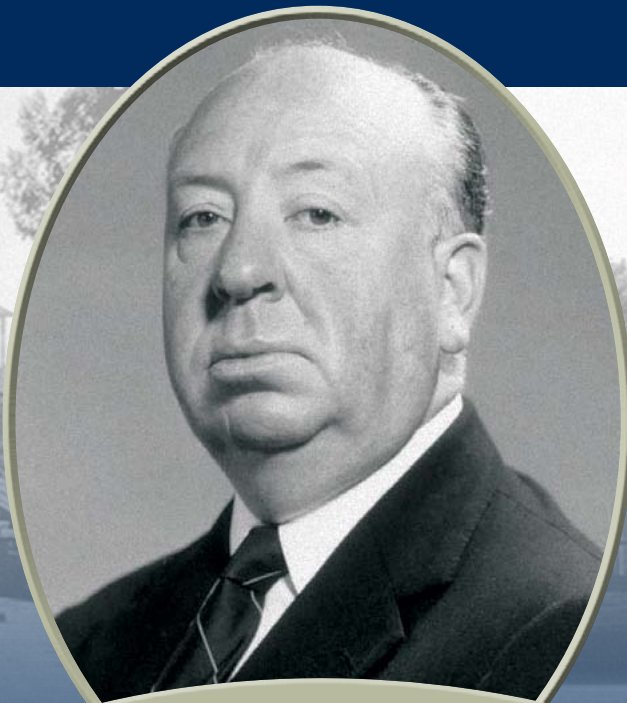


# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S AMERICA



ALFRED HITCHCOCK



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# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S AMERICA

by David Lehman

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When I think of Alfred Hitchcock's America—the vision of America that you get from watching the films that he made during his prime Hollywood period—these are some of the images that come to mind:

Heavy rain, poor visibility. The exhausted driver pulls up to a motel with a vacancy on a forlorn highway (*Psycho*).

A low-flying crop-duster takes aim at the well-dressed man running in a wide-open Midwest cornfield devoid of people or places in which to hide (*North by Northwest*).

The avuncular small-town traffic cop in the street stops an agitated teenager (Teresa Wright) from crossing against the light and says, “Just a minute, Charlie. What do you think I’m out here for?” (*Shadow of a Doubt*).

Judy (Kim Novak) puts on the same necklace that the legendary Carlotta Valdes wears in the portrait in the museum to which Madeleine (also Kim Novak) had earlier paid rapt attention while Scottie (James Stewart) furtively watched (*Vertigo*).

At the tennis championship in Forest Hills all heads in the crowd move back and forth, back and forth, to follow the progress of the ball—all except for one man, Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker), who keeps his eyes squarely on one of the players, Guy Haines (Farley Granger, in *Strangers on a Train*).

The glamorous model Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly), looking like a million pre-inflation bucks, wheels in a catered meal to serve herself and her wheelchair-bound photographer boyfriend (*Rear Window*).

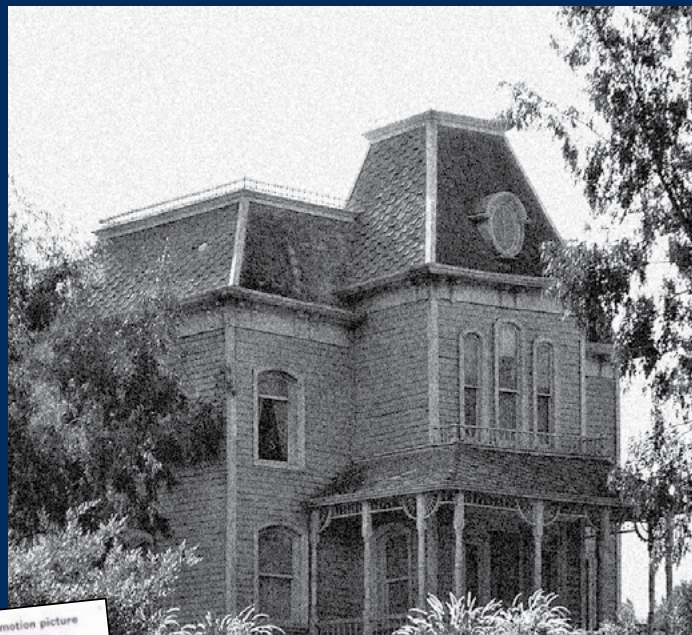
At the base of the Golden Gate Bridge, Scottie saves Madeleine from drowning in San Francisco Bay (*Vertigo*).

The merry-go-round at the Magic Isle amusement park spins out of control (*Strangers on a Train*).

All that keeps a man from falling to certain death from the top of the Statue of Liberty is his jacket sleeve clutched by another man, and the sleeve is ripping apart (*Saboteur*).

The menacing image of birds on telephone wires (*The Birds*).

A montage: the hand of Cary Grant lifting Eva Marie Saint to safety atop Mount Rushmore and then, in the wink of a camera eye, making the same gesture to lift her to the sleeper top of a train



The Bates' home set from *Psycho* (1960), above, and the original movie poster from *The Birds* (1963), left.



compartment, followed a frame later by a suggestive shot of the train entering a tunnel (*North by Northwest*).

The silhouette of an arm wielding a knife, a torn shower curtain, and Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) slumping lifeless in the tub, the blood oozing out of her and flowing down the drain (*Psycho*).

I've stopped myself after a dozen such images or scenes, though I know I can easily double or triple the list. What do these cinematic moments, emblematic as they seem to be, suggest about Hitchcock's America?

The first thing I need to declare is the filmmaker's genius. In his lifetime considered the pre-eminent maker of thrillers, Sir Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980) acquired a knighthood and the sobriquet “master of suspense.” He has long since gained general, if not universal, recognition as one of the major filmmakers—and thus one of the major artists—of the twentieth century.

An Englishman by birth and upbringing, the son of an East End greengrocer, “Hitch” was brought up in a strict Catholic household. One day his father gave the boy a letter and had him deliver it by hand to the local police station, where the officer on duty, after perusing the contents, locked young Alfred in a cell for

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10 minutes, then released him. This enhanced the boy's appreciation of the police and helped plant in him the seeds of a somewhat cruel sense of humor that expressed itself in practical jokes. The heavysset Hitchcock signed his films by making cameo appearances in them, usually at the start of the picture. In *North by Northwest* (1959), Hitch is ready to mount a New York City bus when the doors slam in his face; in *Lifeboat* (1944), the director's image turns up in a scrap of newspaper among the debris in the boat—in a before-and-after advertisement for a weight-reduction program.

Educated by Jesuits before taking some night classes at the University of London, Hitchcock made a number of superb black-and-white films in the Britain of the 1930s; *The 39 Steps* and *The Lady Vanishes* are perhaps the most celebrated of these. Hitchcock and his wife visited America in 1937 and 1938; he loved England, but when David O. Selznick offered him a directorial contract, Hitch signed on. In the end, the reason he abandoned London for Hollywood is simple to state: The latter could far more easily accommodate his aspirations than could England's more provincial film industry. And in truth, Hitchcock, who became a United States citizen, made his greatest movies in his prime American period, which began with *Rebecca* in 1940. Although he kept making movies, through *Family Plot* in 1976—and the least of these movies is worth watching more than once—the ones I find worthiest of attention in this limited context, by virtue of their aesthetic excellence on one side and their American character on the other, are *Saboteur* (1942), *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Spellbound* (1945), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *Rear Window* (1954), *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), *The Birds* (1963), and *Marnie* (1964).

If there is an overriding theme in Hitchcock's America, it is not that there are dangerous paranoids among us, though that is the case; it is that paranoia is sometimes a reasonable response to events in a world of menace and violence, with threats to safety and complacency close at hand, sometimes in the most intimate of places or from the most trusted of friends or relations. As the homicidal Bruno remarks to the traveler who shares his train compartment in *Strangers on a Train*, "Everybody has somebody that they want to put out of the way." And it follows that everybody



James Stewart in *Rear Window* (1954).

else is potentially a victim, an accomplice, an accessory after the fact, a witness, or a sleuth. Life is a cliffhanger. There comes a moment when the hero, or his adversary, or his lover, or a bystander may have to hang from a cliff, a rooftop, or the top of a lofty monument, and while there's no guarantee of survival, the reassuring thing is that someone is on hand to try to save the endangered person. That's part of the picture too.

Hitchcock's America is vast and dwarfs the individual. Man is as alone as Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) on

that wide-open cornfield in *North by Northwest*. If Man is lucky, Woman comes along, and they may learn to like each other against their own initial inclinations, as happens to Barry Kane (Robert Cummings) and Patricia Martin (Priscilla Lane) when they are handcuffed together in *Saboteur*. (Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll, the leading man and lady in *The 39 Steps*, also spend an uncomfortable amount of time handcuffed together, which appears to be Hitch's sardonic view of romance and marriage. In *Saboteur* the pair bicker, and someone overhearing them says, "My, they must be terribly in love.") If our hero is extremely lucky, he looks like Cary Grant and the lady who comes along seems to be in league with the bad guys but turns out to be a friendly double agent with a feminine touch played by Eva Marie Saint (*North by Northwest*). If, however, our hero is unlucky, the dame who comes along is a femme fatale in a plot more fantastic than even a veteran paranoid could devise. If the intricate psychological scheme at the heart of *Vertigo* isn't enough to make Scottie (James Stewart) paranoid, there must be something truly wrong with him.

When I see a Hitchcock movie, as when I read a novel by Graham Greene, I feel that I have entered a universe in which evil exists. Murders happen for the usual reasons (greed, ambition, jealousy, the desire to be rid of a cumbersome parent or spouse) and sometimes for psychologically complex motives. But there is an undercurrent of sin and damnation in even a good-natured nightmare with a happy ending like *North by Northwest*. Just prior to the cornfield scene, Roger Thornhill in his tie and business suit looks completely out of place as he stands in the road with a gentleman who is waiting for a bus. Out of the sky comes the crop-duster. "That's funny," the other man says before boarding the bus. "That plane's dusting crops where there ain't no crops."

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And as the bus departs, leaving Thornhill alone and unprotected in his natty city clothes, it becomes clear that the plane (whose pilot we never see) means to kill him. Evil in Hitchcock's America is this inhuman and malevolent flying creature bearing down on a man who is desperately out of his element. Evil stands out in a crowd, the way Bruno's head remains fixed on Guy while everyone else's head turns to follow the tennis ball in *Strangers on a Train*. Evil is a disturbance of nature, but it can have the force of a natural phenomenon, as when flocks of birds thought friendly and harmless prove to be neither in *The Birds*. But evil is also the shadow that enters the room stealthily, taking its place noiselessly among us and turning out to be the thing that doesn't belong in the picture. In *Shadow of a Doubt* Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten), with his contempt for "all-American suckers," is like a Satan who has sneaked into Eden, in this case the movie's "ordinary little town" with "average" people in Sonoma County, California, which is a version of a pastoral and which he corrupts by his very presence, though it takes the sleuthing of his niece, young Charlie (Teresa Wright), to see through his amiable and charming facade.

The natural progress of paranoia is illustrated in *Psycho* in the fate of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), the bank teller who steals \$40,000, has sex outside wedlock with her boyfriend in a hotel room, and emits the scent of guilt as she flees the city in a newly purchased used car. She has begun to act like a guilty person: fearful, jittery. When she pulls to the side of the road, exhausted, and is approached by a highway patrol officer, she is a bundle of nerves. The officer asks, "Is anything wrong?" "Of course not," Marion says. "Am I acting as if there's something wrong?" "Frankly, yes," says the cop. He means to be kind in his gruff manner when he warns her against sleeping in her vehicle on the side of the road. "There are plenty of motels in this area. You should've ... I mean, just to be safe," he says. The terrible irony of this statement becomes apparent only on a second viewing of the movie, for Marion would have been much safer in her car than in the motel where she does stop. The guilt and paranoia have run their therapeutic course when in the rain and gloom of night she sees the vacancy sign at the Bates Motel. What happens next is that her drama is swallowed by someone else's larger and more lethal nightmare. It is not her dream that matters but the more lunatic dream of Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins). In her movie, the events are comprehensible even when things go astray: A woman gives in to temptation, takes something that isn't hers, runs away, begins to think better of it,

and might even, with the benefit of a good night's sleep, decide to make a clean breast of things. In his movie, none of this matters; all that matters is that she is beautiful as sin. To the two sides of Norman Bates's schizophrenic personality, Marion Crane is either (1) a sexy, blonde female and therefore a natural object of desire or (2) a sexy, blonde female and therefore wicked as Jezebel. And so Marion is dispatched in the shower scene, stabbed by Norman's "mother," before the movie is half over. The greatest danger is the nearest, and one reason the shower scene in *Psycho* is the scariest and most threatening in all of Hitchcock is that it violates the defenseless heroine in the most private and intimate of places.

In the mythic landscape that is Hitchcock's America the murderous or perilous coexists with the homely and domestic. People aren't who they claim to be. A son can impersonate his dead mother (*Psycho*). A salesgirl in a San Francisco department store can impersonate an industrialist's wife (*Vertigo*). Murder is the result, premeditated in one case, spontaneous and unplanned in the other. But if murderers and their accomplices reinvent themselves, the hero, too, must be nimble enough to employ a fictive identity. In *Saboteur*, Barry Kane's very name suggests that he starts with a strike against him. When his friend Ken Mason perishes in the fire at the airplane factory where they work, and the fire is determined to be the result of industrial sabotage, Kane is the chief suspect because he was seen handing Mason a fire extinguisher that the saboteur had filled with gasoline. (Unfortunately, no one saw the villain, Frank Fry, hand the extinguisher to Kane.) Though he is innocent, goodhearted, and good-natured, there is a sense in which Kane has repeated Cain's crime in

Genesis: He has not been his brother's keeper. And he must suffer the fate of Cain, who was sentenced to wander the earth. Barry Kane must cross America in his quest to absolve himself by fingering the real saboteur. The episodic film begins in Los Angeles and ends in New York Harbor. When on the run Barry claims that his name is Barry Mason, conflating his own first name with the last name of his slain buddy, we know he's on the right path, for the progress of a Hitchcock hero is often a parable of identity, and names are sometimes changed along the way.

There's a wonderful variety of bad guys in Hitchcock's America. There are psychotics and con men out there, also kleptomaniacs and traitors and thieves and sometimes just an ordinary husband who has had enough of his wife's nagging and turns murderous. From the back of his apartment, L. B. Jefferies (James Stewart), the laid-up photographer in *Rear Window*, monitors the lives of the people in the apartments around their



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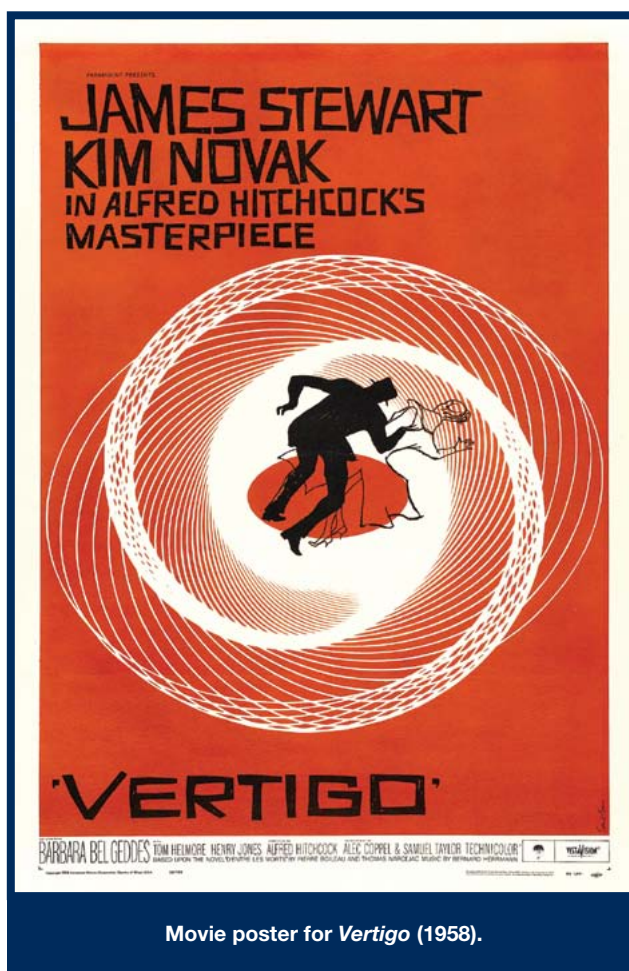
common courtyard in Greenwich Village during a hot summer. He has given nicknames to some of the neighbors, and in each case we can extrapolate an entire movie from the little we learn, as if each window in the movie represented a cinematic possibility, and the voyeur in the wheelchair with the camera is a stand-in for the film director himself. There are the newlyweds, who live mostly behind shut curtains. There is the songwriter, who plays “Mona Lisa” as if in unconscious homage to Lisa Fremont, the Grace Kelly character in the movie. Rebuffed at romance, Miss Lonelyheart is in despair and on the verge of suicide, but then she begins a hopeful new friendship with the songwriter. Miss Torso, the sexy dancer with the acrobatic body, fends off handsome suitor after suitor, reserving her warm embrace for the least prepossessing fellow, who turns up at the end, a short man with a receding hairline in a U.S. Army uniform. It is a little community in a back lot, but behind one window lives one whose existence threatens all, for Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr) has killed his wife and chopped her into pieces that fit in valises. There’s a wail in the middle of the movie when one of the neighbors discovers that her pet dog has been strangled. Behind that wail is an accusation—one of you did this—that is also a challenge to the community. So it turns out to be fortunate, after all, that the film director is a snoop. Jefferies proves that “we’ve become a race of peeping Toms,” but his paranoia is justified; his peeping leads to the apprehension of the guilty one, who must be expelled for the community to continue. This is a miniature of the logic of the generic detective story, with the twist that the rear window of the title is unmistakably a movie screen in metaphor, and we the spectators are implicated in Jefferies’s voyeurism.

When a criminal design is put into effect, it takes on a velocity of its own, like the out-of-control merry-go-round in the amusement park where the villain meets his end in *Strangers on a Train*. It was in the park’s tunnel of love that the out-of-control Bruno Anthony earlier approaches Miriam, Guy Haines’s

unfaithful wife, and strangles her to death. An amusement park is a made-to-order Hitchcock setting, a place dedicated to wholesome fun, with songs like “Ain’t She Sweet” and “Oh, You Beautiful Doll” playing in the background when the violence occurs. In Hitchcock’s America, men and women are surprisingly vulnerable—to lunatics of various stripes, criminals ingenious and banal, and even flocks of birds.

Yet for all that, Hitchcock’s America is also the America of the grateful immigrant, émigré, or refugee: a haven of freedom, a light in the storm of World War II. There is something benevolent in American institutions symbolized by public monuments or by people in uniform. The cop in the street stops young Charlie Newton (Teresa Wright) from crossing against traffic in *Shadow of a Doubt* because this is Santa Rosa, California, small-town America, where the librarians help educate you and the police keep you out of mischief. (Thornton Wilder, author of *Our Town*, wrote the screenplay.) And though Hitchcock has a sense of humor that has been characterized as sadistic, the counterweight to his dark view of humanity is also in his movies. It takes the form of an unrelenting insistence on justice, and sometimes poetic justice, and a reiteration of basic American values. Young Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* has a special bond with the uncle whose name she shares. She has always adored him. When she has reason to suspect him of being the Merry Widow Murderer, seducer and betrayer of wealthy old widows, it nearly breaks her heart.

But not only does she prove her mettle as a sleuth, she opposes her uncle’s evil with a commensurate force of goodness, and that is why she prevails. On the basis of one purloined page clipped from a newspaper and one critical clue—the ring her uncle has given her bears the same initials as one of the murdered widows—she confronts him and gets him to confess. But he doesn’t have to tell her that he has strangled three women. She knows. What persuades her is not so much the evidence as the contemptuous way the killer talks about the “ordinary” people in the “ordinary little town” of Santa Rosa. When Uncle Charlie says, “The world’s



Movie poster for *Vertigo* (1958).

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a foul sty.... If you rip the fronts off houses, you'd find swine," it's as good as an admission of guilt.

Young Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* embodies America in the same way that brash Barry Kane does in *Saboteur*. They radiate the optimism and innocence of an ordinary person to whom nothing truly bad has yet happened. Then one day it does, and it troubles her, and she is no longer innocent in the sense of being unaware, but she is able to resist her cynical uncle mentally and physically, and it is he who falls out of the train to his death when they struggle. The benevolence and kindheartedness of small-town America may be most apparent in *Shadow of a Doubt*. But you can sense the director's affection for American ideals in *Strangers on a Train* when the U.S. senator played by the Hitchcock stalwart Leo G. Carroll says, "Let me remind you that even the most unworthy of us has the right to life and the pursuit of happiness." You hear the patriotic strain loudly in *Saboteur* when a blind man, our heroine's uncle, fearlessly welcomes the fugitive Barry Kane to his rustic cabin in a rainstorm though he can tell the man is in handcuffs. "It's my duty as an American citizen to believe a man innocent until he's been proved guilty," Uncle Philip tells his skeptical niece Patricia.

American monuments turn up in Hitchcock's movies too often to lack significance. Take the United Nations, site of a key scene in *North by Northwest*. The knife that kills the diplomat in the movie is intended for someone else, which in the abstract sounds like a cutting comment on the U.N. But while Hitchcock's intentions may never lack irony, they do not consist solely of irony, and to an important degree the monuments in his films—Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest* and the Lincoln Memorial in *Strangers on a Train*—are invoked for the ideals they stand for.

The Statue of Liberty at the conclusion of *Saboteur* takes its place as the nation's favorite monument, evoking our preferred idea of ourselves. On the observation deck, waiting for Barry Kane and the police to arrive, the heroine finds herself alone with the traitorous Frank Fry. She flirts with him to detain him, and when he grows suspicious, she stands her ground and defiantly recites the great peroration from Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus":

"Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me." The final confrontation takes place on the outside of the statue, between the thumb and forefinger of the hand holding the torch. The placement of Lady Liberty here is a ringing endorsement of American values.

A favorite Hitchcock plot motif is that of the wrong man, the innocent man falsely accused of a crime, usually murder, who must elude his pursuers and track down the true culprit. *Saboteur* is a straight-forward version of this design; *Spellbound*, a baroque one (in which the suspect on the run is an amnesiac whose dreams are choreographed by Salvador Dali); *The Wrong Man*, a grim one made in a semidocumentary style; *Frenzy* (1972), a British version; and *North by Northwest*, a comic apotheosis of the theme. Both *Spellbound* and *North by Northwest* are cases of mistaken identity and can be read as existential parables: The hero needs to discover who he is, or must adopt a made-up identity to become his true, adult self. The quest for the villain and the need to subdue him and foil his plot amounts to the hero's rite of passage.

The tension between aesthetic and moral impulses adds an edge to Hitchcock's movies. The better the villain, the better the movie, was a Hitchcock maxim, and often enough it is the villains who steal the show. Certainly this is true in *Strangers on a Train*, where Robert Walker, playing Bruno, gives a considerably more interesting, threatening, and complex performance than Farley Granger, who plays the tennis pro. Claude Rains in *Notorious*, James Mason in *North by Northwest*, Joseph Cotten in *Shadow of a Doubt* are, for all their villainy, attractive, charming, and urbane. The male lead in some Hitchcock films—Robert Cummings in *Saboteur*, Farley Granger in *Strangers on a Train*, Rod Taylor in *The Birds*—comes close to being a generic figure. None of the other male characters in *Psycho*, and there are quite a few, including John Gavin and Martin Balsam, can hold a candle in interest to the schizophrenic culprit.

The male lead in a Hitchcock movie has heroic qualities but is decidedly a regular guy with flaws or wounds, and even when he is



Scene from *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

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played by an Englishman, he seems a type of the American. Roger Thornhill, the successful Madison Avenue advertising executive in *North by Northwest*, is a commitment-averse mama's boy who drinks too much and elbows inconvenient people out of the way. As the film begins, he leaves his New York office building accompanied by his secretary, dictates an insincere apology to a miffed girlfriend, and, in the time-tested New York manner, swoops in and takes a taxi someone else has hailed. Cary Grant, who plays Thornhill, is the perfect Hitchcock actor. But Jimmy Stewart, the unpretentious average guy, is a close second. Either Hitchcock found something dark that was previously untapped in Stewart or he liked capitalizing on the discrepancy between the actor's image and his character in the film at hand. As Jefferies, the invalid photographer in *Rear Window*, Stewart has less interest in his girlfriend than in spying on his neighbors. In *Vertigo* he plays the police detective John "Scottie" Ferguson, who is hampered by a psychological weakness that the film's criminal mastermind exploits to the hilt: Scottie has acrophobia and gets dizzy in high places, and this in San Francisco. When the film begins, a uniformed cop dangling from the edge of a rooftop clings for his life to Scottie's hand. Scottie, beset with vertigo, lets go, and the cop tumbles to his death.

Scottie is not the only Hitchcock character to suffer from guilt. Gregory Peck in *Spellbound* arrives at the asylum as its new director, Dr. Anthony Edwardes, but is soon revealed to be an impostor, an amnesiac, and a suspect in the murder case of the actual Dr. Edwardes. (In a flashback resembling a psychoanalytic breakthrough, he recovers the repressed boyhood memory of sliding down a New York banister and accidentally pushing his younger brother to his death.) For much of the movie, Gregory Peck doesn't even know who he is, proving thereby that in the asylum the doctors and the patients are hard to tell apart. The Peck character learns that his real initials are J.B., and when he checks into a hotel as John Brown, this represents considerable progress, for the entire film is metaphorically a case study in psychoanalysis in which the patient reveals his dreams, talks about his repressed memories, and discovers at long last that his name is John Ballantine and that though he was the immediate cause of his brother's death, it is now past time to shed the burden of guilt.

Some of the wounded men in Hitchcock's movies have their chance at regeneration and redemption. Gregory Peck gets well through the love and ministrations of the sympathetic psychoanalyst Dr. Constance Petersen (Ingrid Bergman), Hollywood's greatest homage to Freudian psychology. Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*

shows himself so adept at eluding pursuers and escaping from hot spots—by, for example, hilarious antics improvised at an elegant auction house—that by the end of the movie he has proved himself worthy of Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint). As in *Saboteur* and other Hitchcock movies, a change of name spells a change in fortune in *North by Northwest*. Cary Grant thinks he is the adman Roger Thornhill until he is abducted and people start calling him George Kaplan. There is even a room in the Plaza Hotel in Kaplan's name, with suits of clothes in the closet. From the moment he answers to the name Kaplan for the first time, thereby embodying the purely notional spy that the CIA has concocted to lead the bad guys astray, the hero begins his journey through terror toward redemption. In this case, redemption is epitomized by his union with Eve Kendall in that railway compartment as the train enters the tunnel and "The End" appears on the screen.

In some ways a Hitchcock film functions as a morality play. In *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) the cast of characters stranded on a stalled train acts out the appeasement-versus-confrontation debate in Britain in the face of German aggression in the late 1930s. The underrated *Saboteur* is a series of episodic lessons in democracy. When Barry and Patricia throw themselves upon the mercy of circus performers, the troupe—in a flamboyant scene written by Dorothy Parker—debates whether to offer refuge to the fleeing pair. And then they vote. The quarreling Siamese twins cancel each other out. The fat lady declares herself neutral. The leader of the troupe votes for the couple; the malignant midget, against. And so Esmerelda, the bearded lady with her beard in curlers, casts the decisive vote, and it is in favor of the fugitives. *Lifeboat* (1944), about the survivors of a shipwreck adrift in a small lifeboat, is allegorically not only a parable of survival but a contest between American democracy and German totalitarian efficiency. *The Birds* sounds a prophetic call for an ecology movement that has not yet got off the ground in 1963. The Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell has argued that *North by Northwest*, whose title echoes one of Hamlet's famous declarations ("I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a hand-saw"), is in fact a symbolic reworking of Hamlet, and you don't have to agree with this unusual thesis to find the argument fascinating. *Rear Window* is allegorically about moviemaking and voyeurism. *Vertigo* and *Psycho* are allegories of the interior life of the wounded.

Two major Hitchcock movies end without the usual resolution that we expect in a murder mystery—*Vertigo* and *The Birds*. In other of his films as well, the element of threat is what endures



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beyond the solution of the puzzle at hand and the restoration of order. In a Hitchcock movie an object can vibrate with meaning and serve as a metonymy of danger: Guy's cigarette lighter with crossed tennis rackets on it, which Bruno wants to plant at the scene of the amusement-park murder in *Strangers on a Train*; the victim's smashed eyeglasses in the same picture (does any other image convey vulnerability so well?); the crack of light beneath the asylum director's door in *Spellbound*; the key to the wine cellar in *Notorious* (1946); the glass of milk Cary Grant brings to Joan Fontaine in *Suspicion* (1941); the necklace Kim Novak puts on in *Vertigo*. Hitchcock's poetry of objects, as I think of it, could stand as a lesson for modern poets weaned on Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams.

There is this in Hitchcock, and there is some of the most glorious music ever written for the movies, by Bernard Herrmann, Dimitri Tiomkin, and others. There is also glamour, as when Grace Kelly flirts with Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief* or wheels in an elegant repast for James Stewart and her to consume in his bohemian pad in *Rear Window*. And there is the good old-fashioned Hollywood buss that ends the spectacle, as when Ingrid Bergman and Gregory Peck clinch at the gate in Grand Central at the end of *Spellbound*. But I would save the last word for Hitchcock's humor and the marvelous way it coexists with the macabre. In *Shadow of a Doubt* there is a running conversation

between young Charlie's father, Joseph Newton (Henry Travers), and his neighbor and friend Herbie Hawkins (Hume Cronyn) in comic counterpoint to the plot of the Merry Widow Murderer. Both gentlemen are addicted to detective stories and make a competitive parlor game out of planning the perfect murder as a strictly theoretical pastime. When we first meet Joe, he is carrying a magazine entitled *Unsolved Crimes*. The best way to commit a

murder, he has told Herb, is with a blunt instrument. In a later scene Herb jokes that he could have poisoned Joe's coffee unseen. Both men are utterly oblivious of the drama unfolding in the very house in which they drink their coffee and discuss unsolved crimes. When Emma Newton (Patricia Collinge) describes her husband and Herb as "literary critics," she is more accurate than she can know, for the pair have the same relation to the crimes in the movie—murder by strangulation rather than poison or a lead pipe—that literary critics have to literary art. This comic subplot, which

might seem to underscore the theme of our general vulnerability, is a variant on the archetypal story of the scholar who, with his eyes fixed on the stars, falls into a ditch. Most of us are looking elsewhere and do not see the peril immediately before us. This may make us easy prey. But the comedy is benevolent, because the "ordinary people" in *Shadow of a Doubt* are decent, warmhearted, and generous, the backbone of Hitchcock's America. ♣



Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) takes the wine cellar key while Sebastian dresses for the party. (*Notorious* (1946.)



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ALFRED HITCHCOCK

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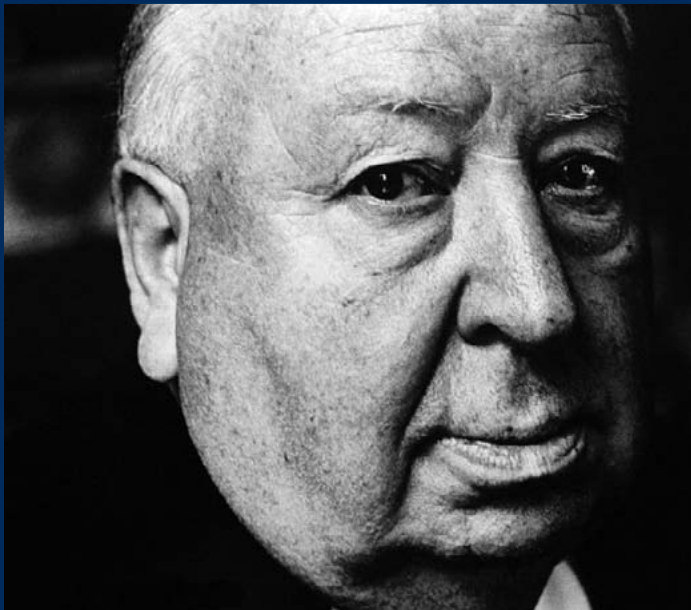
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Photograph of Alfred Hitchcock  
Palumbo, Fred  
1956

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S AMERICA

## ALFRED HITCHCOCK AT RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL

<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1999/hitchcock/lecture/>



Alfred Hitchcock

JACK MITCHELL

**BELOW IS A TRANSCRIPT OF  
A LECTURE HITCHCOCK GAVE  
ON MARCH 30, 1939 AT RADIO CITY  
MUSIC HALL, NEW YORK CITY.  
THE LECTURE WAS ORGANIZED  
BY THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
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I have some notes here that are mixed up with a letter from my mother, and I am trying to sort them out. First of all, before we go into melodrama and suspense, about which Mr. Abbott asked me to speak to you, I wish to talk about the method one invariably uses in designing a motion picture script.

When I am given a subject, probably a book, play, or an original, I like to see it on one sheet of foolscap. That is to say, have the story, in its barest bones, just laid out on a sheet of foolscap paper. You might call it the steelwork, or just the barest bones, as I said before. Now you do not have to write down very much, maybe just that a man meets a woman at a certain place, and something else happens. In the briefest possible way, this thing should be laid out on a piece of paper.

From that, of course, we start to build the treatment of that story--the characterizations, the narrative, and even the detail, until we have probably a hundred pages of complete narrative

without dialogue. But I do not mean narrative in the abstract, the practical side of what is going to appear on the screen. I always try to avoid having in the treatment anything that is not really visual. In dialogue we indicate it by saying, for instance, that the man goes to the sideboard, pours himself out a drink, and tells the woman that something or other is going to happen to him. We indicate it in the treatment, and this is very full and practically the complete film on paper, in terms of action and movement.

The particular reason why I prefer to do that is because I don't like to kid myself. I do not like to let myself think that there is more in it than there really is, because I believe that one should build up. That is why I prefer to start with the broad narrative, and then from that, develop into this full treatment--but purely cinematic treatment. You must not go into anything like a short story, or anything descriptive, like "with half-strangled cries" and that sort of thing. You just want the actual movement or action, and then indicate the dialogue.

Dialogue is the next phase, and that depends on how much time one has. Once the story line is decided upon and one has a dialogue writer in, one usually deals with it sequence by sequence. After the first sequence, we call the dialogue writer in and hand it to him. While he has the first sequence, we start the first sequence in treatment, and build up as we go along. Finally we have a whole pile of material which is treatment, and a whole pile of material which is dialogue.

From the stage we go into the shooting script by assembling the dialogue and the treatment. We keep building it even further, and adding to it. We do not do this in a mechanical way, but put up as many ideas as we possibly can. Finally we have a shooting script of the whole thing. Then we cast it, shoot it, and finally it is shown.

A member of the audience sees that film, and probably after seeing it goes home and tells his wife about it. She wants to know what it was like, so he tells her that it was about a man who met a girl--and whatever he tells his wife is what you should have had on the piece of paper in the very beginning. That is the complete cycle that I like to aim for, as far as possible, and that is the process one works on in designing a motion picture script.

Now to talk about melodrama, you know, of course, that melodrama was the original mainstay of motion pictures material, on account of its obvious physical action and physical situation. After all, the words "motion pictures" means action and movement. Melodrama lends itself very much--perhaps more than before the talkies came in; more than anything else, I mean.

You know we had the early chase films, and we had those French pictures where a man used to run around Paris. He was

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on a bicycle and knocked people over as he went along. Are there any of these films in the museum?

*Mr. Abbott: yes*

Of course, in those days, and even up to the coming of the talking picture, the characters were pretty well cardboard figures. One advantage that the talking picture has given us is that it allowed us to delineate character a little more, through the medium of dialogue. The talking picture has given us more character, and obviously, in the long run, that is what we are going to rely upon.

There has been a tendency, I feel, in the past, in this development of character, to rely upon the dialogue, only, to do it. We have lost what has been--to me, at least--the biggest enjoyment in motion pictures, and that is action and movement. What I am trying to aim for is a combination of these two elements, character and action.

The difficulty is, I feel, that the two rhythms are entirely different things; I mean the rhythm and pace of action and the rhythm and pace of dialogue. The problem is to try and blend these two things together. I am still trying it, and I have not entirely solved the problem, but eventually, I imagine, it will be solved. The field of the future motion picture story has obviously got to come from character, and where the difficulty comes is that character controls the situation.

That is the one thing that disturbs me a little. You see modern novels, psychological novels, with frank characterizations and very good psychology, but there has been a tendency, with the novel and with a lot of stage plays, to abandon story. They don't tell enough story or plot. For a motion picture, we do need quite an amount of story.

Now the reason we need a lot of story is this: a film takes an hour and twenty minutes to play, and an audience can stand about an hour. After an hour, it starts to get tired, so it needs the injection of some dope. One might also say there should be a slogan, "Keep them awake at the movies!" (Laughter)

That dope, as one might call it, is action, movement, and excitement; but more than that, keeping the audience occupied mentally. People think, for example, that pace is fast action, quick cutting, people running around, or whatever you will, and it is not really that at all. I think that pace in a film is made entirely by keeping the mind of the spectator occupied. You don't need to have quick cutting, you don't need to have quick playing, but you do need a very full story and the changing of one situation to another. You need the changing of one incident to another, so that all the time the audience's mind is occupied.



Outside of Radio City Hall in New York City

Now so long as you can sustain that and not let up, then you have pace. That is why suspense is such a valuable thing, because it keeps the mind of the audience going. Later on I will tell you how I think the audience should participate in those things.

In trying to design a melodrama with these elements of character, action, and movement, of course it does present a pretty big problem, and one has to adopt various methods. One method I have used in the past--I did it with *The Man Who Knew Too Much*--was to select some backgrounds or events that would lend themselves to a colorful, melodramatic motion picture. Of course, this is quite the wrong thing to do, but here is an idea: select the background first, then the action. It might be a race or it might be anything at all. Sometimes I select a dozen different events, and shape them into a plot. Finally--and this is just the opposite to what is usually done--select your character to motivate the whole of the above.

Under the present circumstance, people figure out a character or group of characters, and they allow them to motivate the story, the background, and everything else. Now you see, you are liable, unless you get a very colorful character, like an engine driver, a ship's captain or a diver, to be led into very dull backgrounds.

For example, if you take a society woman, she will obviously lead you into a drawing room, into a lot of talk, you see, and there you are! (Laughter) You might choose many characters of that nature, and it is inevitable, if you follow the regular method. I am not advocating that this should be everybody's method, it is only a feeling I have, myself, because I want to get certain things, you see.

Sometimes you cannot get the characters you want to take you into these places, so you say, "All right, I will have the society woman." The next thing is, of course, what to do with her. You might say, "I would like to have her in a ship's stokehole." Your

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job becomes very hard, indeed! You have to be really inventive to get a society woman into a ship's stokehole, to get a situation that will lead that way, and a character who, by reason of the situation, would find herself in a ship's stokehole.

Of course, I'd bet a lot of you would say, "It is too much trouble. Let's put her in a yacht's stokehole. A society woman is bound to go there." That, of course, is radical and you must not do it, because the moment you do, you are weakening and not being inventive.

If you can summon up enough courage to select your background and your incidents, you will find you really have something to work out. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, I said, "I would like to do a film that starts in the winter sporting season. I would like to come to the East End of London. I would like to go to a chapel and to a symphony concert at the Albert Hall in London."

That is a very interesting thing, you know. You create this terrific problem, and then say, "How the devil am I going to get all those things into it?" So you start off, and eventually you may have to abandon one or two events, as it might be impossible to get some of the characters into a symphony concert, or whatever it is. You say, "Well, can't Stokowski have his hair cut?" or something like that, and you try and blend the characters in the best way you can--appear to be quite natural that all the events have taken place in those settings because it was necessary for them to do so.

Now in the shape of this thing, it is inevitable that you must design your incidents and your story shape to mount up. I always think the film shape is very much like the short story. Once it starts, you haven't time to let up. You must go right through, and your film must end on its highest note. It must never go over the curve. Once you have reached your high spot, then the film is stopped.

Now one of the things that is going to help you hold all these things together and provide you with that shape is the suspense. Suspense, I feel, is a very important factor in nearly all motion pictures. It can be arrived at in so many different ways. To me, there is no argument that a surprise lasting about ten seconds, however painful, is not half as good as suspense for about six or seven reels.

I think that nearly all stories can do with suspense. Even a love story can have it. We used to feel that suspense was saving

someone from the scaffold, or something like that, but there is also the suspense of whether the man will get the girl. I really feel that suspense has to do largely with the audience's own desires or wishes.

There, though, we have another subject--audience identification, and it is so great that I don't think I have time to deal with it here. I might say that it is a very, very important point. For example, you probably get more suspense out of an audience worrying about a known figure than some unknown person. It is quite possible that an audience will have convulsions at the thought of Clark Gable being shot or killed, but if it is some unknown actor, they will say, "Who the hell is he, anyway?" That is one important aspect of suspense.

Then there is the other thing, and that is where suspense is in a title. Take a film like *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Suppose it had not had the word "mutiny" in the title, but that it was called *The Good Ship Bounty*. You would have told the audience nothing. With its real title, however, the audience in the cinema is waiting from the moment the picture starts, wondering when the mutiny is going to start.

That applies again and again with titles. A lot of people are very unconscious of that fact. They do not realize how much suspense the audience is enjoying through a thing like that.

But to revert to the actual writing of suspense, of course in the old days, as I said, it was the race to the scaffold. Griffith did it, you know, in *Orphans of the Storm*, *The Knife*, and that sort of thing, but I feel that today we can have two types of suspense. We can have suspense like the old chase, which I would call objective suspense, and then there is a subjective suspense, which is letting the audience experience it through the mind or eyes of one of the characters. Now that is a very different thing.

You see, I am a great believer in making the audience suffer, by which I mean that instead of doing it, say as Griffith used to do it, by cutting to the galloping feet of the horse and then going to the scaffold--instead of showing both sides, I like to show only one side. In the French Revolution, probably someone said to Danton, "Will you please hurry on your horse," but never show him getting on the horse. Let the audience worry whether the horse has even started, you see. That is making the audience play its part.



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The old way used to be that the audience was presented with just an objective view of this galloping horse, and they just said they hoped the horse got there in time. I think it should go further than that. Not only “I hope he gets there in time,” but “I hope he has started off,” you see. That is a more intensive development. Of course, that is simply dealing with the treatment of what is the convention of suspense, but to get to suspense for a film as a whole, as I have said, a title can give it.

And then there is a thing which one might term the springboard situation. In the first reel of a film you establish a given situation. You might take a sympathetic character who gets himself into some sort of trouble, whatever it might be. The rest of the film, then, is, “Will he get himself out of that situation?” I always call that the springboard situation.

For example, this film that Mr. Abbott mentioned, *The Lodger*, was based on Jack the Ripper. I took the trouble to spread a description of this man over London. I did it by every known means of disseminating news. The fact that he only went for fair-haired girls was broadcast, or that he wore a black cloak or carried a bag. I spent a whole reel on stuff like that. By the end of the reel you were shown a house where the gas went out, and just as the man was putting a shilling into the meter, there was a knock at the door. The housewife opened the door, and just then the gas came up with a full flood of light on this figure. Now that is what I call the springboard situation. You then knew that Jack the Ripper was in a London boarding house. In the rest of the film, you see, you were bound to hold on to that.

I have always been, as far as possible, a great believer in that sort of thing, such as you had in the *Chain Gang* picture (*I am Fugitive from a Chain Gang*), where a man escapes and you wonder what happens to him. *Galsworthy's Escape* is another example. They are what I call springboard situations, where suspense starts practically in the first reel. I have always found that, generally speaking, what I would call letting the audience into the secret as early as possible. Lay all the facts out, as much as you can, unless you are dealing with a mystery element. I have just finished a film, *Jamaica Inn*, with Charles Laughton, and apropos of this, I came upon a very queer problem. I don't know how many of you have read the book, but there was a character in it who was a village parson. He was in a village

where wrecking took place--the luring of ships on to the rocks by a gang of wreckers. Their headquarters were at this Jamaica Inn, and the innkeeper was the head of the gang, but he was under the thumb or control of a shadow described in the book.

Actually, of course, it was this parson character who emerged for the last third of the story, and there he took an active part in the film. He had big acting scenes with the girl in the story, and he really took command of the whole picture, he was that strong. But for two-thirds of the picture, he had to appear just as an innocuous figure.

The problem there was, as I saw it, when I came in on this thing, that one would have to have a very important actor to play this character, because of what he had to do in the last third of the picture. The question was, how could one possibly have an important actor playing in an apparently unimportant part in the first two-thirds, when the characters are talking about a mysterious and influential figure?

Well, as you know, in the “who-done-it” story, the murderer turns out to be none other than the butler or the maid! (Laughter) Now this was a sort of “who-done-it” story, but with that difference, that the part was so strong a prominent actor had to be cast for it, because he took possession of the whole film at the end. The question was that you had neither suspense nor surprise. You certainly had one moment

of surprise, though, when Laughton turned out to be whatever it was. A good phrase, that, don't you think? (Laughter)

Naturally, then, the story had to be changed. It is one occasion when journalists say, “Those film people have ruined another good story by changing it around.” But one can really hold one's head up here, and say that it has been done with every possible reasoning. We had to let the audience into the secret about that figure and change the whole middle of the story, so that you saw this figure behind the scenes and how he manipulated the wreckers. We had to invent new situations. We couldn't just show what he did and how he did it, but had to have new situations, showing him up against it, investigations going on by the detectives of the period--if they had them in 1820. The entire middle had to be changed, so that it became a suspense story instead of a surprise story.

How am I doing? (Applause) Don't you want to ask questions? I sound bored, with nobody interrupting me. ☺

I AM A GREAT BELIEVER  
IN MAKING THE  
AUDIENCE SUFFER.

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## MAKING SENSE OF FILMS: FILM AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/film/socialhist.html>

### Making Sense of Film

By Tom Gunning

Increasingly historians have moved away from a history that chronicles battles, treaties, and presidential elections to one that tries to provide an image of the way daily life unfolded for the mass of people: how they worked, what they did for fun, how families were formed or fell apart, or how the fabric of daily life was formed or transformed. Film has an important role to play in these histories. While traditional historical documents tend to privilege great events and political leaders, historians now use other records to discern the lives of "ordinary" people: census records, accounts of harvests and markets, diaries and memoirs, and local newspapers. Film is perhaps more like these records of daily life than it is like the documents that record great events. Motion pictures may provide the best evidence of what it was like to walk down the streets of Paris in the 1890s, what a Japanese tea ceremony was like in the 1940s, what the World Series in 1950 looked like, or how people in factories did their work or spent a Sunday afternoon in the park. All of these subjects could be staged and distorted, of course, and film can be transformed in many ways. But as a record of time and motion, films preserve gestures, gaits, rhythms, attitudes, and human interactions in a variety of situations. In almost any film archive, and in numerous places on the Internet, one can glimpse images of simple actions, from the way a Buddhist monk in Ceylon folded his robe in 1912 to the way people boarded trolley cars in New York City in the 1930s. While film shares much of this information with other forms of documentation, especially still photography, motion pictures allow viewers to see and compare the everyday physical actions of people across the globe and throughout the twentieth century.

This is not to deny that film provides indelible images of some of the twentieth century's great events. Our horrified consciousness of the Holocaust relies partly on the filmed



Film crew in the 1950's.

images from the liberation of the camps, and our knowledge of the devastation of the Atomic bomb comes partly from motion pictures of Hiroshima or of A-bomb test explosions. Conversely, twentieth-century disasters or traumas that went unrecorded by motion pictures – such as the genocide of the Armenians or mass starvation in Asia – are less present in public consciousness because of the lack of vivid images. But when we focus on social and cultural history, especially the important role of leisure in the lives of ordinary people, film not only provides evidence and records but takes on a key role.

In addition to the primarily non-fiction or documentary films discussed above, we must consider Hollywood's primary output, feature films. Can fictional film be used as historical evidence? As evidence of what? Fictional films serve as historical evidence in the same way that other representational art forms do – by making events vivid, portraying social attitudes, and even revealing the unconscious assumptions of past societies. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* cannot be viewed as an objective or accurate view of the era of Reconstruction, but it does – painfully, and even unintentionally – indicate the sorts of hysterical anxieties and aggressive fantasies that underlay American racism, especially in the early twentieth century. Attitudes about gender, class, and ethnicity, as well as heroism, work, play, and "the good life" are all portrayed in fictional

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films as they are in an era's novels, plays, and paintings. But as a form of mass visual entertainment, films reflect social attitudes in a specific and vivid manner.

From 1915 to about 1955, movies were arguably America's most popular form of narrative entertainment. Movies, therefore, aimed at a wider target audience than that of most novels and plays. Does this mean that movies reflect social attitudes more accurately than any other medium, since they reached the greatest number of people? Possibly. But a mass audience does not mean that movies

in America represented all points of view. It often indicates the opposite, with film studios avoiding certain controversial points of view in order not to offend a wide-ranging audience. Since films were released nationally and globally to make a profit, producers tried not to offend groups they recognized as influential and usually avoided political controversies or minority opinions.

Further, from 1916 until the 1950s, movies were not protected by the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech. A court ruling in 1916 (concerning the state of Ohio's ban of *The Birth of A Nation*) held that film could legally be subject to censorship because of its vivid psychological effects and audiences (including women, children, and the "lower classes") who the court deemed more impressionable than the readers of printed matter. A number of states and localities created film censorship boards. Although Hollywood studios occasionally released controversial films, they usually avoided such themes as racial prejudice, child labor, and venereal disease. Likewise, in contrast to the current trend of niche marketing, Hollywood ignored small specialized markets. A small, and financially marginal, series of independent producers did make films targeted at minority markets (such as the African-American films produced by Oscar Micheaux or the Yiddish films



Film crew shooting at an airport

directed by Edgar G. Ulmer). These independent films provide fascinating evidence about the issues and assumptions current in smaller communities, often in sharp contrast to Hollywood films.

Interpreting Hollywood movies as a reflection of prevailing social attitudes or generalizing from specific films requires great caution. Fictional films are complex industrial and social products and how they are made, distributed, exhibited, and received by audiences and critics must be investigated to fully evaluate their roles as historical evidence. For

example, it is dangerous to interpret a few films from a specific period as simple reflections of American society. The attitudes portrayed in a specific film may represent a series of compromises carefully designed to be non-offensive. In addition, individual films can indicate very different attitudes toward labor unions, big business, race relations, or women's rights.

One Hollywood strategy for creating and pleasing a mass audience included designing films so that audiences could interpret movies in different ways. This is clearest in the carefully regulated portrayal of sexual behavior during the period of Hollywood's dominance (1917-1960). An adult or sexually aware audience member may decide that Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart have sex when *Casablanca* cuts from their passionate kiss to a brief image of the control tower beacon at the nearby airport. But a child or a socially conservative viewer may assume nothing happened. Most important, the studio could deny to a censor that any sexual activity took place. The Production Code Administration (an industry-created "watchdog" committee charged with locating scenes that might be considered objectionable and proposing ways to modify them) often suggested such ambiguous scenes to film producers to avoid problems with state or local censorship boards.

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Film going is social and an important aspect of twentieth-century life. Shown here is a giant inflatable movie screen used at a temporary outdoor movie theater.

Ambiguous scenes provide rich material for studying social history, but they require complex interpretation and investigation. Such investigation requires moving beyond the evidence on the screen (whether movie theater, video, or computer monitor) to ask how reviewers, censors, and fans understood films. Likewise historians need to investigate the actual process of filmmaking and the variety of viewpoints involved in production. Hollywood studio archives are filled with discussions of what material should be cut from scripts, what might be offensive to different audiences, how to soften images of sexuality or violence, or how to blur political references. Every Hollywood film involved compromises between divergent viewpoints, often aimed at creating room for multiple interpretations.

Thus, a broad range of materials are needed to write a full history of the cinema as part of cultural life. Film production and film-going are social practices and important aspects of twentieth-century life. To understand them

we need to investigate technology, economics (including business and industrial organization), advertising, and distribution – all of which influenced where films were shown and who came to see them. A wide range of documents provide evidence in this quest, including letters, trade journals, movie reviews, contracts, financial information, scripts, and studio memos. In addition, many non-traditional sources are key to writing the social history of the movies. For example, the design of movie theaters or the switch to video rental stores; censorship and pressure group protests; fan magazines and movie-based souvenirs; fashion designs introduced by films; educational matinees for school children; and reactions by specific communities as gathered through oral histories. The actual role films play in people's daily lives, in their sense of themselves and their world, especially for the early part of the century, however are extremely difficult to document. Those vanished audiences will always remain somewhat elusive. ❁



ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S AMERICA  
YOUTUBE VIDEO OF DREAM SEQUENCE FROM *SPELLBOUND*  
– DESIGNED BY ARTIST SALVADOR DALI –

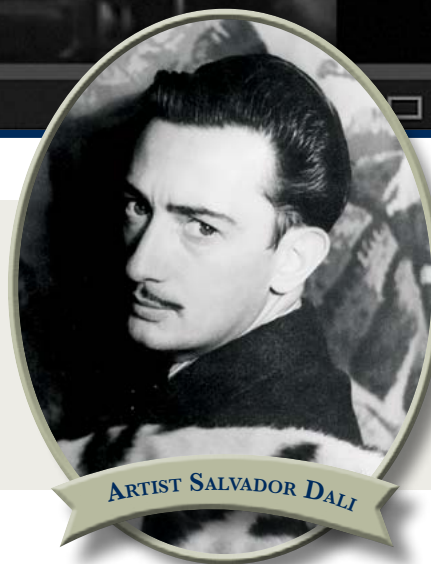
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeRel-eYE4w&feature=player\\_embedded](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeRel-eYE4w&feature=player_embedded)



## Spellbound

Alfred Hitchcock  
1954

YouTube video of the dream sequence from *Spellbound*, designed by Salvador Dali.



ARTIST SALVADOR DALI