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# Dartmouth Film Society Film Notes

## THE SECRET AGENT Great Britain (1936)

Ashenden	John Gielgud	Caypor	Percy Marmont
The Mexican	Peter Lorre	Mrs. Caypor	Florence Kahn
Elsa	Madeleine Carroll	Lilli	Lilli Palmer
Marvin	Robert Young	"R"	Charles Carson

Screenplay by Charles Bennett, adapted from a play by Campbell Dixon based on the novel Ashenden by Somerset Maugham. Additional dialogue by Ian Hay and Jesse Lasky, Jr. Photographed by Bernard Knowles. Edited by Charles Frennd. Art direction by Otto Werndorff and Albert Jullion. Musical direction by Louis Levy. Produced by Michael Balcon for Gaumont-British Films. Released in America June 13, 1936.

Directed by ALFRED HITCHCOCK

We wish to thank the following for their help in our presentation of this film: The British Film Institute; The National Film Archive of Great Britain; The J. Arthur Rank Organization; Universal Pictures Corporation; The Museum of Modern Art Film Library. With the cooperation of the above organizations we have had a 16mm print made up in England, which has been donated by the Dartmouth Film Society to the Museum of Modern Art. Due to legal conditions, the film, following our showing, can be seen only at the Museum and will not be circulated.

"I like THE SECRET AGENT quite a bit. I'm sorry it wasn't more of a success, but I believe it was unsuccessful because it was the story of a man who did not want to do something. He was sent out to kill a German spy and was given a killer to do it and he botched it the first time-- killed the wrong man. You can't root for a hero who doesn't want to be a hero. So its a negative thing. I think that's why it didn't really succeed."  
--Alfred Hitchcock (1963)

Viewed today, THE SECRET AGENT seems one of Hitchcock's most successful films, but it received a bad press when released some twenty-nine years ago. Perhaps it was ahead of its time; in any case, it treated certain themes which were unexpected coming from Hitchcock and it dismayed and baffled its original viewers.

It is based on Somerset Maugham's novel Ashenden, which is a collection of short stories concerning the adventures of a secret agent in Switzerland during World War I. It has been called the greatest of all espionage novels, and not without cause. The film confines itself to episodes from one of the stories, and invents several new situations which were not in the book. In an apparent effort to help the film's success in the American market, Hitchcock's usual script writer of the period, Charles Bennett, was aided by Jesse Lasky, Jr., who was brought to England from Hollywood. (It should be mentioned that the export income on British films was far more important than the domestic returns. But Americans found British films were far too slowly paced for their taste, hence the decision to have some Hollywood know-how on the production.)

But even the assistance of Mr. Lasky couldn't save the film in 1936. After its initial run, it was put back in the vault and was not revived until 1961 when the critics were forced to revise their original judgment. Writing in Sight and Sound, Peter John Dyer gave some reasons for this new interest in the film.

"One can see why THE SECRET AGENT was regarded at the time as disappointing. Readers of Somerset Maugham's story, "The Hairless Mexican," upon which the film was based, knew that Ashenden went to Switzerland to prevent the carrying of important information into enemy territory. The spy is unknown; all that Ashenden is told is that a certain district is suspect; and the film begins by concentrating on the overwhelming difficulty of his mission only to minimize its importance once he has arrived by becoming preoccupied with the romantic skirmishes of the three young protagonists. Since these are merely projected, pretty bloodlessly, by John Gielgud, Madeleine Carroll (the 'wife' provided by headquarters) and Robert Young, the suspense and light romance

play contradictory rather than complementary parts, and the result is an almost fatal imbalance.

"Today, however, one takes it for granted that the parts of a Hitchcock thriller are nearly always greater than the whole, and here, though the string is weak, the beads are pearls. The opening in London during a bomb-raid is masterly, with its fake funeral, its one-armed man lighting his cigarette on a candle beside the empty coffin, the pulling down of the blinds and the shadowed entrance of the 'corpse'. The center piece, the inadvertent murder of the wrong man, is screwed up to the most callous, nerve-wracking pitch imaginable-- both before, in the cross-cutting between the innocent man climbing to his death and his agitated dog in a room miles away; and after, in the café celebration, with the tell-tale button spinning around in the bowl and the assassin flirting with a buxom girl with the same professional indifference that he brought to his miscalculated murder. Here and elsewhere--in the drawn out, monotonous single note of the church organ over which a body lies slumped, in the chase through the chocolate factory-espionage bureau--Hitchcock lays on sound in much the same way as the Chinese are said to delight in water-torture. And his sagacity in casting Peter Lorre as the Mexican killer is rewarded by a performance which makes the film itself as uncommon as it is unsentimentally cruel."

The original ending of the film (which cannot be revealed here because it would spoil the film's impact) was considered too nasty by the censors, and the present ending was substituted. However, it does not make a great deal of difference except that the killer is himself killed which was not in the original plan.

The film was made immediately after *THE 39 STEPS* and used the same photographer, Bernard Knowles, who was to continue with Hitchcock until *THE LADY VANISHES* when he was replaced by Jack Cox. His style of photography is admirably suited to this rather cold-blooded tale but was apparently considered wrong when Hitchcock's films began to get more romantic about 1938.

*THE SECRET AGENT* is also notable in that it had the best cast Hitchcock had used up to this period. John Gielgud made a rare screen appearance as Ashenden; Peter Lorre was the "Hairless Mexican"; Madeleine Carroll, one of Hitchcock's favorite heroines, appears for the second time in his work. The American actor Robert Young was imported to play an American character; and Lilli Palmer made her screen debut.

We hope that you will enjoy this opportunity to see this extremely fine film in its sole American revival. However, we have learned that it has been scheduled for a remake in the near future, but not directed by Hitchcock.

David Stewart Hull

Our next Hitchcock film is *SABOTAGE* (1936) presented Tuesday at 4:00 and 8:30 pm, another vintage chiller, and certainly the director's most cold-blooded film. Another program not to be missed.

Our short subject today is *THE SAD CLOWNS*, with excerpts from the work of Charles Chaplin, Harry Langdon and Buster Keaton.