

Document Citation

Title	Alfred Hitchcock
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Hitchcock, Alfred (1899-1980), Leytonstone, London, Great Britain
Film Subjects	

Hitchcock, Alfred. Director. Born on Aug. 13, 1899, in London, the son of a poultry dealer and fruit importer. The family was Catholic, and Alfred was enrolled at a Jewish school, London's St. Ignatius College, at a young age. He later attended the School of Engineering and Navigation where he studied mechanics, electricity, acoustics, and navigation. At 19 he entered the job market as a technical estimator of electric cables for a telegraph company. At the same time, he was taking art courses at the University of London, studies that soon led to his transfer to the telegraph company's advertising department as a sketch artist and assistant layout man. In 1920 he entered the film industry as designer of titles for the newly formed London branch of Hollywood's Famous Players-Lasky (Paramount). For a long time he was the head of the title department, working closely with the screenwriters of the editorial department.

Occasionally he was even permitted to direct an unimportant scene that did not involve acting. In 1922 the Famous Players studios, in the borough of Islington, were taken over by a British production company formed by Michael Balcon, and Hitchcock was retained by the new owners as an assistant director; but he soon took on other functions as well, working as an art director and screenwriter on such films as *Woman to Woman* and *The White Shadow* (both 1923), *The Passionate Adventure* (1924), and *The Blackboard* and *The Prude's Fall* (both 1925).

In 1925, Hitchcock was promoted to director, getting as his first assignment an Anglo-German production, *The Pleasure Garden*. Back in 1922 he had collaborated with actor Seymour Hicks on completing the final scenes of *Always Tell Your Wife* for an ailing director. In the same year he had also directed a two-reel fiction film, *Number Thirteen*, but the production was never completed. *The Pleasure Garden* was his first real stab at directing, and despite some flaws it proved an impressive debut. Hitchcock, however, considers his third production, *The Lodger* (titled in the US *The Case of Johnathan Drew*; 1926), as his first true film. A suspense drama about a landlady who suspects her new tenant is Jack the Ripper, *The Lodger* told much of its story in visual terms. It contained some bold special effects and introduced a theme that was to reappear in many of the director's films, that of a man accused of a crime he did not commit, an ordinary man caught in a web of extraordinary events. It was also the first film in which Hitchcock made a personal appearance as an extra, needing one more body to fill the screen. The momentary personal appearance later became a Hitchcock trademark, a career-long habit initially motivated by superstition and later continued as a gag.

In 1926, Hitchcock married Alma REVILLE, a film editor and script girl who had been working with him for several years. She would later collaborate as a screenwriter on many of the director's films. Hitchcock failed to match the commercial success of *The Lodger* with any of his next few productions, although *The Ring* (1927), a romantic triangle melodrama with a boxing background, gained the esteem of critics. Hitchcock's next major production was *Blackmail* (1929), the British cinema's first feature film with synchronous sound, although it had been started as a silent film. *Blackmail* contained some innovations in the use of sound and a number of striking special effects, highlighted by the use of the Schufftan process for the climactic chase sequence through the halls and over the roofs of the British Museum. Similar chases were to highlight many of Hitchcock's future films.

The director's next few productions were for the most part unexceptional adaptations of novels and plays, among them *Elstree Calling* (1930), a musical spoof of Shakespeare's 'The Taming of the Shrew'; *Juno and the Paycock* (1930), a straightforward screen adaptation of the Sean O'Casey play; and *Waltzes From Vienna* (*Strauss's Great Waltz* in the US; 1933), a rickety low-budget musical. His only truly interesting film of this ebb period was *Murder* (1930), a slow-paced but still-intriguing whodunit thriller with a backstage background and, for that time, daring homosexual motif.

The year 1934 signaled the beginning of Alfred Hitchcock's international reputation as the master of the thriller genre. During a period spanning five years he turned out a series of superb suspense dramas that established him as England's foremost director. First came *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), a suspense story about a British couple vacationing in Switzerland who become accidentally involved

in international intrigue that culminates in the rescue of their own kidnapped daughter. The film introduced such Hitchcockian hallmarks as the sudden-shock effect and the lurking of sinister jeopardy beneath a surface of commonplace serenity. A huge commercial success both in England and abroad, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* was remade by Hitchcock in the US in 1956 as a more elaborate and in many ways more accomplished color production.

The Thirty-Nine Steps (1935) was an even greater success, both commercially and critically. A free adaptation of a John Buchan novel, it was a delightful combination of hair-raising suspense and diverting romantic and comic relief that served to heighten rather than diminish the tension. The exciting plot had many implausible twists, and Hitchcock confided in a book-long interview with François Truffaut that in this and future films he was concerned less with plausibility and logical story progression than with building up emotion and mood. Hitchcock had less success with *The Secret Agent* (1936), an adaptation of two of Somerset Maugham's Ashenden stories mixed with material from another source; *Sabotage* (US title: *The Woman Alone*; 1937), which, curiously, was adapted from a Joseph Conrad novel titled 'The Secret Agent'; and the much underrated *Young and Innocent* (*The Girl Was Young* in the US; 1937). But these films too were among the finest produced in England in the 30s, providing further evidence of Hitchcock's maturation as an artist and technician.

Hitchcock capped his so-called British period with *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), a superb thriller noted for its technical inventiveness and breezy, often humorous suspenseful action. It won for Hitchcock the best director award from the New York Film Critics. As soon as the picture was completed, Hitchcock was signed by producer David O. Selznick to direct in America. Before leaving England, he regrettably made a final British film, *Jamaica Inn* (1939), an unmemorable production that was not at all typical of the style or quality of his work.

Ever since he began directing, Hitchcock had been aware of the technical superiority of American films over the standards prevailing in the British industry during the 20s and early 30s. He was immensely gratified when Michael Balcon, the producer of *The Pleasure Garden*, commented after a preview screening: "The surprising thing is that technically it doesn't look like a Continental picture. It's more like an American film." Thus, in 1939, Hitchcock was eagerly looking forward to working with the technical facilities of a Hollywood studio, although by making the move he was clearly risking a career that had just reached a peak of reputation and prestige.

Hitchcock's first American movie, *Rebecca* (1940), was not typical of his previous work. It was not a thriller but an adaptation of a Daphne du Maurier romantic novel that he successfully turned into a suspenseful psychological drama. Stylistically, too, the continuity relied more on camera movement than on the more familiar Hitchcockian cutting techniques. *Rebecca* was a superbly directed production, and it won the best picture Academy Award for 1940. Hitchcock was nominated for an Oscar as best director.

Following two entertaining but minor productions, *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), an espionage adventure, and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (1941), a diverting romantic comedy starring Carole Lombard, Hitchcock came back with another well-acted glossy suspense drama, *Suspicion* (1941). Joan Fontaine won an Oscar for her portrayal of a woman who suspects that her husband is scheming to murder her. The husband was played by Cary Grant, the first of several solid

appearances in Hitchcock films, but Grant's presence weakened the plot at the end, as the studio decreed that no star of his magnitude would be allowed to play a murderer.

Saboteur (1942) was a virtuoso exercise in the techniques and gimmickry of the thriller genre, a chock-full-of-fun compilation of Hitchcock's bag of old tricks bordering on self-parody. *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) was Hitchcock's first serious attempt at creating suspenseful drama through subtle characterization, understated plot, and the careful authentic re-creation of the flavor of a small American town. In *Lifeboat* (1944) he demonstrated his technical mastery by confining the entire action to the space of a tiny vessel, and he continued to flaunt his virtuosity with film technique with *Spellbound* (1945), a thriller with psychiatric background and a memorable Salvador Dali dream sequence; with the lavish romantic thriller *Notorious* (1946); and with *Rope* (1948), an experiment in continuous shooting in which unusually long takes were interrupted only when the camera had to be reloaded. *The Paradine Case* (1948) was a lavish but talky and empty court drama, totally unrecognizable as a Hitchcock production, and *Stage Fright* (1950), which he made in England, was one of Hitchcock's less convincing and least successful thrillers.

After a decade marked by hits and misses, the 50s signaled a return to greatness for Hitchcock. *Strangers on a Train* (1951), a superb achievement in suspense buildup and audience manipulation, was but the first of several films in a decade many consider the director's richest and most rewarding. It was a period in which Hitchcock's art reached its full maturity with such superior thrillers as *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Psycho* (1960). These films culminated one of the most illustrious directorial careers in the history of the cinema.

Although he has chosen to limit his thematic range to the genre of suspenseful melodrama and has disappointed some high-minded critics with his lack of seriousness or interest in important social issues, Hitchcock is without question among the few most gifted directors who ever worked in the film medium. A supreme technician and stylist with an unmistakable personal imprint and a great visual artist, he is impossible to dismiss as just the "Master of Suspense," as he has been frequently described. One does not have to share the reverence with which Hitchcock is held by French critics of the New Wave generation, who see him as a profound explorer of metaphysical anxieties, to recognize Hitchcock's eloquence in the language of the cinema and his contribution to the medium's growth as an art.

Among all film directors, Hitchcock is probably the best known to the general public not only by name but also by appearance and area of specialty. This is so not only because of the great popular appeal of his films, nor his participation in them in brief cameo appearances, but also because of the two anthology mystery series he produced and hosted for TV, 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents' (1955-62) and 'The Alfred Hitchcock Hour' (1962-1965), which are still seen on independent stations through syndication. Several book anthologies and a mystery magazine have also used Hitchcock's name as part of their title. Hitchcock is also among the most written about directors. The man and his work have been the subject of numerous articles and several books, including three by noted directors Truffaut, Peter Bogdanovich, and a collaborative volume by Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer. Hitchcock was the recipient of the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award in 1979.

Hitchcock is a meticulous director who plans each shot in

his films with great care and rarely deviates from his and storyboard sketches once the camera begins to roll. He regards acting as just another element of his *mise-en-scène* and has alienated many actors with fragile egos by treating them with the same close attention but aloof detachment as he does the inanimate objects on a set. His ability to manipulate the minds and emotions of audiences is legendary, and audiences don't seem to mind at all. They continue to flock to every Hitchcock film on the strength of the director's name alone, expecting and getting exhilarating entertainment from the grandest wizard of cinema magic the world has ever known.

FILMS: As art director and assistant director—*Woman of the Year* (also co-sc.), *The White Shadow* (also co-sc., ed.) 1923; *The Passionate Adventure* (also co-sc.) 1924; *The Blackguard* (also sc.), *The Prude's Fall* (also sc.) 1925. As director—In the UK: *Number Thirteen* (unfinished two-reeler), *Always Tell Your Wife* (completed in collaboration with Seymour Hicks) 1922; *The Pleasure Garden* (UK/Ger.) 1925; *The Mountain Eagle/Fear o' God* (UK/Ger.) 1926; *The Lodger/The Case of Jonathan Drew* (also co-sc.) 1927; *Downhill/When Boys Leave Home, Easy Virtue, The Ring* (also co-sc.) 1927; *The Farmer's Wife* (also sc.), *Champagne* 1928; *Harmony Heaven* (co-dir. with Eddie Pola and Edward Brandt), *The Manxman, Blackmail* (also co-sc.) 1929; *Elstree Calling* (co-dir. with Andre Charlot, Jack Hulbert, and Paul Murray under supervision of Adrian Brunel), *Juno and the Paycock* (also co-sc.), *Murder* (also co-adapt. and German-language version, *Mary/Sir John greift ein*) 1930; *The Skin Game* (also co-sc.) 1931; *Rich and Strange/East of Shanghai* (also adapt.), *Number Seventeen* (also co-sc.) 1932; *Waltzes From Vienna/Strauss's Great Waltz* 1933; *The Man Who Knew Too Much* 1934; *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 1935; *The Secret Agent* 1936; *Sabotage/The Woman Alone, Young and Innocent/The Girl Who Went Young* 1937; *The Lady Vanishes* 1938; *Jamaica Inn* 1939. In the US: *Rebecca, Foreign Correspondent* 1940; *Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Suspicion* 1941; *Saboteur* (also story) 1942; *Shadow of a Doubt* 1943; *Lifeboat, Bon Voyage* (four-reel doc. for British Ministry of Information), *Adventure Malagoch* (doc. short for British M.O.I.; never released) 1944; *Spellbound* 1945; *Notorious* (also prod., story) 1946; *The Paradine Case, Rope* (also co-prod.) 1948; *Under Capricorn* (also co-prod.; UK) 1949; *Stage Fright* (also prod.) 1950; *Strangers on a Train* (also prod.) 1951; *I Confess* (also prod.) 1953; *Dial M for Murder* (also prod.), *Rear Window* (also prod.) 1954; *To Catch a Thief* (also prod.), *The Trouble With Harry* (also prod.) 1955; *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (also prod.; remake of 1934 film) 1956; *The Wrong Man* (also prod.) 1957; *Vertigo* (also prod.) 1958; *North by Northwest* (also prod.) 1959; *Psycho* (also prod.) 1960; *The Birds* (also prod.) 1963; *Marnie* (also prod.) 1964; *Torn Curtain* (also prod.) 1966; *Topaz* (also prod.) 1969; *Frenzy* (also prod.; UK) 1972; *Family Plot* (also prod.) 1976.

Hobart, Rose. Actress. Born Rose Kefer, on May 1, 1906, in New York City. On the stage from age 15, she was brought to Hollywood in 1930 to play the feminine lead in *Liliom*. Played leads in several other films of the early 30s before returning to the stage, then reappeared on the screen mainly in second leads, typically as "the other woman."

FILMS INCLUDE: *Liliom, A Lady Surrenders* 1930; *Chances, East of Borneo, Compromised* 1931; *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Scandal for Sale* 1932; *The Shadow Laughs* 1933; *Convention Woman* 1935; *Tower of London* 1939; *Susan and God* 1940; *Ziegfeld Girl, Lady Be Good, Nothing but the Truth* 1941; *Mr. and Mrs. North, Prison Girls, Dr. Gillespie's*