**Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980)**

**Summary:**

Anglo-American director Alfred Hitchcock was one of the most influential auteurs in cinema history, making more than fifty feature films between 1925 and 1976. He is widely regarded as one of cinema’s most significant artists. Through his cameo appearances in his own films and on the television program *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, he became a cultural icon. Director of famous films such as *Blackmail*, *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, and *Psycho*, Hitchcock was a multiple nominee and winner of a number of prestigious awards, including two Golden Globes and the first BAFTA Academy Fellowship Award. He was nominated five times for an Academy Award as Best Director. His film *Rebecca*, nominated for 11 Oscars, won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1940. His modernism is evidenced in the strong self-reflexivity of his films. Because the gaze itself is the pre-eminent subject of many Hitchcock suspense thrillers and somber melodramas, his work can be interpreted as a meditation on film as such.

**Main Entry:**

Alfred Hitchcock was a British film director and producer who became famous through various suspense thrillers and somber melodramas. After a successful career in British cinema, he moved to Hollywood in 1939, continuing to make highly remarkable films characterized by a fascination with crime, violence, and murder, and having strong sexual undercurrents. Comprising more than fifty films made between 1925 and 1976, Hitchcock’s oeuvre can be considered as a condensed version of the history of classical cinema. Hitchcock successfully made many transitions: from Europe to the United States, from silent film to sound, and from cinema to television. His work can also be situated at the crossroads of major film schools and styles. Hitchcock could be considered a British director who was highly influenced by American editing techniques developed in the 1910s (by Griffith among others), but who was equally inspired by German expressionism and Soviet montage. Moreover, Hitchcock as an “auteur” is a French invention of the 1950s since particularly *Cahiers du cinéma* critics such as Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard, and François Truffaut, were the first to discern a typical Hitchcock style and Hitchcockian motifs and themes: the narrative structure of the man hunt; the specific use of surprise and suspense effects; the preference for illogical narrative patterns exemplified by the plot device of the “McGuffin;” the interrelated themes of the “wrong man,” the *doppelgänger*, and other forms of doubling; dominant mothers; icy blondes; cameo appearances; references to Christian iconography; the use of significant details or fetish objects; the predilection for enclosed and oppressive spaces; the self-conscious uses of montage and long takes; the abundant use of point-of-view shots; and so forth. Strikingly, Hitchcock developed this highly personal style within the praxis of mainstream British and American cinema. Although he was perfectly in his element in the Hollywood studio system that saw cinema first and foremost as a form of lucrative and standardized mass entertainment, Hitchcock became a self-conscious artist that was possible through his legendary control over the production of his films. As a director and, from 1946 onwards, a director-producer, Hitchcock was in most cases involved in the construction of the script, the cinematography as well as in the set and costume design of his films.

Hitchcock’s modernism is closely related to his fascination for a modern world depicted in espionage thrillers such as *39 Steps* (1935), *Saboteur* (1942), and *North by Northwest* (1959), which situate their stories in crowded streets, hotel lobbies, tourist sites, and all kinds of urban spaces dominated by telephones, cars, buses, trains, ships, and airplanes. The other spatial expression of Hitchcock’s modernism is the home, which features emphatically in some of his 1940s melodramas such as *Rebecca* (1940), *Suspicion* (1941), and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) as well as in some earlier and later films such as *The Lodger* (1926), *Sabotage* (1936), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963). Instead of a place of domestic bliss separated from the dangers of the modern metropolis, the house is turned into an uncanny site of secrets, anxieties, and perversions.

However, Hitchcock’s modernism is first and foremost connected to the high level of self-reflexivity of his films. The theme of looking, observing, gazing, spying, or peeping is not only an important topic, it is also used as a pattern that organizes and structures his films. Because the gaze itself is the pre-eminent subject of a Hitchcock film, his work can be interpreted as a meditation on film as such. In particular, Hitchcock’s films emphasize the basic laws of classical narrative cinema, which is largely based on the spectator’s identification with the (main) character but also with the camera. *Rear Window* (1954), no doubt, is the best illustration of this point. Its protagonist is a photographer and his girlfriend is a fashion model. He is thus a professional “looker,” he carries and organizes the gaze while she is subjected to it. Moreover, mirroring the position of the spectator in the cinema theater, he finds himself in a state of immobility since he is confined to a wheelchair. Sitting in the seat of the cinema theater, we are looking at (and identifying with) an immobile character on the screen, who, looks at (and identifies with) other characters at the other side of the courtyard. The plot evolves around a murder committed by one of the neighbors to his wife. Tellingly, the murder itself is never seen by the protagonist; he as well as the audience only see several “clues” such as the man cleaning a knife, leaving with a big suitcase, taking a ring of his wife’s purse, et cetera. It is therefore the gaze that constructs the fiction – a theme that is also elaborated in *Vertigo* (1958), in which characters become trapped in a world of mere appearances and feel lost in their own inventions, constructions, and desires. Both *Rear Window* and *Vertigo* emphatically deal with a theme that is always implicitly and sometimes explicitly at stake in most of Hitchcock’s films: the theme of looking itself and the ways in which the gaze finds connections and constructs meanings. Moreover, *Rear Window* and *Vertigo* are examples of a cinema that is about someone who looks instead of someone who acts. As a result, in these films as well as in *Psycho*, *The Birds*, and *Marnie* (1964), we find many of the characteristics of the European modernist cinema of Robert Bresson, Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Alain Resnais, or Andrei Tarkovsky: static figures, elaborate scenes without dialogue that are marked by a slow and contemplative rhythm, a tendency toward dedramatization, et cetera. With this self-reflexive attention for the “scopic drive,” Hitchcock became a favourite subject for many film theoretical paradigms (structuralist, feminist, psychoanalist, et cetera) and a major source of inspiration for later directors, such as Brian De Palma and David Lynch as well as visual artists and experimental filmmakers such as Chris Marker and Douglas Gordon.

References and Further Reading:

- Richard Allen & S. Ishii Gonzalèz (eds), *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays* (London: BFI, 1999).

- Richard Allen & Sam Ishii González (eds), *Alfred Hitchcock: Past and Future* (London: Routledge, 2004).

- Marshall Deutelbaum & Leland Pogue (eds), *A Hitchcock Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

Selected Filmography/ List of Works:

- *The Lodger* (1926)

- *Blackmail* (1929)

- *The 39 Steps* (1935)

- *The Lady Vanishes* (1938)

- *Rebecca* (1940)

- *Saboteur* (1942)

- *Notorious* (1946)

- *Rope* (1948)

- *Rear Window* (1954)

- *The Wrong Man* (1956)

- *Vertigo* (1958)

- *North by Northwest* (1959)

- *Psycho* (1960)

- *The Birds* (1963)

- *Marnie* (1964)

Paratextual:

- Link to the 1000 frames per film section of the Hitchcockwiki:

<http://www.hitchcockwiki.com/wiki/1000_Frames_of_Hitchcock>

- Link to the Hitchcockwiki in general

<http://www.hitchcockwiki.com/wiki/Main_Page>

- The Hitchcock page of the BFI screenonline pages

<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/446568/>

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