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Alfred Hitchcock: An Auteur Director

by Anisa Selenica

(Motion Picture Television 1113)

L ights, camera, and action! The audience never realizes how much thinking can go into a film and wonder how it is considered a classic. More specifically, film directors give an incredible amount of effort and thought through theme and style that can be seen in almost every one of their films. In particular, the master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, would come to be one of the most noble auteur directors that film history has to offer. He has displayed themes such as voyeurism, birds, and identity mistake and distinctive technical styles through the camera, actors, and lighting. Hitchcock's masterpieces have been a symbol of art form and his unique style has inspired and transitioned into other films today.

Alfred Joseph Hitchcock was born in London on August 13, 1899. He went to Jesuits Saint Ignatius college, which had sparked his interests in engineering and navigation. At the age of 19, he manufactured electric cables at the Henley Telegraph company. At night, he began studying art at the University of London and was transferred to design ads for Henley's advertising department. Hitchcock became interested in cinema when he submitted a portfolio of title designs to accompany the silent films of Famous Players-Lasky. He married screenwriter and editor, Alma Reville, in 1926 and they stayed together until his death in 1980. They had one daughter together named Patricia Hitchcock (Spoto 3). Starting in the Silent film era, Hitchcock was exploring the elements of movie making and creating classic silent films. In 1939, Alfred Hitchcock left England for Hollywood. A year later he made his first Hollywood film, *Rebecca* (1940), and won an Academy Award for Best Picture ("Alfred Hitchcock"). As the years went on, came out with great classics such as *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963).

The motion picture industry was just starting up and creative cinematic geniuses were just beginning to expand their minds to create memorable films. Most innovations and film movements played a big part in the director's life. He was influenced by the traits of German Expressionism, worked with the elements of film noir, and witnessed the creation of sound in films (Huaco 60). According to the article, Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of a Film Culture, Hitchcock started directing and co-directing about a dozen silent films in England. *The Lodger* (1926) would be considered the first real Hitchcock film. He introduces the theme of an innocent man caught up in events beyond his control and the use of beautiful icy blondes. In fact, the invention of sound opened up the opportunity of dialogue and sound effects. In 1929, Hitchcock produced the first British sound film titled *Blackmail*. The beginning is completely silent because it was a way to get the audience to follow the story before the characters start to speak. He took it a step further by adding sound effects such as a knife stab and car horns honking throughout the movie. During the 1930s, Alfred Hitchcock was producing well-constructed films such as *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *Sabotage* (1936), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), and *The 39 Steps* (1935). This gave him a good reputation for being one of the greatest British directors during his time (Sinyard 26). After winning an Academy Award for *Rebecca* (1940), Hitchcock produced films using the noir style. The films were *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Notorious* (1946), and *Strangers on a Train* (1951); however, they were not really considered to be a true film noir style (Sinyard 66). The early 1930s and 1940s were just the start for Hitchcock and it wasn't until a decade later that he would be coming out with many iconic films.

There is one term that makes us look at films in a different way: auteur theory was developed in the 1940's by French critics, Andre Bazin and Roger Leenhardt. The word auteur means author in French. Auteur theory means that the director is the most important person involved in the creation of a film (Dixon 187). Directors have a very distinctive visual signature like how they work the camera, edit the film, and demonstrate thematic motifs. Hitchcock is nobley known to be one of the greatest auteurs of all time having strong themes and stylistic devices that makes the audience enjoy the film even more (Spoto 85). Author Neil Sinyard, in his book, *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, explained one of Hitchcock's recurring themes of identity mistake. In *North by Northwest*, the protagonist, Roger Thornhill, is mistaken for a CIA agent named George Kaplan who is working against foreign spies named George Kaplin. Identity mistake was the center of the film and showed an 'average joe' can be put into situations beyond belief. This theme is played out in *Vertigo*, involving Scottie Ferguson's investigation of the fake Madeleine Elster and the woman who impersonated her. In his earlier film, *Shadow of a Doubt*, Uncle Charlie is the real 'merry widow' murderer, but the police ended up blaming a man in another state.

Because Hitchcock's goal is to make the audience grasp emotion from the characters, the theme voyeurism plays a crucial role in his films. For instance, in the beginning of *Psycho* we peek into Marion's rendezvous with her boyfriend, Sam. While later in the film, we see Norman Bates looking through a peephole as Marion is undressing in the hotel room (Spoto 335). The audience is playing the role as the intruder in the character's lives which can determine how we feel, what we assume about the character, and what might their occupation may be. For example, in *Rear Window*, we see Jeff, the protagonist, with his broken leg and a camera surrounded with photos. The viewers can assume he's a photographer and continue to look into the character's life (Spoto 237). Just by using visuals, Hitchcock helps tell the story and makes an interesting situation so the audience can look for trivial details.

The motifs in his films are a major detail in his work. More specifically, we will usually see stairways, mothers, and birds. First, stairways were influenced by German Expressionism because they give an uneasy feeling and it was a way for Hitchcock to create suspense (Huaco 60). Neil Sinyard goes on to explain that in *Vertigo*; the stairs in the church bell tower are crucial to the plot. As for the movie in *Shadow of a Doubt*, Uncle Charlie tries to kill his niece by removing one step causing the staircase to collapse. In *Psycho*, inside the Bates' mansion, the staircase leading to Mrs. Bates room is where Detective Arbogast was murdered.

Next, mothers are portrayed as domineering and intrusive rather than loving and caring. The film *Notorious*, shows Nazi conspirator, Alexander Sebastian, in fear of his mother who forces him to slowly poison his wife, Alicia Huberman. Alicia is an anti-Nazi spy for the United States and as a result, he does almost kill her. Similarly, *Psycho* revolves around this theme of 'mama's boy'. In this case, Norman Bates loves his mother; he listens to her, sometimes argues with her, and eventually becomes her. Mothers play a key role in Hitchcock films and set a driving force for male characters.

Lastly, birds are frequently used throughout almost all of his films. They have been a symbol of bad luck since the Middle Ages. Victorian art and poetry have made them symbols of disharmony. For instance, in *Psycho*, the protagonist, Marion Crane, is named after a bird and lives in an area also named after a bird (Phoenix, Arizona). At the Bates motel, Norman and Marion are conversing during dinner and Norman mentions his fetish about birds he comments that she eats like one (Sinyard 113). In the film, *The Birds*, the plot revolves around birds attacking everyone (Sinyard 117). Another example, is the film *Sabotage*, the bomb is made in the bird shop and the instructions for the bomb are on the base of the bird cage (Spoto 55). These motifs are also for the audience to interpret them in any way they want, but ideally, they mean something to the director and his films.

Gifted with great storytelling, Hitchcock's style was very influential and had noticeable trademarks in his films. According to the book, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures*, the author, Donald Spoto, states that one of Hitchcock's screenwriters, Angus

MacPhail, created the term MacGuffin which stands for a detail or an object that is a desire and motivates the actions of characters within the story. However, the object alone is not important to the viewer of the film. This idea of a MacGuffin can be seen in *North by Northwest* with the art statue that contains the government secret microfilm, in *Psycho* with the \$400,000 in the envelope, in *Notorious* with the radioactive material found in the wine bottles, and in *Blackmail* with the woman's gloves found at the crime scene. The style was used as a way to move the story along.

Hitchcock creates this ultra-realism to heighten emotion, especially through a musical score. Spoto says Hitchcock hired composer Bernard Herrmann for his movies. Herrmann created iconic scores for classics like *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *Psycho*. The way he composes his music is very memorable because of the fast pace and intense instrumentations. His musical score has the intention to make you recall the scene in which the music was playing. For instance, the famous shower scene in *Psycho*. Hitchcock loved using beautiful icy blonde heroines like Tippi Hedren, Janet Leigh, Grace Kelly, Eva Marie Saint, and Kim Novak. The characters they have portrayed are very likable with a hidden red-hot inner fire personality. Similarly, an auteur usually uses some of the same actors and actresses in multiple films. For example, Cary Grant, James Stewart, Leo G. Carroll, Grace Kelly, Ingrid Bergman, and Clare Greet. Hitchcock himself makes appearances in all his films. He is usually in the beginning of the film because he did not want to distract the audience from the story.

The camera is the director's biggest priority. It becomes like a person roaming around a room looking for suspicious stuff. The director uses all different types of camera shots and angles. High angles usually mean danger and shock is about to occur. For instance, *North by Northwest*, the camera shows the dangerous situation the character is in, as it shares the view from a great height. Like when Roger Thornhill is running to a cab after Mr. Townsend was killed in the U.N. building (Sinyard 103). Hitchcock also uses the unique birds eye view as the scene is being viewed through the eyes of a bird which relates to his theme of birds that represent bad luck. *Psycho* used it when Mrs. Bates bolts out of the room with her knife and kills Detective Arbogast as he was walking up the stairs (Sinyard 115). The position of Hitchcock's camera transfers the audience in the scene and shares new perspectives.

Another technique that Hitchcock uses to exemplify his style and theme is lighting. The lighting in his films is extremely crucial because it represents themes such as good vs evil. In *North by Northwest*, Roger meets a spy named, Phillip Vandamm, and as he's talking to Roger, he is placed in the dark shadows of a room and Roger is positioned in the lighter part. This element foreshadows the theme and style used in his films. In *The Birds*, the birds eye view drives the ferocious intensity of bird attacks after the gas station explosion. We watch the fire unfold as the birds swoop in from off-camera to celebrate victory (Sinyard 104). His editing in films show a different point of view shot when he cuts back and forth from the main character to an object repeatedly. For example, in *Rear Window*, he will show an objective shot of Jeff when he looks out the window at one of his neighbors. Then, he will switch to the subjective point-of-view shot, showing us the character's perception of what he sees out the window. Lastly, Hitchcock will switch back to an objective view of the character, so that we may see their reaction to what they have just witnessed. He has a bold and effective montage editing from his famous *Psycho* shower scene where Marion gets stabbed by Mrs. Bates. However, the knife never enters her body, but the way it is edited in rapid clips makes it unbearable to watch and fools the audience into believing that she was stabbed (Sinyard 114). Similarly, in *The Birds*, when Melanie Daniels is in the attic, birds swarm in to attack her (Sinyard 121). It is daunting and frightful for the viewers to see, but it is a key style to his magnificent movies.

In conclusion, Alfred Hitchcock had created many suspenseful masterpieces, sometimes within one year. He has combined early film elements with his new form of style and theme. The symbolic films have been held to high standard among film artists. Throughout his films, he shows this idea of auteur theory and created a wonderful meaning in film history. This theory helped inspire

recent filmmakers to learn to create their own unique style and theme.

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