Chapter 21

Auteur Theory: Alfred Hitchcock

Objectives: The chapter focuses on introducing Hitchcock as a major filmmaker and understanding his legacy.

Key words: auteur, French New Wave, suspense, motif, color, voyeurism

Background

“I am a typed director. If I made Cinderella, the audience would immediately be looking for a body in the coach.” - Alfred Hitchcock

In one of the earlier chapters, you have already become familiar with the term auteurism. Let us expand our familiarity with term here.

In 1910, the British magazine Bioscope identified some directors as special. As early as in 1913, in Germany the term autoren film was used based on the idea that a film should be judged based on the works of the writer. Filmmaker and novelist, Alexandre Astruc, coined the term camera pen as he wanted to raise the status of cinema from a working class form of entertainment to high art form. Astruc’s article La Camera –Stylo (1948), called for a new language in filmmaking. For Astruc and the proponents of auteurism, camera should be used the way writers use their pens. Astruc’s contention was that filmmakers should make more personal kinds of film.

We already know that in his ‘Une Certaine Tendance du Cinema Francais’ (1954), Francois Truffaut lay down the overarching principles of the auteur theory. Andrew Sarris (1928-2012), a leading American proponent who wrote for the Village Voice, further added to the understanding of an auteur. According to Sarris, it is the director who is the sole author of his work. This is regardless of the contribution of the writers, producers, or actors. Sarris ranked directors: for instance, for Sarris, John Ford is better than William Wyler.

Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980)

Son of a greengrocer from London, Hitchcock started his career in Britain in the age of silent cinema. Hitchcock’s status as an auteur came into prominence in the late 1950s. French New Wave critics, especially Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol and Francois Truffaut, were among the first to see and promote Hitchcock's films as artistic works. Hitchcock was one of the first directors to whom they applied their auteur theory, which stresses the artistic authority of the director in the filmmaking process. Hitchcock's innovations and vision have influenced a great number of filmmakers, producers, and actors. His influence helped start a trend for film
directors to control artistic aspects of their movies without answering to the movie's producer. Hitchcock was famously involved with every aspect of filmmaking both before and during a shoot and exercised a great deal of control over his work. On most projects he developed the screenplay; was active in casting; and influenced the choice of soundtrack and visual style. In exercising such control to produce a highly personal artistic vision he was able to override the constraints of the studio system that entailed him having authority over the final cut (a privilege afforded to most auteurs).

Auteurs prefer working with the same crew on a film, and Hitchcock was no different. He worked with Grace Kelly on three films, and repeatedly worked with Cary Grant and James Stewart. However, he had difficulties in working with Method actors such as Charles Laughton and Montgomery Clift. At the same time, his fascination with icy blondes, as opposed to sexy blondes, is well-documented.

The François Truffaut interview book (with Helen G. Scott) with Hitchcock in 1966 played a vital role in promoting the director's public authorial identity. Through a series of conversations, we learn how Hitchcock was involved in every aspect of filmmaking, often developed the screenplay, and was involved in casting, influenced the soundtrack and visual style and the overall look of the film.

The most commonly examined areas attest to his title as 'master of suspense'. He is recognized as revolutionizing the thriller genre, playing with an audience's nerves and fears and often tackling subjects of a taboo nature. In an interview, he admitted that he wanted the audience to have a good scare, as people pay money for a good scream when they come for his films. The writer at NYFA.edu says:

Influenced by Russian horror merchant Val Lewton, Spanish surrealist Luis Bunuel and German Expressionist Fritz Lang –Hitchcock cited Lang’s *Der Mude Tod* (1922) as his favorite film –Hitchcock forged a consistent universe that sprung almost fully formed from his Catholic psyche, a world dominated by emotional dysfunction, voyeurism, sexual guilt, innocent men accused, icy blondes, overpowering mothers and psycho killers all played out against purposefully dodgy rear screen projections and often ending with a chase over a famous landmark.

Hitchcock never made films about cops, gangsters and professional criminals. His films are more about ordinary people who get caught up in extraordinary circumstances. For example, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) has suggestions of incest; *Strangers on a Train* (1951) touches on issues of homosexuality; *Psycho* (1960) deals with the Oedipus complex; and *Marnie* (1964) looks at repressed memory. The act of murder in his films is a common Hitchcock motif, whereby he illustrates a fascination with eyes. Hitchcock understood how the eyes reflected what a character thinks or needs. Extreme close-up shots and point-of-view editing force spectators to experience the perspective of both the victim and the killer, as in a close-up of Marion’s eyes in *Psycho* Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) also spies on Janet Leigh through a peephole cleverly hidden behind a painting. In a voyeuristic way the audience enters the violent, frightening scene of *Psycho* where the camera
focuses on the dead eyes of the just murdered Janet Leigh. The film *Frenzy* (1972) engages shot/reverse-shot to mirror the eyes of both the murderer and his prey.

**Hitchcock at the movies!**

Making a cameo appearance was second nature to Hitchcock. Watch him missing the bus in *North by Northwest*, standing on the train station in *Strangers on a Train*, and crossing James Stewart’s path in *Vertigo*.

**The long take in *Rope***

Hitchcock adapted to screen this Patrick Hamilton play said to be based on the Leopald-Loeb case. Arthur Laurentis wrote the dialogues for the film. The film centers on two Harvard students who murder their classmate by strangling him to death and hiding his dead body in a wooden chest. Later in the evening they throw a dinner party for a group of friends who dine off the chest which is used as a dining table.

*Rope* was made with a number of camera movements without any conventional cuts in order to give the impression of one continuous shot. The joins were skillfully hidden at moments where the camera ended up with a close-up of a frame, such as the back of a character’s jacket. This then dissolved into the beginning of the next take.

The film was a technical marvel and is used a text book for teaching editing techniques.

**Mise en scene**

A salient feature of Hitchcock’s cinema is his use of mise en scene. Notice the special use of colours (for example, green in *Vertigo*) and costumes in the director’s works. In the background theme from *Vertigo* (1958), the director’s entire oeuvre summed up in menacingly circling arpeggios. Likewise Bernard Herrmann’s scores for *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960) and *Marnie* (1964), are equally haunting, and so is Miklós Rózsa’s *Spellbound* (1945) scores that are tinged with darkness and dread. To quote Bee Wilson in this regard:

> Colour was not a trivial detail to Hitchcock: the shading of light and dark on a screen was the larger part of cinema. The critic David Thomson argues that an appreciation of *Vertigo* is a "test case" for whether you are "a creature of cinema"; if you find it implausible – "well, there are always novels". Hitchcock's movies always kept the strong visual sense of his earliest silent pictures. Patrick McGilligan, author of the finest Hitchcock biography (*A Life in Darkness and Light*, 2003) notes that the most "celebrated sequences" in his films "might as well be silent". (Wilson, 2012)
This brings us to another major concern in Hitchcock, voyeurism. At this point we must become familiar with Laura Mulvey’s essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” “Cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at.” Many of Hitchcock’s films deal with the act of looking: Psycho, Vertigo, Rear Window employing the use of mirror/shadows doubles, for instance, Claude Rains in Notorious, or Anthony Perkins in Psycho, Vertigo, Rebecca) as well as establishing ‘Double’ relationship between characters in which guilt was transferred from one to the other (Psycho, Shadow of a Doubt, 1943).

In A Room of Her Own, Virginia Woolf “Football and sport are important, the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes trivial, and these values are invariably transferred from life to fiction.” These two sets of values are presented in Rear Window.

Hitchcock with other writers

The great director always worked with a range of writers, including John Steinbeck who wrote Lifeboat (1944) with Tallulah Bankhead; Thornton Wilder and John Michael Hayes, who wrote four scripts for Hitchcock, including Rear Window. Rope (1948) was based on a play by Patrick Hamilton. He also adapted two works by Daphne du Maurier, Rebecca (1940) and Birds (1963).

Hitchcock’s legacy

Filmmakers and audience continue to remain fascinated by Hitchcock, largely because he could manage to withhold the release of many of his films. This ensured the persistent public interest in his works. The film Hitchcock (2012) starring Anthony Hopkins, Helen Mirren and Scarlet Johansson takes an interesting look at the master’s life and career. The film focuses on the making of Psycho and working with his wife, Alma who remained his closest collaborator was his wife Alma Reville, an editor and scriptwriter. Many directors have Here are some films inspired by Hitchcock’s life and works:

- The Girl (2012 )
- Brian de Palma’s Dressed to Kill (1980)
- De Palma’s homage to Vertigo and Rear Window: Body Double(1984)
- Gus van Sant’s literal remake : Psycho (1998)
• *A Perfect Murder* (1998)

• John Woo’s *MI –II* (A Notorious rip-off)

**References:**


**Suggested readings**


**Suggested websites**


- [http://www.slashfilm.com/listen-12-hours-franos-truffaut-interviewing-alfred-hitchcock](http://www.slashfilm.com/listen-12-hours-franos-truffaut-interviewing-alfred-hitchcock)

- [http://hitchcock.tv](http://hitchcock.tv)

- [http://home.comcast.net/~flickhead/RopeTwo.html](http://home.comcast.net/~flickhead/RopeTwo.html)

- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umfiwI-7I0M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umfiwI-7I0M)
Quiz

1. Answer the following in brief:

i. Explain the use of colors in *Vertigo*.

ii. Mention the major themes in Hitchcock’s films.

iii. Name any two books that Hitchcock adapted for his films.

2. Match the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>i</th>
<th><em>Spellbound</em></th>
<th>a</th>
<th>Bernard Herrmann</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td><em>A Life in Darkness and Light</em></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>Miklos Rozsa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii</td>
<td><em>Psycho</em></td>
<td>c</td>
<td>Daphne du Maurier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td><em>Birds</em></td>
<td>d</td>
<td>Patrick McGilligan (author)</td>
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</tbody>
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3. Fill in the blanks:

i. The term…………..was coined by Alexandre Astruc.

ii. Hitchcock made a ……..appearance in almost all his films.

iii. Andrew Sarris contributed for ……………

**Answer key**

2. i.- b; ii. -d; iii. -a; iv.-c

3. i. –camera stylo; ii.- cameo ; iii.-*Village Voice*