



Director Spotlight: Alfred Hitchcock

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/special/section/director-spotlight-alfred-hitchcock#>



Alfred Hitchcock's iconic *Psycho* turns 50 this week and so we're casting an in-depth glance at the entire career of the Master of Suspense over the next 11 days. There will never be another filmmaker quite like Alfred Hitchcock. His genius was singular and indelible.

Edited by Robert Moore and Stuart Henderson and Produced by Sarah Zupko

There will never be another filmmaker quite like Alfred Hitchcock. Just imagine: this is a man whose career spanned almost 60 years, who survived the complex shifts from silent to talkie and black and white to colour, who worked as an auteur and a studio hack (sometimes simultaneously), who experimented with an array of original techniques (a real time feature, a one-set film), and who managed to develop some of the most complex characters and arresting images ever committed to celluloid. At his peak, Hitchcock was averaging almost a film a year—in the most extraordinary example of his industriousness, he made seven movies (including at least three stone classics) between 1953 and 1956!

Unable, or unwilling, to compromise, he was famously stubborn and pigheaded. He was also frustratingly sexist, blind to racial politics, and prone to armchair psychology. He had a black sense of humour and a soft spot (or was it an obsession?) with blondes. He wondered if anyone could ever truly be called “innocent”; he mistrusted bureaucracy and the very rich; he had a thing for gay subtexts. He hated death, but was drawn to it, as are we all. He helped to create the modern horror genre, the modern thriller, and the modern black comedy. He *changed film*, even as he was inventing new ways to approach it. There will never be another filmmaker quite like Alfred Hitchcock. His genius was singular and indelible.

—*Stuart Henderson*



Director Spotlight: Alfred Hitchcock

Hitchcock 101: Day One, 1927 - 1934

By PopMatters Staff 11 June 2010

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/126797-hitchcock-101-day-one-1927-1934/>

The Lodger (1927)

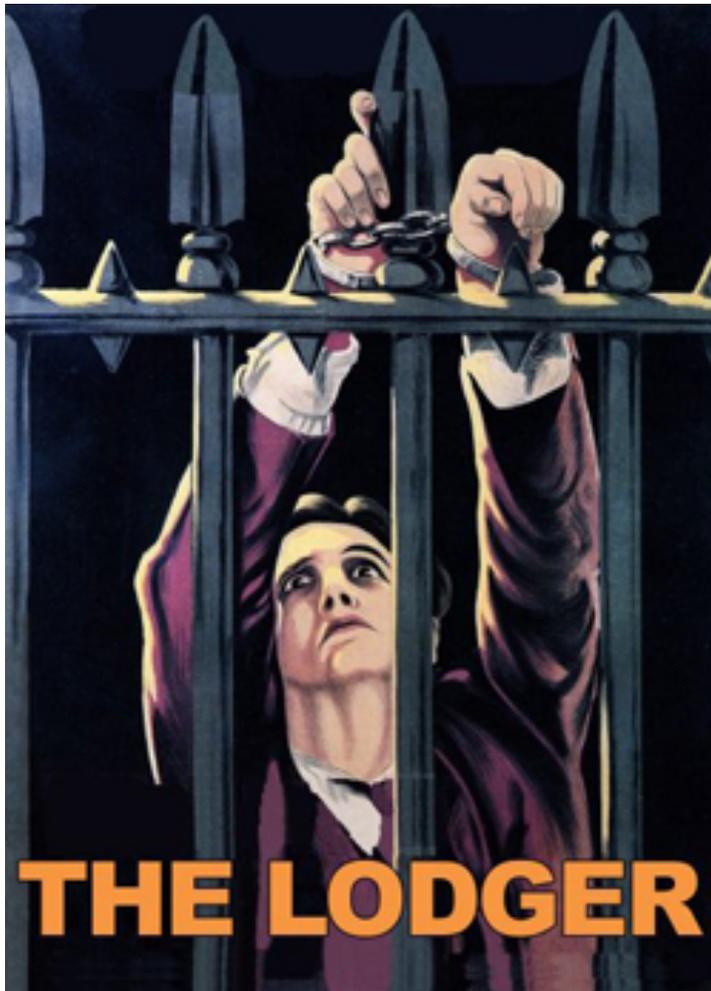
Although he had directed films before *The Lodger*, Alfred Hitchcock described this as his true directorial debut. Indeed, watching the film today is complicated by just how much one knows about the director and his personal styles. Many of his signature moves seem to be present here, preternaturally present, elements of an authorial signature that is still to be fully defined in the future: a mysterious and morally ambiguous main character, plot twists and last minute revelations, endangered innocents, eloquent cinematography, a brief appearance by Hitchcock himself (the first of many to come), and of course, blonde women! The full title of the film defines this as “A Story of the London Fog,” and with this Jack the Ripper plotline the film literally starts with the murder: a close up of a woman’s terrified face screaming straight at the camera, and presumably her killer, her blonde curls glorified in a backlit halo. Combining the abruptness of pure emotion with the humor and irreverence that will soon become a staple of the Hitchcock style, the film explains that this is the seventh victim of a serial killer who seems to select his victims for their golden hair, whether natural or peroxide-enhanced, and follows up with a funny sequence in which spooked dance girls contemplate wearing dark wigs before leaving their dressing room. Mothers try to keep their blonde daughters at home! Professional blondes consider going back to their roots!

It is into this context of social unease and misty, foggy nights in an expressionist urban landscape that a mysterious man arrives at the doorstep of a family with a room to let. This stranger, of course, begins to keep to himself in a way that becomes increasingly unnerving. Is Jonathan Drew (Ivor Novello) the serial killer on the loose, or is he unjustly suspected because he is a sensitive, slow-moving, intense, silent young man? In contrast to the moody shuffling about of their new lodger, the Bunting family is cheerful and solid. Always interested in social distinctions, Hitchcock contrasts the familial space of the kitchen in the basement with the

refined sadness of the lodger and his room. The landlady's daughter, Daisy (June), is soon caught between the easy social manners of her boyfriend Joe (Malcolm Keen), a policeman investigating the murders, and the attractive stranger upstairs whose shy reluctance has its own vampish allure. Annoyed by the interference, Joe begins to suspect that Drew is the killer, and the story takes off from there, with prejudice, jealousy and sexual competition confusing the detective work as bodies continue to pile up.

The film includes a rather daring range of visual experiments, which Hitchcock has explained as a combination of his American training in editing style and his work with German Expressionist directors at UFA in previous years. In the recent digitally restored version, these aesthetic choices shine once more: we have blinking neon signs that advertise the uncannily named play "Golden Curls," art deco intertitles, expressionist lighting schemes, startling close-ups of Drew's scarf-covered face, a complex bird's eye view shot of an oval staircase with the lodger's hand in perfect focus as he descends, dimly lit and claustrophobic exterior spaces under a streetlight, and the celebrated shot of the family room ceiling with its swaying chandelier evaporating to reveal Drew's anxiously pacing feet upstairs. There is also a set piece that opens the film and functions as a miniature documentary: it tracks the way a murder becomes news, from the eye witness's testimony, to the policeman's investigation, the journalist's report, and the actual process of printing the newspaper and delivering it in a van through the sleepy city streets. This unexpected procedural segment contributes to the film's interrogation of the appeal of murder and its

presence in public culture. Murder thrills, and murder sells.



Both *The Lodger* and Fritz Lang's *M* a few years later depict the serial killer as a city creature, feeding on the complexity and anonymity of the metropolis and in turn fueling the city's desire for transgression and gore. Hitchcock identifies social paranoia as part of the problem, as the unknowable city is potentially both sexy and dangerous, and modernity becomes the facilitator, if not the cause, of new social and sexual pathologies. In addition to the sense that the elusive murderer is motivated by a new sexual fascination with blonde hair (a case of textbook cinematic fetishism), as well as a kind of implicit pop-psych misogyny (the killer is dubbed "The Avenger" as if he is avenging on women some kind of wound the women have enacted on him), the film also presents the strange dynamic of crowds, with neighbors and spectators always on the verge of becoming a

mob and victimizing the vulnerable. When confronted, Drew presents a touching defense: not only is he not the killer, he is hunting the killer himself in order to avenge the death of his own sister, the first victim.

While this explains Drew's maps of the murders, his suspicious outings, and his collection of newspaper clippings of the serial killer's exploits (for a while, anyway), it does not protect him from a spontaneous mob about to enact its own vengeance. With Drew handcuffed, hanging from the embankment railing, and under attack by an unruly mob, the last minutes of the film offer one plot twist over another, and articulate a question that Hitchcock fans will find familiar: the killer's compulsion, the crowd's bloodthirst, the viewer's breathless anticipation, are these emotions all that different from each other? Taunting audiences for their own fascination with murder is another classic-to-be move. Hitchcock's most intimate insights on mass culture are already present in *The Lodger*, and the movie combines secret thrills and guilty pleasures, the conflicting desire to catch a murderer but also potentially let him get away with it.

🌀 *Despina Kakoudaki*

[968 words]



Director Spotlight: Alfred Hitchcock

Hitchcock 101: Day Six, 1948 - 1954

By PopMatters Staff 18 June 2010

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/127050-hitchcock-101-day-six-1948-1954/P1>

Dial M for Murder

(1954)

Sometimes it is easy to forget that, auteur theory aside, Alfred Hitchcock was a studio director making film after film under contract. In interviews he refers to *Dial M for Murder* as a basic studio product, the kind of film that “requires no great creative effort,” that allows you to “keep your hand in,” “play it safe,” and make “an average movie.” “I could have phoned it in,” Hitchcock apparently said in a press conference about his “ordinary craftsmanship” here, a pun that is just too perfect for this film!

The movie is based on a successful stage play by British playwright Frederick Knott, who also wrote the script. Despite his protestations, Hitchcock made an enjoyable and economical film, while retaining the play’s sense of spatial confinement and the theatrical emphasis on exposition and dialogue. We start with a basic love triangle, consisting of rich heiress Margot (Grace Kelly in her first role with Hitchcock), her husband, former tennis star Tony (Ray Milland), and her lover, detective story writer Mark (Robert Cummings). Unbeknownst to Margot and Mark, Tony has known about their affair for a year and has used this time to hatch a plan for the perfect murder. It’s a cold-blooded plot, revolving around an old school friend he spots in a pub, who has made a new career out of swindling money from older ladies and occasionally killing them; a love letter from Mark that Tony manages to acquire after staging the “theft” of Margot’s handbag in a crowded train station; a phone call; and an innocuous-looking latch key. After luring conman Charles Swann (Anthony Dawson) to his apartment, Tony blackmails him into accepting the perfect plan: using Margot’s own key, Charles will enter the apartment the following night, Tony will call Margot from his club at 11 pm, she will come out of the bedroom to pick up the phone, and Charles will kill Margot and stage a routine-robbery-turned-accidental-

murder in the apartment. Tony has a perfect alibi, and Charles's payment will come in untraceable small bills that Tony has been saving for a whole year.

Plan A looks great, but Margot fights back, killing Charles with a pair of scissors while Tony is still on the phone. The turn in the film comes in the following scenes, as we watch Tony constructing Plan B in front of our eyes, planting evidence that will incriminate Margot and make it appear that she intentionally murdered Charles for blackmailing her. At first this plan works too, and Margot is imprisoned and sentenced to death, which would have been a new version of the perfect murder for Tony if other people hadn't started seeing patterns. In a last-ditch effort to save Margot, Mark concocts what he thinks is a fictional explanation of the events, but one that comes too close to the truth, while Chief Inspector Hubbard (in a great performance by John Williams as the quintessential British policeman) notices that the murdered man had no key on him. Although all latch keys look alike, and nobody uses a key-ring in this film, there is a different level of perfection in how a key works in its proper lock. When Tony opens the door to his apartment using the key left by Charles under the carpet on the stairs outside, he finds that he has an audience, and that this simple action of opening the door finally reveals his role in the story. Cool as ever after this version of a grand entrance, he pours everyone a drink!

The film is quite insistently about certain kinds of storytelling, about how many explanations can fit the same physical facts, and whether these explanations are as interchangeable as the similar looking latch keys and the similar looking men's raincoats that are also swapped in the film. All the questions of a classic mystery work well here: sometimes the truth sounds like fiction, sometimes explanations that fit perfectly do so because they are artificially designed to fit, and the question is whether the truth has a different propelling power or not, whether it fits even better. In fact, the mystery is solvable only because nobody made a copy of the two original keys, an option that occurs to Tony too late as he tries to enhance his first explanations. And although everyone is just so cool and modern about it, the whole lock and key metaphor has a provocative connection with the adultery subplot: we see Margot kissing her husband at the beginning of the film and kissing Mark only a few seconds later. Keys and locks have to be perfectly matched, but it's different for people. It's as if Margot's infidelity has created the possibility that a different key can fit this lock, an option that the male characters have to render impossible, unacceptable, through the course of the film.

If the film traffics in the fantasy of the perfect murder, it fuels this fantasy through the implicit desire for a perfect monogamy. Or, the perfect murder is the only answer to the demise of a fantasy of perfect monogamy. Given that the film presents men's clothes, keys and positions in the story as largely interchangeable, whereas Margot's handbag, for example, is never lost or replaced by another similar object, one can see where the anxiety comes from. This motivating violence of a fundamental

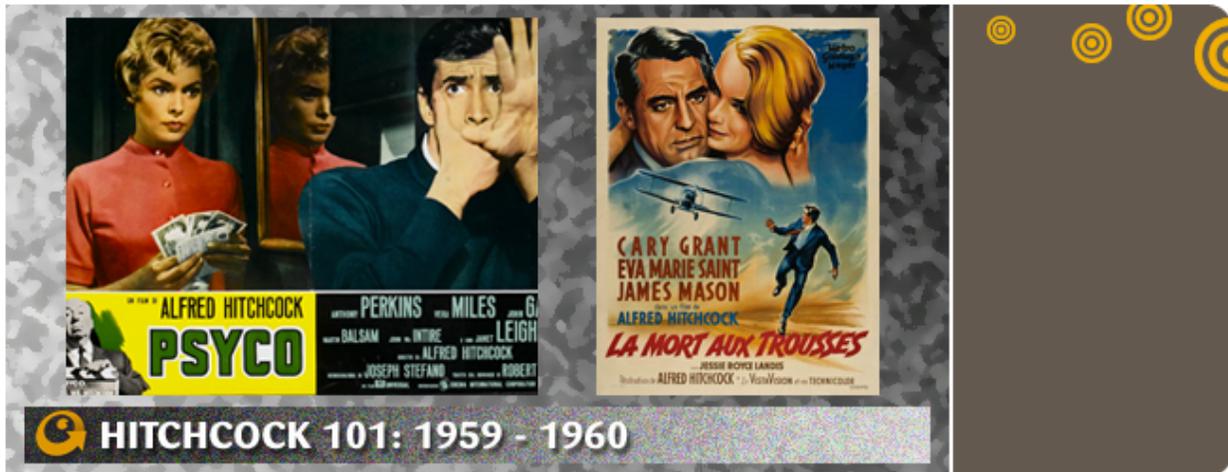


gender betrayal is brought to the foreground in the recent remake *A Perfect Murder* (Andrew Davis, 1998), starring Michael Douglas, Gwyneth Paltrow and Viggo Mortensen. More intense than its 1954 counterpart, the film seethes with a hidden rage about a promised but undelivered or compromised patriarchal order. Woman with Money? Men interchangeable? Unthinkable.

Dial M For Murder was shot in 3D, at the tail end of a short-lived fascination with the technology in the 1950s and it may strike contemporary viewers as an unconventional choice for this depth-making technology. The film is rarely screened in 3D today, so it is hard to appreciate what the mode does for this insistently interior story. In contrast to the contemporary tendency to use 3D for new worlds and huge visual spectacles, here we need to notice the creation of depth at choice narrative moments, rather than set-up or world-establishing moments. When Margot answers the phone the camera creates a slow half circle around her, the murderer comes into view, poised behind her and slowly extending his knotted scarf to strangle her. If this visual treatment activates depth, the background space, the moment when Margot reaches for the scissors in order to defend herself activates a break of the implicit fourth wall, the forward space, as her outstretched hand reaches straight through the screen towards us. In addition to using many unusual and overhead camera angles, and many objects in the extreme foreground, Hitchcock uses 3D to add dimension to a limited space—limited at first in its spatial footprint perhaps, but since when have stories been truly limited in their meanings by physical facts?

 *Despina Kakoudaki*

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[Director Spotlight: Alfred Hitchcock](#)

Hitchcock 101: Day Nine, 1959 - 1960

By PopMatters Staff 23 June 2010

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/127351-hitchcock-101-day-nine-1959-1960/P1>

Psycho (1960)

I teach *Psycho* almost every year in my introduction to film classes, even though it is not my favorite Hitchcock film, and, as you can read elsewhere in this series, I don't think it's truly characteristic of Hitchcock's long career in the movies. I teach *Psycho* because it is interesting, and because it is showy! You take any two-minute sequence from this film and ask students to write a shot-by-shot breakdown of its structure, noticing things like the lighting, mise-en-scene, editing, costume, use of music, performance, and framing, and they will come up with something intriguing, new to them and often new to me. Cultural aura aside, looking at this film in detail pays off. *Psycho* may not be subtle, but it is deeply satisfying.

Consider, for example, the wicked perfection of the first scenes, in which a nosy camera pans around the skyline of Phoenix Arizona, and then enters a hotel bedroom window, circles the room, and settles on a half dressed couple: Sam Loomis (John Gavin) is standing next to the bed, wearing dark pants and no shirt, and Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is lying on the bed at an angle, in white bra and slip. "You never did finish your lunch," Sam says, and the camera cuts away to a quick shot of her sandwich and drink on the bedside table. An easy continuity shot, we think, and in his long close analysis of *Psycho* Raymond Durnat calls the shot "pointless" or at most "atmosphere". And yet, when a student of mine focused on this cutaway she discovered that it has a similar formal structure as the previous shots of the couple, with a dark lean vertical figure over a white horizontal figure at an angle. The point of view perspective isn't a perfect match, but the people and the lunch have similar framing. Why? Because these people had each other for lunch. When Marion next delivers my favorite line in the film—"These extended lunch hours give my boss excess acid"—we can hear the word "sex" twice in the phrase, hiding in "these

extended” and “boss excess”. The latter phrase even employs the word as an aural palindrome! Someone clearly had a lot of fun writing this film, and a lot of fun shooting it.

This sense of crafted, meaningful, dense cinematic representation, in which puns live up to their implications and images reveal and obscure at the same time, continues throughout the first part of the film. Sam and Marion can’t afford to marry, and Marion is tired of meeting in hotel rooms, longing for a sit-down dinner and respectability instead. She returns to her office only to be confronted by the luxuries of other people’s lives: “I’m buying this house for my baby’s wedding present,” the rich client in the cowboy hat tells her. “Forty thousand dollars, cash! Now, that’s not buying happiness. That’s just buying off unhappiness.” Provoked by his flirty arrogance, Marion goes home with a headache, promising to drop off the cash at the bank on her way. But... she packs a suitcase instead and drives off to Fairvale California, to find Sam and restart their life.

The scenes of Marion driving through the day and night are strangely alive despite their minimalism, a showoff display of what makes a character and a performance tick. She spends the first night on the side of the road, is awakened by an iconically startling policeman in dark sunglasses, and decides to trade her car for one with California license plates. She drives on into pouring rain and, finally exhausted, decides to stop somewhere safe for the night, becoming the first and last person in film history to think the “Bates Motel” a safe haven. And here we are introduced to another instance of how lives intersect. Norman Bates (in a magnificent and subtle performance by Anthony Perkins) is a shy young man, adorable in his eagerness to please and clearly oppressed by his domineering mother and meager opportunities. He shows her a room, makes her a sandwich, discusses his hobby of taxidermy, and reminds her that sometimes people are entrapped by their circumstances.

It is such a bitter irony that Marion is killed brutally in the shower of her room just after she has decided to turn around and head back to Phoenix, return the money and get out of the trap she stepped in. We only see the outline of the murderer, a woman’s outline that we identify implicitly from Norman’s subsequent cries of “Mother! Oh God, Mother! Blood! Blood!” Norman cleans up the bathroom, wraps Marion’s nude body in the shower curtain, places her, the suitcase, and the money in the trunk of her car, and sinks the car in a tar pit. There goes our star, our character, and our story. Now what?



Hitchcock used to say that audiences often don’t remember much of the second part of the film, and this bears out in my experience teaching it. The details of Marion’s story are imprinted in viewers’ minds, partly because they are designed to be memorable. They are intended to be mined for clues. After her murder the film becomes looser, less dense, the language less pun-infested, the cinematography less pointed. Marion’s sister Lila (Vera Miles), and private detective Arbogast (Martin Balsam) arrive at Fairvale, and join forces with Sam to find out what happened to Marion. Arbogast questions Norman and tries to question Mother, but is brutally

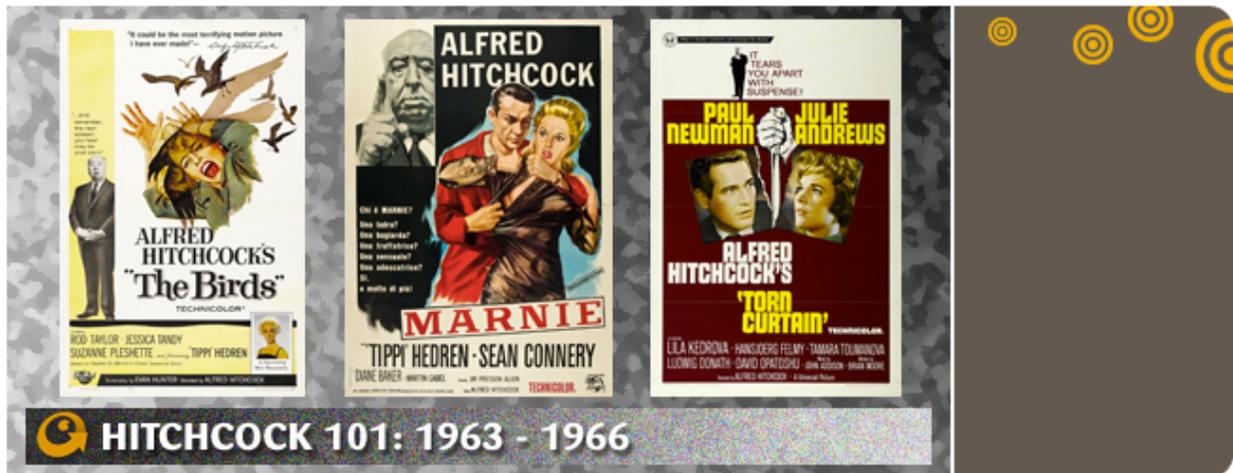
killed by her in an unexpectedly intense scene on the staircase of the Bates house. The relationship between the Victorian house and the rambling motel building becomes intensified, as now each structure holds different promises of danger. Norman grows much more ominous as time goes by, while Lila and Sam still think they are solving a mystery.

The final sections of the film include not one or two but three resolutions: Lila searches the Bates house while Sam detains Norman, and finds that Mother is a mummified corpse hidden in the cellar. Norman rushes in to kill Lila dressed in Mother's old-fashioned housedress and an ill-fitting wig. So it was Norman who killed Marion and Arbogast after all. But wait, the police psychiatrist explains: it was Mother inside Norman, the identity he absorbed in order to animate the corpse that would not relate to him any more. In a calm authoritative voice that contemporary audiences sometimes find funny or campy, the psychiatrist describes the split in Norman's psyche, and we get a direct glimpse of Norman in the holding cell. He sits still as the Mother's voice describes what she has done, how she has explained everything to the police, exonerating herself and blaming Norman for the murders. In the last shot of the film Norman and Mother appear to be co-present on his face, as a faint skull looks at us through his ominous dark eyes.

The film was based on a novel by Robert Bloch, inspired by the true gruesome story of serial killer Ed Gein. In addition to being one of the most iconic, most famous films ever made, *Psycho* was an incredible success for Hitchcock, who shot it quickly, in black and white, and using his TV crew. The confidence of the actual film is palpable, the result of honed textual and narrative practices of a seasoned director and a professional cast and crew. We may be in the proverbial dark about what is going on for most of the movie, but the film is fine-tuned, sure-footed, assertive in the effects it wants to create, its timing, and the kinds of densities required of both mystery and horror generic structures. If the film heralds the success of horror films, B movies, slasher films, and teen flicks that traffic in unnamed dread, its pedigree is in the classic Hollywood studio picture, in film noir, the detective film, and the classic melodrama. Hitchcock pays close attention to characterization, motivation, and sequence, even as he eagerly replaces these solid pleasures for what seems to be a wild and strange ride into the unknown. Not subtle, but really fun.

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[Director Spotlight: Alfred Hitchcock](#)

Hitchcock 101: Day Ten, 1963 - 1966

By PopMatters Staff 24 June 2010

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/127386-hitchcock-101-day-ten-1963-1966/P1>

Marnie (1964)

Hitchcock said in an interview that *Marnie* “is the story of a girl who doesn’t know who she is. She is a psychotic, a compulsive thief, and afraid of sex, and in the end she finds out why.” But at the beginning of this complex film, Marnie Edgar (Tippi Hedren) is a delight, a beautiful and smart thief who can transform herself from a sexy brunette secretary in Pittsburgh, to a stylish if reserved blonde professional visiting her mother in Baltimore, to an eager redhead widow looking for a new job in Philadelphia. We see these transformations take place within a matter of minutes, complete with matching handbags and color-coded suitcases, as Marnie selects each new identity and social security card. We also see her stake out her next gig, figuring out office geographies and safe combinations also within minutes. Such pure cinematic pleasures, of heists in progress, of body transformation and deceit, of artifice and spectacle and surface, eventually have to be traded in for something different, depth and self-knowledge, memory, truth and authenticity. This growing up business is necessary, but it’s just not as much fun...

The problem is that Marnie gets caught by her latest boss, Mark Rutland (Sean Connery) who realizes that she infiltrated his company in order to eventually steal the firm’s money, which she has done countless times before. Instead of taking her to the police he blackmails her into marrying him, and they embark on a promising honeymoon fueled by his considerable wealth and obvious fascination with her. But things do not go as planned. Marnie cannot stand to be touched by a man, not even her loving husband, and his frustration with her frigidity evolves into sadism, the need to observe and subdue her. He rapes her. Then, out of wonder at the wild thing he has caught or perhaps out of remorse, he decides to find out what makes Marnie so unknowable, so compulsive, and so obviously afraid of sex and men.

The final acts of the film strike a familiar if not downright clichéd tone for us now, and it is hard to remember that it was films like this that popularized the ways childhood trauma and

repression are depicted in contemporary culture. Although both Marnie and Mark make fun of psychoanalysis, Marnie slowly relives her formative trauma in her mother's dockyard rowhouse. Inside the daring adult woman is a frightened little girl, but inside the frightened little girl is an unexpectedly effective killer. I would warn you about spoilers here but you have seen this move before: the prostitute mother, the nighttime male visitors, the little girl awakened and moved from her warm bed, the dangers of sex, the violent drunken sailor, the fireplace poker, the mother who takes the blame for the murder, and the little girl who holds it all inside.



Marnie is a disquieting film, and the last collaboration of the classic Hitchcock team. Robert Burks, Hitchcock's director of photography for more than ten films, and George Tomasini, his editor for nine, both died soon after its completion, while creative differences made this the last Hitchcock film with music by Bernard Herrmann. Despite its elegant cinematography and great performances, and despite the implicit promise that confession equals absolution (Hitchcock was raised as a Catholic, and the logic of confession proliferates as Marnie promises to confront all her victims) the film feels somewhat sadistic too, not just because of the controversial rape sequence, but also because the film insists on making Marnie, and us, look, look into the self, look into the past, re-live repressed trauma, and take responsibility. It's as if we have to pay for our pleasures, in the now familiar "Bourne Identity" algorithm of combining the joy of heist and multiple identity plots with the insinuation of trauma, memory loss, murder. In contrast to the surface pleasures of Marnie's early transformations, the quest for depth creates an uncomfortable equivalence between criminal infiltration,

sexual penetration, religious confession and psychoanalytic self-narration. But Hitchcock also adds another now-classic dimension to the notion of psychoanalytic catharsis: inside the religious and proper cold mother, Bernice (in a subtle and touching performance by Louise Latham), is the former prostitute, purposefully withholding affection from her daughter and demonizing men and sex in order to ensure Marnie would grow up to be decent. "Decent?" Marnie asks at the end of the film, "Oh Mama. Well, you surely realized your ambition. I certainly am... decent." The film may overtly thematize cool criminality and sexual frigidity, but at its core features other kinds of permafrost.

🌀 *Despina Kakoudaki*

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