

## ALFRED HITCHCOCK: AUTEUR?

---



"There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it."  
(Alfred Hitchcock)

Auteur theory was articulated in the 1950s by French film critics, most notably by Francois Truffaut. The concept describes the mark of a film director in terms of: thematic or stylistic consistencies, personal aesthetic vision, recurring themes, established technique, a defined view of the world and a significant degree of control over production. The works of an auteur director are stamped by the personality and unique artistic vision of its creator, and are as recognisable and distinctive as the creators of any other work of art. In auteur films, it is the director who controls the artistic statement, takes credit for the film and is responsible for attracting the audience.

When auteur theory was being developed, Alfred Hitchcock was frequently acknowledged as the consummate exemplar, and his name evokes immediate expectations in terms of themes and techniques. As befits the master of mystery and suspense, his films play with the audience's nerves, sexually or tabooed areas assume central or implicit places in his work (the latent homosexuality of *Strangers on a Train*, the parody of an Oedipus complex in *Psycho* and the traumatic remembrance of repressed memories of

*Marnie*), there is a persistent element of black comedy, and frequent eccentric characterisations. Hitchcock was influenced by the German Expressionists, and admired their ability "to express ideas in purely visual terms" (Spoto 68). It is this visual expression of thought and psychology that Hitchcock achieves throughout his films.

Hitchcock's films are marked by his mastery of cinematic technique which is exemplified in his use of camera viewpoints, elaborate editing and soundtrack to build suspense. *Notorious* includes an incredible zoom-in from a high shot to an extreme close-up of a significant plot detail and suspense building inter-cutting of the final scene. In a scene in *Blackmail*, Hitchcock uses a complex pattern of sound and dialogue based around the word knife to reflect feelings of guilt and in the *The Thirty-Nine Steps* there is a cut from a woman's scream to the similar sound of a train whistle. His personal stamp is typified by the use of a lightbulb to produce the effect of an ominous, glowing glass of milk in *Suspicion*. This attribution of symbolic power to inanimate objects is another hallmark of Hitchcock: a bread knife (*Blackmail*), a key (*Notorious*). He also places great focus on the creation of set pieces where he is able to exercise his talent for detail and suspense.

Hitchcock's vision of the world is reflected in the themes that predominate in his films. The specific psychology that is presented in the films, such as the fascination with wrongful accusation and imprisonment, is a significant part of the Hitchcock signature. One of the basic themes is that of: the mistaken identity, the wrong man accused who must find the real perpetrator in order to prove his innocence (*The Lodger*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *North By Northwest*, etc.). Hitchcock also found visual expression for his themes in recurrent motifs that express his vision of the world: staircases (*Strangers On A Train*, *Vertigo*, *Psycho*), sinister houses (*Psycho*), chasms (*Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*) and National Landmarks (most obviously in *North by Northwest* which includes the United Nations' Building and Mount Rushmore).

*Notorious* includes prime examples of trademark Hitchcock themes: a woman complicitous in her forced transformation to a different person, later brought to its fruition in *Vertigo*; the figure of the mother both adoring and deadly, who appears in various forms in *Strangers on a Train*, *Psycho* (1960), and *Marnie and the MacGuffin*, the narrative device Hitchcock once defined as the thing that motivates the actions of the characters but which is of minor interest to audiences. The MacGuffin in the case of *Notorious* being uranium ore hidden in wine bottles in Sebastian's basement.

Donald Spoto notes that the Hitchcock touch was evident even in his earliest films: "in the structure and content of the screenplay . . . in the development of plot and theme and images; in the selection of cast and setting; in the style of lighting and placement and movement of the camera; in the moods created, sustained, and shifted; in the subtle manipulation of an audience's fears and desires; in the economy and wit of the narrative; in the pacing; and in the rhythms of the film's final cutting". Hitchcock was, therefore, able to transcend the artistic constraints of the Studio System in which most films are recognisable as the work of a particular studio than of an individual director and make highly personalised films that bear the stamp of his artistic personality.

Francois Truffaut referring to Hitchcock: notes that "he exercises such complete control over all the elements of his films and imprints his personal concepts at each step of the way, Hitchcock has a distinctive style of his own. He is undoubtedly one of the few film-makers on the horizon today whose screen signature can be identified as soon as the picture begins." It was Truffaut's publication in 1967 of his interviews with Hitchcock that established Hitchcock as the 'quintessential auteur' (Spoto). However, this was shortly after the badly received *Torn Curtain*, and, as Spoto points out, Hitchcock was only too happy to accept Truffaut's 'sincere and devoted homage' which was also a 'masterpiece of Hitchcockian self promotion'.

Spoto also notes that Hitchcock in his interviews with Truffaut reduces the contribution of others to the production of his films to 'little other than elves in the master carpenter's workshop'. With the demise of the Studio System in the 1950s there was more freedom for a single personality to take control and shape the film into something consistent and relatively personal. However, film by its very nature, is a collaborative medium subject to a host of outside elements and rarely the result of a single person's efforts and input. The director has to work with contracted actors, scriptwriters, camera operators, and a many other personnel. Deadlines and costs further discourage experimentation.

DeRosa's account of Hitchcock's collaboration with the scriptwriter John Michael Hayes indicates that Hitchcock's artistic vision were not always his alone and were often radically reshaped and transformed by Hayes' writing. The Hitchcock-Hayes collaborations--*Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief*, *The Trouble with Harry* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*- reflect a lighter and more sophisticated side to Hitchcock. Perhaps referring to the collaborative period, Hitchcock said: "People embrace the auteur theory, but it's difficult to know what someone means by it. Very often the director is no better than his script." However, Hitchcock did little to dispute his own cinematic mastery and when interviewed by Truffaut, he downplayed the role of Hayes labelling him "a radio writer who wrote the dialogue."

Throughout his career Hitchcock depended on good stories, great performances by actors and the creative contribution of many others. Hitchcock said the success of *Psycho* was 50% due to Bernard Herrmann, and it was Herrmann who insisted that the shower scene have music, and Hitchcock finally agreed against his own better judgment. However, there is 'a consistent vision, with insistent demons, observable' (Spoto) in his films. Hitchcock was a consummate craftsman who planned each shot in advance, involved himself with every aspect of the physical production, and guided the development of his material from start to finish. Before any film he planned every detail thoroughly in advance with the help of storyboards and pictorial outlines. This in itself affected the way his films looked and as he had planned every shot so carefully, he did not need to film any superfluous material. Thus his producers were not given the opportunity to change or recut the film. His control was 'justified by a profound inner conviction that he did know better than others what would work in the formulation and expression of an idea' (Spoto).

In the end, perhaps what distinguishes Hitchcock as the ultimate auteur, or as an audacious self publicist, is the boldness of his numerous cameo appearances, which promoted his own image and can be seen as serving the same function as the artist's signature on a painting.

## REFERENCES

- Francois Truffaut: *Hitchcock* (1967)
- Donald Spoto: *The Life of Alfred Hitchcock*, Collins (1983)
- Steven DeRosa: *Writing With Hitchcock: The Collaboration of Alfred Hitchcock and John Michael Hayes* Faber & Faber; (July 2001).
- John Russell Taylor: *Hitch, The Authorised Biography*, Abacus (1978)