

## Lecture 9 - Hitchcock

### I. Movie house culture

- Entertainment
- Genre and license
- Invention vs. convention
- "The genius of the system"

### II. Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980)

- An anecdote
- Hitchcock's career
- Hitchcock the technician
- Themes

### III. The Double Man

*Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- The Hollywood Era and Consensus Narrative
  - The problems of a society are acted out within consensus narrative.
  - In the middle ages, the consensus narrative environment was the church
  - Theater grew out of certain performative dimensions of religion.
    - The earliest theater traveled from town to town on wagons, and it was religious in nature.
  - From the silent era until the advent of television, film in America was a consensus narrative.
  - You used to be able to walk down 42<sup>nd</sup> street in New York, and there would just be block upon block of nothing but movie theaters.
    - Many of these theaters were unbelievably ornate, with gilt work, plush carpets, balconies...
    - Virtually everybody in society had access to these places
    - You could go and watch 4 or 5 movies in a row.
    - You could stay for hours and hours without getting kicked out.
      - Homeless people could go there
      - They were a place of illicit sexual trysting
      - Jack Kerouac describes spending several weeks at a time in a movie theater in *On the Road*
- Hitchcock (1899-1980)
  - We'll be watching earlier Hitchcock in this class
  - Genre Work might look formulaic, but in fact it is the fact that it seems so comfortable that allows the form to explore the forbidden
    - In Hitchcock's work, these forbidden elements often lie right under the surface

- “High” art vs. “Low” art
- Hitchcock is a particularly dramatic example – he’s so unique that we might want to call him a genre unto himself, within the genres of mystery or thriller
- An anecdote, which Hitchcock told to many people: his father called him over one day and told him to take a note down the street to the local constable, and the constable read the note and then locked him in a jail cell, and told him “this is what happens to bad boys.”
  - This is representative of the unexpectedness of life – a young boy who has no reason to think he is guilty of anything
  - The eruption of something terrible and unexpected
- Hitchcock’s work is full of sudden eruptions of violence and evil – it’s a world of black and white good and evil
- He never graduated from college
- He worked in film at a variety of levels
- Worked for a time in German film, and he was fascinated by German expressionism.
- He directed six silent films – he spans both the
- *The Lodger* – 1926. A sort of Jack-the-Ripper story. Innocence accused.
- *Blackmail*, 1929, the first British feature with synchronous sound. About homosexuality – a very shocking subject at that time.
- He made *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *The 39 Steps*, and *The Lady Vanishes* in the 1930s – here he really came into his own, became famous
- *Rebecca* – bestseller, won an academy award, established him as an international figure.
- *Shadow of a Doubt*, 1943
- *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, *The Birds* – these classics came later, in the 1950s and 60s
- His two periods, early and late, are very different
- We can think of Hitchcock as a technician and craftsman
  - He was obsessed by every aspect and detail of how movies were made
  - By the time he came on the set, he already had everything planned out
  - He once called actors “cattle”
  - He loved to set himself problems that were difficult to solve, so that these limitations would create a more creative and interesting film.
    - For example, in *Rear Window*, the entire film takes place in one room
- He likes to make brief appearances in all of his films
- His themes include: Disorder, Entrapment, Voyeurism, Instability, Evil...
- Clip: A famous part of *North by Northwest*, in which a previously safe environment suddenly becomes a place of menace.
  - This clip is an example of the trauma that he forces his innocent characters to go through

- Notice the crane shot at the beginning – why does it return at the end? Why is it important?
- Note how he uses silence
- Evil erupts from the strangest places in Hitchcock's universe