

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

MOVIEMAKING MASTER CLASS

*Learning About Film
from the Master Of Suspense*

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M I C H A E L W I E S E P R O D U C T I O N S

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INTRODUCTION

Good day. My name is Alfred Hitchcock and I will be taking you on a personal guide through the making of a motion picture...

Alfred Hitchcock was inarguably one of the greatest filmmakers of the 20th century. He was also one of the most influential directors in motion picture history, inspiring many others through his understanding of all aspect of cinema and his innovative approach to filmmaking. All of his collaborators, including



Portrait of Alfred Hitchcock

screenwriters, assistant directors, actors, and production staff testify that not only was Hitchcock a first-rate *auteur*, he was also a great teacher, regularly engaging with his audiences and giving lectures at film institutes, universities, and film schools across the country. “He was a great director, who inspired many others,” says Jay Presson Allen, the screenwriter of Hitch’s *Marnie* (1964). “I couldn’t learn as fast as he could teach.”

In a career spanning six decades, Hitchcock directed 57 feature films, 18 episodes of the television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Alfred Hitchcock*

Hour (introducing 361 total episodes), and oversaw a series of books and a mystery magazine bearing his name. He became a director at the age of 25 and pioneered many techniques in the suspense and thriller genre, framing shots to maximize anxiety and fear and using innovative film editing techniques to create shock and surprise. Although Hitchcock never won a competitive Oscar, he was nominated five times as Best Director for *Rebecca* (1940), *Lifeboat* (1944), *Spellbound* (1945), *Rear Window* (1954), and *Psycho* (1960). He won two Golden Globes, a BAFTA Academy Fellowship award, eight Laurel Awards, and two honorary Academy Awards. In 1979, a year before he died, Hitchcock was given a lifetime achievement award by the American Film Institute. In a 2012 poll by *Sight and Sound* magazine, his masterpiece *Vertigo* (1958) was named the number one film of all time, surpassing such greats as *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Tokyo Story* (1953), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

This book is intended for everyone with an interest in film, not just for fans of Hitchcock or film students. Anyone who enjoys film will enjoy this book if they want to know what makes a film good, because who better to teach you about film than Alfred Hitchcock? His work is an exemplary model for understanding the art and craft of film, because of his understanding of pure cinema. Not only was Hitchcock the “Master of Suspense,” he was also a master of directing, framing, editing, scoring, casting, and marketing. By studying Hitchcock you study everything filmmaking encompasses.

As a filmmaker myself, with a lifelong interest in Hitchcock, the more I delve into the making of his films, the more I appreciate his artistry as a consummate craftsman who thoroughly understood the business of moviemaking. Through my two books on the making of *The Birds* and *Marnie*, I have extensively researched the Alfred J. Hitchcock collection held at the Margaret Herrick Library

in Beverly Hills, delved into his production notes, interviewed many of the key personnel who worked with Hitch, including writers, actors, art directors, costumer designers, storyboard artists, and illustrators. All of his co-workers have affirmed to me that Hitchcock was one of the most collaborative directors that they have worked with, who not only knew his job, but everyone else's on the movie set.

Although Hitchcock was the “Master” of suspense movies, his general approach to cinema applies to all types of genres, not only films that are explicitly suspenseful. Traditional films that share elements of suspense and the manipulation of information to create suspense include dramas, action adventures, and romantic comedies. This is the very paradigm that underlies good storytelling. Although you may not want to make a suspense film, it's valuable to learn how Hitchcock's cinematic practices apply to your film, no matter what type of film you do want to make, because his principles are the very foundation of filmmaking.

Take, for example, a summer blockbuster like *The Amazing Spider Man* (2012). On the surface it doesn't seem to have much in common with Hitchcock, being an adaptation of a Marvel comic book. But if you take a closer look at the film, many of the suspense techniques, the withholding of information, the manipulation of audience identification with the central characters, the use of point of view, etc., shows just how close to the Hitchcock model it really is. Further clues can be seen in the posters of Hitchcock movies prominently displayed in the background — for example there's a poster of *Rear Window* in Peter Parker's bedroom — showing that central characters in both films are photographers. Peter grieving for Gwen also meets a redhead played by the same actress, Emma Stone, in a scene with shades of *Vertigo*. There's even an appearance by comic book legend Stan Lee as the librarian, in the style of Hitchcock's famous cameos.

What do other movies like *The Bourne Identity* (2002), *Shutter Island* (2010), *The Ghost Writer* (2010), and *Source Code* (2011) all have in common? They too were all inspired by Hitchcock. Martin Scorsese, a longtime admirer of Hitchcock, says, "You can watch Hitchcock's films over and over throughout your life and find something new every time. There's always more to learn. And as you get older, the films change with you. After a while, you stop counting the great number of times you've seen them. I've looked at Hitchcock's films in sections. Just like the greatest music or painting, you can live with, or by, his films. And you can't say that about every director."

You don't just have to like thrillers to appreciate Hitchcock. He pioneered and revolutionized the way all kinds of stories were told on screen. Not only the way he handled suspense, but also romance and comedy. Even the most romantic love story needs suspense. As Kim Novak, who starred in his romantic epic *Vertigo* says, "Hitchcock is one of the great directors and one to be studied. He was a perfectionist. He didn't make any short cuts like some directors do today. There wasn't a part of the movie he wouldn't have a say in. When you are studying his work, you are watching the total making of a movie."

This book is intended for everyone with an appreciation of film and for those who want to make a film, whether they are a screenwriter, production designer, editor, or an aspiring director. It's also intended for fans of Hitchcock, in the hope that they can gain a deeper understanding of his methods and genius as a filmmaker. By understanding how Hitchcock, the "Master Filmmaker," conceived his films, both the novice and the more experienced student will develop in the process a deeper knowledge of how films are made and what makes a film good.

Now in this master class, we will take you through the process of making of a movie, with Alfred Hitchcock as your guide. Each chapter covers a different aspect of

filmmaking, from coming up with an initial story idea through writing the full screenplay; prepping sets, costumes, storyboards, and shots; casting and directing actors; and post-production editing, scoring, and marketing. We'll be using examples from Hitchcock's films, which span the history of 20th century cinema.

Using unpublished material from both the Alfred Hitchcock Collection in Beverly Hills, as well as interviews with the "Master" himself and his long-standing collaborators, including actors, writers, and technicians, this book is an insider's guide to moviemaking. We'll discover tips from Hitchcock on how to tell a story visually rather than merely through photographs of people talking, how to compose a shot, and how to create suspense through framing, editing, and music. As Hitchcock said, "I'm not interested in content, but more in the technique of storytelling by means of film."

The master class is designed as an ongoing tool for making your own movies. The exercises at the end of each chapter are laid out to stimulate the reader and give a better appreciation of Hitchcock's cinematic techniques. They are designed to be used by the film student, in class, by individuals or groups, as a starting point for further discussion in conjunction with a recommended viewing list of Hitchcock's key films.

Although in this master class we acknowledge Alfred Hitchcock as a giant of cinema, we recognize at the same time that modern audiences are keenly aware of contemporary directors such as Martin Scorsese, David Fincher, Christopher Nolan, Steven Spielberg, and Peter Jackson. With the advent of CGI and big budgets driven by action sequences and special effects, both of which are routinely planned using pre-visualization, Hitchcock's methods of meticulous pre-planning has triumphed in the last thirty years. There is no director whose films are taught more than Hitchcock's, and whole courses are built around him at schools and universities across the country.

Hitchcock believed that film schools should teach the history of cinema as much as anything from the beginning. “I’m a puritan and believer in the visual,” said Hitchcock. “And that’s what I think schools should teach. So often you hear of schools, which send out a student with an 8mm camera and see what he observes. That’s only a part of it.” As director and Hitchcock fan William Friedkin says, “Just watch the films of Alfred Hitchcock, that’s all you need to know on how to make films.”

As well as looking to the “Master” for ideas and inspiration, directors have remade and reworked his films, borrowed his themes and images, and delivered their own homage and tributes. Just one film, *Psycho*, has inspired three sequels, a shot-by-shot remake by Gus Van Sant, and an entire genre of slasher films, from *Halloween* (1978) to *Smiley* (2012). As *Halloween* director John Carpenter says, “I look at Hitchcock as a valuable natural resource since I try to steal from him as often as I possibly can. Emotionally, I grew up watching Hitchcock movies and learning cinematic technique without realizing I was actually in a filmmaking classroom rather than a movie theatre. Beyond the obvious clichés of ‘Master of Suspense,’ Hitchcock loved pure cinema. More than loving it, he understood it in as profound a way as any great director before or since.”

At this writing, 32 years after Hitchcock’s death and 90 years after his first directed film, public interest in Alfred Hitchcock remains enough to warrant not one, but two feature film biographies — *Hitchcock*, starring Anthony Hopkins, and *The Girl*, starring Toby Jones — guaranteed to bring the mischievous genius of Alfred Hitchcock to whole new generations.

So sit back, be prepared to be thrilled and entertained, and let Alfred Hitchcock be your guide as we uncover the tips and techniques that made him one of the greatest film artists of the 20th century.



CHAPTER ONE

TELL ME THE STORY SO FAR

“Well, for me, it all starts with the basic material first...you may have a novel, a play, an original idea, a couple of sentences and from that the film begins.” — Alfred Hitchcock

Two strangers meet on a train and plot to trade murders; a wheelchair-bound photographer passes the time by spying on his neighbors through his rear window; an American couple’s son is kidnapped while vacationing abroad and they get caught up in an assassination plot; a young woman is stabbed to death in a motel shower by an unknown assailant; flocks of birds inexplicably attack a seaside town. All of these ideas have the indelible stamp of one director — Alfred Hitchcock, a master of suspense and the macabre. “I think that all the films I make are fantasies,” said Hitchcock. “They are not slices of life, they are larger than life.”

WRITE DOWN YOUR IDEA ON A BLANK PIECE OF PAPER

Hitchcock often started with larger than life ideas when thinking about the plot of his films and he would write down his idea on a blank piece of paper. Imagine wanting to film a scene across the faces of Mount Rushmore. Or someone addressing the general assembly of the United Nations refusing to continue until the delegate of Peru wakes up. When the delegate is tapped on the shoulder, he falls over dead. Or a fight to the finish atop the Statue of Liberty?

In finding his ideas, Hitchcock often turned to newspaper articles, short stories, plays, and novels. In Hitchcock's stories about love and romance a woman is persuaded to go to bed with a Nazi spy for the good of her country in *Notorious* (1946), and in *Vertigo* (1958), a retired detective attempts to reshape a shop girl into the image of his lost love. These are just some of the many examples where Hitchcock takes one basic idea and spins it into a movie.

The idea for *Notorious* arose from a newspaper article about a young woman in love with the son of a prominent New York socialite. The woman feared that a secret from her past — that she had slept with a foreign spy to gain valuable information — would destroy her chance of happiness. Hitchcock and his screenwriter Ben Hecht decided to keep only the part about the young woman pressed into sexual service for her country. From that idea arose the plotting for one of Hitch's finest films, which is more of a love story than a suspense story. As he said about *Notorious*, "The whole film was really designed as a love story. I wanted to make this film about a man who forces a woman to go to bed with another man because it's his professional duty. The politics of the thing didn't much interest me."



Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) and Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) are chased across the faces of Mount Rushmore (*North by Northwest*, 1959).

Vertigo was based on a French novella, *D'entre les morts* — literally translated *From Among the Dead* — about a detective, suffering from a fear of heights, who is hired to follow the troubled wife of a friend. From this idea, screenwriter Samuel Taylor came up with the San Francisco locations, the characters, and the powerful theme of obsessive love. As Taylor said, Hitchcock was “the master of the situation, the vignette, the small moment, the short story; he always knew what he wanted to do with those.” These ideas were part of a mosaic, and when you put the mosaic together, then you have the whole story.

Torn Curtain (1966), about an American physicist who pretends to defect across the Iron Curtain, to the dismay

of his fiancée, was conceived from real-life events. When Hitchcock read about British spies Burgess and Mclean defecting to Russia during World War II, he wondered, “What did Mrs. MacLean think of the whole thing?”

PITCHING YOUR IDEA

“Life is a big mystery. I think people are intrigued about mystery, to find out about things that they don’t know anything about.”

— Alfred Hitchcock

Hitchcock kept his stories simple so that the audience could follow them. If anything in your story is densely plotted and convoluted, you won’t get the suspense out of it. Abstract stories tend to confuse the audience, which is why Hitch tended to favor crime stories with spies, assassinations, and people running from the police, which was suited to his highly visual style. Although he complained that “crime fiction is second-class literature in America” compared to Britain, where it was more highly regarded, it also gave Hitchcock some of his greatest films, including *Rope*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Rear Window*, and *Psycho*. These sorts of plots make it easier to play on fear and suspense. Can you pitch these stories in an elevator in one line?

Screenwriter Ernest Lehman was originally contracted to write a screenplay from the novel *The Wreck of the Mary Deare*, but couldn’t find the inspiration to do so. Instead he said to Hitch, “I want to do the Hitchcock picture to end all Hitchcock pictures. It has to have glamour, wit, sophistication, and move all over the place with suspense.” Hitch’s response was, “I always wanted to do a scene on Mount Rushmore, where the hero hides in Abraham Lincoln’s nose.” This scene got both Lehman and Hitchcock thinking in a Northwesterly direction, but

it took them almost a year to write *North by Northwest* because it was an original idea.

Hitchcock liked the first 65 pages of Lehman's script and went to the execs at MGM, who had been expecting an adaptation of *Mary Deare*. Hitch was a master storyteller and adept at selling ideas to network execs, so he pitched the story premise and first 20 minutes of *North by Northwest*, not knowing where the story was going to go. The execs were thrilled — they thought they were going to get two Hitchcock movies instead of one. Then Hitchcock looked at his wristwatch and said “Well gentlemen, I have a meeting to attend. I'll see you at the preview.” But he did such a good pitch that the execs at MGM were spellbound and commissioned the film on the spot. Typical Hitch!

The examples from *Notorious*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, and *Torn Curtain* all are ideas for a solid story premise. A story premise involves a protagonist who must be proactive with a goal. A man pulling a knife out of another man's back in the lobby of the United Nations while all around him everyone thinks he's just stabbed the guy. That's a story premise. What can he do so not to be arrested for it? The rest of the movie sees the man (Cary Grant) running both from the police and from the actual murderers, as he seeks to prove his innocence.

WRITE A CATCHY LOGLINE

A logline or pitch is a brief explanation of your story and is usually one to three sentences long. It contains the basic elements of the protagonist, the conflict, the antagonist, and the genre. The logline is a concise description of the movie including its essential hook. Think about these basic ideas in Hitchcock's films, and how the titles are mirrored in the following loglines.

A woman is haunted by the memory of her husband's first wife — *Rebecca*.

A wheelchair-bound photographer spying on his neighbors suspects that one of them has murdered his wife — *Rear Window*.

A secretary embezzles \$40,000 from her employer and while on the run encounters a young motel owner under the domination of his murderous mother — *Psycho*.

A wealthy San Francisco socialite pursues a potential boyfriend to a small Northern California town that slowly takes a turn for the bizarre when birds of all kind suddenly begin to attack people with increasing viciousness — *The Birds*.

COMING UP WITH YOUR OWN IDEA — ORIGINAL SCREENPLAYS

Although Hitchcock developed only six of his movies from original screenplays — *The Ring* (1927), *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), *Saboteur* (1942), *Notorious* (1946), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Torn Curtain* (1966) — he loved spinning ideas from his own imagination, and from the imaginations of his screenwriting collaborators.

Like Hitch, Steven Spielberg says that he “dreams for a living” and has the audience in mind when he makes a film. Quentin Tarantino sees himself as more of a writer/director rather than a director. “The glory in what I do is that it starts with a blank piece of paper,” says Tarantino. “If you look at something like *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), and if my mother had never met my father, that would never have existed in any way shape or form...it started with a pen and paper.”

Tarantino admits that it's hard work to start from scratch. Even though you may have made many movies before, it doesn't necessarily help you. He believes that while it may be easier to direct other people's scripts and work with the screenwriter, six years down the line you may have lost your original writer's voice. Even though he loved filming the novel adaptation *Jackie Brown* (1997), Tarantino says that he doesn't want to adapt other people's work in the future, but instead wants to continue coming up with his own original ideas.

Alfred Hitchcock wasn't short of original ideas, but he most often preferred to build those ideas around solid source material.

ADAPTING SOMEONE ELSE'S IDEA — ADAPTED SCREENPLAYS

“A best-seller in literature is one thing — it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be a best-seller in film.” — Alfred Hitchcock

If you don't have your own original idea you can adapt someone else's, which is what Hitchcock most often did. One of his biggest challenges for Hitch was to find exciting and original source material to adapt, so he turned to short stories, novels, plays, and newspaper articles for inspiration. Some of his films from novels include *Rebecca* (1940), *Psycho* (1960), *Marnie* (1964), and *Frenzy* (1972); from plays, *Rope* (1948), *I Confess* (1953), *Dial M for Murder* (1954); from short stories or novellas, *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), and *The Birds* (1963).

Hitchcock was reluctant to adapt major and popular literature, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, whose theme of guilt, murder, and redemption would seem perfect for him. In fact he often made successful films from extremely mediocre material and pulp fiction. As he said, “I have always maintained that

it is supreme foolishness to take any book and film the whole of it, just because one angle of it is really worth screening.” Most often in Hitchcock’s adaptations he ran with the ideas from the source material that interested him most, while ignoring the source material as a whole.

When he was developing *The 39 Steps* (1935), Hitchcock saw the promise of John Buchan’s original story, but couldn’t see it in its entirety as good film material. So he took some of the novel’s characters, part of the plot and the locations, and created the story of an innocent man on the run, accused of a crime he didn’t commit and caught up in a web of international intrigue. Very often Hitchcock didn’t read the entire novel or story, but just took the basic premise. For example, *The Birds* bears little resemblance to Daphne du Maurier’s short story set in Cornwall, apart from the idea of birds attacking humans. As Hitch said, “It isn’t because I want to change the story...I just take the basic idea. I only read the story once, and never look at it again.”

Sometimes Hitchcock would write a scenario without even completing the original book, knowing only the bare plot, the characters, and the rough outline. The basic idea may be in any of these elements or in certain of the situations. But if you plan to adapt a book, be careful, because a good book doesn’t necessarily mean it will make a good film. Hitchcock’s *Topaz* (1969) was adapted from Leon Uris’ novel, a best-seller at the time, but the result wasn’t a successful movie.

THEMES IN YOUR STORY

You now have the idea for your movie, but what are the major themes and what kind of story do you want to tell? The theme is the main subject of the film, the central characteristic, concern, or motif, and it should arise from your basic idea. For Hitchcock, the themes must blend two important elements.

Firstly, your theme should hang on one single central idea that the audience must always be thinking about. Hitch believed the formula for making an exciting film is to find a single problem, which is sufficiently enthralling to hold the attention of the audience while the story unfolds. A good movie formula states in the first ten minutes the single central theme what the film is about, and it must state what the problem is. It could be as simple and tried and tested as boy meets girl, boy falls for girl, boy loses girl, and finally boy and girl get back together.

Secondly, your theme must have scope to introduce a number of other elements or sub-themes in the movie. For Hitchcock, such themes included love (*Vertigo*), guilt and innocence (*The Wrong Man*), psychology (*Marnie*), morality (*Rope*), and duty (*Notorious*). As Hitch understood, deep underlying themes add essential emotional resonance to the surface plot.

THE WRONGFULLY ACCUSED MAN

“I’m not against the police, I’m just afraid of them.” — Alfred Hitchcock

The “wrongfully accused man” was a subject Hitchcock returned to repeatedly throughout his career in stories often featuring innocent men forced to dodge both the real villains and the police until they can unmask the true criminal and prove their innocence. Think of Robert Donat being chased by police in *The 39 Steps* (1935), Robert Cummings being framed in *Saboteur* (1942), Henry Fonda arrested for crimes he didn’t commit in *The Wrong Man* (1956), Cary Grant being mistaken for a spy in *North by Northwest* (1959), and Jon Finch being set-up for murder by his best friend in *Frenzy* (1972).

Another reason behind Hitchcock’s fondness for the wrongfully accused man story is a structural one. The audience must have sympathy for the man on the run. But



The innocent Manny Balestrero (Henry Fonda) lines up in *The Wrong Man* (1956).

they will wonder, “Why doesn’t he go to the police?” Well, the police are after him, so he can’t go to them. Otherwise there will be no chase story. The important thing is that he cannot and must not go to the police. Hitchcock stated that his greatest fear was of the police, and he often told the story of when he was five years old his father sent him to the local police station, “with a note to the chief of police, who read the note and promptly put me into a cell and locked the door for five minutes; and then let me out, saying, “That’s what we do to naughty little boys.”

The man on the run in these wrongfully accused films is the average man. He’s not a professional, detective, or criminal, but the everyman. As Hitchcock said, “That helps involve the audience much more easily than if he

was unique. I have never been interested in making films about professional criminals or detectives. I much prefer to take average men, because I think the audience can get involved more easily." So for Hitchcock, the theme of the innocent, wrongfully accused man taps into the audience's own fear that it could easily be them in the same position.

In Hitchcock's films, the best example of the wrongfully accused man is *The Wrong Man*, the true story of musician "Manny" Balestrero (played by Henry Fonda) who was falsely accused of armed robbery. As Hitchcock says, "Well it happens so often, and I think it creates a rooting interest within an audience, because nobody likes to be accused of something that he wasn't responsible for." *The Wrong Man* being a true story added to the audience fascination.

Martin Scorsese, when making his New York-based movie *Taxi Driver* (1976), was inspired by Hitchcock's film. "*The Wrong Man* is a picture I often used repeatedly for mood, paranoid style, beautiful New York location photography," says Scorsese. "And I think ultimately it's the reason I asked [Hitchcock composer] Bernard Herrmann to do the score. I think about the paranoid camera moves, the feelings of threat when Henry Fonda goes to pay his insurance in Queens. He's standing behind the counter and the woman's looking over and you see Henry Fonda from this point of view. And the way the camera moves, her perception, excellent bit part players, the fear, the anxiety and the paranoia, is all done through the camera and the performer's face."

This theme of the wrongfully accused man is a popular one in today's movies, from *The Fugitive* (1993), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), and *Minority Report* (2002), to *Eagle Eye* (2008) and *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011).

THE DUPLICITOUS BLONDE

“Blondes make the best victims — they’re like virgin snow that shows up the bloody footprints.” — Alfred Hitchcock

Hitchcock is famous for casting blonde leading ladies who are cool, mysterious, and elegant. Throughout his career he gave us some of the screen’s most fascinating, complex, and duplicitous female characters. Memorable “Hitchcock blondes” include Madeleine Carroll in *The 39 Steps* and *Secret Agent*, Joan Fontaine in *Rebecca* and *Suspicion*, Ingrid Bergman in *Spellbound* and *Notorious*, Grace Kelly in *Dial M for Murder*, *Rear Window*, and *To Catch A Thief*, Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, Eva Marie Saint in *North by Northwest*, and Tippi Hedren in *The Birds* and *Marnie*.



The morally conflicted Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) in *Notorious* (1946).

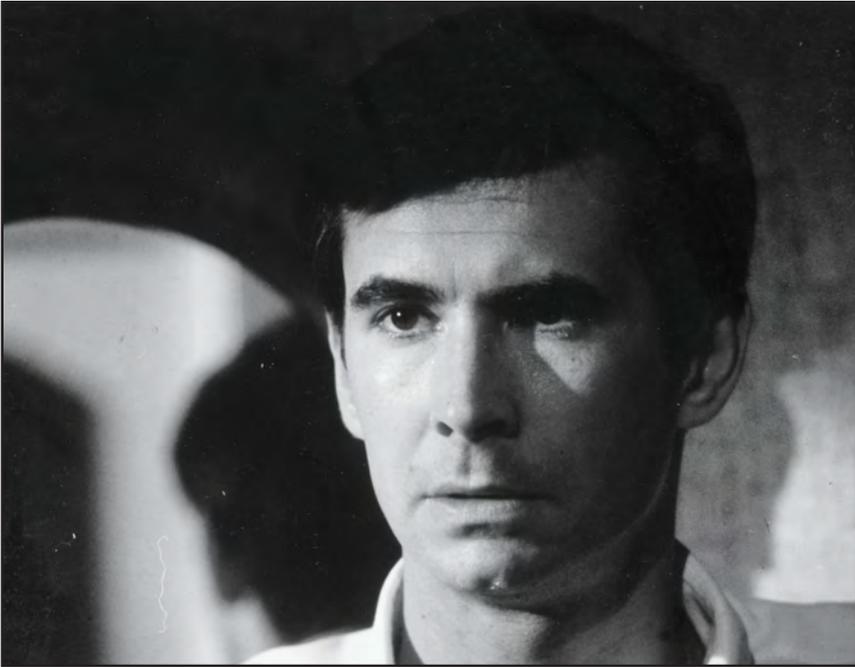
These women are often punished for a crime that they have committed, such as the characters played by Janet Leigh in *Psycho*, Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, and Tippi Hedren in *Marnie*. Ever since his early film *The Lodger* (1926), where the serial killer, a Jack the Ripper type, murders blonde women, Hitchcock maintained that blondes make the best victims. He loved contrast, so he presented women who were very ladylike on the surface. As Tippi Hedren said, “He liked to take women who are cool and in control, jumble them about and see if they survive and how they survive.” In *The 39 Steps*, the public sees Madeleine Carroll have no time to be her usual sophisticated self — she is far too busy racing over moors, rushing up and down embankments, and scrambling over rocks.

Today’s blonde femme fatales have been inspired by Hitchcock heroines. Think of Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* (1992), Kim Basinger in *L.A. Confidential* (1997), and Naomi Watts in *Mulholland Dr.* (2001).

THE PSYCHOPATH

“I’d like to discuss a subject very dear to me
— homicide.” — Alfred Hitchcock

The serial killer or psychopath has long fascinated Hitchcock ever since *The Lodger* (1929). His films feature a roster of crazy psychopaths. In Hitch’s favorite of his films, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), a beloved uncle is really the “Merry Widow Murderer.” In *Rope* (1948), two buttoned-down students are actually thrill killers. Two men swap murders in *Strangers on a Train* (1951). In *Psycho* (1960), motel manager Norman Bates has guest (and mommy) issues, and in *Frenzy* (1972), a rapist and murderer leaves a necktie around the neck of each of his victims.



Anthony Perkins as the psychopathic boy next door, Norman Bates, in *Psycho* (1960).

What do these crazy guys have in common? They are all attractive and seductive. As Hitchcock knew too well, evil is attractive, otherwise the murderers would never be able to get near to their victims. We'll be getting up close to these villains too in more detail in Chapter 4 to show how Hitchcock cast and directed actors, often against type, to play these sympathetic murderers.

The attractive psychopath is a tradition that continues in recent movies. The characters played by Robert De Niro in *Cape Fear* (1991), Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Matt Damon in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), and Stanley Tucci in *The Lovely Bones* (2009) all owe a debt to Hitchcock. All of these murderers are charming, devious, sympathetic, and deadly.

SECRETS AND SPIES

The spy genre is one of the oldest in film history and Hitchcock was fascinated with spies and secrets. Many of his films deal in espionage, such as *Secret Agent*, *The 39 Steps*, *Sabotage*, *Saboteur*, *Foreign Correspondent*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *North by Northwest*, *Torn Curtain*, and *Topaz*. Hitchcock spies are either ordinary men plunged into the world of espionage, such as James Stewart's American doctor abroad in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) or Cary Grant's advertising exec in *North by Northwest* (1959). Or they are real spies, as in *Secret Agent* (1936) and *Topaz* (1969). As Hitchcock remarked, spies are really two different people — heroes in their own country and villains in the foreign country. This contrast fascinated him.

These early spy films from Hitchcock heralded the way for today's iconic spy characters, as *North by Northwest* (1959) triggered the cycle of James Bond films. Indeed the attack on Bond by the helicopter in *From Russia with Love* (1963) bears many similarities to Cary Grant being pursued by the crop-duster plane, as do chase sequences in *The Prize* (1963) and *Arabesque* (1966). But by the mid 1960s, Hitchcock had tired of that character, feeling that the Bond films had become a “comic book” version of his original idea, so he set out to make more realistic spy thrillers such as *Torn Curtain* (1966) and *Topaz* (1969). In recent years, Hitchcock's spy films have heavily influenced both the *Bourne* and *Mission: Impossible* series.

CONTENT

“So many people are interested in the content, that if you painted a still life of some apples on a plate, you'd be worrying whether the apples are sweet or sour. Who cares? I don't care myself.” — Alfred Hitchcock

You've decided on the theme for your movie, now you need to inject a heavy dose of content and bring your movie to life. Hitchcock famously declared that he didn't care about content in his movies, and that he was more interested in film technique. As long as the audience reacted in a certain way, the idea for the film could be about anything you like. "If you begin to worry about the details, about the papers. I don't care what the spies are after," Hitchcock said. First and foremost he put cinematic style before content; "I don't even know who was in that airplane attacking Cary Grant. I don't care. So long as that audience goes through that emotion."

What did Hitch mean by these quotes? Does that mean that you shouldn't care about the content of your movies too? Maybe some of what Hitchcock said in public was intended to shock or otherwise create reaction and controversy, and he may have not meant it literally. When he says he doesn't care about the content of the film, he may have meant he cares about keeping the audience emotionally involved more than he does in the logic of a mystery story. Suspense was foremost to him, but there can't be thrills without mystery or some other dramatic context to make us care.

Although Hitchcock may have said he doesn't care about content, it's only content that creates suspense. There can be no suspense unless you craft the combination of your story and character that makes the viewer care about what's going to happen. All of that is content. It may not matter who the pilot of that gun-rigged cropduster is, but it *does* matter that someone with a motive (content) has hired them to kill our hero. They were hired for a reason. There must be motivation to keep us emotionally involved, and what Hitchcock is the master at is keeping the audience emotionally involved. That's the definition of suspense — content.

This all leads naturally into what Hitchcock called the “MacGuffin” — a key plot device in his films that drives the story.

THE MACGUFFIN — WHAT IS IT? (AND DOES IT MATTER?)

“It’s the device, the gimmick.”

— Alfred Hitchcock

Hitchcock often talked about “the MacGuffin” in his film, but what exactly is it? Let’s hear it in Hitch’s own words: “It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, ‘What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?’ and the other answers, ‘Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.’ The first one asks, ‘What’s a MacGuffin?’ ‘Well,’ the other man says, ‘It’s an



Cary Grant, Eva Marie Saint, Alfred Hitchcock and James Mason ponder the MacGuffin, in this case microfilm hidden inside a ceramic statue, during the filming of *North by Northwest* (1959).

apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.’ The first man says ‘But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,’ and the other one answers, ‘Well, then that’s no MacGuffin!’ So you see, a MacGuffin is nothing at all.”

Does it make any sense? Or are you still in the dark? Well that’s half the point. The MacGuffin is the engine of the story and was coined by Hitchcock scenario editor Angus McPhail. It is the object around which the plot revolves, and motivates the actions of the characters. It could be stealing the secret papers, the plans to a fort, an airplane engine, or an atomic bomb, and is the thing that everyone in the film wants, but the audience doesn’t really care about.

Often a MacGuffin is central to thrillers, spy stories, and adventures, and becomes very important in a Hitchcock movie. Most of the characters in the story will base their actions on the MacGuffin, although the final result will usually be of greater significance than actually getting, controlling, or destroying the MacGuffin. So a MacGuffin’s purpose is to motivate the characters into action.

Examples of the MacGuffin in Hitchcock’s films.

The 39 Steps — Top secret plans for a revolutionary aircraft engine.

Notorious — Radioactive uranium ore.

North by Northwest — Government secrets hidden on microfilm inside a pre-Colombian ceramic statue. Hitchcock called it “my best MacGuffin” — the emptiest, the most nonexistent, and the most absurd.

Psycho — \$40,000 in stolen cash.

The Birds — The reason why the birds attack.

Torn Curtain — The secret formula for an anti-missile device.

Family Plot — Valuable diamonds.

Hitchcock was joking when he told his story about the lions in the Scottish highlands. But if the MacGuffin is important to your characters, it has to be important to your audience. They've got to know and understand enough to become emotionally involved. When Hitch and his screenwriter Ben Hecht were writing *Notorious*, the MacGuffin of the uranium ore became so involved it actually got in the way of the real plot, which was about a woman, played by Ingrid Bergman, who has to go to bed with a Nazi sympathizer. She chooses duty over love, as does her real lover, played by Cary Grant. (When researching *Notorious*, Hitchcock quite coincidentally asked a Caltech scientist how big an atomic bomb was, and he later heard that the FBI kept him under surveillance for three months!)

In *North by Northwest*, the MacGuffin is the narrative device that propels the plot, but who in the audience really cares about the roll of microfilm in the pre-Columbian statue? They're having too much fun watching Cary Grant run all over the map and fall in love with Eva Marie Saint. As Hitchcock said, "A true MacGuffin will get you where you need to go, but never overshadow what is ultimately there."

For the first 40 minutes of *Psycho*, the audience becomes invested in the character of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), who flees town after having stolen \$40,000 of cash from her boss. But then she is suddenly killed in a motel room shower, and the cash is casually tossed along with her body into the trunk of her car, which itself ends up in a swamp. The film's real story then begins, which is about who killed Marion and why. The MacGuffin — the money — got Marion to that shower, and that's all that really matters.

Examples of the MacGuffin in other director's films.

During an interview for *Star Wars* (1977), George Lucas described R2D2 as “The MacGuffin...the main driving force of the movie, or the central object of every character's search.” That's because both the Rebels and the Empire were after the plans of the Death Star inside R2D2, and the search for R2D2 drove the plot of that film.

In Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the viewer never finds out what's inside the briefcase, which book-ends the movie. All that matters is that this MacGuffin is wanted by a crime boss, who sends his two thugs, played by Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta, to retrieve it.

In *Avatar* (2009), the MacGuffin is the “Unobtainium,” the sought-after mineral that sets the plot in motion (much like the uranium in Hitchcock's *Notorious*) — ultimately inconsequential to the actual story being told.

KEEP YOUR PLOT MOVING

“When making a picture, my ambition is to present a story that never stands still.”

— Alfred Hitchcock

“The length of the film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder.” — Alfred Hitchcock

You have your MacGuffin and all of your characters are after it, and now its on to the chase. Hitchcock used to say that there should be a slogan, “Keep them awake at the movies!” As he well knew, films usually play from 90 to 130 minutes, and an audience starts to tire after an hour, and so they need an injection of what he called “dope.” The “dope” to keep them awake is action, movement, and excitement. But there is more to it than that, because movies need careful pacing, fast action, and quick editing. A well-paced film should keep the audience's mind

occupied and this is achieved not necessarily by acting or quick editing, but by a very full story and the changing of one situation to another.

Hitchcock never filmed a physical chase just for the sake of it. For every film, your central character should have a goal, an aim, and the audience should be rooting for that character. A chase is essentially someone running toward a goal, or fleeing from a pursuer (which is actually the pursuer running toward a goal). Hitchcock said, "Probably the fox hunt would be the simplest form of the chase." But put in place a girl instead of the fox, and substitute the boy for the hunters, then you have a chase of boy after girl, or the police chasing a criminal. So long as a plot has either flight or pursuit, it may be considered a form of the chase. In many ways the chase — whether in low or high gear — makes up 60% of the construction of all movie plots. "Well for one thing, the chase seems to be the final expression of the motion picture medium. Where but on screen can automobiles be shown careening around corners after each other? Then too, the movie is the natural vessel for the chase story because the basic film shape is continuous. Once a movie starts it goes on."

The 39 Steps is one of Hitchcock's favorite films because of the rapid and sudden switches in location. Once the train leaves the station the film never stops moving. Such movement takes time to plan out, especially to blend the characterization with the action. Halfway through the movie, lead character Hannay (Robert Donat) leaps out of a police station window with half a handcuff on, and immediately walks into a marching Salvation Army band. To escape the police, he marches with the band, then slips into a public hall, where he's immediately mistaken for a guest speaker and ends up on an oratory platform. It's the rapid movement from one scene to another, and using one idea after another, that keeps the audience hooked.

SUSPENSE VS. MELODRAMA

“It’s been my good fortune to have something of a monopoly on the genre. Nobody else seems to have taken much interest in the rules for suspense.” — Alfred Hitchcock

Hitchcock was dubbed the “Master of Suspense” and rightly so. But what is suspense? It could be described as the stretching out of anticipation. And what is the difference between mystery and suspense? The two terms often get confused. So let’s hear it from the “Master” himself: “Mystery is an intellectual process, as in [solving] a ‘who-dunit’...but suspense is essentially an emotional process. With suspense it’s necessary to involve emotion.”

One example of mystery occurs in *Vertigo* when Scottie (James Stewart) follows Madeleine (Kim Novak) to the McKittrick Hotel. He sees her in the bedroom window, but when he goes up to her room, she has disappeared, as has her car parked outside. Kim Novak remembers, “I asked Hitchcock how did Madeleine leave the hotel, because we never see her leave. His answer was ‘That’s why it’s a mystery, my dear.’ In a mystery, you don’t need the answer to every question.” And that was very important to Hitchcock, to leave some questions unresolved so that the audience will be thinking about them at the end of the movie.

Suspense, however, is different from mystery. Nearly all stories can do with suspense, not matter the genre. Even a love story can have suspense. It’s much more than saving someone from the path of an oncoming train; there’s also the suspense of whether the man will get the girl. Suspense has largely to do with the audience’s own desires or wishes. So getting the suspense right in your movie is a very important part of the process. Hitchcock created different ways of generating suspense, from building story tension to editing techniques, to using sound and music to evoke terror and anticipation.

GIVE YOUR AUDIENCE INFORMATION

“There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it.” — Alfred Hitchcock

All suspense comes out of giving the audience information. If you tell the audience that there’s a bomb in the room and that it’s going to go off in five minutes — that’s suspense. Hitchcock knew how to mix the ingredients of suspense so that emotional tension became almost unbearable.

“We’re sitting here talking,” said Hitch in an interview, “and we don’t know that there’s a bomb hidden inside your tape recorder. The public doesn’t know either, and suddenly the bomb explodes. We’re blown to bits. Surprise. But how long does it last, the surprise and the horror? Five seconds, no more.” The secret, Hitch maintained, was to let the audience in on the secret — the ticking bomb. In that way, instead of five seconds of surprise, you’ve created five minutes of suspense. The bomb need not even go off for the audience to have had a thrilling emotional experience.

The number one rule with suspense, then, is that you must give the audience information. For example, if something is about to harm the characters, show it at beginning of the scene and let it play out. Constant reminders of this looming danger will build suspense and keep the audience on the edge. But remember that suspense is not in the mind of the character. They must be completely unaware of it.

A good example of this type of suspense building, where the audience knows more than the characters, occurs in *The Birds*. Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) sits in front of a jungle gym outside Bodega Bay School and starts to smoke a cigarette. Unbeknownst to her, one crow lands on the bars of the jungle gym behind her. As she continues smoking obliviously, two, three, four more

crows gather on the jungle gym. Finally Melanie notices a single crow in the sky and follows its movement down to the jungle gym. It is now covered in a mass of menacing crows, all awaiting Melanie's next move. The suspense in this scene is so exciting because it comes from the audience knowing more than the character. There will be more about this celebrated sequence in Chapter 6 on editing.

In *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Hitchcock lets the audience know the moment an assassination attempt is to be made at an Albert Hall diplomatic concert — at the strike of an orchestra's cymbals. By pre-familiarizing the film's audience with the piece of music, and cutting repeatedly to the percussionist holding the cymbals, the build-up to the possible moment of murder becomes filled with suspense.

INVOLVE YOUR AUDIENCE IN THE SUSPENSE

Hitchcock made the bold decision in *Vertigo* to reveal to the audience — 40 minutes before the end of the movie — that Madeleine Elster and her mysterious doppelgänger Judy Barton (both played by Kim Novak) are in fact the same woman. Hitch said to his screenwriter Samuel Taylor, "This is the time for us to blow the whole truth." Taylor was shocked, saying, "Good God, why?" The Paramount studio executives were also against this, because they wanted the ending to be a surprise, but Hitch knew that it would be more powerful if he let the audience in on the secret.

One of the fatal things in suspense is to confuse the audience. Without knowing that Madeleine and Judy are the same person, audiences would be as confused and frustrated as Jimmy Stewart's character, Scottie. So Hitchcock decided to tell all in a flashback, and, in doing so, the audience then sits through the remaining 40 minutes of

the film thinking, “What will Scottie do when he finds out that it’s the same woman? What will Judy do when he finds out?” If the reveal were left to the very end, all the audience gets is five minutes of surprise. Good suspense should actively involve the audience in the telling of the story.

“I said if we don’t let them know, they will speculate, some of them will even say, maybe it’s the same girl,” Hitchcock said. “Now they will get a blurred impression of what is going on.”

In *Psycho* the audience also knows more than the characters know when detective Arbogast (Martin Balsam) enters the Bates house to investigate, one of the most suspenseful scenes in Hitchcock’s films. We can’t help but feel anxious for Arbogast as we know that the murderous Mrs. Bates is waiting for him at the top of the stairs. (And yet, unlike *Vertigo*’s big reveal, *Psycho*’s secret — the true identity of Mrs. Bates — is left as a final shock for both the characters and the audience. An interesting — and successful — choice on Hitchcock’s part.)

Another good example of suspense building occurs in *Marnie*. The audience knows that a cleaning woman is around the corner while Marnie is robbing the Rutland office safe. Marnie doesn’t know — which is more suspenseful for us, because although she’s a thief, we don’t want her to be caught. The irony here is that through this suspense technique the audience builds a sympathetic attachment to the wrong-doer — a Hitchcock specialty. We know that stealing is wrong, but our desire to warn Marnie about that cleaning lady ends up overwhelming our logic.

OTHER DIRECTORS USING SUSPENSE

“Suspense is like a woman. The more left to the imagination, the more the excitement.”

— *Alfred Hitchcock*

Although many people think of Hitchcock's films as violent, Hitchcock actually rarely used graphic violence. Suggestion was enough in his masterful hands. In *Psycho*, after the shower scene and Arbogast's murder (themselves suggested more than graphically shown), there is less and less violence as the movie goes on. Hitch felt that he had already worked the audience into enough of an emotional state that just the expectation of possible violence was now all that was needed. Nearly all suspense movie directors draw upon the techniques used by and usually first developed by Hitchcock. One that comes to mind more than any other is Steven Spielberg. During the filming of *Jaws* (1975), Spielberg had a great deal of trouble with making the mechanical shark look authentic and frightening. Suddenly Spielberg was left with having to tell a story like Hitchcock, which is that you don't show the shark for most of the movie. So he used suspense techniques to tell the story. You see the reactions of people to the shark, you see the shark towing things through the water, you see spurting blood, you see people being yanked underwater, but you never see the shark itself, and that's something Hitchcock would have done and indeed did do during the bird attack on the Brenner house towards the end of *The Birds*. It's all filmed with suggestion.

“The whole technique which we used on *The Blair Witch Project*,” says director Daniel Myrick, “and what I continue to use to this day because it's like Horror 101, and it comes from the Hitchcock Book — you give clues to what's happening or you hear what's happening or you

catch glimpses of what's happening, but you don't actually see it."

Hitchcock's influence on suspense can also be clearly seen in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Demme's editor Craig McKay says, "Suspense is really an expression of fear. We can build that in our storytelling by withholding information. Frankly, it's manipulation, but in using that manipulation it also empowers the story. Not knowing where we're going to go next is the thing that human beings hate the most. We would all like to know where we're going, if it's all going to be alright." McKay and Demme always attempted to keep the audience from getting ahead of the story in *The Silence of the Lambs*, to keep it suspenseful.

Alejandro Amenábar, director of *The Others* (2001), says, "Steven Spielberg, Alfred Hitchcock, and Stanley Kubrick are the three directors that, when I was a teenager, I used to analyze their movies and watch them over and over. Their perspective — I identified with them. In the case of Hitchcock, his use of suspense is something mathematical, and my first three films — *Tesis*, *Open Your Eyes*, and *The Others* — have something to do with that."

The Bourne Identity (2002) has more action than most Hitchcock movies and also has lots of suspense and surprise together with an active chase sequence. Watch how the story is told visually, through the editing, and how the main character's point of view is used to make the audience feel like a participant in the movie. Notice how the audience often knows more about the dangers than the characters, and listen to how the tempo and type of music raises the suspense. There will be more about all of these techniques for developing suspense in the following chapters.

Many of today's movies take little time to build suspense and are often just one big explosion or CGI effect after another. You've got to give your audience time to

get into the scene, and to build up suspense gradually, as evidenced in the crop-duster scene of *North by Northwest*. Today, you'd have the guy get off the bus, and immediately the plane would show up and chase him into the field. There would be dozens of special effects shots, and the sequence wouldn't play nearly as well emotionally with an audience. It's to Hitch's credit that he builds suspense over eight minutes of silence.

EXERCISES

1. Write down some ideas for a thriller or suspense movie and see where it leads you. What are your themes and how do they relate to the plot? Can you say what your movie is about in one sentence?
2. Lay down your story in its barest form and start to write down your idea on one piece of paper. You don't have to write very much, maybe just a man is asked to meet someone at Grand Central Station and then something eventful happens. Where does the story lead?
3. Once you've written down your idea on one sheet of paper, pitch to your friends what the film is about. Are you excited telling your story? Are your friends excited about it and want to know where your story leads?
4. Think about the protagonist for your film. Is he or she a hero or a heroine, a wrongfully accused man, a spy or a villain? Give your character attributes so that they come alive on paper.
5. Come up with an idea for a MacGuffin and how it might drive the plot in your film. Why do your characters want it so badly? Watch the following films: *Casablanca*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *Mission*:

Impossible III. Can you spot what the MacGuffin is in these movies? How does it drive the plot?

6. Write a suspenseful scene. Make sure that the audience knows more than your characters. How does that make the scene more suspenseful?
7. Examine the ways information was manipulated in the last film you watched or in your favorite film. Focus on the first 15 minutes of the film. How are Hitchcock's cinematic practices applied to these films?

Key Hitchcock films to watch

North by Northwest (1959)

Psycho (1960)

The Birds (1963)

Other director's films to watch

Pulp Fiction (1994)

The Usual Suspects (1995)

Se7en (1995)

Inglourious Basterds (2009)

The Tourist (2010)

Further reading

Save the Cat! (2005) by Blake Snyder

Writing with Hitchcock (2011) by Steven De Rosa