

The Screening Room's

ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS

Summer Series - Poster Mini Exhibit

Please enjoy this mini-exhibit which we have on display in conjunction with The Screening Room's program of Hitchcock films, "ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS" which will be running through the months of July and August. The program will cover different decades in his long career, from THE LADY VANISHES from 1938, to his first Hollywood-produced film REBECCA (1940), to his "Golden period" in the 1950's (STRANGERS ON A TRAIN and DIAL M FOR MURDER) and wrapping up with one of his last true masterworks, THE BIRDS (1963). – *Writer & Poster Collector Barry Yuen*

THE BIRDS (1963)

Hitchcock was in a position where he had to somehow top the enormous success of PSYCHO, so he came up with this scenario of apocalypse, based on a Daphne du Maurier story. Hitchcock had adapted du Maurier's REBECCA successfully, so maybe he thought of her as a good luck charm. As with PSYCHO, an attempt is made to mislead the audience, this time by starting the film off like a romantic comedy, and then having the horror elements gradually take over. But this time, no one was fooled. Everyone was waiting for The Birds to attack. Hitchcock makes the audience wait to the point of making them impatient, and then takes them by surprise with the viciousness of the attacks. He manipulates the audience in a different way than he did in PSYCHO.

He made several decisions that made this film unusual, even experimental. First of all, no explanation is ever given for the attacks, although there are certain things in the film that could be taken as clues. Film scholars advance theories to this day. The trailer for the film has Hitchcock delivering a very tongue-in-cheek speech about how mankind has treated the birds, which gives them good reason to turn on us. The trailer can be seen on DVD's of the film and is well worth a look.

Secondly, the ending is left open, with no resolution. No one comes up with the solution that will defeat the birds and save mankind. We're left with the impression that the attacks will continue, or may even spread worldwide. Many audiences found this frustrating. It was definitely breaking the rules, as far as traditional narrative goes, and was a very bold move on Hitchcock's part. Universal would put a "The End" title on some copies of the film because of audience response (people were going "Is that it?"). You may or may not see it.

Third, and this makes the film truly remarkable, is that there is no traditional music score as background, which went against how all Hollywood movies were made at the time. Many scenes play in an eerie silence. Hitchcock never gave any rationale for why he chose to do this, but it seems like he wanted to make an unrealistic subject matter seem more realistic, as though it were taking place in the real world. Another line of thought was that it would subtly unsettle the audience. They might not realize that there was no music score, but they would sense it, and feel that something was off. (From my own personal experience, I think I saw this movie about 3 times before I realized there was no music.)

Hitchcock liked to challenge himself by finding cinematic possibilities in confined spaces. We see this occur with *LIFEBOAT*, *ROPE*, and *REAR WINDOW*. Another example occurs in *THE BIRDS*, where Hitchcock films a major attack on the entire town while limiting himself to the perspective of the heroine trapped inside a tiny telephone booth. It's a stunning 2 minute scene.

Much has been made of Tippi Hedren's ordeal filming the final attack scene, where she was put in a room and had live birds hurled at her for days on end, until she collapsed under the strain. Nowadays, such a scene would be done with CGI, but back then, there was no other way of putting such a scene on film. No one had done a scene like that before (or since, really).

The film, and the poster, are personal favourites of this writer.

DIAL M FOR MURDER (1954)

Hitchcock chose to make *DIAL M FOR MURDER* for the simple reason that it was considered to be a sure-fire hit, having had a successful run on Broadway. It was filmed during the height of the craze for 3-D films, and Hitchcock was always keen to experiment with film form (like he did with *ROPE*), but he used 3-D in a restrained way. The two most obvious uses of 3-D are when Grace Kelly reaches out for the scissors during the attack scene, and the scene where the detective holds out a key and says (as if to the audience) "Is this your key?" However, by the time the film was completed, the 3-D fad had passed, and the studio chose to release it without 3-D. The 3-D version would occasionally be screened in revivals, though.

This would be the beginning of Hitchcock's working relationship with Grace Kelly, who would become his favourite actress, until she married the Prince of Monaco and retired from acting. Hitchcock's prototype of "the cool blonde" would seem to have reached its peak with Grace Kelly. Hitchcock attempted to find a replacement for Grace Kelly with the actresses in subsequent films, like Kim Novak (VERTIGO), Vera Miles (PSYCHO) and Tippi Hedren (THE BIRDS).

If you stop to think about it, you could think of DIAL M as being a sequel to STRANGERS ON A TRAIN. In STRANGERS, Guy is a famous tennis player whose wife is murdered by a psychopath who is known to him, which leaves him free to marry the woman he is now romantically involved with. In DIAL M, what if "Tony" (who is also a famous tennis player) is Guy several years down the road? His new marriage hasn't worked out, and now he wants to have his current wife murdered, again by someone who is known to him. The tennis connection is kind of a weird coincidence.

NORTH BY NORTHWEST (1959)

Cary Grant, like Jimmy Stewart, was one of Hitchcock's favourite actors. Both Grant and Stewart had the honour of playing the lead role in 4 Hitchcock films. NORTH BY NORTHWEST is the ultimate Cary Grant/Alfred Hitchcock movie, in that it's a constant barrage of twists and turns. Hitchcock had dealt with the subject of spies and espionage before (THE 39 STEPS, SECRET AGENT, FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT, THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH), but this was an intensification of those previous films, and must have been an influence on the James Bond films that would begin in the early 60's. Bond can be seen as an extension of Grant's urbane playboy/womanizer persona, while James Mason's villain character set the precedent for many Bond villains: civilized and polite on the outside, ruthless on the inside.

Some of Hitchcock's favourite motifs occur in *NORTH BY NORTHWEST*: (1) "The MacGuffin" which Hitchcock defined as "the something that the spies are after, but what it is doesn't matter". (2) Characters threatened with death by falling from a great height, which can also be seen in *SABOTEUR*, *TO CATCH A THIEF* and, of course, *VERTIGO*. (3) Symbols of order being disrupted by disorder. This is a favourite theme of Hitchcock's, reminding us that our safe, orderly world can be upset by chaos at anytime. *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* has the final life or death struggle taking place on Mount Rushmore, and the U.N. Building being the scene of a murder. Reinforcing the theme, the main situation of the film is that Cary Grant's character has his entire life turned topsy-turvy over a simple case of mistaken identity. In other films, we have the School being under attack in *THE BIRDS*, and the matrimonial bureau being the scene of a horrible rape and murder in *FRENZY*.

NORTH BY NORTHWEST contains two of Hitchcock's most iconic sequences, which are familiar even to those who are just casually acquainted with Hitchcock's work: the crop-duster scene, and the pursuit of the main characters as they climb down the faces of Mount Rushmore.

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN (1951)

If we're going to talk about Hitchcock, then at some point we need to repeat his anecdote about being taken to the police station and locked in a cell for perhaps 15 minutes when he was a child (his father's idea). Those 15 minutes would have felt like an eternity to young Alfred. When it was over, the officer in charge then told him, "That's what we do with naughty boys". Hitchcock repeated this story constantly through his life, and used it to explain his lifelong anxiety about being stopped by a policeman for any reason. It may also account for his attraction to stories about innocent men on the run from the law – from *THE 39 STEPS* to *SABATOUR* to *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* to *FRENZY*. But what went unsaid was this: He spent the rest of his life showing the world what a naughty boy he could be, by depicting all manner of murder and mayhem onscreen (with the ultimate transgression being the End of the World itself in *THE BIRDS*, and that's about as naughty as you can get). Case in point: *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*.

The notion of the “shadow-self” who embodies all the dark, negative feelings and impulses that we deny in ourselves (the Freudian model of the Id and the Super-ego) goes back to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but the shadow-self doesn’t necessarily have to look like a monster. This is a concept that Hitchcock was drawn to again and again. Like the two Charlies in *SHADOW OF A DOUBT*, Guy and Bruno represent the duality of human beings. They are like two halves of the same person. In *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*, the visual motif of the double keeps cropping up again and again, reinforcing the theme to the point of obsessiveness. (we had seen this previously in the similarly-themed *SHADOW OF A DOUBT*) The very first scene shows us 2 pairs of feet walking to the train, and a contrast is set up right away when we see dark, conservative-looking shoes contrasted with flashy-looking two-toned shoes. The 2 main characters accidentally meet when they cross legs at the same time (criss-cross – not the first time we will see this, either). Also note the 2 criss-crossed tennis racquets that appear on the lighter, and the shot of criss-crossing railroad tracks (which has no function other than to remind us of the idea of “criss-cross” – Bruno’s term for the concept of exchanged murders). 2 significant characters wear glasses, and because of this we get 2 scenes of women being strangled. More doubling: Guy’s love interest has a sister (played by Hitchcock’s daughter, Pat), and Guy’s wife goes to the fair with 2 boyfriends. Even Hitchcock in his cameo appearance has his “double” – a double bass in a case that Hitchcock lugs aboard the train.

It becomes obvious that Bruno, with his offer to murder Guy’s wife for him, is acting out desires that are already within Guy. At one point Guy very plainly says out loud “I could strangle her!” Bruno is Guy’s darker half. This is visually demonstrated in the scene where Bruno is hiding in the shadows and Guy joins him in the dark, with the gate reminding us of prison bars. (and we get an echo here of Hitchcock’s fear of the police) Hitchcock is building upon ideas already expressed in *SHADOW OF A DOUBT*. One thing that may not be obvious about Bruno is his sexuality. Is Bruno gay? This didn’t occur to me until I’d seen the movie a few times, but if you go into the movie with the preconception that Bruno is gay, then the entire performance seems to back this up. Robert Walker appears to be pushing the idea as far as it could be allowed by 1951 standards.

Hitchcock is famous for filming murder scenes in expressive, unusual ways. (Copycat filmmakers will often go for fancy camera angles in the hope that they are being “Hitchcockian”) The murder of Miriam is filmed as a distorted reflection in the lens of her glasses, which have been knocked to the ground. In order to get this effect, they would have had to build an oversized prop to capture the reflection. Hitchcock instructed the actress playing the victim to “float to the ground”, which, when you stop to think about it, would have been difficult to do when someone is holding you by the neck. (Don’t try this at home!) There were out-takes where she fell to the ground with a thud, but after a few tries, a perfect take was achieved, and the final result looks very graceful onscreen (and disturbing at the same time!).

The filming of the climax, with the carousel spinning out of control, gave Hitchcock nightmares for years. The man who crawls under the spinning platform was, in reality, risking his own life. “If he had raised his head an inch or two, he would have been killed.” Hitchcock explained. Keep this in mind when you’re watching the movie. The anxiety that Hitchcock felt over this lingered on for years to come.

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN is one of Hitchcock’s most accomplished movies, and heralded his “Golden Period” of masterpieces during the 50’s.

REBECCA (1940)

As Hitchcock’s career progressed in the 1930’s his reputation grew by leaps and bounds. Hollywood began to sit up and take notice of this new talent and offers were made for Hitchcock to come to Hollywood to make films there. Obviously this was appealing to Hitchcock, since this would give him access to much greater resources than what was available to him in England. Hitchcock accepted the offer to work for producer David O. Selznick, a Big Name in Hollywood, who was famous for having produced GONE WITH THE WIND.

The downside of working for Selznick, as Hitchcock would soon come to learn, is that he was obsessive about being in control of every aspect of production. Nowadays, we think of the Director as being the most important person in the filmmaking process, but in those days, the Producer was the Big Cheese, and the director was, more often than not, a workman for hire. Since Hitchcock had very definite ideas about how his films should be shot, this led to many conflicts between the two of them.

Hitchcock thought some of Selznick's ideas were ridiculous, like ending the movie with the smoke from the burning house forming a giant letter "R" in the sky. "Can you imagine?" Hitchcock would say, sarcastically, when telling this story. Luckily, that idea was scrapped. As we know, Hitchcock preferred to pre-plan as many shots and angles as he could, and minimized improvising on the set. Selznick preferred that each scene be shot in as many different ways as possible, so he could pick and choose the shots himself and shape how the film looked. So it would seem that it would be a bad idea to put these two in a room together. But somehow, it all worked out, and REBECCA ended up being an impressive American debut for Hitchcock.

If you are not familiar with the story, it's an adaptation of a novel by Daphne du Maurier, about a rather meek, insecure woman (who curiously, is never given a name by the author) who marries a wealthy man, but after moving into his mansion, finds that the memory of Rebecca, his late first wife, hangs over the place like a shroud, making her feel more insecure. I hate to spoil the movie for anyone, so I won't go into any more details. But it's interesting to note that the theme of the dead continuing to have an influence on the living is something that Hitchcock would return to several times, most notably in VERTIGO (the Carlotta Valdez story, and Scottie's subsequent obsession over Madeline's death), PSYCHO (Mrs. Bates!), and MARNIE (Marnie's phobia of the colour red is explained by the death of the sailor).

REBECCA would win the Oscar that Year for Best Picture, but the Oscar would be collected by Selznick as Producer, not Hitchcock. The Hitchcock/Selznick relationship would deteriorate more as time went on. You can be sure that each found the other “difficult”. They parted ways after THE PARADINE CASE (1947). In REAR WINDOW (1954), Hitchcock would work in a sly dig by having Raymond Burr, playing a slimy murderer (who even goes so far as to kill someone’s pet dog), made up to look like Selznick.