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Alfred Hitchcock - A Silent Vision

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Alfred Hitchcock has left us with an incredible legacy of outstanding films. Traditionally regarded as a master of flawlessly edited, fast-paced suspense movies that make the audience's hair stand on end, Hitchcock's work has also been met with considerable critical acclaim. The groundbreaking studies by Lindsay Anderson, Jean Domarchi and Eric Rohmer/Claude Chabrol initiated a critical discourse that has not come to a standstill. (Note 1) Raubicheck's and Srebnick's collection of essays provides the reader with a fairly comprehensive introduction to the contemporary diversity of critical approaches to Hitchcock's films. (Note 2)

This study will focus on an element in Hitchcock's work that has been strangely marginalized by the critics. David A. Cook's *A History of Narrative Film* is one of the very few sources that highlight the influence of the silent film on Hitchcock's conception of the cinema. In fact, Hitchcock is one of the very few directors who managed to transport some of the qualities of the silent era into the canon of Hollywood mainstream. For Hitchcock, the silent film always remained the purest kind of cinema (Truffaut 53). Especially the short stint at the German UFA in 1924, "where he fell under the spell of Expressionism" (Cook 294), influenced his work to a much greater degree than most critics are willing to concede.

While the pot-boiler or suspense movie admittedly became an ideal canvas for Hitchcock to project some of his basic fears and nightmares to the screen, (Note 3) my argument is that in Hitchcock's world the mode of representation is as important as the script. In *Psycho* (1961), it can even be regarded as the primary source of interest. Hitchcock's specific use of the language of film reveals a strong influence by Eisenstein and such German directors as Lang and Murnau. Hitchcock loved German silent films, especially because of their outstanding technical qualities. In his conversations with François Truffaut, Hitchcock points to their suggestive use of light and shadow, their audacious way of moving the camera and experimenting with unusual camera angles, and their attempt to reduce the amount of titles to a minimum in order to create an entirely visual style of representation. Apart from that, German silent film directors displayed a high degree of commitment towards their films which turned into very personal, private visions. I will try to show how

all of these qualities manifest themselves in Hitchcock's art and how they are complemented by an equally skillful use of sound.

a) The German Touch

The Lodger (1926) was Hitchcock's first stab at the suspense genre. It was also the first film that established a typical Hitchcock style. Fear and horror are entirely conveyed from the perspective of the prospective victim (a landlady who suspects her new lodger to be a terrible murderer). The whole tension of the situation is reflected in her facial expression. For the first time, Hitchcock manages to create a purely visual style that conveys a story with a bare minimum of narrative explanations. The film displays the director's ability to elicit highly committed performances from his actors, a quality that is complemented by a marvellous use of light and shadow, and a superior editing. The film also underlines Hitchcock's inventiveness on the set which he shared with his German colleagues. In one of the film's best scenes, for example, Hitchcock presents us with a simultaneous shot of the lodger walking up and down in his upstairs room and the landlady listening downstairs, her face filled with fear. The outstanding effect was not achieved by the (already established) technique of juxtaposing two different images, but by the construction of a ceiling made out of glass. Even Hitchcock himself regarded this idea of his as rather eccentric (Truffaut 41). It is this moment of eccentricity, though, that makes Hitchcock a true contemporary of the better known of the silent film directors who would take any effort to make a scene correspond completely to a specific image in their minds. For this reason, Hitchcock was always prone to all kinds of bizarre (but highly effective) ideas.

In *Suspicion* (1941), he hid a small lamp in a glass of milk in order to create a frightening effect of illumination. For *Spellbound* (1945), he used a specially designed model of a gun that seemed to be big enough to blow both Ingrid Bergman and the viewer into pieces. The outstanding staircase sequence in *Psycho* (1961) was created by a careful use of backprojection, (Note 4) while the old man in the breathtaking roundabout sequence in *Strangers on a Train* (1951) literally risked his life for Hitchcock's "vision" of the scene--one false move, and his head had been chopped off. The film also reveals Hitchcock's predilection for experimenting with unusual camera angles when we witness the first murder through one lens of the victim's glasses, inverted and distorted. No silent film director could have shot this more intensely.

In fact, many of Hitchcock's best scenes are the result of a very silent conception of the screen. To the climactic attack of The Birds (1964), which was based on 371 individual trick shots (Cook 304), to the Salvador Dali designed dream sequence in Spellbound or to the crop-dusting and Mount Rushmore sequences in North by Northwest (1959), sound comes only as an addition.5 The same holds true for the opening sequence of Rear Window (1954), in spite of its expressive use of various

layers of music. The film, a highly influential and profoundly modern study of the moral complicity of the voyeur,6 begins with a wonderful panning shot of the courtyard that introduces us to the perspective of James Stewart, the man behind the telescope. After that, the camera focuses on Stewart himself, his broken leg, a broken camera and a number of journals on the table. Finally, we see pictures of race cars overturning. Thus, Hitchcock does not convey the history of Stewart's accident by traditional elements of narrative cinema (dialogue or flashbacks) but by a series of carefully selected images, a technique that has very rarely been used in American films ever since.7 Rear Window, in other words, shows Hitchcock at the height of his craft. b) Sound and Montage Hitchcock was clearly aware of the fact that the transition towards sound did not necessarily enrich the medium of film. In many cases it implied a shift towards a more theatrical style of representation, as opposed to Hitchcock's notion of pure cinema (Truffaut 53). Accordingly, the sound version of Blackmail (1929) shows an expressive use of natural and non-natural sounds beyond the level of mere representation. The film contains the first experiment with interior monologue on the screen, and it shows how to use sound as a means of conveying a certain psychological condition (when the heroine's feeling of guilt is conveyed by the seemingly endless clanging of a shop bell). In yet another scene, the word "knife" emerges from a harmless conversation, tormenting the heroine's soul as a constant echo. In The 39 Steps (1935), Hitchcock develops a new way of blending sound and image by inter-cutting the scream of a cleaning lady with the whistle of a train, thus creating an outstanding audio-visual montage (Cook 296). Psycho carries the use of montage even further. The shower scene, a series of 87 rapidly alternating fragmentary shots, turned into a masterful vindication of a technique that had made Eisenstein's Odessa Steps sequence one of the most harrowing moments in the history of world cinema. Just like Eisenstein, Hitchcock was a master of audience manipulation. He used to conceive a scene entirely from the perspective of the viewer who, as in the shower scene, seems to be almost part of the action. The same holds true for the second murder scene in which an unusually high camera position seems to draw victim and audience alike into a deep abyss. In one of the film's quieter moments, Hitchcock combines the use of interior monologue with a subjective camera perspective. When Janet Leigh imagines how her boss finds out about her theft, the camera follows her eyes that try to protrude the streams of water on the windscreen of her car. Thus, the scene invites the viewer to a strange ride into darkness and-- silence. By the time Janet Leigh's eyes capture the sign of Bates Motel, sound and words have ceased completely. The transition is very indicative of the film in general that comes closer to a silent movie than any other of Hitchcock's sound films. Three reels of film contain no dialogue at all, and about 50% of the movie is totally silent. It seems to me that with Psycho Hitchcock's cinematic vision had come full circle. Psycho is pure cinema, a highly manipulative ride into a bleak world full of desolation and despair. Hitchcock's finest films combine the qualities of an excellent script with an immaculate understanding of the medium of film, a union which has been critically labelled as "the Hitchcock touch." While many contemporary American directors have tried to imitate that specific "touch" of Hitchcock's, very few of them have

been successful. Brian De Palma's Obsession (1976), Damian Harris's Deceived (1992) and especially Peter Hyams's powerful Narrow Margin (1991) are rare exceptions. Like Robert Altman and Orson Welles, Hitchcock presented Hollywood with a very personal vision of the screen that could hardly be imitated.

Notes

1

Jean Domarchi's interpretation of *Rear Window* initiated a highly intellectual discourse on Hitchcock by establishing a parallel between the situation of the viewer behind his telescope and the audience at the cinema. Chabrol and Rohmer, on the other hand, focused heavily on Catholic themes of guilt and innocence, thus starting an entire line of Freudian and post-Freudian criticism. Contemporary variations include Price's study on*Hitchcock and Homosexuality*, Modleski's feminist approach that analyzes typical plot elements from the perspective of a neo-Freudian model view of the male and female spectator, and Ann Cvetkovich's essay on "Postmodern Vertigo: The Sexual Politics of Allusion in De Palma's *Body Double*." In my opinion, some of these and similar approaches fail simply because they refuse to realize that film is, first of all, a language that can be broken into various constituents. Stefan Sharff's analysis of *Alfred Hitchcock's High Vernacular* is the most convincing of the more recent publications simply because Sharff (a former student of Eisenstein's) works exactly from this premise. His study categorizes Hitchcock's specific use of the language of film in a highly satisfying and detailed manner by focusing on its principles of organization.

2

The collection is remarkable because of Anthony J. Mazella's essay on *Rear Window* which continues a "meta-cinematical" line of thinking started by Domarchi.

3

In this context, I have to mention Truffaut's (highly illuminating) interviews with Hitchcock which provide the reader with a comprehensive view of the man and his vision of the screen.

4

Of course, Hitchcock did not film Martin Balsam falling down the stairs. Instead, he shot the fall without the actor by using a dolly. Then he placed Balsam in a chair in front of a creen and made him wave his hands about (Truffaut 268).

5

This quality of Hitchcock's art was marvellously captured by Vincent Gallo's pantomime approach to the crop-dusting sequence from *North by Northwest* which turned out to be the sole climax of Emir Kusturica's recent*Arizona Dreams* (1992).

6

Until today,*Rear Window* has inspired an impressive amount of films. Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966), Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1973), Brian De Palma's *Body Double* (1978), Claude Miller's *The Eye* (1982) and Philip Noyce's *Sliver* (1993) come to mind almost immediately.

7

A fairly recent example can be found in a film by American experimental director Jon Jost whose *Frame Up* (1993) opens with a series of quickly presented items like keys and postcards that, in their rapid succession, introduce the film's central characters.

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