts: it does not really convey underlying emotion, it does not involve the audience, and it is grafted onto a film that is otherwise quite different in style. By contrast, the solution of showing how exterior sounds impinge on a character in *Blackmail* has become a much more integral part of Hitchcock’s style. Specifically, Hitch-
other characters is when a knife flies out of her hand. Commentators have always treated the episode as an isolated gimmick, but the knife sequence as a whole should be seen as the culmination of a larger movement to which Hitchcock has been building since the murder. The scenes showing Alice’s retreat from the artist’s rooms and her subsequent wanderings through the streets have each used one or more of the elements that coalesce in the knife sequence. To recognize that preparation, one must first be aware of the specific elements of the knife sequence, which through cutting, camera work, and sound is carefully constructed to build up to its climax. The sequence occurs while Alice is eating breakfast with her parents. In the doorway leading from the breakfast parlor to the father’s shop stands a gossip who is talking about the previous night’s murder. 26 Alice’s parents go about their business and do not pay much attention to the gossip’s neighbor. Hitchcock’s cutting shows that the guilt-ridden Alice is already more sensitive to the woman’s speculations about the murder. As the gossip’s speech becomes more graphic, Hitchcock suggests Alice’s increasing sensitivity by panning from the girl to the chattering neighbor: “A good clean whack over the head with a brick is one thing. Something British about that. But knives—[the camera pans back to Alice] knives is not right. I must say I could never use a knife.” At this point the camera, having ended the pan on a medium-close shot of Alice, cuts to a close-up of her. Thus Hitchcock has already emphasized the word knife with his camera work, first by panning on the word to Alice, then by cutting in closer when the word is repeated. The gossip continues: “Now mind you, a knife is a difficult thing to handle...” From here on in her dialogue becomes almost abstract: it alternates between a blur of nonwords and the word knife five times. From offscreen the father says, “Alice, cut us a bit of bread, will you?” and the camera tilts down to Alice’s hand approaching the knife (which looks just like the murder weapon). We hear knife five more times now, in the gossip’s voice, at a fast pace, with the intermediate words eliminated. On the sixth repetition the word knife is screamed, and the actual knife seems to leap out of Alice’s hand and fall to the plate.

Having begun the sequence by showing others in the room with Alice, Hitchcock then intensifies it visually by progressively clos-

First Experiments with Sound

ing in on her. The camera work shows cause and effect, stimulus and reflex, by tracing a path from the gossip’s talking face to the girl’s head and then to her hand. There is also a progression in the representation of Alice’s attention. At first Alice pays attention to the gossip speaking and hears words objectively. Then, while we still hear with her objectively, the word knife is emphasized through visual means. Next the word is selected from the rush of words until it is isolated from its context. Finally, Hitchcock increases the volume of the word to emphasize the subjectivity of the moment, still further matching the visual intensity of the close-up with the aural intensity of the loudness.

The subjective sound in the knife sequence thus entails a combination of restricted hearing and distortion. Each of these techniques has been introduced earlier in the film in association with point of view. At the very start of the synchronized part of the film (Alice’s meeting with Frank at Scotland Yard), Hitchcock calls our attention to the role sound will play by introducing a very obvious case of restricted hearing. Hitchcock makes us notice it by intentionally annoying us with it. A guard whispers something to Alice that neither we nor Frank hear. She laughs, and then Frank laughs lamely, as if to minimize his exclusion from the little game. At this point in the film the girl is behaving unreasonably about Frank’s lateness for their date, and it is almost the last time we will see or hear something from Frank’s viewpoint. Even here any sympathetic identification between the audience and Frank is minimal because the action is not seen from his perspective; he is as deep in the frame as the other two characters, and no subjective cutting is used. Nevertheless, we identify aurally with him because we share his frustration at not hearing the whispered joke.

The connection between restricted hearing and a character’s point of view is a little stronger in a scene outside the artist’s home. The artist and Alice are about to enter the front door when Tracy, who has been eavesdropping on their conversation, asks from offscreen if he may speak to the artist for a moment. 27 The immobile camera stays on the girl as the artist excuses himself to her. Since her expression is blank and the mise-en-scène very spare, there is nothing for us to do but listen with her. However, all we hear is some mumbling, a loud honk, more mumbling, and then a loud
“no!” The artist walks back into the shot and says, “That chap’s nothing but a sponger. Always bothering people on the street.” Thus the sound here has been presented from the girl’s point of view, although if we are standing where the camera is, we would presumably be as close to the men talking as we were to Alice. Hitchcock has established a correspondence between the framing and the aural limitation of the scene. Yet, oddly enough, the effect of the aural limitation in the shot is to emphasize the visual limitation. We do not yet feel that there has been any distortion of the sound track. Hitchcock was always careful to save any extreme effect (e.g., a close-up or an overhead shot) until he needed it for maximum impact. In this case he saves subjective distortion of the soundtrack until after the murder.

Hitchcock first makes us aware that he is distorting the sound track subjectively when he exaggerates the loudness of bird chirpings to stress Alice’s agitation on the morning after the murder. When the mother enters Alice’s bedroom to wake her, she uncovers the cage of Alice’s canary. Once the mother leaves the room, the bird’s chirping is loud and inarticulate while the girl takes off the clothes she wore the night before and puts on fresh ones. The chirps are loudest, unnaturally so, when she is looking at herself in the mirror, the most “interior” action she performs while dressing. The sound reminds us of the tiny, birdlike jerking that the girl made immediately after stabbing the artist. Just after the knife sequence there is another subjective distortion of sound, when a customer rings a bell as he enters the store. We are in the breakfast parlor, and yet the bell resonates much more loudly than it does elsewhere in the film. The camera is on a close-up of Alice’s face to indicate that it is her point of view, once again, from which we hear.

In a sense the use of bird noises in the bedroom scene should be distinguished from the other techniques mentioned here. Whereas aural restriction and distortion of loudness are related to character point of view, the choice specifically of bird sounds has a particular meaning for Hitchcock independent of the film. This sequence marks the beginning of an ongoing association of murder and bird noises in Hitchcock’s mind that accrues meaning from film to film, from Blackmail and Murder through Sabotage (1936), Young and Innocent (1937), and Psycho, and culminates in The Birds. (All of these instances are discussed in succeeding chapters except those in Murder and Young and Innocent. In both these films the discovery of the murder victim is accompanied by bird screams.)

It should be pointed out that although Hitchcock’s style is known to have been influenced by German expressionism visually, there are even expressionistic precedents from the silent period for his use of words that haunt a character. The expressionists would sometimes show visually that a word was haunting or compelling a character by having the written word float across the screen. In The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919), the words “You must become Caligari” hover in the trees during a scene depicting how an asylum director felt compelled to assume the identity of the original Caligari he was studying. Similarly, Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler (1922) uses the technique in a scene in which Inspector Wenk, under the influence of Mabuse, is being compelled to commit suicide by driving off a cliff. The control word, Melior, which Mabuse used to hypnotize Wenk, is seen as emanating from the distance toward which Wenk is driving up the road, as if it is beckoning him onward.

In Blackmail the haunting by a word is the culmination of a complex interrelationship of words and images. The girl’s association of her guilt with a forearm and a knife has initially been presented visually. During the murder itself there are two images of forearms. The rape and the stabbing take place behind a curtain. During the struggle, the camera tracks in to a close-up of the girl’s forearm reaching out from behind the curtain and finding a bread knife on the table. Eventually, the sound of her cries and the jostlings of the curtain die down to the silence and the stillness of death. After what seems forever (but is actually a second or two), the stillness is broken by another forearm protruding from the curtain. It is upturned as if appealing for rescue. It falls to the same place where hers had found the knife. But this forearm stays there, for it is the arm of the dead man. Only then does the girl back out through the curtain, knife in hand. The visual similarity between the girl’s and the man’s arms has already complicated the issue of who was the attacker and who victim. Both the outstretched arm and the knife images haunt Alice on her walk through London. She sees a traffic cop’s arm, and then she “sees”
is seen from the same angle and set up as Alice confronting the bum. Thus, even the association of the knife in hand and a scream is prepared before the knife sequence.

The above cluster of interrelated audiovisual images (knife, arm, murder, scream, the word knife) is also related to a second cluster that associates the idea of guilt with another hand image and another sound—specifically, a pointed finger of accusation and the sound of laughter. These complex images all coalesce in the very last shot of Blackmail, where the two motifs converge when we see a painting of a pointing clown while we hear the sound of laughter. It is no accident that the figure is specifically a jester, for the painting evokes the Elizabethan jester, whose function was to provoke laughter while revealing truths too unpalatable to be stated without the indirection of parable or art.

The painting is first introduced in the artist’s flat. It was the last painting completed by the artist before his death, and it is in part a surrogate for the man who painted it. When we and Alice first see it in his rooms it seems to represent all dirty old men. Its pointed finger suggests both that the girl is every man’s victim and that she is somewhat guilty of having invited whatever is in store for her by having ascended to the artist’s rooms in the first place. After the murder the painting seems to take on the role of witness as well as accuser, and the girl rips away a piece of it, although not the eyes. There is even the suggestion of a Dorian Gray analogy: although the would-be rapist himself is charming and attractive (he is played by a suave, young Cyril Ritchard), he has externalized his ugly soul into the leering jester. This painting of his true feelings is paralleled by his painting Alice as a nude figure before he persuades her to undress. The possibility that the nude painting expresses her hidden desires as well as his is suggested by the fact that she is actually holding the paintbrush while he guides her hand.

The image of the pointed finger of accusation is used not only in connection with the artist’s death but elsewhere in connection with the blackmailer’s. At one point, while Frank, the girl, and Tracy trade threats and counterthreats, for example, Tracy is heard from offscreen saying, “It’s my word against hers,” and above the girl’s head in the frame—although unnoticed by her—is his forearm with a finger pointing at her. Tracy’s last gesture before falling to his
death in mid-sentence is to point at Frank and say, “It's not me you want, it's him. Why his own...” (Durgnat points out that there are many other hand images. Alice's implicating glove has two missing fingers. During the restaurant scene Frank has offered to give Alice nail scissors for Christmas. And all the principals in the film variously rub their hands together in gestures of guilt, nervousness, tension, or greed.)

The introduction of the painting into the last shot of the film contributes to the irony of the film's conclusion. *Blackmail* ends in the same lobby where Alice first met Frank. She has just confessed to him that she stabbed the artist, and he has prevented her from telling the police. As they enter the lobby, they join the same guard who was on duty the night before when Frank left with Alice. He jokes with them about Alice's having solved the crime and about her replacing Frank at his job (yet another suggested cross-identification of characters in the film). All three laugh, and the camera dollies in on the girl's face to a close-up that excludes the two men. Her laughter is forced. She looks dismayed, as if she notices something. Hitchcock cuts to the painting of the jester. It is a closer shot than we have ever had before, however, so that we do not see the picture frame, and the jester's pointed finger aims straight at us and (according to editing logic) at the girl. While the guard jokes about having "lady detectives," Hitchcock cuts back to the girl and then to the painting, which we see is now being carried through the doors that lead into the prison area. Back to back with the jester painting is the nude caricature of the girl drawn jointly by Alice and the artist. This is the last shot of the film, and the sound beneath it is of laughter, uproarious laughter, which echoes too loudly for the occasion.

Hitchcock emphasizes the importance of the laughter by putting it last in the film—a position that makes it a comment on the whole film—and by separating it from its source—a disembodied that renders it more cosmic. To whom is the laughter attributed? The laughter has a different meaning for each person in the lobby. Hitchcock has prepared us for this ironic tension in the two earlier episodes involving laughter. Both take place in this same lobby and involve different levels of understanding. The first instance of

laughter occurs when Frank meets Alice and the guard whispers something to the girl. As I mention above, Frank joins in the laughter of the girl and the guard even though he does not hear the joke, to minimize his feeling of being left out. The guard, who represents normality, a refusal to notice anything disturbing, is also the person who laughs a second time in the foyer. Alice arrives to confess and tells the guard she wants to see the Chief Inspector about the artist's murder. As she looks out the window, the guard comes up from behind her and says, "And I suppose you're going to tell them who did it." When she answers "Yes," he laughs at what he considers to be the absurdity of her having anything to say about the murder. The guard, of course, is the only one of the three in the final scene of the film whose laughter is completely innocent. Frank is aware of the irony of Alice's displacing him as the detective who solved the case. And Alice realizes that the laugh belongs to the jester in a sense.

The presence of the two paintings as surrogates for the artist and the girl implies that the girl will be haunted by guilt for the rest of her life. The last shot shows her surrogate being incarcerated, even if she is not. The finger of guilt has been pointed at her, and there seems no way for her to alleviate the sense of guilt that makes her so different from the more innocent girl who stood in the lobby the day before. The penultimate shot, a close-up of Alice, isolates for us her fear and discomfiture. It also identifies the last shot as a representation of her point of view. Thus, the distorted laughter is in large part a subjective echo of Alice's feelings—of her sense of exclusion from the two men, of her bitter awareness of the implications of the paintings, of her new understanding of the discrepancies between appearance (three people having a laugh together) and reality (her emotional confusion).

The interpretation of the laughter in the last scene as essentially subjective adds to our appreciation of Hitchcock's control over the film's overall structure. With this in mind, the knife sequence can be seen not only as the culmination of the scenes that preceded it but as a preparation for the final scene. Hitchcock once again, by distorting a sound, separating it from its source, and linking it to recurring visual motifs, has found an aural expression for the girl's
unrelievably guilt that haunts us as much as it does the girl. With such an ironic ending Blackmail might well have been subtitled The Last Laugh.

As I indicated in my introduction, Hitchcock typically has had less control over the music than over the other aspects of production. His use of music in Blackmail reflects his need to observe various conventions and his desire to do something personally creative with the music. It is complicated by the film's midstream switch to synchronized sound, for Hitchcock had to deal both with the silent-film conventions of scoring for live orchestra and with the early talkie expectations that a character would perform a song in synchronism. Manvell and Huntley have claimed that the musical accompaniment of Blackmail "had already been considered on the basis of a 'live' orchestral accompaniment in the cinemas." But if that were true it would seem unlikely that the music of Campbell and Connely, a composer-lyricist team, would have been chosen for the film because songs would not have been required. The scoring may reflect an uncertainty until the last minute about the extent to which synchronized sound would be used. At least one reel of film, that in which a character performs a song that is subsequently used as a motif in the scoring, could not have been conceived for anything but a synchronized sound movie. Manvell and Huntley's statement that "Blackmail offers a recorded example of a silent film score, with only occasional, if interesting, concessions to sound film technique," is certainly true of the first reel. They accurately describe the scoring to the first reel as "an exact version of the kind of sound that used to accompany films in the largest West End cinemas of the late twenties. It is repetitive, naive in content, highly atmospheric and based almost entirely on a simple 'theme and variations' pattern." Musical themes introduced in the first reel do recur later in the film, associated with similar images. (A string agitato theme identified with the image of the spinning wheel comes back both when we see the wheel again and during the Museum chase. There is a central theme arranged for full orchestra that is associated with Scotland Yard, and there is a pizzicato phrase that ascends the scale almost every time a character climbs a flight of steps.) Nevertheless, Hitchcock did manage to assert his personality over the scoring by controlling not

Blackmail. Cyril Ritchard seduces Anny Ondra with a song.

the content so much as the placement of it. Whereas it was typical of the period to use either all music or none, Hitchcock has already hinted at his future style by eliminating scoring under most dialogue sequences and by insisting on silence during most moments of tension.

Hitchcock fared ever better at incorporating the song "Miss Up-to-Date" into his overall style so that its presence is not a mere concession to popular taste. Extraneous songs were being inserted in Hollywood nonmusicals throughout 1929 and 1930, in an age that apotheosized the film that was "all singing, all dancing, all talking." The lyrics place the song in the Hollywood flapper-as-good-girl tradition of such films as Our Dancing Daughters (1928). Yet the lyrics are also central to the moral issues of Blackmail.
“Miss Up-to-Date” is sung by the artist when Alice visits his flat. Before he physically attempts to seduce the girl, he sings and plays the song on the piano in synchronism as she changes into a posing costume. During the song she comes from behind the screen and leans on the piano as he sings directly to her. He tells her that the song is “about you, my dear.” These are the lyrics, so far as they can be made out on today’s prints:

They praise the woman of the past age
And loathe her daughter of this fast age
They sing a hymn of hate about Miss Up-to-Date
And spend their spite from morn till night—

They say you’re wild and naughty child,
Miss Up-to-Date
But who but you could...[unintelligible]
Pretty child, today won’t bother you
It’s such a shame to break that heart of you
Although you’re a dame with a plain-spoken name,
drink a cocktail or two
Why the alarm, there’s really no harm in the
few little things that you do
You’ve a heart of gold, so let them nag and scold
You’re absolutely great, Miss Up-to-Date.

At first glance the song is simply part of a seducer’s repertory; the invitation to “drink a cocktail or two” is realized in the film’s action, and the refrain is repeated much more frenetically on the piano by the artist as his lust grows. The lyrics, however, also introduce the notion that art is based on reality. Like the nude that is drawn as a caricature of the girl, the song projects an image of how the artist envisions the girl, an interpretation of behavior that the girl does not wish to accept. There is the suggestion that the girl’s extreme reaction to the artist’s advances is prompted by the unacceptable image of herself that he has revealed to her.

The use of the song also makes sense in terms of the artist’s characterization. Cyril Richard has been cast for his deceptively charming appearance, and his attempt to seduce the girl first through song rather than force is consistent with his other behavior.

After the murder his song is used to underscore the girl’s sense of guilt. Following the silence of the murder, an orchestrated version of the tune returns dirgelike to the sound track, in a minor key and at half tempo. Throughout most of the girl’s flight the tune haunts the sound track, just as the images of the arm and the knife haunt the visuals. Although the scoring is not actually a projection of her thoughts as are the subjective shots of her visual hallucinations, the music is nevertheless, as scoring often will be for the rest of the sound era, an extension of her emotional state, especially when it is heard in a piano version. The melody continues throughout her trek through London and finally is wiped out, as it were, by the scream that ends the sequence. The fact that the music associated with the artist is connected with his more appealing nature makes its repetition all the more accusatory, like the outstretched arm. It is probably no accident that at the very end of the film, when the artist’s painting is being carried into the prison, the orchestral arrangement that swells over the logo is the last line of “Miss Up-to-Date,” adding further irony to an already ambiguous ending.

“Miss Up-to-Date” is not the only song in the film. During the restaurant scene the main tune played under the quarrel that precipitates the girl’s leaving with another man (the artist) is “Girl of My Dreams,” a love song sung by a man whose girl has left him. Although the source is not shown, the music is presumably being played live because we hear clapping between numbers. In keeping with Hitchcock’s mischievous humor is another tune, which the blackmailer whistles after he has conned the couple into providing him with a free breakfast: “The Best Things in Life Are Free.” Moreover, Tracy’s whistling is no random effect. Two other men whistle: the artist, while he pours Alice a drink, and the detective, while he searches the artist’s flat. The effect of the parallel actions among the three characters is to suggest that there may be a moral parallel among them as well.

I have mentioned two instances in which Hitchcock has suggested that art mirrors life: Alice finds her guilt reflected in both the artist’s song and his paintings. Again, this is no isolated motif. Hitchcock frequently draws on art to comment on life. In some cases, such as the above, he stresses the close connections between life and art. In others, he contrasts the timelessness of art.
with the ephemerality of human existence. In *Blackmail* Hitchcock develops these issues in terms not only of music and painting but of architecture, sculpture, and even motion pictures.

The film’s climax is a chase through the British Museum. Hitchcock emphasizes three aspects of the Museum: its size, its sense of entrapment, and one Egyptian sculpture, all three of which comment on man’s fate. When the blackmailer first enters the building, the shots are angled so as to make him look insignificant next to the imposing columns of the facade. Interior shots are chosen for their geometric and mazelike quality. A high-angle shot of the reading room, especially, with its spokelike diagonal passages leading to a series of concentric circles, identifies the idea of entrapment with the recurring images of circles that range from the film’s first shot of a spinning wheel (on a police van) to the dome of the Museum. The one display in the Museum singled out specifically is an enormous stone face of Nefertiti, past which the blackmailer drops on a rope that seems as slender as his chances of escape. Larger-than-life sculptures of heads—the Statue of Liberty and Mount Rushmore—also witness the descent of characters in the finales of *Saboteur* (1942) and *North by Northwest* (1959). The sight here of the implacable visage of the aged stone queen is directly preceded by a shot of the face of a very anxious Alice. Indeed, the entire chase in the Museum is intercut with shots of Alice back home, as she decides to write a confession note to Scotland Yard that would free Tracy if she were to act in time. The crosscutting therefore functions partly for suspense. Moreover, it reminds us that it is she whom the police should be chasing—and that if Tracy is caught, he will surely tell this to the police. However, the juxtaposition of the girl’s face with that of the queen also suggests that Alice is tampering in a godlike manner with the fate of another human being.31

All three of Hitchcock’s favorite aural motifs (silence, screams, disdain for language) appear as early as *Blackmail*, in varying degrees of cohesion with the rest of the film. One motif—the disdain for language—seems almost gratuitous.32 It can be seen in a short comic-relief sequence in which the artist’s maid reports the murder to the police. The episode, a comedy of miscommunication between maid and policeman, is shot as a phone call with the

---

**First Experiments with Sound**

Woman on the top left of the screen and the policeman on the right bottom:

- Policeman: Who did you say it was?
- Woman: Mr. Crew.
- Policeman: Mr. Who?
- Woman: No, Mr. Crew, I tell you. It’s ’orrible.
- Policeman: All right, don’t you worry. I’ll send someone around right away. What number did you say—seven or eleven?
- Woman: Thirty-one.
- Policeman: Thirty-one.
- Woman: What?
- Policeman: Thirty-one, I said.
- Woman: No, no! Thirty-one.

There is little other evidence in the film to suggest that this is a serious statement on the inadequacy of language. At any rate, the sequence is less significant for its meaning than as an example of the freedom with which Hitchcock could treat language in an era when dialogue was usually considered sacred.

On the other hand, Hitchcock’s treatment of silence is central to the moral issues of *Blackmail*. One of Hitchcock’s major themes in the sound era is that a character’s silence—that is, not speaking—can be a symptom of moral paralysis.33 Alice, Frank, and Tracy all exhibit this behavior to some extent. Alice’s delay in not reporting the murder is responsible for Tracy’s death, and Frank is at least as guilty because he tries to prevent her from speaking. Indeed, Alice and Frank are frequently at odds about when she should talk and
when she should be quiet. In their first scene together Alice punishes Frank for being late by giving him the "silent treatment." When Frank later confronts her with the implicating glove, the girl grabs his hands but is unable to speak. Finally, Frank yells out in frustration, "For God's sake, say something!" During the confrontation between the blackmailer and the couple, when Frank blackmails Tracy in turn, Hitchcock emphasizes the girl's silence by showing her face while we hear the men talking offscreen. Tracy sees that she is having a struggle of conscience and tells Frank, "Why don't you let Alice speak?" Frank answers, "I know what I'm doing. She'll speak at the right moment" and tells the girl, "For God's sake be quiet." When Alice finally goes to Scotland Yard with her confession he tries to prevent her from telling anyone but him. Her delaying tactics in saying "I'd better say now what I have to say; I'd rather not wait" are sufficiently long enough to allow a phone to ring that will effectively prevent her telling the police. Frank crumples Alice's confession note (or possibly the application to see the inspector) and puts it in the same pocket where he had previously concealed the glove. Again, the concealment of this written confession plus the suppression of her oral confession, together with the image of the paintings being imprisoned, suggest that Alice will live uncomfortably with her suppressed secret unless she finds some appropriate way of letting her guilt surface.

One way guilt surfaces is through a scream, and that is the meaning of Alice's second scream in *Blackmail*. More often a Hitchcockian scream is a cry for help, as is Alice's first scream. This earlier scream is prepared for when Alice, shortly after arriving at the artist's flat, looks out the window and sees a Bobby across the street, walking his beat. She turns back toward the room looking reassured; by implication, help is within earshot if she must call for it. When the artist later attacks her, she cries out in protest. As she calls, "Don't! Let me go, let me go!" Hitchcock cuts to the same shot used earlier of the Bobby seen through the window, which may be, as Durgart suggests, a wry comment on the fact that the Bobby is too far away to help but a threat to her once she has stabbed the artist. In subsequent films Hitchcock will elaborate on the pessimistic implication here that a scream for help

is likely to go unanswered. He will emphasize the exterior shot that shows the scream as either unheard or ignored.

Alice's scream is actually so weak as to suggest an ambivalence about her desire to be rescued. Hitchcock saves her loud scream for the cry of horror she emits when she sees the sleeping beggar with his arm outstretched. The second scream works both structurally and psychologically. It is a necessary release of emotions for the girl, who has not uttered a sound since the murder. The sound track has been dominated by variations on the artist's song in the scoring, and now the sound track picks up her first conscious aural expression of her guilt for what she has done. Because Hitchcock thinks that conscious acknowledgment of one's darker nature and deeds is necessary for one's psychological well-being (although he does not believe that simply identifying traumatic youthful experiences alleviates their effects), this scream is to be taken as a cathartic first step for the girl's recovery of her mental stability; it certainly is for the film's viewers, who also have had no release for their tensions.

The girl's scream is merged into the scream of the maid, to whom Hitchcock cuts as she discovers the artist's corpse. I consider this transition to be a case of ineffective expressionism; the gimmick draws attention to itself without justification. Otherwise, *Blackmail*'s aural techniques derive organically from its meaning. Not until *Secret Agent* would Hitchcock once again find a vehicle appropriate for extensive experimentation with the use of expressionistic sound. By 1936 re-recording practices were quite sophisticated. Therefore, much of the impetus to use sound creatively in *Secret Agent* must have come not (as in *Blackmail*) from the challenge of overcoming stringent technical limitations but from a wish to explore the new range of expressive possibilities available with technically sophisticated equipment.

**Notes**

1. Actually, the distinction belongs to the undistinguished *The Clue of the New Pin*, a film made by British Lion for British Photone in response to quota production legislation. (A quota system was established in 1927 to ensure that British theaters would show a
reasonable proportion of their own films and not depend on American imports.) Little notice was paid to the film, which was presented at a trade show in March, 1929, four months before Blackmail's premiere. Rachel Low speculates that it excited little attention "because it was on disc and technically rather unsatisfactory." See her The History of the British Film: Volume 4, 1918–1928 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), p. 194.


3. Low, History, p. 191. The reference to Photophone must be a mistake on the part of the author because that is a sound-on-disc system and she says elsewhere in her book that B.I.P. adopted sound-on-film. The print itself identifies its recording system as R.C.A. Photophone, a sound-on-film process that, although poorer in sound quality than disc systems, had advantages in distribution and projection and therefore took hold in British studios.

4. Ibid.


10. An impressive and useful exception to the inaccurate histories of technological developments is Barry Salt, "Film Style and Technology in the Thirties," Film Quarterly 30 (Fall 1976):19–32.

11. Salt, in "Film Style," p. 25, is the one writer who does not note that cameras inside soundproof booths could pan about thirty degrees left or right.


13. Nonparallel cut is a term used by some sound editors to indicate that the sound is edited either before or after a transition from one shot to the next. The disjunction can be a matter of a few frames or of several seconds.


17. Ibid., p. 52.

18. Salt, in "Film Style," p. 20, observes experimentation with this editing practice in films from the beginning of the thirties.

19. "Rubber numbering" is the edge numbering of sound and picture tracks so that synchronism can be easily established later. Salt, in "Film Style," pp. 28–30, shows how these various developments permitted new editing freedom, and he argues that they also are responsible for the decrease in the "Average Shot Lengths" of Hollywood films in the mid-thirties.


22. See chapter 7 on aural intrusion.

23. One More Mile to Go is one of the twenty television films that Hitchcock personally directed between 1955 and 1962, mostly for his series "Alfred Hitchcock Presents." In 1968, Jack Edmund Nolan indexed the films and argued persuasively that they should be considered as part of Hitchcock's personal oeuvre because they continue the stylistic and thematic interests of his feature films. See his "Hitchcock's TV Films," Film Fan Monthly 84 (June 1968):3–6. Of the four television films I mention, three are twenty-three-minute films produced for "Alfred Hitchcock Presents": Breakdown (13 November 1955), Back for Christmas (4 March 1956), and One More Mile to Go (3 April 1957); the fifty-two-minute Four O'Clock was made for NBC's "Suspicion" series and shown on 30 September 1957.


26. It is appropriate that the gossip, whose function in life is to publicize private matters, is always stationed by the doorway that serves as a threshold between the public part of the family residence, the shop, and the family's home.

27. Eavesdropping is the aural equivalent of voyeurism for Hitchcock and is just as morally dubious. Hitchcock may use it to characterise a villain (Blackmail, the British version of The Man Who Knew Too Much, The Lady Vanishes, Rebecca) or a heroine who is too timid (Jamaica Inn [1939], Rebecca, Suspicion). The director plays with the audience's complicity as eavesdroppers when we strain to overhear verdicts (Murder, Notorious, Frenzy), domineering mothers (Notorious, Psycho), confessions (I Confess), and quarrels (Rear Window). Eavesdropping is overtly dealt with in Easy Virtue (1927), The Skin Game (1931), Sabotage (1936), Mr. and Mrs. Smith (1941), and Marnie.


30. Ibid., p. 28.

31. Although the various parallels between life and art are central to the meaning of the film, the first connection is introduced somewhat whimsically in terms of motion pictures. During the restaurant scene the couple argues about a film that Frank wants to see and that does not interest Alice. It is entitled Fingerprint and is therefore about him, a detective. He claims that a film about Scotland Yard can't be realistic. However, Hitchcock through Alice takes a jab at both movie directing and realism by having her retort that "I heard they've got a real criminal to direct it, just to be on the safe side."

32. Maurice Yacowar has written that "in this film, speech brings confusion and isolation
rather than clarity and community," but the format of Yacovar's survey does not allow him room to develop his argument. See his "Hitchcock: The Best of the Earliest," Take One 5 (21 May 1976):42.

33. John Belton has suggested that "all of Hitchcock's films concern themselves with paralysis of one kind or another," in "Hitchcock in Britain," The Thousand Eyes 2 (Winter 1979):5-9.

34. Durgnat, The Strange Case, p. 93.


3 Expressionism at Its Height:

Secret Agent

Of all Hitchcock's films of the thirties, Secret Agent (1936) is the one in which he experiments with sound most obviously and most continually. In fact, in this film the celebrated Hitchcockian wit more often finds expression in aural than in visual ideas. Some of the aural tours de force that various writers have noted, if only in passing, include a sustained organ chord produced by a murdered organist, the use of a fire alarm to create a diversionary panic in a chocolate factory, and the whining and howling of a telepathic dog who senses that his master, far off on a mountain, is being murdered. To be sure, such effects do share the tendency of expressionistic devices to draw attention to themselves. What the writers have not noticed, however, is that these set pieces are more than isolated bravura effects; they are an organic part of a profound exploration of the possibilities of subjective sound. As in Blackmail, the hero and heroine passively allow the murder of an innocent man, and Hitchcock once more uses aural expressionism to convey their sense of guilt. Hitchcock's experiments in Secret Agent with nonliteral and even subliminal sound effects push far beyond the usual limits of narrative film. Yet none of these experiments have received any critical attention to date.

There is a unifying concept that links style and theme in Secret Agent: the way chaos can overwhelm apparent order. In metaphorical terms, this concept might be expressed as "discord overwhelming apparent harmony," and, indeed, in Secret Agent the musical metaphor comes to life. Music is by definition the ordering (spatially for harmony and temporally for rhythm) of what would otherwise be random sounds. For Hitchcock the breakdown of social order is best expressed subjectively through an individual's perception; he exposes a character to chaos in order to penetrate