



HITCHCOCK'S MURDEROUS

The scene with the dragging.

The scene with Dwight Manning being pulled relentlessly down the dark hall by that fucking terrifying white lion in a mansion the size of Xanadu.

That's what everyone talks about.

That is, those who've seen it. Which is barely a couple dozen people. Just Hollywood insiders and lawyers who, over the years, have been able to get a glimpse through careful wrangling.

I speak, of course, of Alfred Hitchcock's lost masterpiece, MURDEROUS.

The scene in question, which goes on longer than any such moment in a Hitchcock film, packs as much wallop as the PSYCHO shower scene. It's hard to put your finger on what it is. The realism of the lion's behavior, the *hate* the creature seemed to draw up from itself. The meaty believability of that leg it has chomped down on... to this day, no one is sure how the actor, Manning, was able to use a fake bloody prosthetic leg to so credibly pull off the illusion.

But it is masterful.

It's hard not to taunt you. We know you want to see it. Almost all the private VHS copies were destroyed, impossible to find now. There's some print lab tech who supposedly has a Beta, and Joel Silver is rumored to have all but the first reel, but we doubt all that. No one has it. The story goes that it was the first thing Spielberg asked for when Universal chief Sheinberg gave him a job. "I want to see that movie. I want MURDEROUS."

He got it. But not many others do. The legality of getting a look at it is, to be frank, complicated. Following the collapse of the independent studio, Faraday, that made it, the rights became entwined in the dispute of the cantankerous brothers who each owned a piece. Their fight, over the decades, and the astounding array of legal instruments they put in place, ensured that no one would get to see it but them.

There were two prints left, total, and each man had one.

Even now, thirteen years after their deaths, their last wills bar the film from being seen without a compelling artistic or judicial reason, as evaluated by their executor, the indefatigable lawyer William Maliers, now in his 80s and showing no signs of giving in.

He doesn't have to share. So he won't.

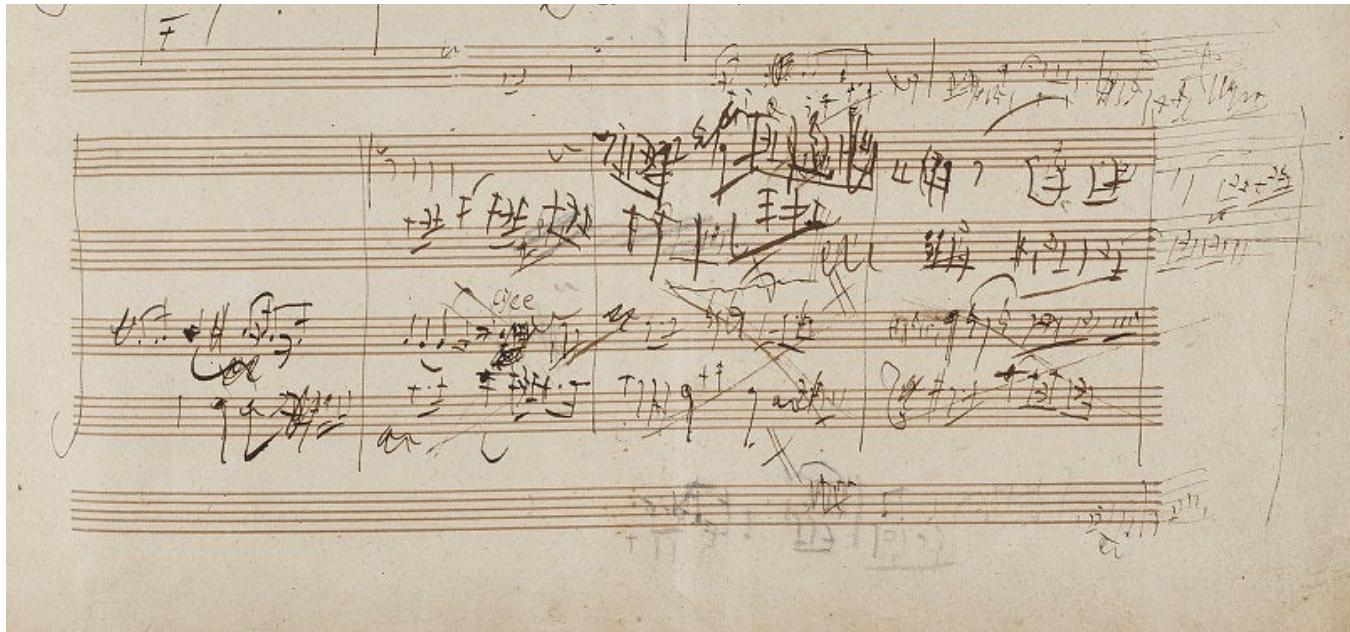
But he has. With us. And the price was steep: Bernard Herrmann's grand piano given in exchange, to an elderly attorney who has no love of modern cinema but has a deep weakness for film music composers from the Golden Age.

So we got to see something only a few score of people have seen.

And what a score it is, by the way.

Bernard Herrmann was a madman. The PSYCHO strings, the VERTIGO heights, the NORTH BY NORTHWEST tango-inflected music he conjured... it was nothing compared to what he created with MURDEROUS. A fragment of the score has emerged online in some form or another, but it's only a taste.

A morsel. The film it wraps itself around fits perfectly, another historic melding of Hitchcock's warped vision and Herrmann's unerring ear.



So what can we tell you about it all?

Well, for starters, the famous, talked-about scene of the lion dragging is only one of the amazing sequences in this picture.

Hitchcock outdid himself.

Some say that in 1966, following its completion, and the total eclipse of it caused by the brothers' dispute, Hitch fell into a pretty serious depression, and never really recovered. MURDEROUS was the culmination of techniques honed in both PSYCHO and THE BIRDS, with a cool meanness and a sense of style neither film reached, in a way. His later movies were pale ghosts of what he'd achieved.

Tarantino likes to brag that he owns a print, but we know it's a lie, not only because of the tight lock and key Maliers has it under, but because if he did, more people would know about the cameo.

Hitchcock always put in a cameo. And we can reveal now what it is.

He plays a character in the corner of the frame who is on a TV screen who is inexplicably destroying a TV set.

How appropriate.

Hitchcock's love-hate relationship with TV was well known.

And he looks very calm in the shot. For a maniac.

So let's detail the details of his maniacal film.

To begin with, it's a revenge flick.

The premise is incredibly simple and instantly scary: a paralyzed man finds himself locked in a rundown Florida mansion with an absolutely terrifying, half-starved white lion.

But how we get there is pretty juicy.

I know Jimmy Stewart was supposed to star in this, but it would be entirely different if a recognizable face were here, and the old man would've been just too much a touch of old Hollywood. Manning, as an unknown, is someone we fear for.

In the opening, sweepingly efficient scene, the main character, a mild-mannered photographer named Del Sevitts, is abducted from his studio where he is surrounded with enormous blow-ups of his work: black and white re-creations of crime photos done for lurid fiction magazines of yesteryear.

We like him immediately, as he chats humorously on the phone with a client he has yet to deliver for, and dotes on his army of cats, strays taken in that cleverly foreshadow the cat-and-mouse game to come.

Three men, shadows, enter quickly and snatch him rather brutally, putting a black hood over him as the distressed, giant faces of crime victims look on from the photo-festooned walls.

Del almost gets away—writhing free, he ends up rapping crazily at a window next door—but the patrons there only watch as he is savagely beaten and kidnapped.

It's a startling moment, right off: a group of your fellow citizens just stare eerily as you're beaten and pulled away by armed thugs.

Turns out, these people "watching" in the next building were the residents of a home for the blind, as a sign later reveals, in a classic Hitchcock twist.

It's an incredibly memorable scene and we're barely 7 minutes into the film.

Later, when the hood is pulled off, poor Del is a long way from home.

He awakes in a huge room, part of a gloomy mansion with high ceilings and lots of shadows. The film's in widescreen technicolor, but the mossy greens and deep blacks make it seem color-drained and claustrophobic.

Now, Del has absolutely no idea why he's been taken.

And we believe him.

And then Kessner emerges. One of the most frightening characters in 20th century movies, Kessner is a mystery. The millionaire madman is clearly based somewhat on Howard Hughes, and in part on Citizen Kane's alter ego Hearst, but his scarred face and furious eyes give him a whole other dimension of menace.

Kessner doesn't come out all at once. He takes his time. He moves around in the background, walking past the open doorway back there in the large living room.

Del is startled and uneasy. When he finally speaks, his voice is hoarse and bewildered.

Frighteningly blurred out by Hitchcock, Kessner steps out and walks directly toward Del with a weirdly elegant silver poker in his hand as it comes into focus. He has heated it from the fireplace in the other room, and proceeds to lay it on Del's head.

Del screams and passes out again.

When next he awakes, he is in some kind of sitting room that looks out over a porch.

It's raining outside.

Kessner sits beside him, half in shadow, and terrifying with his disfigurement.

For his part, Del has a red mark on his forehead, the beginning of many forms of damage to his body yet to come.

The excruciating thing is that, for the longest time, we don't know why Del has been kidnapped, either. Kessner talks to him about all manner of things —great nihilistic dialogue the likes of which we won't see until *True Detective* season one—but he gives no reason for Del's detainment.

Del wracks his brain, but he cannot remember harming anyone or doing anything that would have caused this.

Kessner, whose servants and henchmen seem incredibly undisturbed by their forced guest, gives Del a grand tour of his estate.

Including a view of his menagerie.

Exotic animals are an obsession with Kessner, and he possesses an entire private zoo of sorts, with weird gazelles, African buffalo, a gorilla, colorful birds, and... a starving white lion.

In the Cornell Woolrich short story on which MURDEROUS is based, the author lays out the landscape in sinewy prose:

The zoo was a wreck of aesthetics, everything thrown together not to give one a sense of wildness at all, but to celebrate the power of the zookeeper, and the zookeeper alone. An ugly grizzly was placed side by side with two bull elephants from across the world; African baboons with their wide, yawning jaws were huddled against American weeping willows draped in Spanish moss; an Irish cobblestone trail led to a domain of tapirs, big and prehistoric-looking mammals with somewhat piglike heads.

The grizzly was called Tarniss, after an old boss Kessner had when doing railroad work as a child. To torment the old thing, Kessner would alternately feed the lion in front of the bear, and starve the bear, or else gorge the bear on cow's meat and starve the lion. Thus, they hated each other's guts, he said. Currently the lion was in the house in a second-floor cage, awaiting "special circumstances."

The lion, needless to say, is the star of the movie, and it is a real find. How the wranglers managed to get a performance out of this thing we don't want to know, but this lion is an *actor*.

Clearly, Kessner is not particularly kind to his animals, and maybe neither was Hitchcock. We're not sure if the humane society was involved back then.

The creatures in the movie look haggard, worn, hungry, and truly sinister.

But it wouldn't matter if they were as cuddly as toy bears, Del freaks out. He does not like wild animals ever since his father beat him silly as a kid in a violent encounter at a zoo.

And that's just the start of Del's problems.

Kessner informs him in an emotionless tone that Kessner plans to dismember Del bit by bit, day by day, and *feed him to the menagerie*. Mainly the lion. The lion is his prized possession. He deserves to eat well.

It's clear he means this.

With the first scheduled operation set for the next day, Del tries to escape that night, but his quarters are nothing more than a large and beautiful prison. A note warns him he has the option of committing suicide. Del doesn't take it. Though later he wishes he had...

Daylight. And men enter the room, Del fights back, but in moments, he is injected with a tranquilizer and pulled into an operating room.

He awakes later... staring into the gilded cage of the white lion.

Who is eating his surgically-removed leg.

Del is staring in horror at his own lost limb, and he spills out of his wheelchair, trying to get away—but he has, he now fully realizes, only one leg.

He passes out from horror.

That night, he is visited by a beautiful young blonde played by Vivian Hathaway. It's Kessner's daughter and she awakens Del with a whispered and rather terrifying explanation for his predicament.

It seems that Kessner has taken care of his enemies this way more than once.

She lives in the enormous estate, and in sympathy, has come to get him out.

She wheels him out, past shadowy, palm-tree thrashing windows in the night.

But Kessner's men try to stop her.

Del has found his manliness in the midst of his fear, and with surprising skill, he leaps up to fight off one of the thugs. The struggle is admirable, and we realize Del has some serious chops as a fighter, but he is missing one leg, and the thug overpowers him, just as Kessner descends down the stairs to observe the altercation.

Del then watches in shock as his blonde saviorette begins laughing at him.

Clearly, she's not playing with a full deck either.

Kessner and the girl get into an argument, where it finally becomes clear why Del has been brought here.

Woolrich plays it this way:

The girl hissed at Kessner, "Why should it be so easy for him?"

"I can promise you it sure as hell won't be easy for him," Kessner snarls.

Del felt dizzy. He could hear the words through a haze of narcotics given to him in the night. The blonde looked to be near to tears. "He killed my sister. He killed my mother," she was saying. "He should think he can get away. He should want his freedom, and almost have it. And then he should die. Goddamn painfully."

Sister. What was she... Del struggled to make sense of it. "I never killed anyone. Listen to me—I never killed anybody—"

Kessner strode over to him. His scarred face snarled into a worse gargoyle expression, and his arm slammed down, punishing Del into unconsciousness yet again.

When he wakes in the morning, Del has now lost his other leg, and is watching the lion devour it.

He now has two stumps just above the knee as his tan trousers show a flatness there while he sits in the confines of his wheelchair.

He becomes desperate, horrified, trying to wheel away as Kessner impassively watches.

"We're not through with you yet," Kessner says, watching without alarm as Del's wheelchair slides recklessly away and down the hall.

The white lion looks up, its maw covered in blood.

A nightmare image.

Kessner walks slowly after Del, knowing the maimed man cannot escape.

Del reaches the long stairway and sees no way down.

Kessner's daughter moves into the light down below there. She looks at him with an empty hate, and Kessner's men retrieve Del, moving his wheelchair back into the lion's den...

Del cannot get anyone to listen to him. He insists he had nothing to do with any killing, and we believe him. At first he tries to figure out if it was some kind of drunk-driving incident, as he has had more than his share of benders. But that's all in the past.

He tortures himself that night trying to remember if he could've done such a thing.

Finally, Kessner comes to him and explains the murder was cold, calculating, and devastating.

He is convinced that his men, trained investigators, have found the right suspect. Him.

The thugs stare coldly at Del from behind Kessner.

It has the feel of a Kafka story, really. It's totally surreal and deeply unnerving.

The door slams.

Del realizes he is going to be taken apart, little by little. He's starting to crack under the strain and begins talking to himself quietly, a little monologue that helps us a bit to figure out his strategy. Manning plays this extremely realistically, and we really do feel horrified for his circumstances.

And then he starts to fight back.

Using the long knife left on his prison-room desk and intended for suicide, Del pries open the shuttered window.

He then pulls himself—as he is now without the bottoms of his legs—out onto the second-floor ledge of this mansion...

This is tremendously well-shot, given that it's night, and as we glide along the edge with Del, he realizes he has absolutely no idea how he is going to do this.

There is a high tree next to the ledge, but he has no hope of reaching over to get it. Trying becomes excruciatingly suspenseful.

With uncanny humor, Hitchcock doubles down on the suspense by cutting inside, where the maid, in cleaning up the kitchen, alone now and the only one awake, is watching an incredibly suspenseful second scene on TV.

This scene has no context and is just pure cinema.

On the TV screen, a tiny, tiny little boy is running through a rainy-day traffic scene as fast-moving cars whip past him. It's like a precursor to the FRENCH CONNECTION as this toddler almost gets killed time and again, while someone—possibly his half-beaten-up mother—comes looking for him...

And this is intercut with Del's attempted escape on the ledge!

It's just unbelievably intense and crazy.

Just as Del reaches a branch on a rain-slicked tree, the kid in the TV scene causes a terrible smash-up, a pile-up, as his mother snatches him free.

Meanwhile Del stops his progress, and looks out across the swampy, forested area miles ahead... Lightning and heavier thunderheads are on their way. He has a look of realization. "We're in the path of a hurricane..." he mutters.

And he actually turns around and heads back inside the mansion.

There is no way he can get free in this.

How Del Sevitts eventually ends up going *mano e mano* with that huge lion is interesting to watch unfold, as we know it's going to happen sooner or later...

Kessner returns, plagued with nightmares and committed to killing Del once and for all tonight, all at once.

Del, though, has watched how Kessner deals with his staff of hired killers.

He argues with Kessner and ingeniously suggests that Kessner's own men, in particular a bony-faced bald man by the name of Geiller, were truly the killers of Kessner's wife and daughter.

Del has seen the mild patches of affection and eye contact Geiller has given Kessner's other, living daughter. He spins a yarn that Geiller is the psychotic, who killed Kessner's family when they witnessed his inappropriate relationship with Sandrine, Kessner's daughter.

Geiller argues with Del a bit too forcefully.

Del, it appears, has guessed right.

Soon Kessner and Geiller are in full battle mode.

Kessner is killed along with his other cronie and Geiller runs off with a knife wound just as the storm hits the house.

Del is left in the room with two bodies—but the door wide open where Geiller has escaped.

We have this momentary elation of feeling like Del is free. Then he wheels himself out into the hall... and we begin hearing strange noises.

Amid the freakish sounds of the hurricane, building in strength, we hear cages unclicking, and animals wailing and chittering.

Geiller has let them out.

And so, we end up with our hero Del Sevitts stuck in a hurricane-blasted house with a loose psycho somewhere...

...and a half-starved white lion who comes crawling up the stairs.

The hide-and-seek of the ensuing scenes are marvelous, and the house is punctured above by falling spears from torn-up palm trees which adds to the chaos.

The white lion, Wylde, naturally, soon finds poor Del.

Dragging him down the hall to destroy.

He is interrupted, however, by the arrival of Sandrine, the blonde daughter, who is hiding herself on a half-ledge created by the ceiling 's decorative moulding.

She screams. Knowing now that Geiller is the real killer, she tries to help Del by making noise, agitating Wylde.

The white lion then tries to claw up the wall to get at her.

Del goes crawling for Kessner's left-behind rifle.

In the background, Sandrine, trying to get away, falls from the little ledge, and the white lion makes savage work of her.

Now Del has his weapon and gets himself in position.

He fires repeatedly—hitting Wylde twice, but only succeeding in pissing him off.

Del manages to get into the service elevator... but when he emerges downstairs, he crawls into the storm-riddled kitchen, where the maid seems to be almost frozen in terror.

He crawls toward her, asking her if they can get to the car. She says only, "Geiller..."

The psychotic man comes out of the darkness and swipes Del's rifle away.... He pulls Del back towards the elevator but then he freezes.

The white lion is entering the kitchen from the other door.

Geiller drops Del like a piece of bad meat.

He flees somewhere into the house as Wylde treks slowly toward Del.

The servant woman runs outside into the storm—getting to a car, a Jaguar, but having trouble starting it.

Meanwhile, inside the mansion, the lion puts its enormous head right at Del's chest. It pushes him back, toying with him. Del screams. He hits the ground and lies still.

The lion regards him.

This moment goes on dazzlingly long...

And the lion strides out, leaving him there. Del's eyes open. He can't believe it, and neither can we. He pulls himself out of the kitchen, toward the huge living room where he can see the lion now near the stairs.

There's a huge clatter as the gazelles race through the ruined mansion, and Geiller emerges from a side room—a hunting trophy room—where he has retrieved a massive elephant gun.

He takes aim at the white lion.

Del stares as lightning flashes. Wylde rushes across the wide hall as Geiller takes aim—a huge crash resounds—everything goes dark—

But when we can see again, the lightning reveals that Geiller is a new meal for Wylde.

The scary, half-skeletal lion drags Geiller back into the trophy room to devour.

Cutting outside, we see the scope of the storm, and the terrified maid getting the car started and gunning the engine. As she travels down the tree-lined lane, she's crying, tormented, and anguished.

Praying in Spanish, she gives up, her conscience winning out. She turns the car around and heads back to the mansion to save Del.

By now, inside the house, Del has gotten across the living room parlor and retrieved the huge elephant gun. He is reloading it, muttering to himself.

And, sure enough, the white lion emerges from the trophy room.

Power comes back briefly, and he is in full light, though rain is tumbling down through the roof.

Terrified, Del lifts the huge gun.

Suddenly—the maid's car smashes in the front door! She screams for Del.

The lion, however, is shocked now and provoked. It rushes up onto the hood of the car and the woman shrieks, pulling back out.

Only to reveal Tarniss, the massive grizzly bear, outside in the rain.

The bear rears up onto the car as well.

The engine dies.

In absolute terror, the servant breaks from the car and runs fiercely for cover in the house, but Wylde tackles her in a frenzy.

Del hoists his huge gun and prepares.

The bear has trundled forward almost automatically to get at the maid, and now the two massive animals stare each other down, with the maid on the ground unable to move.

As the astonishing clash unfolds, lion versus bear, Del takes aim and screams in horror...

He fires a blast and blows off the bear's head, the shot continuing to travel forward, slamming into the lion's upper right shoulder area.

The maid crawls free, crying in the heavy rain.

But the lion is not dead.

Wounded, weak, it starts crawling for Del...

And crawling...

And crawling...

And when it finally gets right up to him...

It collapses.

Into death.

We back out from the rainy scene of the half-demolished mansion, as Herrmann's roaring horns crescendo, and we witness the weird sight of the gazelles and the Cape Buffalo galloping past...

The Wild overtaking the Civilized.

Breathlessly, we fall back in our chairs.

Fade out on a classic never to be known.